東京物語

*Tokyo Story*

*(Tokyo monogatari, Yasujiro Ozu, 1953)*

**Discussion Points**

1. Think about what is at the core (theme) of the story?

2. How does Ozu depict family dynamics in this film – specifically the bond between parents and children?

3. How do you respond to the slow pace of the film?

4. What is your opinion on the portrayal of women in the narrative?

5. What do you think is the effect of presenting:
   (a) frames in which the camera is right between the two people conversing and films each person directly?

   (b) so-called *tatami* shots (the camera is placed as if it were a person kneeling on a *tatami* mat)?
6. How does Ozu present the progression of time in the story?

7. Think about the following translated dialogue between Kyoko, the youngest daughter in the family, and Noriko, the widowed daughter-in-law, after Mrs Hirayama’s death. How would you interpret it in terms of the story as a whole?

K: “I think they should have stayed a bit longer.”
N: “But they’re busy.”
K: “They’re selfish. Demanding things and leaving like this.”
N: “They have their own affairs.”
K: “You have yours too. They’re selfish. Wanting her clothes right after her death. I felt so sorry for poor mother. Even strangers would have been more considerate.”
N: “But look Kyoko. At your age I thought so too. But children do drift away from their parents. They have to look after their own lives.”
K: “I wonder...I won’t ever be like that. Then what's the point of being family?”
N: “But children become like that...gradually.”
K: “Isn't life disappointing?”
N: “Yes, it is.”

Yasujirō Ozu (1903 – 1963)

- Born into a prosperous middle-class family towards the end of the Meiji emperor’s reign – Japan began opening to the outside world after 260 years of feudal isolation.
- As a teenager, Ozu was the archetypal movie fan – played truant to watch movies; collected movie memorabilia; watched lots of Hollywood movies.
- Joined the production company Shochiku at 19 despite father’s disapproval.
- Directed his first movie in 1927 – learned from Hollywood genres and directors like Harold Lloyd and Josef von Sternberg.
- For years Ozu remained unknown abroad, chiefly because decision-makers considered him “too Japanese” to be exported. Tokyo Story received an award from BFI in 1958. When the film opened in New York in 1972, coinciding with the publication of Paul Schrader’s Transcendental Style in Film, it received critical acclaim.
- Some of Ozu’s films include Late Spring (Banshun, 1949), Early Summer (Bakushu, 1951), Floating Weeds (Ukigusa, 1959) and An Autumn Afternoon (Sanma no aji, 1962). Many of his favourite actors reappear in his films.
- Ozu’s sensitivity to domestic and familial problems resulted in his ‘home drama’ genre from the mid 1930s onwards. The focus of his work was never escapist; his characters remained embroiled in social and moral dilemmas.
- Tokyo Story was originally inspired by the classic American film, Make Way for Tomorrow, directed by Leo McCarey, a story that must have greatly touched Ozu to compel him to make his own Japanese version of that story.
• **Style – ‘Ozu-esque’:**
  “Most of his shots were low and stationary shots and his visual strategy was very simple; which some critics consider profound. His camera is usually three feet above the floor and he almost never moves it. Every single shot has an intended composition and the only movement you see in most Ozu films is characters walking in and out of rooms, not the camera itself.” ([Classic Art Films site](http://www.classicartfilms.com/))

Ozu links scenes with cutaway shots rather than conventional fades out shots; his enthusiasm for ‘modernity’ is seen in shots of factory chimneys, railways, etc.

• **Conscripted when Japan seized Shanghai in 1937.**

• **Did not depict war in his movies and his characters are not ideologically driven.** War meant death so the only soldiers in his films are dead ones.

• **Never married and lived with his mother until her death in 1962.**

• **Died of cancer on his 60th birthday.** His gravestone is marked with the Chinese character *mu* – (literal meaning ‘nothingness’) understood to mean ‘transendence of the self’ in Buddhist philosophy.

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**Japanese Cinema – A Brief History**

• **The first film ever produced in Japan was a short documentary about geishas playing musical instruments, shown in June 1899.**

• **Throughout the silent era, Japanese cinemas employed narrators known as benshi who described the action to audiences in a running commentary as the film played.**

• **The first acknowledged master of Japanese cinema was Kenji Mizoguchi, whose career in the silent era (between 1920 and 1930), included making period dramas, samurai films, kitchen-sink melodramas and love stories.** The international success of his 1952 masterpiece *The Life of Oharu*, which won the Silver Lion at the Venice film festival, popularised Japanese cinema in the West.

• **The 1940s saw the great Japanese director Akira Kurosawa make his debut.** He collaborated with actor Toshiro Mifune on 15 films, including his 1950 Academy Award winning classic *Rashomon*. Some of Kurosawa’s famous films are *Seven Samurai* (1954), Macbeth adaptation *Throne of Blood* (1957) and *Ran* (1985).

• **Ozu is considered one of the great masters of the Golden Age of Japanese cinema.** Ozu’s naturalistic style, often shooting his actors from floor height and favouring simple photography and editing, has had a huge influence on western filmmakers, including Mike Leigh.

• ***Gate of Hell* (1953) by Teinosuke Kinugasa, was the first Japanese colour film released internationally.** It won two Oscars in 1954, for Best Costume and the then-
honorary Best Foreign Language Film award. The film also won the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival, the first Japanese film to achieve that honour.

- In 1954, Ishiro Honda’s low-budget monster movie Gojira was released. Dubbed into English and re-named Godzilla, the film became a worldwide hit and emerged as the icon of Japan’s film industry, spanning dozens of sequels, animations and a 1990s American remake.

- The 1960s – rise of the New Wave Japanese filmmakers. Best known example, Seijun Suzuki’s surreal yakuza gangster epic Branded to Kill (1967). Hiroshi Teshigahara’s 1964 drama Woman in the Dunes won the Special Jury Prize at Cannes and was nominated for Best Director and Best Foreign Language Film at the Oscars.

- The 1970s – major change in depictions of sexual relationships with Oshima making his controversial 1976 period drama In the Realm of the Senses. With frank depictions of a sadistic love affair, the film has never been shown uncensored in Japan. The 1970s also saw a revival in samurai films (known as chanbara) with the 1973 release of Toshiya Fujita’s cult classic Lady Snowblood, acknowledged by Quentin Tarantino as one of his most influential films.


- The late 1990s and the 2000s – Japanese strain of horror films based on old folk tales and urban legends known as J-Horror emerged. Hideo Nakata’s Ring franchise, begun in 1998, and Dark Water (2001) were screened internationally to critical and commercial acclaim. Nakata made his English language debut with the American remake of his own Ring II, with the Ring franchise and Dark Water all being remade by American studios. His most recent film, Chatroom, about five teenagers who meet online, was written by Irish playwright and screenwriter Enda Walsh premiered in the Un Certain Regard section at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival. Battle Royale (2000), based on a popular novel of the same name was released to international acclaim.
Film Terminology 101

Shot
- a single, constant take made by a motion picture camera uninterrupted by editing, interruptions or cuts
- a single film frame (such as a still image)
- a follow-shot – when the camera moves to follow the action
- a pull-back shot – a tracking shot or zoom that moves back from the subject to reveal the context of the scene
- shot analysis – examination of individual shots
- a one-shot, a two-shot, and a three-shot – common names for shooting just one, two, or three people in a shot

Suggested Films
- Battle Royale (2000, d. Takashi Miike / Kinji Fukasaku)
- Departures (2008, d. Yojiro Takita)
- Fireworks (1997, d. Takeshi Kitano)
- Harakiri (1969, d. Masaki Kobayashi)
- Late Spring (1949, Yashuziro Ozu)
- Memories of Matsuko (2006, d. Tetsuya Nakashima)
- Rashomon (1950, d. Akira Kurosawa)
- Seven Samurai (1954, d. Akira Kurosawa)
- Spirited Away (2001, d. Hayao Miyazaki, animation)
- The Taste of Tea (2004, Katsuhito Ishii)
- The Wind Rises (2013, d. Hayao Miyazaki, animation)

Note
If you are interested in researching your family history, you can get advice from the Archives & Local History Service on Level 2 of John Gray Centre for access to all items available. Opening Hours: MON 9.30am-5.00pm, TUE 9.30am-7.00pm, WED Closed, THU 11.00am-5.00pm, FRI 9.30am-5.00pm.