Tokyo story

Director: Yasujiro Ozu
Country: Japan
Date: 1953

An article by Eric Snider for *film.com:*

Of Tokyo Story, Roger Ebert wrote: "It ennobles the cinema. It says, yes, a movie can help us make small steps against our imperfections." Jeffrey Overstreet observed: "These characters never surprise us with anything showy, lurid, or sensational. They're ordinary human beings, treated with fierce attention that feels like deep respect." Philip French called it "one of the cinema's most profound and moving studies of married love, aging and the relations between parents and children." This is high praise for a Japanese film that the average moviegoer may not have heard of, by a director who isn't a household name. Why does Tokyo Story win such accolades in movie-buff circles? Let's take off our shoes by the door and investigate.

The praise: Every 10 years, the British Film Institute's Sight & Sound magazine surveys a large, international group of critics and film experts to compile a list of the greatest films of all time. Tokyo Story appeared on the two most recent lists, at No. 3 in 1992 and No. 5 in 2002. [It also ranked No.3 in 2012.] The movie is also included on Time magazine and Empire magazine's lists of the best films of the 20th century.

The context: Now considered one of Japan's greatest directors, Yasujiro Ozu (1903-1963) wasn't well-known outside his homeland until after his death. His most acclaimed film, Tokyo Story, was made in 1953 but didn't play in the U.S. until 1972, and it was another 20 years before it climbed onto Sight & Sound's once-a-decade survey. Which is to say, the story behind Tokyo Story's notoriety is as slow-moving as the story in Tokyo Story. Ozu started making films during the silent era, cranking out a couple dozen of them, mostly shorts, between 1927 and 1932 alone. His work in the 1930s started to move away from comedy and toward drama and social criticism, and though he wasn't a major box-office draw, he was admired by Japanese critics. His career was interrupted by stints in the military during the Second Sino-Japanese War and World War II, and it was after these experiences that he produced his most significant films. Pretty much everything you'll ever read about Ozu pertains to one of the 13 movies he made between 1949 and his death in 1962. They deal primarily with ordinary human experiences like family, marriage, and death, though Ozu himself never married or had children.

Tokyo Story was conceived and produced in the same workmanlike manner as most of Ozu's movies. He and collaborator Kogo Noda (who co-wrote half of all the films Ozu ever made) spent about 14 weeks drinking sake and writing the screenplay. This was followed by a few weeks of scouting locations, then four months of shooting and editing. Ozu used a lot of the same cast and crew from one film to the next, which helped things run smoothly. There was nothing about the project to suggest that it would come to be considered Ozu's masterpiece; even the title was typically generic. (It was one of four Ozu films to have the word "Tokyo" in it. Other Ozu titles include Late Spring, Early Summer, Good Morning, Tokyo Twilight, The Only Son, and There Was a Father.)

Part of the reason Ozu's movies weren't exported to the West in the 1950s, when contemporaries like Akira Kurosawa were enjoying so much international success, was that Ozu didn't make period pieces or samurai movies. Japanese distributors didn't think movies dealing with modern, mundane Japanese life would be of interest to Western viewers, so they didn't bother trying to export them. As a result, when Ozu's movies did finally reach American shores, cinephiles who were accustomed to Japanese cinema being all about geishas and samurais — because those were the only Japanese movies they'd had access to — were smitten with the sheer ordinariness of Ozu's stories. Furthermore, Ozu's movies made it to the U.S. at a fortuitous moment. As film scholar David Desser wrote, "That [Ozu's] films were relatively plotless and steeped in everyday life

made them seem if not part of, then related to, the French New Wave or the severe style and themes of Michelangelo Antonioni and Ingmar Bergman." Tokyo Story fit in with the 1960s art-house style, even though it pre-dated it by more than a decade.

The movie: An elderly husband and wife take the long train journey from Onomichi to Tokyo to visit their adult children — possibly for the last time, given their advancing age and the distance between the two cities. They find that while their children are glad to see them, nobody has any time for them. It's kind of sad.

What to look for: The films tells a seemingly ordinary story involving some seemingly ordinary people. Yet there is something strange and aloof about the way Ozu depicts it. The characters speak in a way that sounds stiff and formalized to modern, Western ears. You may wonder: Is this really how Japanese families interacted in 1953? Or is it just how Japanese movies depicted Japanese families in 1953? Would a Japanese viewer in 1953 have thought, as do we, "Man, it's sad that these people don't treat their parents better"? Or would the viewer have thought, "Eh, that's how life goes"?

You'll be glad to know that movie nerds have been discussing the answers to those questions for half a century. Ozu's style was deliberately formal, which highlighted (and maybe exaggerated) the politeness of Japanese society. But he was also documenting the state of Japanese culture at the time, and doing so without much commentary or didacticism.

Desser writes: "The film is, paradoxically, both intensely insular and immensely universal…. So completely does the film derive from particularities of Japanese culture — marriage, family, setting — that critics have argued over the film's basic themes. Is it about the breakup of the traditional family in the light of postwar changes (increase urbanization and industrialization, which have led to the decline of the extended family)? Or is it about the inevitabilities of life: children growing up, getting married, moving away from home, having children of their own, leaving their aging parents behind?… Though the film is set in a specific time and place, such questions concerning the breakdown of tradition … are universal in their appeal."

Ozu's visual style is definitely uncommon, though — by contemporary, modern, Japanese or American standards. When a director's visual style is noteworthy, it's usually because of something flashy, something with pizzazz. The opposite is true with Ozu: What makes his films stand out is how calm and serene they are, yet how inviting and warm. He shoots most scenes as if from the perspective of someone kneeling on the floor, observing the action. This came to be known as the "tatami shot," referring to the traditional Japanese mat. The camera doesn't tilt upward, though. It remains level, looking straight ahead, and it almost never moves. (Roger Ebert says the camera moves only once in Tokyo Story, and that this is "more than usual" for an Ozu film.)

When characters have conversations, Ozu will often have them look almost directly at the camera, as if we are the other person. Then he'll cut to the other character making his or her reply, also looking at the camera. Even a casual moviegoer will notice that this is different from the usual method of portraying conversations in film. If the tatami shots make us feel like quiet, unnoticed observers, these dialogue shots draw us in, make us part of the action. Notice also how Ozu will linger on a room (and a scene) after the characters have exited, or cut to it before they arrive. In The New York Times, Roger Greenspun described this as "an acknowledgment that places are sanctified by people and that even when they have gone away, a bit of their presence lingers on." The effect of all these devices: it almost feels like we're living in this world with these characters, kneeling on their floors, having conversations with them, witnessing their lives.

What's the big deal: Ozu's visual style suits his material perfectly. If he had been making samurai movies or slapstick comedies, obviously he'd have approached them differently. This matching of content and style is a crucial element of effective filmmaking, and one that's not easy to achieve. The fact that the characters' lives are not extraordinary is part of the point. Ozu wants us to relate to them somehow, to see ourselves and the people we know reflected on the screen. One of the reasons the film has endured is that it has accomplished this for so many people over so many years. We may live half a century and half a world away from the story, but we can probably identify with many of its elements. Considering how few films have any emotional resonance at all, let alone resonance that spans time and cultural barriers, that's kind of a Big Deal.

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