

# Directing transcendence



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Tokyo Story, directed by Yasujiro Ozu, is a deeply meditative film. The plot is deceptively simple: an old couple visits their adult children in Tokyo.

However, their children does not treat them well. On their return, the wife falls ill and passes away. At the funeral, the family gathers. Each member is shown grieving, especially the children. Using repetition, camera height, and editing, Ozu induces the audience into a state of transcendence. With heightened perception, Ozu invites the viewer to observe the subtle complexities of human nature and life, transcending above judgement and emotions.

Ozu incorporates many visual and aural motifs throughout the film. These motifs are repeated consistently, with rhythm, and without embellishment. Furthermore, the motifs often contain an act of repetition within itself. For example, the rhythmic humming of a motorboat can be heard in establishing shots. The setting of the film is in the summer; characters are frequently, and gently, swaying their fans back and forth. As Fumiko dials the telephone, the sound of her dialling is rhythmic; so too, is the ringing at the receiving end. As Shukichi realizes the imminent death of his wife, he repeats twice: “ I see... She’s not going to live.” Then, after some pause, “ I see... So this is the end.” All of these repetitive elements build up to a final climax in the funeral scene. Throughout the scene, the repetitive chanting of monks can be heard. One monk hits a moktak, a regular beat, to signify the rhythm of chanting. The guests are given prayer beads to count the repetition of the chanting. Even in editing, Ozu introduces a steady rhythm by cutting shots together with similar durations (in the first part of the scene, durations of 4-6 seconds). These rituals are usually attributed to bringing concentration in

meditation. In the same way, Ozu integrates repetition in the rest of the film to induce the audience into a state of highly focused meditation. In general, meditation practices usually involve two stages: concentration, and observation. Ozu's films manifest the second stage through his unique style.

Consistently, Ozu uses a steady, unmoving camera. The lighting available can be assumed to be natural to their environment (e. g. windows, lamps). The architecture of the Japanese home is captured without embellishment. Various knick knacks, tools and decorations, minute details are visible in domestic settings. In an establishing shot of the funeral scene, two pillars are blocking some of the family members; one pillar is centered in the frame. It is clear that Ozu does not wish to obstruct everyday life with its infinite beauty and nuances. Camera angles are frequently straight; editing between shots consist only of simple cuts. Ozu's naturalistic style coaxes the audience into quiet observation. In combination with the concentration induced through repetition, the audience can ascend into a full meditative state, perhaps even a transcendental state. Most notably, Ozu persistently uses a low camera height, often described as the height of a person sitting on a tatami (Ebert). This camera height is steadfast throughout the film. The perpetual nature of this camera height serves as a vehicle for transcendence. As all shots are experienced at this height, it is as if the audience has embodied an omnipresent being, one that is seated in meditation. Furthermore, Ozu follows action with a unique style. As characters move from room to room, in the initial shot, the character is seen leaving the room, then Ozu immediately cuts to the character entering the next room. This is seen as Keizo is seen exiting the room during the funeral

scene. The continuity of editing promotes the omnipresent effect.

Furthermore, the utilization of the 180 degree angle change during conversation also activates omnipresence, such as when Noriko and Keizo converse briefly.

To fully emphasize the meditative state, Ozu inserts establishing shots between scenes. The ingenuity of these establishing shots reside in their stillness. Often, they are of mundane environments such as rooftops, gazebos, and doorways. In the funeral scene, Ozu shows the funeral hall, and later, a walkway. The purpose of these shots is akin to the period at the end of a sentence. They allow the audience to rest, much like shavasana at the end of yoga practice. Ozu gives the audience space and time to experience tranquility within the meditative practice of his film. As the audience enters a state of focused, quiet observation, Ozu maintains a neutral tone. He neither praises nor condemns; he is consistent. Ozu invites the audience to examine the full complexity of human nature and social interactions. This intent is clear through Ozu's omission of action, such as train rides and Tomi's death. In the funeral scene, the rituals performed are not shown. Instead, Ozu focuses on the reactions and interactions between characters. To cultivate neutrality, when characters speak with one another, Ozu invariably utilizes a medium shot, in a position straight in front of the character speaking. Full attention is given to the character. In a similar fashion, Ozu cuts the shot only when the character has finished speaking. It does not matter how mundane the topic is or how short the sentence, the same treatment is given. The audience, in a crucially perceptive state, is able to give reflection on the fullness of character. The most polarizing example is revealed

through Shige. During Shukichi and Tomi's visit to Tokyo, Shige is shown pushing away her own responsibilities. She asks her brother, her sister-in-law, her husband, anyone who would be able to take care of her parents in place of her. She readily cuts corners when accommodating her parents. Shige chillingly accepts her mother's imminent death by packing funeral clothing. After performing sacred rituals for her mother's death, Shige wastes no time in speaking of the profane, and asking for mementos. It is easy to label Shige as selfish, inconsiderate, and emotionless. However, through careful observation the audience is able to see the subtleties in her character. For example, Shige notes her perception of her parents' failures in causal banter (e. g. Tomi's weight, Shukichi's drinking). It is understood that the family dynamic was also not perfect in the past. As Shige inquires on her siblings' preparedness for the funeral, it can be accepted that her prudence is virtuous. Her hard-headed nature may have stemmed from the struggles as a woman in modern society. Through this deeper understanding, the audience can accept Shige's genuine burst of tears at the confirmation of her mother's death. Although Shige may have understood the event logically, she reacts with authentic emotion at that moment. In the funeral scene, Shige sniffs in mourning. Shige, despite being formal and practical, does not use a handkerchief. The audience is able to appreciate the sincerity of her grieving while supported by the burden of her complex character. Likewise, Keizo's regret shines through at the funeral. The repetitive chanting frustrates him, compelling him to remember his unfulfilled duties as a son. "One cannot serve one's parents from beyond the grave." Yet soon after, Keizo chooses to leave his newly widowed father in favour of work and

baseball games. The audience must accept the children as Tomi and Shukichi does: with disappointment, but also with forgiveness.

Ozu presents the concept of balance throughout the film. Tomi, described as full of vitality, faces an untimely death. As Tomi and Shukichi experience sadness or fear, Ozu includes warm non-diegetic music, such as when Tomi examines her own mortality on a hill with her grandson. As they experience kindness or understanding, there is silence except for quick diegetic sounds. The characters of Shige and Fumiko can be interpreted as existing in balance. While Shige is strong-willed, Fumiko is obedient. In the funeral scene, there is representation of the masculine and feminine. As Keizo laments, the masculine straight lines of his suit is contrasted with illustrations of water lilies on the screen behind him. Similarly, against Noriko's feminine silhouette, the screen doors have a blocky, regular pattern. Keizo struts back into the room with limbs hanging freely, while Noriko rushes back, limbs folded. The establishing shots are especially convincing. In the shot of the exterior of the funeral hall, the tombstones and walls stand stationary, tranquil. In the same shot, tree branches waver gently. Again, there is a reference to life and death. Where there is stillness, there is movement. In the shot of the walkway, the architecture and far off mountains are still, while paper lanterns sway in the wind. This idea of balance reinforces the tranquility resultant from repetition in meditation, and the fullness resultant from careful observation of subtleties of characters.

In his portrayal of the Japanese family, Ozu encourages the audience to be more forgiving through observing the complexity in human nature. This is achieved by elevating the audience in to a meditative state and maintaining

a neutral tone. Through repetition, consistent camera height, and editing, Ozu provides the audience with a path to transcendence, and a magnanimous understanding of disappointment. In the final shot of the funeral scene, a boat passes through the image, as it has many times throughout the film; its rhythmic, familiar humming is barely audible. As Noriko summarizes in the end, children will inevitably become distant to their parents, and life, inevitably, goes on.