

NOTES FOR OZU, *I WAS BORN, BUT . . .*

To locate Ozu's work against model of "classical Hollywood cinema" through focus on relation between space and narrative logic: use of specific spatial devices which challenge the supremacy of narrative causality

I. NOTION OF SPACE AS SITE FOR ACTION IN CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD MODEL:

1. in classical editing: concentration on specific spatial points seen as loci of drama; camera positioning motivated by narrative dominant
2. the 180 degree rule: the rule guarantees that the background space of the scene will not change greatly;
the match on action makes the cut virtually invisible
creation of space which is easily legible because it is always motivated by cause/effect chain
3. space and objects = externalization of character traits
 - a] objects used for verisimilitude or
 - b] to reveal something about the characters (e.g., Sam Spade)
4. general but not exact continuity of graphic configurations;
lighting : action-centered
5. Hollywood model creates a "closed" space

II. OZU: REFUSAL OF CONTINUITY STYLE

Use of low camera height (lower than subject photographed) rather than low angle
Camera is seldom tilted out of horizontal plane, yielding an almost straight-on angle in most shots (exception: *I Was Born, But . . .* telephone pole)
Spatial structures are not motivated by cause/effect chain of narrative; motivation is "artistic"
Space is sometimes constructed against cause/effect sequence & becomes foregrounded

1. INTERMEDIATE SPACES

landscapes, empty rooms, other actionless spaces
interest in spaces between points of narrative action

Techniques used to construct intermediate spaces:

- a] play with focus: dramatic dominant will be thrown out of focus; another space will be sharply visible (rack focus)
- b] editing cutaways: cuts to spaces beyond periphery of the action
- c] cutaways function as ellipses within a scene: cutting to 'empty' locales to cover time lapses

d] transitional series of shots between scenes:

- *such shots present locales near the area of the upcoming scene
- *they present a surplus exceeding rules of economy
- *these shots make the spatial elements of the transition “bleed” into the scene

E.g., *I Was Born, But . . .*

As one scene ends, the camera tracks the boys and the father walking along a road past a telephone pole. Cut to low angle shot of top of supposedly the same telephone pole. The next shot shows title, “Morning,” followed by shot of shirts set out on a line to dry; a number of telephones are visible in the rear. Next, the father is shown between the sheets, exercising with his arms stretched out, echoing shape of the shirts. Cut to MS of the father, telephone poles still in background. It is not certain how the shots are linked, except that there is one element repeated (the telephone pole): scene gives oblique entry into the scene’s space, which remains “open.”

Cutaways and transitions mark temporal ellipses:

Duration is presented through spatial configurations.

Cutaways and transitions are not symbolic of characters’ traits, causal forces, narrative parallels.

Spaces empty of characters contest the presence of “human nature” and “character psychology.”

2. 360-DEGREE SHOOTING SPACE (vs. 180-degree space)

Shooting area is circular, not semi-circular. Hollywood patterns use 180 degrees & 30 degrees; Ozu uses 360 degrees and 90 degrees:

E.g. *I Was Born, But*

First scene, father stands waiting for a train to pass. MS shows frontal view of father from waist up as striped train guard post is lowered in front of him; guard rail slants slightly from lower left to upper right. The father is no longer visible. Cut approx. 90 degrees to LS of train disappearing down the track. Because of the cuts, a different background appears in each shot and creates discontinuity.

Complete spatial orientation is avoided by use of *spatial anchors*.

E.g., *I Was Born, But*

The boys eat their lunch in a field. A series of 4 medium shots cuts between the boys; each shot has the feet of the off-screen boy in a lower corner. The lunch scene = a series of ninety-degree cuts.

2 types of circular space

- a] camera is at edge of circle and directed at objects at center
- b] camera is at center: circular approach to dialogue scenes as alternative to shot/counter shot
- c] matches on action cross the axis
- d] eye line matches without 180-degree rule: characters may appear to be side by side looking in same direction

3. THE “HYPER-SITUATED” OBJECT: OZU’S TREATMENT OF MISE-EN-SCÈNE

Objects become more noticeable than their narrative function would seem to warrant

E.g., *Late Spring*: Noriko and father talk while preparing for sleep at the inn in Kyoto; CU of father beginning to snore; cut back to Noriko looking at him, then turning her head to look at the ceiling; cut to MLS of vase in other part of the room; cut back to Noriko; cut to identical shot of the vase; scene ends.

This shot/counter shot does NOT present Noriko’s POV:

- * Noriko looks up at the ceiling before each cut to the vase;
- * In previous shot, the vase was in a corner of the room behind the two beds
- * the vase works *against* narrative flow; its lack of function creates a second formal level alongside the narrative; its motivation is purely “artistic.”

4. GRAPHIC CONFIGURATIONS

Notion of the **graphic match**: one or more objects, shapes, and/or colors will be positioned within the frame in one shot in such a way that the element will be matched by a similar element in the next shot.

Cp. Eisenstein & his notion of **vertical reading**. Graphic configurations forced on our attention demand a contrapuntal reading and suggest the indifference of the film’s spatial structures to temporal and causal chain of the narrative.