Tokyo Story (東京物語, *Tōkyō Monogatari*, 1953)

Alexander Knoth

dir. Yasujiro Ozu; prod. Takeshi Yamamoto; screenplay Yasujiro Ozu, Kogo Noda; photography Yuharu Atsuta; music Takanobu Saito. 35mm, black/white, 134 mins. Shochiku, distrib. Shochiku.

At the time of *Tokyo Story*'s release, Yasujiro Ozu had already directed forty-five movies and had consolidated his status as Shochiku's most famous director. Until his death in 1964, he produced at least one feature every year and helped build up the studio's reputation in the field of drama (Choi 36). Often referred to as the director of »home dramas,« Ozu established himself as a renowned creator of so-called *gendai-geki*, or films about contemporary life. *Tokyo Story* falls into the subcategory *shoshimin-geki*, which deals with the daily routine of the lower middle class. Those movies are characterized by a humanistic touch as well as a social critique of changing postwar society in Japan. Ozu once declared *Tokyo Story* as »one of my most melodramatic pictures« (4).

Ozu was profoundly influenced by Hollywood silent movies. These marked his first contact with cinema, and he was eager to imitate the modern U.S.-American style of that period (Raine 105). It was especially his early, prewar films, like *Days of Youth* (1929), *Walk Cheerfully* (1930), and *I Flunked, But . . .* (1930), that mirrored a Western lifestyle that Japanese society was gradually becoming exposed to during the Showa era. In terms of cinematography, lighting, storyline, editing, gags, and body language, Ozu copied the morality tales of Hollywood films and borrowed heavily from the comedies of actor and producer Harold Lloyd (Bingham 49-50). Although his films shifted from the proletariat to the upper middle class, and from lighthearted comedies to excessive sociopolitical fables that culminate in mature and universal stories of human life, it is important to understand that Ozu maintained a steady catalogue of principles both in front of and behind the camera. Under the credo of repetition and difference, themes and constellations reappeared and formed a distinctive style: »stereotyped social images, instantly recognizable to Ozu's audience, became the basis of his patient exploration of domestic conflict and social change« (Bordwell 39). These reoccurring images were produced by a small group of selected actors, screenwriters, and cinematographers with whom Ozu worked almost exclusively. Ryu Chishu and Setsuko Hara became prominent faces and actors of archetypal characters, often associated solely with Ozu roles. In that way, Ozu

promoted something akin to the classical Hollywood star system by typecasting his movies (Phillips 159). For jointly written screenplays, his lifelong friend and collaborator Kogo Noda was an important asset (Desser 49). Ozu's tailor-made scripts adapted the prominent images of actors and created a chorus of films that featured the same casts and storylines. *Tokyo Story* is no exception to this. Moreover, the backdrop of familial constellations and the development of archetypal figures echo Thomas Elsaesser's seminal definition of the Hollywood melodrama thus making Ozu's style comparable to Western productions.

Tokyo Story tells the story of Shukichi (played by Ryu Chishu) and Tomi (played by Chieko Higashiyama), who depart from faraway Onomichi to visit their grown-up children in Tokyo. The film contrasts the behavior of their children (Shige, Koichi, and Keizo), who are too busy to spend time with them, with that of their widowed daughter-in-law (Noriko), with whom they maintain a close relationship. The film's major subject is the loss of the family unit. In Ozu's words: »Through the growth of parents and children, I described how the Japanese family system began to disintegrate« (4). The motif of travel from a rural area to Tokyo stretches back to Ozu's *Dreams of Youth* (1928), the high expectations in younger generations and parental disillusionment is seen in both *The Only Son* (1936) and *Early Summer* (1951), and the general premise of the script is an imitation of an American feature film, Leo McCarey's *Make Way for Tomorrow* (1931). *Tokyo Story* thereby echoes and combines many of Ozu's earlier films.

A loose family structure is presented in travel sequences and picturesque destinations: »Here Ozu and Noda present an episodic, leisurely survey of the extended family, structured around journey that link Onomichi, Tokyo, Atami and Osaka. Variety is created by shift from one picturesque locale to another and by the gradual revelation of every family member's routines, both at home and at work« (Bordwell 329). The episodic narration is connected through so-called pillow shots. These shots can either hold a contemplative function or mark a temporal or spatial transition between two sequences. David Desser points out that »instead of a direct cut between scenes, Ozu often finds ›intermediate spaces.‹ […] Such spaces are sometimes called ›still lifes‹ and, like the still lifes in classical paintings, are often devoid of human figures. Ozu achieves a particular poignancy in many of his still lifes by highlighting the paradox of humanity's presence by its abscene« (10). Desser's notion of paradox is the same as Elsaesser's definition of the visual metaphor. The setting does not only serve the structure of the film—which, in this case, would be the spatial or temporal transition—but is also sentimentally charged and loaded with symbolic meaning. The lifeless and deserted image points to the emotions of the protagonist, a method also used in Hollywood melodrama (Elsaesser 53).

In a famous scene during the parents' stay in Atami, the pillow shot unfolds its full effect. Shukichi and Tomi sit side by side on a quay wall, enjoying the scenic view of the sea. The night before, the couple realized that Atami is not to their liking. They also feel homesick for Onomichi, yet they decide to leave for Tokyo. They witness that their children have changed, and the idyllic atmosphere is darkened by Tomi's suddenly feeling faint, which foreshadows her death. Before Ozu cuts back to Tokyo, he prolongs the sequence with one of his many corridor shots, showing the interior of the hotel's hallway and another view of the sea from inside. After ten seconds, a change of scene occurs, and factory chimneys come into view. This clearly marks a transition: The plot has translocated from Atami back to Tokyo. The pillow shots emphasize the

contrast between Atami's pastoral landscape and the hectic big city, »between the old and young, the archaic and modern« (Bingham 52)—and, on another level, represent the alienation between parents and children as a result of divergent lifestyles.

Another trademark of Ozu's films can also be seen in the aforementioned scene: his distaste for cinematic exaggeration, or »Anti-Cinema« (Yoshida 29). When Tomi struggles to get up on the wall, the idyllic scenery is not disturbed by any cinematic tools. The music continues playing soothing sounds and does not reflect the action. Departing from Elsaesser's idea that music in melodrama serves as a third dimension to address the protagonist's problems (45), Ozu refrains from using music to underline the tension. Instead, he continues to convey a sacred atmosphere, which brings the audience to nearly forget the incident. Unaccented presentation and elliptic storytelling omit crucial plot points and are essential to Ozu's depiction of everyday life. While Hollywood productions are usually »tied to the dramatic, the action-packed […] in the interest of moving the plot along,« Ozu's films rather consist of »series of moments, cumulative in their power and their emotional effect« (Desser 5-6). Important elements of the plot are deliberately placed outside the viewer's perception or are only insinuated. *Tokyo Story*, for example, does not show the stopover in Osaka during the parents' trip to Tokyo. In the beginning they talk about visiting their son Keizo there, but neither Osaka nor the encounter is shown on screen. Ozu instead skips directly to Tokyo with another sequence of transitory pillow shots. Elsaesser acknowledges elliptic narration as a part of the melodrama: »The feeling that there is always more to tell than can be said leads to very consciously elliptical narratives, proceeding often by visually condensing the characters' motivation into sequences of images which do not seem to advance the plot« (52). Furthermore, Ozu withholds characters' backstories, which makes it difficult to analyze them as psychologically motivated. His style refuses to convey any sentimental codes through dialogue, and the cryptic acting steps back behind a more complex system of meaning.

The morally motivated character described by Elsaesser in his work on melodrama is also present in *Tokyo Story* (45). The film is didactic rather than moralistic. Growing up can be a disillusioning process that can result in disappointed expectations. Children leave home and start their own families. Disappointment is part of life and puts the idealistic idea of a harmonious family to the test. Ozu depicts the cycle of birth, coming of age, and death. This continuity becomes visible in the first and last sequence of the film. From 2:15:32 to 2:15:54, Ozu shows a ship passing by the Onomichi Bay, just like he did at the very beginning: a symbol of the continuity of life. Tomi is dead, but life continues. He underlines this method again through pillow shots. They show objects of everyday life, which remain fixtures regardless of the human actions around them. Donald Richie identifies this structure as the motif of reoccurrence: »In most Ozu films the structure presumes this ›return‹ and it is this which makes the final reels of these pictures so compelling. The idea of the ›return‹ (like the idea of the circle) is something which all of us find emotionally compelling« (Richie 1974, 12). Indeed, this effectively encapsulates the message of *Tokyo Story*: Time passes and people are forgotten. In this sense, Ozu relies on the Japanese concept of *mono no aware*—»pathos of things«—to bring the audience to feel the sadness of life. In one of the last scenes, Noriko confesses to Shukichi that she sometimes forgets her dead husband. Shukichi comforts her, saying this is natural and that she must find another man. He hands over Tomi's watch as a symbolic act. Here, an unusual cut renders a sense of sentimentality.

Noriko cries and is touched by the gesture. The sequence unfolds without any of the prologues that previously established tone or provided setting through pillow shots. Rather, Ozu directs us straight toward Noriko's emotional outburst. This melodramatic highlight of *Tokyo Story* is deepened further by way of the children's choir somberly concluding the scene.

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