

*To the distant observer
They are chatting of the blossoms
Yet in spite of appearances
Deep in their hearts
They are thinking very different thoughts*

KI NO TSURAYAKI

Noël Burch

To the Distant Observer

Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema

Revised and edited by Annette Michelson

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles

12. Uchida Kisao, 'The Motion Picture Theatres in Japan', *Japan Film Yearbook*, 1937, p. 53. Several other contributors stress the fact that a movement towards mixed programmes had begun (presumably because of a scarcity of native sound films). Today the segregation principle is completely restored in the cities; some theatres have two or more halls, one of them reserved for foreign films.

substance with Uchida Kisao that 'the minority of the public who prefer foreign pictures to Japanese ones are of a higher intellectual level than the majority who are satisfied with pictures made in Japan. Indeed, some critics have gone so far as to state that the former form a class all by themselves. Such being the case, one may well understand why it is there are to be found in every important city in Japan theatres which make it a business of screening only imported films'.¹² And it was of course the same élite which was reading Western or Western-style literature, listening to Western or Western-style music. However, a very large majority in every walk of life were watching Japanese films. And until the mid-1930s a majority of these films were 'all the more Japanese' as they were silent.

15. Some Remarks on the Genre Syndrome

Before turning to the cinema of Ozu, so firmly anchored in a single genre, we must consider one important general aspect of the Japanese attitude towards cinema. Although present since the beginning, its relevance to our theoretically oriented investigation begins in the 1930s. As all observers of Japanese cinema have pointed out, numerous strict genre classifications were set up and maintained at all costs, in production and programming as well as in publicity and criticism. The distinction between *jidai-geki* and *gendai-geki* (period as against modern 'plays') may appear identical with the genre distinctions of the West, costume-drama, gangster film, etc. However, there are, I believe, two important differences.

Japanese genre taxonomy has been developed and used, not to establish hierarchies of differentiation, as so often in the West, but in order to emphasize an objective unity/plurality relationship. This is achieved partly through linguistic effect, by the repetition of a root word (though an occasional departure from the norm may not imply a break in the series), but undeniably reflects a very real attitude. *Jidai-geki*, *gendai-geki* and also *ken-geki* (sword plays, a more pedantic term for *chambers*) were simply variants on a single object, the film: Tanaka's *The Red Bat* was *jidai-geki*, Mizoguchi's *Sisters of Gion*, *gendai-geki*, and his *Tale of Late Chrysanthemums* a *Meiji-mono* dealing as it does with the Meiji period that comes 'between' *jidai* and *gendai*. Indeed the Japanese divide their films as rigorously as they divide the periods of their history or the many natural seasons of the year. Historical criteria are not the only ones that are used, of course, but the *jidai-Meiji-gendai* series may be regarded as primary to all the others. Like all the others, these categories are purely descriptive, not hierarchical, and they are far more widely used by both critics and general public than any hierarchical distinctions (such as B-picture and main feature, or art-film and pot-boiler) which dominate our Western discourse on film.

1. Of course, many of these films are also part of a series, which further heightens the sense of sameness.

2. After the Pacific War, the genre may be said to have revived in the films of such directors as Inai Tadashi and Yamamoto Satsuo, though the development of class struggle was such that these films reflected far more often than in the 1920s the aspirations of the proletariat.

3. At about the same time, the Communist Party was able to create a special committee called *Prokino*, for the distribution and production of films for workers. There were some forty productions. Of the five surviving films, I have seen only *May Day* (1935) by Iwasaki Akira, a film of newsreel format, predominantly consisting of long shots of demonstrators and police.

The other major type of genre classification is based upon what we might call 'subject-matter'. However, in this case the term covers much more than the general plot outline and setting. *Seinen-eiga* or *haha-mono* are not simply films about youth or about a mother; they are films set in quite specific social milieux, developing a very similar ideological message, with more or less the same set of character types and more or less the same narrative structure. To take a more recent example, practically all of the *yakusa-eiga* ('bad-guy movies') made in the late 1960s and early 1970s – and this means over a hundred films a year – resemble each other closely in setting, subject-matter, structure, pace and tone; they present, in particular, the same actors in the same typed roles with only a change of name.¹ Then *chambara* of the 1920s and the *shōnin-geki* (films about 'townspeople', i.e. the lower middle-classes), which were the dominant genres of their respective periods, also share this extraordinary homogeneity, which of course can also be traced back to the poetry of the Heian period and indeed to almost every Japanese artistic practice. It is often said that Bresson, for example, makes the same film over and over again under different guises; this is the hard core of the *auteur* theory. From a Western point of view, this may be true, but any comparison with the *shōnin-geki* of Ozu or Goshō makes his work seem a veritable zigzag of eclecticism. And despite the important ideological and above all formal differences between the films of these two men, and between their films and those of Shimizu, Shimazu and countless others, they constitute a remarkably unified genre. They maintain a conformity inconceivable in, for example, the gangster movies of Hollywood, with their self-conscious and unrelenting search for a 'new twist'. As stated earlier, the essence of Mizoguchi's or Ozu's films is not originality, but a supremely refined contribution to a continuum.

There appeared towards the end of the 1920s, however, an important genre which to an extent seems to have escaped from this homogeneity, no doubt because it was the first to reflect class struggle rather than the 'unanimist' ideology of traditional Japan. It lasted about five years, and then succumbed to the repression that hit the whole radical movement.² This new genre, called *keiko-eiga* ('tendency film') reflected the impact upon the liberal petty bourgeoisie of such pregnant ideas from the West as 'democracy', 'socialism' and even Marxism.³

Gendai-geki, to which the *keiko-eiga* of course belonged, had developed through the 1920s as an effort to master and to *naturalize* the codes of the Western film.

Insofar as they bore strongly the stamp of traditional attitudes the results remained out-of-phase, de-centred with respect to those codes. We are about to examine the consequences of this. However, when it came to emulating the social cinema of Europe in films inspired, on one level or another, by class struggle in Japan, a fresh need was created for better assimilation of codes so closely associated with realism in the West. And, of course, diversification is one of the Western models. Iwasaki Akira, the celebrated left-wing critic, has described the two main sub-genres into which these films seem to have been divided:⁴ some 'took the alternative of depicting in a very real way the miserable petit bourgeois outlook of the unemployed and wage-slaves euphemistically called [the] salary-man. Others chose to handle serious problems into satirical comedies. The former [i.e. the latter] group is represented by Ozu Yasujiro who directed *The Chorus of Tokyo* (1931) and *I Was Born, But...* (1932); the latter [former] by Uchida Tomu, the director of *The Champion of Revenge* (1931), and Itami Mansaku who directed *The Unrivalled Hero* (1932).'⁵

Besides this general subdivision, it seems that at least the 'serious' tendency films were more differentiated *individually* as well, if only in accordance with the stereotypes of Hollywood and Europe. The half-dozen films of this sort which I have seen including Ozu's *That Night's Wife* and Mizoguchi's *Tokyo March* seem to confirm this hypothesis.

Richie and Anderson explain that the tendency film reached its peak in 1932 and then, due to frequent censorship, degenerated politically into bedroom farces about the lower classes. Others took the form of *rumpen-mono*, films about the lumpen proletariat, a less dangerous topic than bona fide and possibly organized proletarians, less subversive than holding a mirror to the exploited lower middle classes. This genre produced, however, important works of art, including Ozu's *An Inn in Tokyo* (1934).

The entire history of Japanese cinema, like the whole of Japanese art and life, is intricately patterned by genres and sub-genres.⁶ We will return to them incidentally, even though the main thrust of this study is in the direction of the deeper structures of Japan's cinema. For, as I have been at pains to insist, Japan, viewed in and for herself, is an assemblage of just such surface patterns.

4. See *Japan Film Yearbook*, 1937. It is significant of more than one contradiction in the Japan of those years that nearly all of the articles in that very official publication have, overtly or between the lines, a Left bias. Such a situation would have been inconceivable in Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy.

5. These films of Uchida and Itami (*Adachi senshu* and *Kokushi mado*) have not survived, but Uchida's *Police* (*Kessanshikan*, 1933) is a perfect pastiche, well ahead of its time, of the post-war Hollywood police investigation film with social overtones.

6. For a fuller listing and description, the reader is referred to Richie and Anderson (particularly Chapter 13). On this subject they are quite informative, if whimsical.

16. Ozu Yasujiro

OZU YASUJIRO

Ozu began making films in 1927. With the exception of his very first film, *Sword of Penitence* (*Zange no yatba*, 1927), he is known to have specialized from the start in *gendai-geki*. Only six of the first eighteen films which he had directed by the end of 1931 survive today in part or in whole. I have seen only three of these, but *Days of Youth* (*Wakaki hi*, 1929) and *The Lady and the Beard* (*Shukuyō to hige*, 1930) are no doubt good examples of a naturalized form of the Western bourgeois comedy, subtly off-centre by virtue of its very slightness, as it was widely practised in Japan at that time.¹

Whether or not *That Night's Wife* (*Sono yo no tsuma*, 1930) resembles other early Ozu, whether or not it resembles other films of the Western 'social' tendency, I have no way of knowing. The film is, however, fascinating evidence of the impact which American films and Western culture had, not only upon Ozu but upon a sizeable portion of the Japanese middle and lower middle classes. It is an adaptation of a piece of American pulp fiction. An unemployed office-worker commits a robbery to bring food to his starving wife and medicine to his sick child. That same night, a plainclothesman comes to arrest him but the wife manages to get her hands on his revolver and the trio spend the night in tense confrontation, with the detective held vigilantly at bay. Overcome by fatigue, the couple doze off and awake to discover the detective has the upper hand again. However, his heart has been softened by his glimpse of the man's personal tragedy and he gives him a chance to escape. The husband nobly pretends to pay his debt to society; he and the detective march off side by side into the dawn.

In addition to this familiar pattern² the film, though clearly set 'in some Japanese city', scarcely shows us a single traditional artefact (the couple's tenement room has Western beds, chairs, etc.), and the few studio exteriors show an anonymous concrete metropolis, close to the settings of *The Crowd* or *Splendour*. The film reveals, moreover, a

thorough mastery of the Western system, with only an occasional false eyelid-match (though we shall see the importance of this apparently insignificant detail). There are a great many descriptive pan-shots, aimed at stressing the squalor of the principal set. There are also, however, close-ups of objects which do not possess the same connotative weight, which appear rather to serve as *sheer transition*. The most typical example is a series which, near the beginning of the film, affords a transition between the sick child in her bed and the father crouching in the shadow of a building prior to the robbery.

- close-up of the ceiling-lamp above the girl's bed
- potted flower on the window-sill
- tree foliage and a street lamp
- high-angle shot of shadows of foliage projected on the balcony with the sidewalk in the background below

Though this procedure is somewhat simplistic in its linearity, it very directly prefigures a strategy that soon became essential to Ozu's film-making.

There are also a great many 'spoken titles', but the film paradoxically pays tribute to that significant avatar of dominant ideology in the West, the doctrine that 'the picture should tell the story'. For these titles are totally redundant, so explicit is the imagery, so carefully spelled out in visual terms is the narrative. Not, of course, that directors such as Murnau, Leni or Lubitsch, despite their frankly condescending attitude towards a public judged capable of perceiving only one idea at a time, actually doubled the silent pantomime with equivalent titles. On the contrary, the films which best illustrated the ideology of the pictorial narrative — such as *Der Letzte Mann* and *Ménilmontant* — eliminated titles altogether.

In Ozu's film, which otherwise reproduces the codes of the Western all-picture narrative, titles re-enact, at the surface of the screen, the pre-emptive role of the *benshi* (who was certainly part of the performance). Possibly the great explicitness of the images and tautological character of the titles were intended as *'bershi repellents'*. Whatever the case, the narrative saturation of these images situate this film at an opposite pole from Ozu's mature works of the mid-1930s.

Of Ozu's silent films, those best known in the West today are three comedies made during the next three years: *Chorus of Tokyo* (*Tōkyō no gasshō*, 1931), *I Was Born*, *Bur...* (*Umarete wa mita keredo*, 1932) and *Passing Fancy* (*Dekigokoro*, 1933). These films were experiments for the masterpieces to come. In them Ozu appears to be eliminating gradually a certain laxness in shot composition (particularly

1. I have not been able to see the recently discovered *Be Cheerful* (*Hogoraka ni susume*, 1930) or *I Flunked*, *Bur...* (*Rakudai wa shita keredo*, 1930), nor have I seen the twenty-minute fragment of the earlier *I Graduated*, *Bur...* (*Daijoku wa deta keredo*, 1929).

2. As familiar to the Japanese as to us, unjust suffering, revolt and penitence before the social order are an established theme in Japan (cf. the *Chishinshū* theme). Ozu's choice of this obscure piece of hack-work clearly repeats the pattern of Japan's discovery of Western literature according to a principle of recognition.

154

noticeable in *That Night's Wife*). It is also in these films that the systematic low-angle frontality, which has elicited so much comment from critics, begins to appear. More generally and more significantly, we witness the gradual abandoning of that narrative density so typical of the West, that relentless chain of diegetic events codified by Griffith's generation and brought to the peak of perfection by Lang in the first *Mabuse*. To Westerners used to that narrative density, Ozu's films, like so many Japanese films, will seem increasingly 'halting', 'aimless', 'vague', full of 'dead spots'. Abandoning certain Western codes, however, did not constitute for Ozu an end in itself. He does not stop at refusing, at a formless 'de-construction'; he organizes the resulting gaps and ambiguities with a refinement attained by none of his contemporaries. The dilution of narrative is associated with a growing stylization of editing procedures. Camera movements are subjected to a swift radicalization through numerical reduction, specialization and geometrization. The pan-shot, in particular, was soon to be eliminated completely. Ozu's comedies of this period, while perhaps recalling American silent comedy, are significantly closer to the Soviet school (*Mr West, Bed and Sofa*). They display certain attitudes towards editing (an awareness that the cut was not to be 'taken lightly') and towards camera movements (an urge to use them sparingly) which were common to some of the most advanced French and German as well as Soviet directors during the late silent period.

By these Western norms, *Chorus of Tokyo* – a portrait of a white-collar worker and his family – is the most patently *recherché* of these three comedies; it is also the closest to slapstick. The celebrated gag of the wad of banknotes that falls into the gentlemen's urinal and then is spread out all over the office to dry is not entirely typical of the film, whose overall structure does, nonetheless, hinge on a succession of gags, however slight in some instances these may be. Far more discreet, and at the same time representative of the editing subtleties which already point to the future, is the following gag sequence that takes place in the main character's home as he is dressing to go out.

- close-up of a table-top with a hat and mirror; the man's hand enters the shot and picks up the mirror
- medium close-up of mirror as he polishes it on his trouser leg, crossing the room
- 180° reversal: medium close-up as he stands knotting his tie, then looks off-screen left
- low-angle shot of factory chimneys against the sky
- medium shot of main character from behind; the ball is thrown into the shot from the left

- close-up of ball bouncing on *tatami*
- repeat of previous shot; he picks up the ball and throws it out of shot again (left)
- medium shot of child catching ball from off-screen left ('wrong' direction match)
- return to shot of father; child enters shot from left

Now, while the 'one-idea-per-shot principle' is still maintained in this brick-on-brick editing scheme, the sequence is revealing in several ways. First, it attests to a tendency to dilute narrative consistency, which becomes increasingly noticeable in Ozu's work. Late silent films like *An Inn In Tokyo* and *A Story of Floating Weeds* will be almost exclusively composed of such 'mood pieces'. Secondly, the shot of the sky with chimneys, though tenuously 'justified' by a glance at what retrospectively may be assumed to have been a window, prefigures, by its composition, placing and quiet disruptiveness, the kind of de-centering through more or less unsituated, off-screen elements which will soon develop a complex semi-autonomy, as we shall see. Although the incorrect direction match may seem an insignificant lapse, it heightens the autonomy, the 'otherness', of the space in which the cutaway shot places the child; it is also related to the function of the exterior cutaway and has a similarly premonitory significance with regard to future films.

I Was Born, But... and *Passing Fancy* are both pitched in a somewhat lower key than *Chorus of Tokyo*. The plot lines are even more slender and the gags far less gross. Both are centred around children. The former shows the tribulations caused their lower middle-class parents by a pair of particularly obstreperous but delightful brothers. The latter deals with the relationship between an unemployed labourer (played by Sakamoto Takeshi, one of the most remarkable members of Ozu's growing troupe of actors) and the young son whom he is trying to raise in precarious circumstances. All of these films show Ozu's preference for strict formalization which will develop into the unparalleled beauty of the films of the later 1930s and early 1940s, before its gradual petrification in academic rigidity during the post-war era. Yet he is still, one senses, casting about for new strategies. The limitation of camera movement, for example, produces interesting attempts to use tracking not merely as a descriptive device, but as an organizational procedure. The barber-shop sequence in *Passing Fancy* is bracketed by slow, contrary tracking shots combined with sophisticated ellipses through dissolves. All such punctuating 'opticals' will soon disappear completely for reasons to be discussed later, but this architectonic use of lateral tracking

will recur again in *A Story of Floating Weeds*, where it has much the same function, but as part of a sustained pattern articulating the film as a whole. Similarly, the use of a repeated gesture associated with a recurring frame (the main character in *Passing Fancy* putting on or taking off his coat) to give rhythmic pattern to a series of brief sequences, is another type of structure that will reappear in later films, though much less obtrusively and, again, as part of their basic structure.

Although *Passing Fancy* is said to have been made a few months after *Woman (or Women) of Tokyo* (*Tokyo no onna*, 1933) I find it difficult to believe, on internal evidence, that this was actually the case. True, the rather sudden change of genre with this film may have accelerated Ozu's development. Whatever the case, *Woman of Tokyo* is the earliest film in which two important components of Ozu's system of representation are completely in place, and they will remain constant in his work until the very end of his career.

Although its theme is thoroughly Japanese, the film constitutes a rather strange return to the type of plot and characterization of *That Night's Wife*. A poor student and his sister share a flat. He does not know that in order to finance his studies, she supplements her meagre secretarial earnings by working nights as a taxi-dancer/prostitute. The young man's fiancée accidentally discovers the truth (*her* brother is a police official and the police seem to have been particularly concerned with private morality at that time) and unthinkingly blurs it out to him. Unable to bear the shame, he commits suicide.³

Two major aspects of Ozu's systemics⁴ figure prominently for the first time in this film. Their theoretical implications are of great importance.

The reverse-field figure with matching eyelines (and an acute angle of incidence to camera axis) was not merely the last component of the dominant Western editing system; it was, as well, the most crucial. It was this procedure which made it possible to implicate the spectator in the eye contacts of the actors (and ultimately in their 'word contacts'), to include him or her in the mental and 'physical' space of the diegesis. Clearly such a procedure was basic to the illusionist fantasy/identification situation. For many reasons, as we have seen, the Western representational system as a whole had gained very slow acceptance in Japan. Reverse-field editing, in particular, was still being awkwardly and sparsely used by a large majority of Japanese film-makers when Ozu began his work. He himself assimilated the Western codes of *décaloupage*, handling them with increasing ease as he went along. One anomaly,

however, persists all through the comedy period; he seemed never quite 'sure' about or 'properly' concerned with eyeline and screen-direction matching. Sometimes these were 'right', sometimes not. Since this was still common in Japan and not uncommon in Europe and even America, this might not seem extraordinary. In 1933, however (in my opinion, and despite the lost films, it was in *Woman of Tokyo*) he began systematically to set up his camera in such a way as to produce invariably incorrect eyeline matches. Moreover, he continued this practice until the end of his career. The angles of incidence nearly always match; the directions never do. Once one is aware of this trait, one necessarily sees it as the consequence of a deliberate choice, as part of a fundamental textual economy. This conclusion is borne out, with a disarming directness, by the following anecdote, reported by Sato Tadao.⁵ At some point during Ozu's later career (after 1938, unfortunately, the exact date seems unknown), Ozu's editor, Hamamura Yoshiyasu, decided it was time to call the master's attention to the fact that his eyeline matching was 'wrong'. In order to settle the argument which naturally ensued, Ozu decided to try it — both ways. He shot a two-person reverse-field sequence as he normally did, matching the eyelines 'incorrectly', then shot it again the 'right' way. When the two montage sets were screened, Ozu's only comment is said to have been, 'There is no difference.' Hamamura could only let the matter drop, while Ozu went on imperturbably setting up reverse-fields 'the wrong way'. I will not presume to interpret Ozu's cryptic 'There's no difference.' He had already, at a crucial stage in his career, made a definitive choice between the two procedures, after using them interchangeably. The choice must be regarded, therefore, as part of a coherent economy within which there was a difference. The fact remains that by this choice Ozu symbolically (in the strongest sense of the word) challenged the two basic principles of the dominant Western mode of representation. He challenged the principle of *continuity*, for the 'bad' eyeline match produces a 'jolt' in the editing flow, a moment of confusion in the spectator's sense of orientation to diegetic space, requiring a moment's readjustment. The resulting effect of hiatus emphasizes the disjunctive nature of the shot-change, which the developed 'editing rules' had perceptually obliterated.

Even more fundamentally, by undermining the verisimilitude of face-to-face reverse-field situations, Ozu challenged the principle of the *inclusion of the viewer in the diegesis* as invisible, transparent relay in the communion of two characters. Once the spectator is unconsciously obliged to rectify with each new shot-change his mental position

3. According to Sato Tadao, author of a major study on Ozu and his work, the 'original' script indicated that the girl worked nights . . . to pay her membership dues in the (outlawed) Communist Party. Ozu preferred to avoid a clash with the censors. While this might have made the film a good deal more 'original', not to say bizarre, I cannot see that it would have made it a greater step towards *An Inn in Tokyo* or *Only Son*. . . not furthered the interests of the working-class movement.

4. An association of inter-related but semi-autonomous systems. The concept is also useful in dealing with such Western directors as Dreyer or Godard.

5. Unpublished English translation of his *Ozu Yasujiro no get-jitsu*. Asahi Shinbun, Tokyo, 1971.

with respect to the players, the trap of participation no longer functions in quite the same way.

Various explications of this development have been proposed by Japanese critics. Most of them are postulated upon the idea that it is a device meant to express 'incommunicability' or some such neo-Western cliché. Sato Tadao offers, somewhat guardedly, a slightly more sober version, suggesting that Ozu's characters speak to themselves rather than to their partners. No single 'explication' can satisfactorily account for Ozu's decision. Its full implications can be grasped only by situating it within the whole set of seminal choices which subtend Ozu's mature work. Once described, they are seen to offer a discreet but devastating critique of the fundamental tenets of the dominant cinema.

Apart from the young Naruse, no other Japanese director seems to have imitated Ozu in his systematic disregard for eyeline matching, not even those who, like Shimizu, were otherwise indifferent to the Western codes. One cannot therefore simply claim that linear spatial orientation is not 'natural' to the Japanese as it is to Westerners. It has, however, been suggested that for the Japanese 'the entire experience of space in the most essential respects is different from that of Western culture.' In the Ryoanji rock garden in Kyoto, 'the grouping is such that no matter where one sits to contemplate the scene, one of the rocks that make up the garden is always hidden'; the Japanese 'believe that memory and imagination should always participate in perceptions.'⁶ This implies that any spatial arrangement is a 'text' that requires a reading; it is not simply given and received *at face value*. Ozu's approach, not only to eyeline but also to screen-direction and -position (the 180° match was to become increasingly prevalent in his work) does express a typically Japanese approach to the perception of three dimensions by stressing that *their representation is not to be taken for granted*.

We shall see how this reading tallies with other aspects of Ozu's work. For the present, we must examine the second feature of Ozu's systematics, which had reached full development in *Woman of Tokyo*: the very particular use of 'cutaway still-lives'. (At times, landscapes fill the same function, and in the silent films, the 'still-lives are occasionally filmed by a moving camera, as in the opening shot of this film.) The particularity of these shots is that *they suspend the diegetic flow*, using a considerable range of strategies and producing a variety of complex relationships. With some hesitation, I will call these images *pillow-shots*, proposing a loose analogy with the 'pillow-word' of classical Japanese poetry.⁷ As we shall see, they also play at times

the role of 'pivot-words' and for this reason the term I have chosen is not entirely adequate.⁸

The pillow-shot may also be regarded as an expression of a fundamentally Japanese trait. Like Ozu's mismatching, it is not simply a signature, an individual stylistic trait, but a culturally and complexly determined sign of dissent from the world-view implicit in the Western mode. This mode, of course, is profoundly *anthropocentric*, as demonstrated by the rules of centering applicable both to composition within the frame and to the whole camera/diegesis relationship. Prolonged or 'unmotivated' absence of human beings from the screen in a fiction feature film⁹ functions as a departure from the codes. In Antonioni's *Eclipse*, this departure is received as a sophisticated poetic statement. In a more advanced film like Paulino Viot's *Contacos*, it has a critical, aggressive effect.

Ozu's pillow-shots have a similar de-centering effect when the camera focuses for a moment, often a long one, on some inanimate aspect of Man's environment.¹⁰ People are perhaps known to be near, but for the moment they are not visible, and a rooftop, a street-light, laundry drying on a line, a lampshade or a tea-kettle is offered as *centre of attention*. It is the tension between the suspension of human presence (of the diegesis) and its potential return which animates some of Ozu's most thoughtful work, making these shots anything but decorative vignettes. It should be emphasized that while Ozu developed the pillow-shot to a degree of unparalleled refinement, it was used by other film-makers of the period. Naruse, Shimizu and others introduce these shots into their films. And from the evidence of Tsakata Tomotaka's earliest surviving film, *Town of Love* (*Ai no machi*, 1928),¹¹ Ozu did not invent the procedure; the future director of *Five Scouts* anticipated the master's later uses of the pillow-shot by some three or four years.

Ozu's approach to the pillow-shot cannot be reduced to a simple, endlessly reiterative assertion of a single truth – that Man is not the centre of the Universe – however fundamental it may be. These shots intervene in a certain kind of discourse, and each de-centering effect possesses its own specificity. These shots cause a suspension of the diegesis;¹² this statement requires qualification. For, as analysis will demonstrate, while these shots never contribute to the progress of the narrative proper, they often refer to a character or a set, presenting or re-presenting it out of narrative context. The space from which these references are made is invariably presented as outside the diegesis, as a pictorial space on another plane of 'reality' as it were, even when the artefacts shown are, as is often the

8. A Japanese critic of the 1960s (Naibu Kenosuke) has called these shots *karen shio* ('curtain shots'), comparing them with the punctuating function of the stage curtain in the Western theatre. This term has not been generally adopted in Japan and I feel that it is a misleading oversimplification. The traditional technical term 'cutaway', though materially correct, is also unsatisfactory by itself, as it does not do justice to the complex specificity of this figure in Ozu's work.

9. Unless it conveys some such clear, unambiguous message as 'Sunday' or 'spooky house'.

10. The half-dozen films made by audio-visually illiterate Navajo Indians under the non-directive guidance of the semiologist Sol Worth and the ethnographer John Adair offer a striking similitude with the non-anthropocentric pillow-shot. In nearly all the films, on-going human action is frequently inter-cut with 'gratuitous' shots of the surroundings (a stone, a door, a landscape). The makers' general lack of concern with matching, as well as the actual editing context, precludes any reading of these shots as 'cinemy' continuity-saving cutaways. We are clearly dealing with a cultural and ideological attitude much closer to the Far-Eastern view of the relations between man and his surroundings than to our own. (See Worth, Sol, and Adair, John, *Through Navajo Eyes*.)

11. A print is preserved in the Cinéma-thèque Royale de Belgique.

12. The suspension of the diegetic flow is not unrelated to that suspension of the production of meaning which characterizes the practices of Zen Buddhism. Roland Barthes (op. cit., pp. 97-101) has set forth the premises of this materialist reading, while commenting upon the annexation of Zen by neo-Christian ideology as an 'answer', proposed by a certain Anglo-American bourgeoisie, to the unbearable tensions associated with the crisis of State Monopoly Capitalism. Paul Schrader's *Transcendental Style in Film* is a recent attempt to conceptualize Ozu's films into this neo-spiritualist trend.

6. Hall, Edward T., *The Hidden Dimension*, p. 153.

7. *Makurakoto* or pillow-word: a conventional epithet or attribute for a word; it usually occupies a short, five-syllable line and modifies a word, usually the first, in the next line. Some pillow-words are unclear in meaning; those whose meanings are known, function rhetorically to raise the tone and to some degree also function as images' (Brower and Miner, op. cit., p. 508.)

Fig. 10. Ozu Yasujiro, *Woman of Tokyo*

case, seen previously or subsequently in shots that belong wholly to the diegesis. This exteriority, the result of many factors, cannot be defined in simple terms. One of its primary signs is the stillness of these shots in a context whose movement ensures diegetic continuity, tells us that the imaginary referent is a *living world*. The shots also imply exteriority because they lack a compositional centre. This is why the phrase 'still-life' so often seems apt. They cannot be correctly described as merely shots of lamp-posts or of laundry hanging on the line in the same manner that a diegetic shot can be described as 'close-up of John' or 'long-shot of Sally'. Unmoving, often lasting a long time (seldom less than five seconds, which we at least experience as long for an 'unpeopled' shot), fully articulated from the graphic point of view, they demand to be *scanned* like paintings, not like *inhabited* shots which, even in Ozu, are relatively more centred around characters.

The complex structural function of the pillow-shot is best understood through the opening sequence of *Woman of Tokyo*. Admittedly not one of Ozu's mature films, it nevertheless already provides excellent illustration of the use of this figure, crucial to his objective break with the linear approach that had dominated the cinema of the West

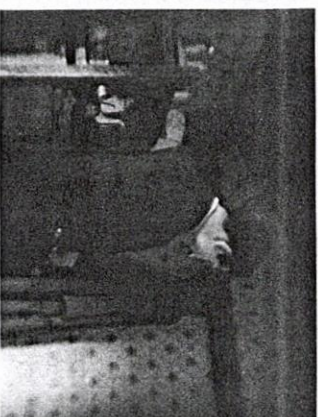
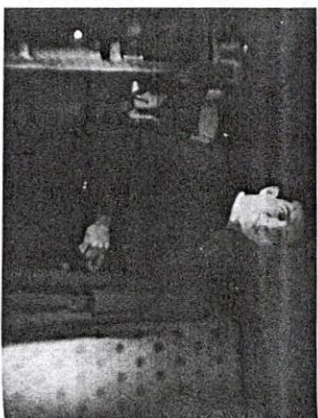
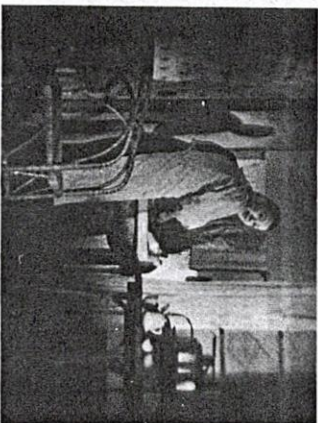
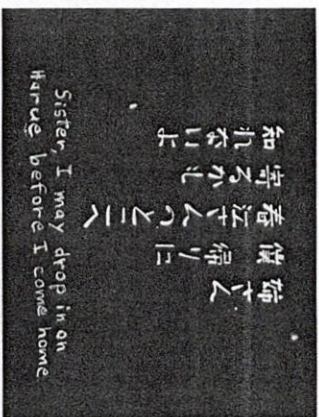
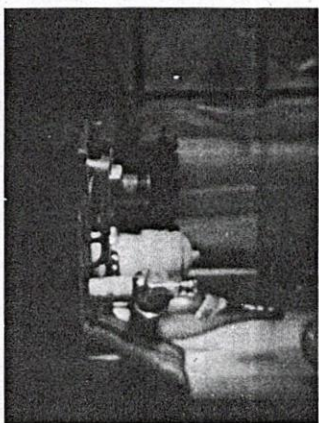
for twenty years and of which *That Night's Wife* had provided such a reasonable facsimile.

Like all of Ozu's films, *Woman of Tokyo* opens with a pillow-shot.¹³

- very slow dolly-back from a close-up of a gas-burner to a larger shot of the corner of the room (Fig. 10, Pl. 1); the shot is held for several seconds
- *apparent* ps¹⁴ of a low table (on it are breakfast remains) seen at a rather low angle (actually, what might be the leg of a pair of trousers hanging in the background is the *perfectly motionless* leg of the brother) (Pl. 2)
- waist-length shot of the sister washing up; she turns towards the camera and speaks (Pl. 3); incorrect eyeline match with the following
- knee-length shot of brother answering (Pl. 4)
- title: 'Sister, I may drop in on Harue before I come home' (Pl. 5)
- medium shot: sister goes back to work (Pl. 6)
- brother continues to dress (Pl. 7), then sits down; match on movement
- 180° reversal: brother starts to put on his socks (Pl. 8)

13. In transcriptions pillow-shots are subsequently indicated by the initials ps.

14. As defined above: absence of people, of pro-filmic movement, etc. However, as this example shows, a shot will often be *compositional*, beginning or ending 'pillow', ending or beginning 'diegetic'.



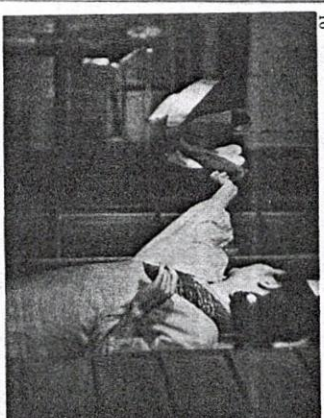
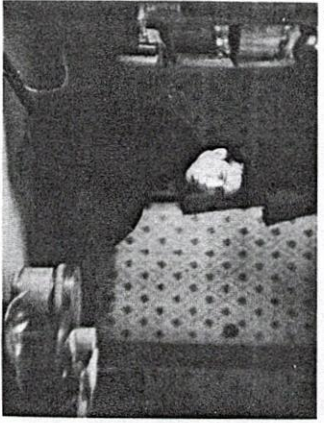
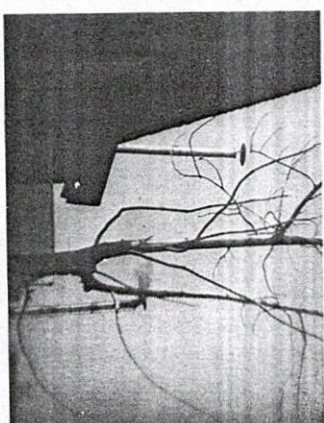
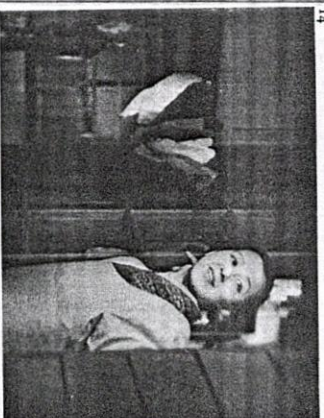
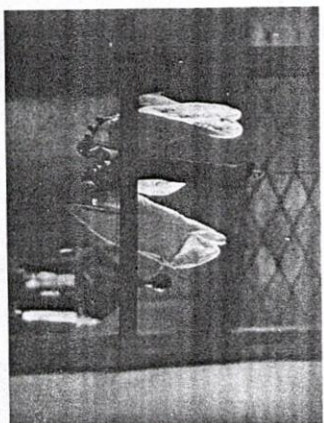
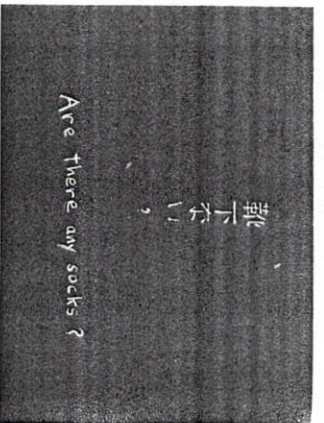


Fig. 10. Ozu Yasujiro, *Woman of Tokyo*

- 180° reversal: close-up of leg and foot (hole in sock) (Pl. 9)
- title: 'Are there any socks?' (Pl. 10)
- ps: outside the window, socks are hung up to dry (Pl. 11)
- medium shot of sister looking out of window (Pl. 12a); she turns to brother (Pl. 12b); incorrect eyeline match with following
- medium shot of brother (Pl. 13)
- close-up of foot; he has removed his sock and is massaging it (Pl. 14)
- ps: near-repeat of window with socks (Pl. 15)
- exterior shot of socks and window; window slides back but it is five seconds before the sister appears, looking not at socks, but past camera (Pl. 16)
- ps: tree silhouetted against sky with rooftops (Pl. 17)
- return to sister; she turns and reaches for a pair of socks (Pl. 18)
- long-shot of room, brother in foreground, sister at window in back (Pl. 19a);



Fig. 10. Ozu Yasujiro, *Woman of Tokyo*

- she brings him socks (Pl. 19b) (incorrect eyeline match with next shot)
- title: ‘You have to pay your tuition today?’ (Pl. 20)
- 180° reversal: medium shot of brother, kimono of sister in foreground (Pl. 21)
- reversal: knee-length shot of sister (incorrect eyelines) (Pl. 22)
- (The brother’s answer, not shown, is: ‘There’s no hurry’)

The very first shots of this sequence illustrate perfectly one of the most frequent *modus operandi* of the pillow-shot, particularly in the silent films: a *gradual* transition from the inanimate ‘universe’ of the pillow-shot to the animate world of the diegesis. This type of transition is frequent in this film and in *An Inn in Tokyo*, *A Story of Floating Weeds*, *A Mother Ought to be Loved*,¹⁵ and in *Only Son*. The opening of *Woman of Tokyo* provides one such transition through four successive frames, of which the first two are linked by a slow, brief tracking movement.¹⁶ Each of the first three, while they present artefacts suggesting human presence, give no hint of the actual, off-screen presence of human beings. In other words the flat, obviously inhabited, might be empty. In the non-diegetic, frozen time of the pillow-shot, it is empty. This fundamental uncertainty (are

there or are there not people ‘present’ off-screen; if so, where? how many? who?) is an essential dimension of the pillow-shot. The third shot in the series contains, moreover, an element of ambiguity, likely to be read only in retrospect. Such effects of *trompe-l’œil* are not uncommon in Ozu’s films. As motionless as those that precede, the *tab-leau* that appears here also seems ‘uninhabited’ at first; it, too, seems to present ‘abandoned’ artefacts, like those of the previous shot. Yet the trouser-leg in the background is actually ‘alive’. Or rather, and here is the crux of the matter, it comes alive in the next shot, so that the previous shot is perceived retroactively as ambivalent, as an interlocking pivot or transition between the stasis of the pillow-shot and the ‘life’ of the diegesis.

This use of the procedure is particularly remarkable in *An Inn in Tokyo* (*Tōkyō no yado*, 1935), another portrait of an unemployed worker (again played by Sakamoto Takeshi), this time with two boys to raise. It is probably the masterpiece of Ozu’s silent period. Very near the beginning of the film, after a brief sequence in the industrial wasteland which is the rather abstract main setting of the film, there occurs a pillow-shot of a lamp-post with a poster on it advertising ‘Rabies-prevention week’. This announcement plays a role in the future development of the slender narrative but no one is seen looking at the poster, either before or after its presentation. For this and other reasons adduced below in discussing the narrative function of certain pillow-shots, it must be considered, at one level, as equivalent to the next shot in the series, which shows the signboard of the inn, occupying a discreetly peripheral position in a beautiful window composition with a lantern. The next shot continues with the utter stillness of a pillow-shot, but while the centre of the screen is occupied by one of Ozu’s ‘signatures’ (a certain form of glass lampshade), in the lower right-hand corner and completely out of focus (it is the lampshade which is sharp) is the motionless face of a small boy asleep. We next cut to a closer shot of the same boy, still asleep and still absolutely motionless. The next shot shows a man on a bed, also asleep and motionless, but in the foreground and in focus, while in the background, out of focus, are the father and his two sons, equally unmoving. At last, one of the sons almost imperceptibly moves his arm, but it is not until the sixth shot in the series – the first of several close-ups which follow – that full movement finally returns, and the diegesis acquires its usual consistency.

The crucial role of the hard-and-soft focus relationship within such ‘pillow-structures’ is further illustrated by the last three shots of the opening sequence in *Woman of Tokyo* described in part above. After her brother has gone,

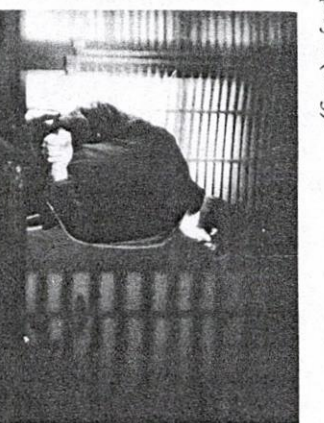
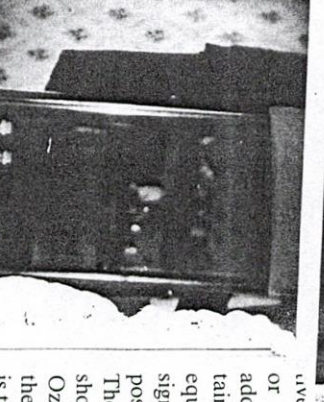
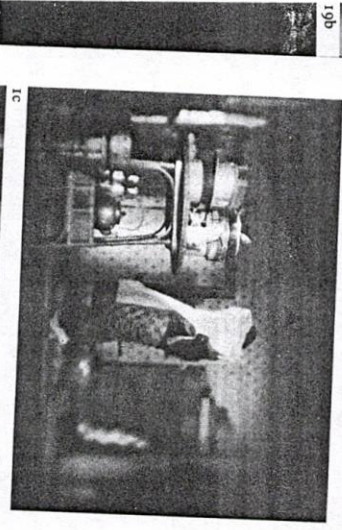
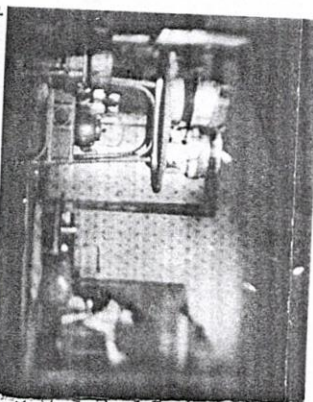
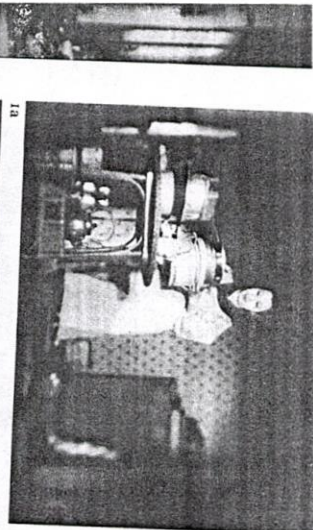


Fig. 11. Ozu Yasujiro, *Woman of Tokyo*

17. And all emblematic of the Japanese home. Nearly all the pillow-shots carry with them the cluster of incidental symbolism traditionally attached to nearly every object – plant, tool, decoration, etc. – which is part of the traditional way of life.

hasized by the fact that the focus is such as to blur the an centre of the diegesis (soft-focus in the pillow-shots then used for this kind of de-centering).

s pillow-shots come in series, this ambivalent image is a nade to the sequence's closing shot. After an intervening e-up in which movement, definition, etc. ensure 'nor- diegetic production (Pl. 2), there is a close-up in the or of the sister completing her make-up (Pl. 3a). We see how an 'animate', fully diegetic shot can become a ow-shot: the sister leaves the shot, the mirror remains y (Pl. 3b) and this out-of-focus, reflected image is held ive seconds, so that the shot is quickly transformed into animate pillow-shot – an effect facilitated, of course, e lack of any off-screen sound. The next shot is sepa- from the previous one neither by dissolve, fade nor 'punctuation'. Even at this early stage, Ozu's elimina- of such devices was essential for developing the full valence of the pillow transitions. The next shot in the e, then, seems entirely unrelated to the empty mirror: re still in the frozen space-time 'outside' the diegesis. in retrospect does this 'still-life with gloves' (Pl. 4) ce a narrative 'elsewhere and elsewhere' as we discover presence and profession of the man who has just shed n: a policeman come to see the sister's employer (Pl. 5).

the sister potters about the room (Fig. 11, Pl. 1a), re., her smock (Pl. 1b) and finally settles down at the far enu., refer to a character, as in this instance, or to a setting, the room before her make-up box (Pl. 1c). She is quite ou., with the gas-burner and tea-kettle which serve through- of focus, but the camera remains in this position for nine as introductory emblems of the brother's and sister's seconds. We note the looming presence in the foreground. It may also be used as authorial signature; such are the of objects such as tea-kettle and rice-cooker, all typical lampshades which appear in so many Ozu films (two pillow-shot objects).¹⁷ They have figured, or will figure, ire to be seen in Fig. 11, Pls. 1a-c, although in this film the pillow-shots in this film. Their presence here and the facie does not appear in a pillow-shot until the very end).

that the sister can scarcely be seen to move during the final ne very sophisticated use of the pillow-shot as recurring nine seconds (her apparent stillness is heightened by themblem of a family and its house is found in one of his last scale and low definition of her image) make this one onasterpieces, *Toda Brother and Sister* (*Toda no kyōdai*, those 'semi-pillow-shots'. This 'pillow-status' is further 1941). A motif of potted plants and a caged bird reappears

in a variety of compositions throughout the film. In this instance, particularly close to the actual pillow-word of poetry, the emblematic function is more general, more ambivalent than that of the gloves in *Woman of Tokyo*, or of the sword in its scabbard which introduces the sequences in the home of the fiancée's policeman brother.

And indeed, from the early to the later films, the relations of the pillow-shot to the diegesis evolved and became less specific. It might be objected, for example, that the shots of drying socks (Fig. 10, Pl. 11) and of a tree against the sky (Pl. 17) are not pillow-shots at all but an integral part of the diegesis. In terms of visual style, both of these shots are pillow-shots. However, unlike the 'purest' pillow-shots, which transmit no diegetic information beyond the suggestion of a timeless place or presence, these shots do participate in the diegetic movement: they respond to what preceded ('yes, there are socks', 'the sister sees that it is a fine day'). Moments in which 'the picture tells the story' were already rare enough in Ozu (the only other one in this sequence being the close-up of the hole in the sock, Pl. 9). Yet we do find a few more such instances in the silent films, such as the bicycle in a house entrance, indicating the son's presence in his foster-mother's house, in *A Story of Floating Weeds*, and this later narrative annexation of the pillow-shot is actually more systematic than the examples in *Woman of Tokyo*. The shot of the socks, in its second appearance (Pl. 15), is diegetically superfluous, and is thus partly expelled from the diegesis. The bicycle, on the contrary, while it conveys each time the same message of presence, brings fresh temporal data to the progress of the narrative ('this is another visit'). However, this direct narrative function was gradually phased out, and disappeared completely in the sound films, which is not surprising.

Another sequence in *Woman of Tokyo* seems worth citing here, precisely because of the way in which semi-narrative functions are incorporated into a pillow-structure: at the end of the film, when the sister has come to the fiancée's flat to find out if she has seen the missing brother, a child appears to tell the fiancée that she is wanted on the phone. The fiancée goes out and the sister is left alone.

- she glances to her left
- ps: kimono hung up to dry, framed in the doorway to an adjoining room
- she looks up
- ps: in the right foreground, out of focus, one of those 'signature' lampshades and in the left background, in focus,

a clock indicating 8:20 (The information offered as to the time of day is the diegetic centre of the shot - the presumed object of the sister's gaze - but while this is made explicit by the focus, it is contradicted in part by the predominance in the composition of the lampshade)

- ps: interior of a watch-maker's shop: clocks all over the wall and, in the foreground, a telephone receiver off the hook; the fiancée enters the frame, smiles a thank you at someone off-screen and picks up the receiver

(A titled, cross-cut sequence sets forth a conversation with her brother in which he tells her of her fiancée's suicide)

- numbed, she slowly hangs up the receiver
- ps: composition of clocks on wall
- fiancée standing by phone with hand still on receiver
- ps: clocks on wall (different shot)
- ps: clock and lamp seen earlier in fiancée's flat (this time the composition is laterally reversed, and the lamp on the left is now in focus, while in the background to the right, the clock, still indicating 8:20, is blurred)
- ps: (actually a 'false' one, not unlike the second shot of the film) shows the traditional charcoal brazier with tea-kettle and, in the foreground, the motionless pattern of the sister's kimono
- in front close-up, the sister looks up as the fiancée opens the door

Several observations are in order here. The shot of the kimono drying and that of the first lamp-with-clock composition are both, through the sister's off-screen gaze, related to the diegesis. Visually, however, they partake of the timeless stillness of the pillow-shot, and their diegetic relationship is in no sense part of a chain of necessary meaning, like the socks-shot analysed earlier. Thus, for a moment, the diegesis is suspended, only to 'recover' as we cut to the telephone-with-clocks. The cutaway to the clocks on the shop-wall as the fiancée hangs up acts as a diversion; we seem to have entered another transitional suspension, but the action is then resumed exactly where we had left off. The shot was in fact a suspenseful parenthesis. However, the appearance at this point of a very similar pillow-shot is, on the contrary, the first in a transitional series which constitutes a double variation on the earlier series. The cut from clocks on shop-wall to clock-and-lamp is a *signifying* (diegetic) reversal of the earlier transition (it 'takes us back' to the flat) while the second of these shots is a *non-signifying* reversal of the first shot in the earlier transition (reversal of positions and focus relationship). The third of these pillow-shots, moreover, is a reference to another 'pillow-structure' (the tea-kettle and brazier have

been emblematic of the fiancée's room throughout the film). In this particularly dramatic sequence the suspension of meaning itself acquires the weight of pathos and, thereby, a second meaning, a connotation. Such rhetoric was soon to disappear completely – together with scenarios like this one. Structurally, however, these early pillow-shots function according to a model which was to remain essentially unchanged for thirty years.

The final shots of Tokyo exemplify the pillow-shot at its purest, as a *satōri*-like¹⁸ suspension of meaning; they prefigure its use in the most mature films. Scandal-mongering reporters try to interview the sister and fiancée over the brother's corpse; then we see them back in the street, going about their business; they come upon a piece of 'real news' posted on a telegraph pole; they go out of the frame, chatting merrily. After a few seconds there is a cut to a close-shot of the nondescript base of the telegraph pole, then to a dolly-shot along the kerb-stone, in the course of which the image fades out. Not even the ironic tone of the first of these pillow-shots (the news-bill, the 'emptiness' left by the reporters) can be said to survive in the semantic void of the last two, which provide a paradigm of de-centering and meaninglessness, the filmic equivalent of the Zen-master's stick-blow answers to his disciples' earnest questions.

I shall cite further significant instances of the pillow-shot in dealing with Ozu's later films, but first we must examine the other aspects of his systemics.

Camera movements, severely restricted in number and specialized in *Woman of Tokyo*, were gradually to disappear almost altogether. The successive stages of this disappearance are of considerable interest in themselves. I have already referred to the occasional moving semi-pillow-shots in *A Story of Floating Weeds*. In the subsequent *An Inn in Tokyo*, there is still a surprisingly large number of track shots, but these, without exception, are used to 'freeze' apparent screen-movement; they are follow-shots or reverse follow-shots that accompany the wretched father as he wanders aimlessly through the industrial suburbs of Tokyo with his two boys, occasionally making a half-hearted attempt to find work. The same frame is maintained throughout each given shot. Camera movement is used to reproduce, at moments when a relatively ample pro-filmic movement is indispensable to the narrative, that principle of immobility central to the pillow-shots and which came to dominate Ozu's work as a whole, especially after he began to work with sound. Paradoxically, this gradual absorption of the diegesis into the static world of the pillow-shots, though essential to Ozu's development,

ultimately contributed directly to the frozen academicism of the films that followed *There Was a Father*, made in 1942.

In *Only Son*, Ozu's first sound film, the first and almost the only camera movements appear as a sudden, startling departure from the principle of camera fixity which characterizes the opening section of the film. These are a series of gently weaving low-angle shots taken from behind the mudguard of a taxi which, we soon learn, is conveying the old mother and her son, whom she has come to visit for the first time in the city. In *Toda Brother and Sister*, only a single camera movement appears, in the film's penultimate shot, a very brief pull-back when the sister is disagreeably surprised not to find her brother in his room and realizes that he has not kept a promise of marriage he has made. The poetic aptness of this effect is completed by a long shot of the brother running on the beach. In his last masterpiece, *There Was a Father*, he eliminated camera movement altogether.

This development is not to be explained by any single reason; these directorial positions form a coherent whole. However, even as early as *Woman of Tokyo*, camera movement is used to contribute to the effect of quietude. And one reason why Ozu's richest period is that of the late silent and early sound films, is because of their dialectical structure in this respect whereas the systematic exclusion of movement in most of the post-war films seems, ultimately, an impoverishment.

We must now consider the low-angle camera position which has come to be identified with the films of Ozu. Of course, many Japanese film-makers often adopt a low level for their camera, if only because the Japanese, in their traditional interiors, spend much of their time on the floor. Unless one wishes a constantly high angle on seated characters (like Mizoguchi in his late silent and early sound films) a shortened tripod is indispensable. Ozu did, however, use a shortened more systematically than any of his contemporaries. Many 'expressive' explanations have been offered, of which the most pertinent is Sato Tadao's suggestion that this angle endows all pro-filmic activity with a 'ceremonial quality'. This peculiarly Japanese reaction is perhaps difficult for us to appreciate fully, except insofar as religious and other ceremonies in Japan do take place close to the floor and involve low bows and prostration. However, the key to Ozu's specific, radical use of this procedure lies in more theoretical considerations. In order to understand it, we must examine the films subsequent to *Woman of Tokyo*. For while the camera in this film is often very low, the type of composition produced often involves an emphasis on deep space relatively untypical of Ozu's work.

18. Satōri... which Westerners can only translate with vaguely Christian words like *enlightenment*, *revelation*, *insight*... Barthes, Roland: op. cit., p. 99.

This is partly due to the nature of the lodgings – one-room flats – in which the film was set. It is also quite clear that the principles of *flatness* and *frontality* had not yet been added to his gradually evolving systematics. From *A Story of Floating Weeds* onwards, it will become increasingly apparent (and overwhelmingly clear in *Toda Brother and Sister* and *There Was a Father*) that a set of converging strategies is at work. Not only is the camera unusually low, but it is systematically placed at right angles to the back wall and in the centre of the rectangular 'vault' of the room or set. The characters are usually filmed head-on and in long shots. They generally occupy only the lower part of the frame when they are seated. This, in combination with the low-angle frontality, is a further flattening factor, since one perceives that which is behind the characters as above them. Also, as Sato Tadao points out, in the later films the converging borders of the *tatami*, insofar as they are visible at such a low angle, are carefully obliterated by the placing of flat cushions.

Now, all of these strategies produce a single effect: the elimination of depth indices, the flattening of the image, its reduction to the two-dimensional surface of the screen. We have already discussed the surface-oriented character of traditional Japanese art and architecture and the unconscious tendency to ignore the Western strategies of depth representation in earlier films. It seems obvious – and an examination of Figs. 12–16 will prove helpful here – that Ozu uses every technique at his disposal to produce the *filmic image as picture plane*.

Stillness, which was becoming increasingly predominant in his films, is important in this development, since movement (and especially axial movement, which rapidly became rare) is basic to the illusion of depth. Once we understand this preoccupation with a picture plane, other aspects of Ozu's systematics begin to take on importance. Series of reverse-angle shots in his mature work are seen as a succession of flat surfaces, side by side rather than face to face; there is no imaginary space between for the spectator to be inserted, as it were. There is no encounter between *eyelines*, the necessary complements in Western cinema of the receding and converging parallels of deep space. Similarly – and this is particularly true of *A Story of Floating Weeds* and *Only Son* – the systematic neglect of direction-matching (of frame exits and entrances) tends to prevent successive shots of a given interior from flowing into one another 'naturally'. The mental reconstitution of a three-dimensional space on the basis of these 'badly joined', flat images, requires a considerable effort of memory and imagination, i.e. a *reading*.

Another strategy of editing related to the overall flatness of image is Ozu's fondness for 180° cuts, in particular without change of shot size. *There Was a Father* is rich in matches of this kind, rigorously proscribed by the film-school primers, which produce the disconcerting effect of a picture that has been abutted to its photographic reversal – the shot seems to 'flip over'.

Finally, though it would be absurd to reduce the pillow-shot to any 'ultimate' function, the pictorial quality which it almost inevitably displays may be regarded as the epitome of Ozu's surface imagery.

Though such metaphors have their limits this visual flatness has a diegetic 'equivalent', for incidents soon grow rare in the Ozu narrative. These portraits of family life, or lessons in family relationships, become increasingly *eventless*. This phenomenon, which touches a whole sector of Japanese film-making, will be discussed later. As concerns Ozu, particularly important are the developments after his belated conversion to sound. The early sound films (from *Only Son* to *There Was a Father*) quite naturally relied more on dialogue, but while this did facilitate characterization (within, however, very narrow culturally and socially determined limits), it also soon tended to reduce the narrative incidents to *spoken* events, and the relative autonomy of the imagery, mostly of people talking, increases greatly. Here one may observe an unexpected similarity with the doll theatre. The wildly contorted features and almost unbearably expressive vocalization of the *gidayu bushi*, the slow succession of the all but frozen *tableaux* formed by puppets and manipulators (the puppets often remain motionless for minutes on end, with only an occasional bob of the head and flick of the hand to indicate the identity of the 'speaker') suggest indeed a parallel: a division of labour between presentational image and representational voice in both the performance of the dolls and the films of Ozu.¹⁹

Only Son (*Hitori musuko*, 1936), the master's first sound film, is not only his most radical experiment with this division between the verbal and the spatio-temporal parameters; it is also, in my opinion, his supreme achievement. It is difficult to describe with written words and still photographs this principle of disjunction, as it is most commonly and *relatively* presented in long dialogue scenes. In the analysis that follows, this disjunction may be taken as the fundamental basis on which Ozu has built a system of 'pillow-structures' and other relationships.

The sublimated plot of *Only Son* is a far cry from the melodrama of *That Night's Wife* or *Woman of Tokyo*. It tells of a widowed working-class mother who, at the insistence of her son's schoolteacher, makes every sacrifice to

19. I have already mentioned one film by Antonioni in connection with the de-centring function of the pillow-shot, and it is not without interest that his first – and finest – film, *Contact d'un amour*, is based on a comparable dissociation of text and images (see my *Theory of Film Practice*, Ch. 5).

send the boy to high school. Years later, when she visits him in Tokyo, she finds that he is one of the vast city's army of unemployed, barely able to keep alive on part-time night-school teaching. Realizing that his mother's disappointment is justified and a source of profound shame, he promises to apply himself to getting ahead in the world. His mother goes back to her province and the silk-mill where she has toiled all her life; nothing remains for her but to die.

One of the pillow-shot emblems used frequently in this film is the traditional head-rest or mounted bolster which, in accordance with polite custom, the son has bought for his mother's use during her stay in his house. Its use in one brief sequence, mid-way through the film, is worth describing here. A pillow-shot of the sleeping mother's kimono hung on the wall, attesting as part of its function to her general presence in the house, is followed by a shot in which the bolster occupies most of the foreground (in focus). In the background, completely out of focus, the son and his wife discuss the problems (in particular, the financial ones) caused by the mother's visit, happy though they are to have her. The conversation is pursued in a pair of medium close-ups of the couple (with the 'incorrect' eyeline match which by now was standard), followed by a slightly larger shot taken from the same angle, showing as before the bolster with husband and wife in background. This time it is they who are sharp while the bolster is out of focus. In this shot, their conversation is ultimately interrupted by the arrival (off-screen voice) of the mother.

This remarkably elegant visual structure is derived so directly from the 'pillow' concept that it seems almost to develop in a different space from the dialogue, even though the couple are actually on the screen. In contrast with the soft focus in the relatively deep sets of *Woman of Tokyo*, there is no effect of depth at all. So close are characters and bolster that the effect is more like that obtained in the French silent films of the 1920s by artfully smearing vaseline on a sheet of glass in order to blur certain areas of the picture. Here, too, the fuzzy patches do not appear as 'incidental' background or foreground, but as soft areas sharing the surface of a composition with the hard areas (a trait to be observed in many pillow-shots, beginning with *Woman of Tokyo*).

It is in *Only Son* that the organization of the pillow-shot reaches its ultimate degree of sophistication. The opening sequence of the film, which I have illustrated photographically, is a remarkable case in point, involving an interesting variant on the hard-and-soft-focus motif:

- ps: 'still-life with oil-lamp' (Fig. 12, Pl. 1)

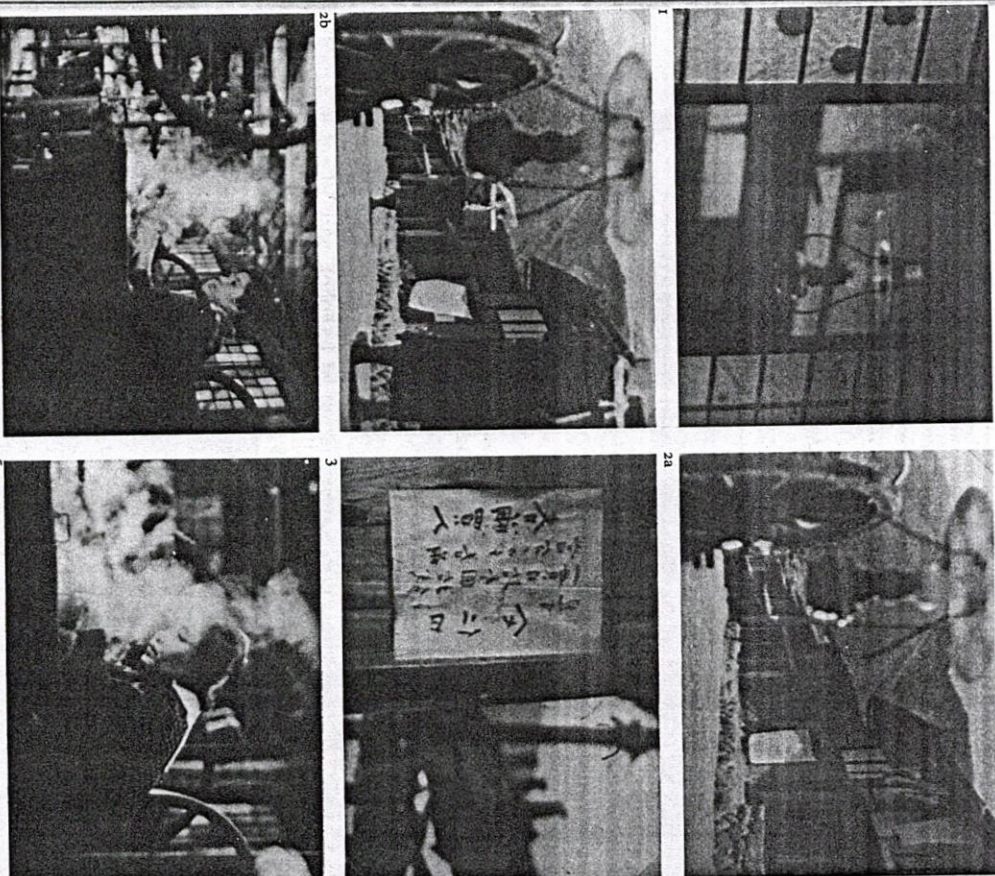


Fig. 12. Ozu Yasujiro, *Only Son*

- ps: 'village-street with oil lamp' (the same or another?); the lamp is fuzzy (Pl. 2a). After a few seconds, the deserted pillow-shot acquires a new dimension as a woman worker carrying a bundle of silk appears in the roadway (Pl. 2b), followed by another, and another
 - in the background, the women workers, out of focus now, in the foreground, a notice referring to the presence in the village of a silk mill (Pl. 3)
 - inside the mill: a woman working (Pl. 4)
 - another woman working (Pl. 5)
- (The second of these women is the mother, the first her best friend; their conversations subsequently provide com-

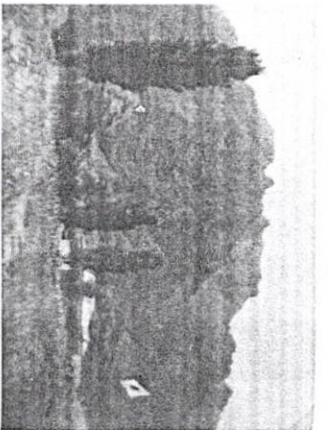
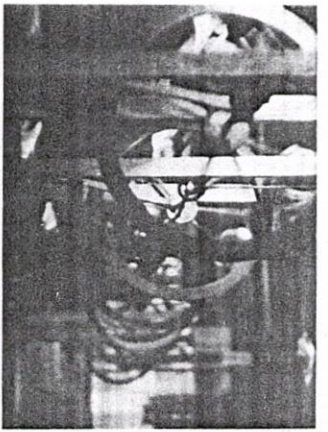


Fig. 12. Ozu Yasujiro, *Only Son*

mentary-interludes between the film's three sections)

- ps: spinning machinery (Pl. 6)
- ps: long shot of the village with only the Japanese flag stirring faintly in the evening breeze (a remarkable displacement of the conventional 'establishing shot') (Pl. 7)
- ps: another 'still-life with oil-lamp' (Pl. 8)
- the mother in her house grinding rice-flour with a mill-stone (Pl. 9)

The organization of this approach to the centre of the *diegesis* is quite complex: it develops from stillness to movement and back to stillness before the definitive entrance of full diegetic movement. Parallel to this, we are introduced first to the *anonymous figures* of the women porters, then to *characters presented* as anonymous and, finally, to the mother in her role.

These visual structures were completed by a discreet progression on the sound-track, evidence of experimental attentiveness to sound throughout. The first shot is silent for a moment, then the chimes of a clock are heard, carrying over into shot 2 (lantern with street). There is another pause, followed again by chimes, heard briefly until the appearance of the notice-board. We then hear the muffled noise of mill machinery, a motif that will recur throughout

(a factory near the son's house in Tokyo provides a subtle variant). This sound grows louder during the three shots in the mill; it gives way to another long silence during the last lantern shot. The series ends with the synch sound of the grinding stone over which the film's first dialogue will soon be laid. In this sequence a new dialectic of sound/silence is added to the visual movement/fixity relationship which already informed the 'pillow-structure'.

It is used remarkably well towards the end of the mother's stay in Tokyo, immediately after the film's one 'dramatic' moment – a nocturnal conversation in which the mother pours out her disappointment to the mortified son while his wife sobs bitterly on the other side of a *shoji*. Following a close-up of the couple's sleeping baby (wife's sobs continue off-screen), we cut to a pillow-shot which has been a constant motif: a rather wide view of one corner of the sitting-room. On the wall, placed upside down as tradition prescribes, is a good-luck scroll given to the son by his old teacher, and beneath it the usual charcoal brazier and tea-kettle, along with the baby's empty bottle. The wife's sobbing continues for a while longer, then silence. After some thirty seconds (the shot lasts fifty and is the longest pillow-shot I have seen) there is a barely perceptible change in the lighting, followed by the emergence of a distant mechanical throb. Then there is a pillow-shot of a mother's bolster and quilt, another of silk skeins drying on a rack and finally (as the background sound grows slightly louder) a shot of the mother herself holding her grandchild in her arms and chatting gaily to it as she ambles back and forth in a vacant lot.

This extraordinary sequence is one of Ozu's most radical. The implicit mediation on film-time and the ellipsis, the interweaving of so many different motifs essential to the film's *diegesis* (the sequence is a veritable nerve-centre in this respect) are typical of this, his most mature period.

Ozu made *Only Son* when he was thirty-three years old. Apart from the obvious pressures of the political situation, the master's two long periods of 'silence' – 1936–42, broken only by the totally atypical and negligible *What Did the Lady Forget?* (*Shokujyō wa nani o wasureta ka*, 1936), and 1942–8 – clearly mark basic divisions in his development: growth/plateau/decline.

Toda Brother and Sister (*Todake no kyōdai*, 1941) together with *There Was a Father* form indeed the plateau/peak of Ozu's mature development. Both are characterized, in particular, by an unparalleled predominance of long-shots. These are often de-centered, as in Mizoguchi, when the characters are seated. The closer



Fig. 13. Ozu Yasujiro, *Toda Brother and Sister*

Figs. 14, 15. Ozu Yasujiro, *There Was a Father*

20. It should be stressed that this theme of 'shame', so common in Ozu's films, must not be regarded, as Western commentators tend to do, as a personal one but as one of the principal cultural themes of Japanese history, fundamentally related to the individual's sense of social solidarity (see Doi Takeo, *The Anatomy of Dependence*). On the other hand, Sato Tadao's remarks on the biographical and psychoanalytical origins of the widowed-father theme seem very plausible.

21. Ernest Callenbach points out to me the 'great pathos Japanese people attach to children being brought up without the normal complement of parents'. And he is quite right that while this may be 'a characteristic Ozu theme' [cf. *Passing Fancy, Only Son, An Inn in Tokyo*, etc.] it is widespread in Japanese films and in Japanese society.

shots, introduced in accordance with a pattern also found in films by other, minor directors, often seem almost arbitrary. They appear to obey principles of symmetry or geometry, rather than any dramatic code. *Toda Brother and Sister* and *What Did the Lady Forget?* are the only films from Ozu's mature period to deal with upper-middle-class family life. The Toda family is especially well-to-do. I expect that this is related to the ideological pressures of the period as well.

Ozu's last masterpiece was *There Was a Father* (*Chichi arite*, 1942), the almost excruciatingly sublimated study of a widowed schoolteacher, masterfully portrayed by Ryu Chishu, another famous member of Ozu's troupe, who played the schoolteacher in *Only Son*. In *There Was a Father*, the schoolteacher abandons his career after a fatal accident, on a school excursion, for which he feels indirectly responsible.²⁰ This father too has a young son to raise, and the film follows their relationship over some twenty years, until the father's death.²¹ The beautiful scene of the boating accident is a fine example of Ozu's faculty for de-dramatization. The father glances out of an off-screen window and asks the students relaxing in the hall of an inn: 'Who went boating? I forbad it.' One of the students gives a name and the games and conversations resume. After a



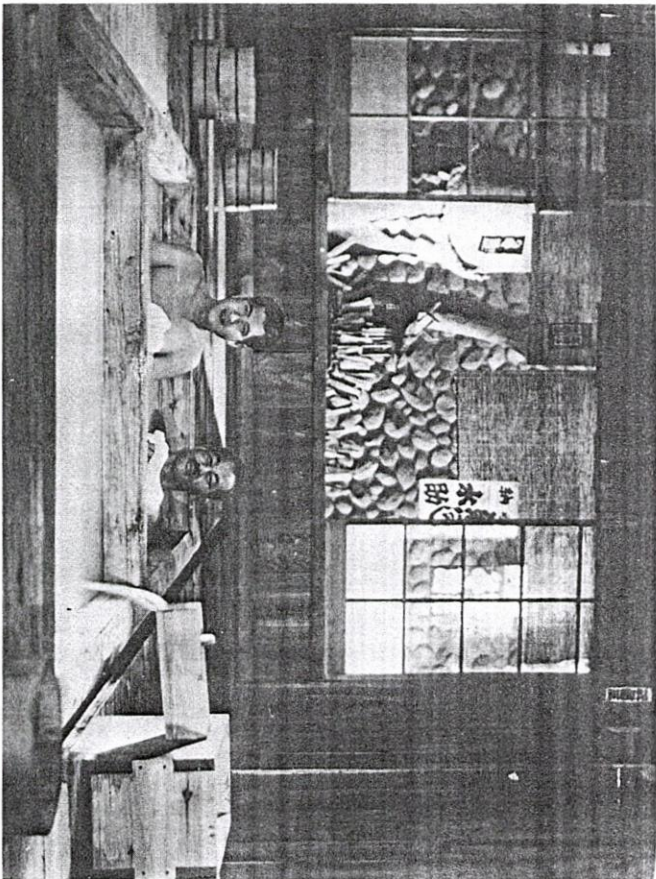


Fig. 16. Ozu Yasujiro, *There Was a Father*

few minutes, a breathless student rushes in with news of the accident. Students and teachers all hurry out, past the row of drying umbrellas (an image which served as introductory pillow-shot to this sequence). On the wharf, the children's cries of 'ahoy' echo pathetically across the lake, and the sequence ends simply with a shot of an overturned row-boat, drifting. The funeral which follows is probably the most remarkable ceremonial sequence in a body of work which abounds in them.

One of the most beautiful of all the pillow-shot series occurs during a weekend spent by the father and his grown son in a mountain hotel. A long dinner conversation is followed by a fifteen-second pillow-shot of the empty bath-house in which we have seen them bathing before dinner (Fig. 16) (and the frame is exactly the same in both instances). There follows a seventeen-second shot across the top of the bath-house roof, with the hotel and vague signs of human presence in the distance and, finally, a ten-second shot of the empty dining-room in which the meal was taken. The return to 'diegetic plenitude' is gradual, since the next sequence is completely wordless; father and son stand fishing side by side in a mountain stream.

The very perfection of this film contains the seeds of that

academicism to which the master succumbed soon after the war. His refined system was imperfectible by then, and departure from it was certainly not encouraged by the alternatives which he saw around him.

Ozu is known to have rehearsed his actors for hours in order to work every bit of 'spontaneity' out of their acting; in this, his approach is related to Bresson's. Sato Taduo also points out that his characters constantly behave as though they were being observed by others, that their behaviour is at all times 'public', we might say 'presentational', and that Ozu's 'psychology' is systematically *superficial*. I would add that Ozu's films, whatever their subject, whatever their formal organization, always evoke the traditional tea ceremony and what the celebrated tea-master Okakura called its 'moral geometry':

Be sure you know
That the tea ceremony, in essence,
Is nothing
But to boil water,
Make tea and drink it.²²

This didactic poem by the sixteenth-century tea-master Rikyū, is one more reminder of the essentially earthly character of all Zen-related disciplines, epitomized by *cha-no-yu*, the Japanese name for what we call the tea ceremony (it means simply 'hot water for tea'). The emphasis, in Ozu's work, on the quotidian, the here-and-now, on everyday gesture and everyday objects (among them, precisely, the tea-kettle and charcoal brazier) and on their *fine appreciation* – by both characters and 'camera' – is clearly related to *cha-no-yu*. Many famous accounts of such 'ceremonies' read like an Ozu script, replete with pillow-shots and seamless ellipses. Here is a passage from a description of a private 'ceremony' offered by Rikyū to a fellow tea-master, Sōkyū.

The host and the guest had exchanged a few words, when they heard the sound of the kitchen door open. As Rikyū explained, a servant he had sent to Samegai for its noted water had just come back. Saying he would now get that fresh water, Rikyū lifted up the kettle and went into the kitchen. Sōkyū drew near the fire and looked at it, now that the kettle was gone. The charcoal, so arranged as to fit the time of the dawn, was beautiful beyond words. Looking up, Sōkyū noticed reserve charcoal neatly kept in a container on the shelf. He brought some down, added it to the fire, and cleaned the fireside with a feather brush. When the aged host reappeared from the kitchen with the kettle in his hand, Sōkyū explained that he had added more charcoal to the fire as he thought it would be needed for boiling the fresh water, even

²² Quoted in Ueda, Makoto, op. cit., p. 96.

though he was sorry to impair the beautiful arrangement the host had originally made. Rikyu was deeply moved and complimented Sokyu, saying that he was delighted to entertain such a thoughtful guest. As the winter night was long, there was still a bit of time until daylight. Rikyu, saying that he would like to serve tea while the fire lasted, brought out a light meal. As they sat eating, the morning bloomed out.²³

However, Ozu is not to be read in the light of a single historical aspect of the Japanese 'text', *Zen/haiku/chia-no-ya*. As we have seen, essential traits of Japanese painting and narrative arts, and of typically Japanese social behaviour, are always present in his films. The Japanese, of course, are fully aware of this quintessential quality of his work, and for many years steadfastly refused to make any effort to export his films, or those of his major contemporaries. It was assumed that these films were 'too Japanese' to be understood by Westerners. I reserve discussion of the elitist and equivocal admiration his works have aroused in the West for a later occasion.

What is one to make of Ozu's known admiration for American films? However much they may have affected his earliest work, absolutely no such influence is detectable by the mid-1930s, and one is inclined to feel that his relationship with the films of Hollywood and Europe (the particularly admired Ophüls and Lubitsch) was purely subjective. However, two of his key films, *Woman of Tokyo* and *Only Son*, contain very strikingly used citations from Western films. In *Woman of Tokyo*, the brother and fiancée watch a fragment of Lubitsch's sketch in *If I Had a Million*, while in *Only Son* the young man takes his mother to see a Viennese operetta. In the first of these interpolated sequences, Charles Laughton at his desk is given a message that the boss wants to see him. He climbs long flights of stairs and passes through endless offices on the way to the inner sanctum. This sequence is used by Ozu as a subtly metaphorical transition (ironical in its attitude to the Japanese sense of hierarchy) between two pillow-shots, one of the sister's humble typewriter, which closes the sequence of the police investigation in the office where she works, and one of the fiancée's brother's sword and scabbard, symbol of his social authority. In *Only Son*, mother and son watch a scene from a germanic operetta: a coy plump 'peasant girl' is pursued through a field of wheat by a dashing, amorous cavalry officer to the accompaniment of syrupy music and spectacular tracking. This sequence is offered as the antithesis of Ozu's manner, and yet the sequence ends with a close-up of a fallen locket which Ozu contrives to integrate into his editing as if it were a pillow-

shot, for it is immediately followed by the shot of the mother's kimono, opening the sequence built around the bolster, as previously described. In this sequence, Ozu seems more aware than is commonly admitted that his departure from the language of *That Night's Wife* was in fact a departure from Western approaches. It is as though he introduces a reference by which to measure the distance covered, while recalling the cosmopolitan enthusiasms of his youth.

Rediscovery of the three or four lost films made between 1933 and 1937 is not likely to add greatly to our understanding of the work of Ozu Yasujiro. Judging from the incomplete version now available *A Mother Ought to be Loved* (*Haha o kowazu ya*, 1934) is a moderately interesting compromise between family melodrama (*Woman of Tokyo*) and the more subdued profiles of the later work, with handsome uses of the pillow-shot. It also has some curiously Sternbergian sequences in a water-front bar, in which the elder son tries to pry his younger brother away from the clutches of a prostitute. These scenes are probably the last traces of any actual Hollywood 'influence' on Ozu.

Barring the unlikely emergence of a lost masterpiece, the mature work of Ozu may be said to consist, then, of five films: *An Inn in Tokyo*, *A Story of Floating Weeds*, *Only Son*, *Toda Brother and Sister* and *There Was a Father*. This body of work is incommensurable with that of any other Japanese film-maker except perhaps Kurosawa. (Too much of Mizoguchi is still missing for a meaningful comparison.) As a contribution to Japanese culture, however, it is comparable only to that of the great poets, painters or sculptors of the past. For like theirs, Ozu's *oeuvre* is not merely an individual achievement but, more significantly, that of an historical and national collectivity.