

A Study of the Documentary Aesthetics of “Tokyo Story” in Terms of “Society, Family, and Life”

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Abstract. Based on the history of documentary film development and related theoretical arguments, this paper analyzes Yasujiro Ozu's work Tokyo Story. It combines Ozu's expressed attitudes towards “family,” “life,” and “society” with the film's narrative content, character development, and visual composition to elucidate the documentary aesthetics of the film.

Keywords: history of documentary film development, Yasujiro Ozu, Tokyo Story, documentary aesthetics

1. Introduction

The “documentary style” emerged simultaneously with the birth of cinema. The founding filmmakers, represented by the Lumière brothers, advocated for the objective documentation of social life, with “representation” as the ultimate goal, opposing artistic processing and creation. As a result, the “documentary style” became the origin of various film styles. Early documentary film theories primarily focused on documentaries, which more distinctly embodied documentary aesthetics. In the late 1920s, John Grierson first used the term “documentary” in his review of Robert Flaherty's film Moana. Although documentary content and form expanded widely in the subsequent period, and new technical breakthroughs occurred, they adhered to the documentary ideology proposed by theorists like Siegfried Kracauer, who argued that documentaries should engage less with inner life, ideologies, and spiritual issues. “It caters to our deepest needs precisely because it reveals external reality to us, perhaps for the first time, thus deepening our relationship with ‘this earth, which is our dwelling place.’”[1] He believed that the essence of cinema lies in the restoration of material reality, akin to naturalism, documenting the vast world and its transformations to achieve a self-sufficient inner experience.

With the outbreak of World War II and the subsequent discontent and rebellion against wartime propaganda films, more acute social issues gradually became exposed to public scrutiny. This led to the emergence of Italian “Neorealism,” which proposed the slogan “Take the camera to the streets” to reflect widespread social issues through a strictly documentary style. The focus on social issues and the real-life experiences of people became the primary narrative content and theme, addressing war, post-war social realities, and more. This approach emphasized the conflicts within society and the lives of the lower-class and working-class people.[2] Bazin's ontology of cinema and his long-take theory further enriched documentary aesthetics. The birth of Japanese documentary cinema was also influenced by World War II. In the unstable post-war Japanese socio-political and economic environment, the Japanese “Neorealism Movement” emerged, sharing perspectives and connotations with Italian Neorealism, focusing on society, the lower classes, and significant events. However, Japan's unique national culture and historical background gave it a distinct character. Tokyo Story (1953), directed by Yasujiro Ozu and released in Japan, inherited, practiced, and endowed new documentary aesthetic characteristics to both Japanese and global cinema.

2. Analysis of Family-Themed Content During the Transition from a Familiar Society to a Society of Strangers

The concept of a “differentiated order,” which describes a familiar society, was proposed by Fei Xiaotong as a theoretical perspective on the structure of Chinese society. This order is characterized by a social structure built upon networks of personal relationships, underpinned by ethics and morality. A similar concept can be applied to Japanese culture. The notion of the

“extended family” has been a constant throughout Japanese history. However, with the rapid development of industrialization, post-war socio-economic recovery, and the refinement of relevant laws and regulations, a polite and orderly social system gradually emerged, transforming Japan into a society of strangers. Besides maintaining traditional Japanese etiquette and respect for elders, a latent sense of alienation began to surface in interpersonal relationships, particularly between parents and children. The film *Tokyo Story* is set during this transitional period. Wim Wenders once remarked that Yasujiro Ozu’s works “depict the transformation of Japanese life, with the gradual change in Japanese families leading to a weakening of national identity.” The film begins with an elderly couple from Onomichi visiting their children in Tokyo and ends with their children returning to Onomichi to mourn their gravely ill mother. The couple moves from the familiar society of Onomichi to the gradually alienated society of Tokyo, and the film transitions from the couple together to the father living alone. The opening and closing scenes both feature conversations between neighbors in Onomichi, but the emotional tone between these two points is worlds apart. This transformation reflects a sense of societal inevitability and personal disillusionment. Upon their arrival in Tokyo, the elderly couple is “received” by their children in order of seniority. Throughout the “reception,” the children display a polite respect toward their parents. For instance, the daughter-in-law thoroughly cleans the house before the couple’s arrival, rearranges the son’s desk to make space for them to sleep, and continues to observe traditional Japanese hospitality etiquette, even amid the rapid modernization and industrialization in Tokyo. The eldest son, too, sits with his parents and engages in polite, yet hollow, conversations about the past. However, the children’s tone also subtly reveals their reluctance and irritation, fulfilling their obligations more out of duty than genuine care. When the elderly couple arrives, the daughter-in-law asks the eldest son if they should have sashimi for dinner that night. The eldest daughter suggests that meat would suffice, and after some thought, the son agrees that they don’t need to have sashimi and that meat will do. This is the first line in the film that evokes a poignant sense of melancholy, whether for the elderly couple who have raised their children with great hardship or for the children who utter such words after reuniting with their long-separated parents. The next day, the eldest son dresses up intending to take his parents and sons on a tour of Tokyo, but his plans are thwarted as his duties as a doctor require him to attend to a patient. Ozu’s depiction of this family is entirely impartial and documentary-like. The characters are neither perfect nor villainous; they are complex individuals with both virtues and faults, making them feel like real people living in the same era. This approach mirrors the creative philosophy of Italian Neorealism, which asserts that “films should depict reality through living, breathing characters with whom we can directly relate.” [2] This is a characteristic of documentary-style films. For example, the eldest daughter complains that the husband’s gift of cakes for the parents was too expensive; she shirks her responsibilities by handing over the care of her parents to Noriko, the widow of the second son, under the pretext that her own barbershop is too busy. She and her eldest brother then discuss sending their parents to a hot spring in Atami, Japan, to ease their workload, but when their parents return earlier than expected, it disrupts their plans. After crying over the news of her mother’s death, the eldest daughter turns around and asks for her mother’s clothes.

As for the second daughter-in-law, Noriko, she is the only female character in the film who embodies true kindness, beauty, and virtue. She takes leave from work to accompany the elderly couple on a tour of Tokyo, borrows sake from the neighbors to serve them, and prepares a thoughtful meal for them. She even gives the couple her pocket money. After the mother’s passing, Noriko shares with the couple’s youngest daughter her thoughts on the “theory of change and growth,” lamenting the inevitable repetition of the “alienation” phenomenon among the couple’s children. When the father advises her to remarry, she tearfully confesses her true feelings, revealing that she does not love her deceased husband as much as the couple imagined and can hardly remember his face. Her care for the elderly couple is sincere and genuine. This aligns with the Italian Neorealism principle of focusing directly on various social phenomena without resorting to fictional narratives. Zavattini believed that “the need for such fictional, glamorous stories merely serves to mask human weaknesses, and the so-called imagination involved is nothing more than imposing rigid formulas onto the living reality of society.” Ozu refrains from praising or criticizing anyone in the film; he merely records and describes what happens within this family. By abandoning the imagination of fictional and glamorous characters, the film’s authentic portrayal reflects reality more truthfully. Noriko stands as a model in people’s minds, in stark contrast to the couple’s other children. The elderly couple remains outwardly calm and gentle throughout their “reception,” responding to their children’s dutiful but reluctant gestures—driven by external work and livelihood pressures—with polite and courteous remarks. Although they perceive their children’s actions, they keep their thoughts to themselves, never raising their voices to reprimand them. This restraint and reserve align with traditional Japanese cultural traits. The entire film is marked by a slow, soft, and unhurried conversational pace, with the elderly couple’s emotions hidden within their lonely responses like “Is that so?” and “I see.” Even when they return to Onomichi, the letters they send to their children are filled with gratitude and good news, withholding any mention of worries or troubles. It is only in the mother’s final moments of illness that they send word to their children.

In the film, there is a scene where the elderly couple travels to Atami for a vacation. At night, as they try to sleep, they find themselves in two different worlds separated by just a wall: outside, the young people are unusually loud and noisy, while inside, the elderly couple lies awake all night. This candidly reflects the “rise” of Japan’s younger generation and the decline of the traditional “extended family.” Here, “rise” refers to the younger generation becoming the backbone of Japan as the times change and the country develops. They are now the mainstay of society and the core of the family. However, when this generation shares the same space with the older generation, they are fundamentally incompatible. It is not hard to notice that the young people’s daily activities and conversations in the film are lazy, passive, and lacking in vitality. As time progresses, the cohesion of the “extended family” gradually dissipates, and the younger generation begins to establish their own independent households, moving to big cities in this “society of strangers.” This societal shift is poignantly captured when the elderly mother remarks upon first

arriving in Tokyo that the city seems small, expressing surprise that she was able to see her children so soon after leaving Onomichi. However, after a series of “receptions,” she later comments that Tokyo feels vast and that it is easy to get lost. These contradictory statements indicate that the warmth once present in the city is slowly being eroded. The social transformation’s residual effects are widespread, as seen when the elderly couple visits an old friend, Hattori. The three elderly fathers drink together and lament, realizing that Tokyo is not as good as they imagined, their children are not as exceptional as they had hoped, and they are not as filial as expected. They end their conversation with a bitter laugh, noting that at least their children are better than those who harm their parents. This comparison to such unethical parent-child relationships subtly conveys the deep sorrow of the older generation—a sorrow that reflects the societal melancholy that Yasujiro Ozu sought to express.

Gu Cangwu, in his essay “Mourning without grief: On Ozu,” wrote: “What he understands is not just the sorrow of an individual, a family, or a particular nation or era, but the sorrow that potentially affects everyone, all families, all eras, and all nations. This sorrow stems from the deviations created by various factors such as human nature, society, and culture. These deviations are not the fault of any individual but are the ‘shared karma’ of humanity, which is what Yasujiro Ozu mourned.”

3. Analysis of Cinematic Composition and Shot Techniques in Japanese Documentary Style

Early documentary filmmaker John Grierson once stated that documentary films should adhere to the principles of being “sociological, poetic, and technical.” These three elements also resonate with the traditional cultural thoughts of Eastern societies. Yasujiro Ozu’s works portray the social customs, human interactions, and cultural practices of Japanese society, capturing them through cinematic techniques that unify these elements into a consistent and outstanding form of expression. This approach aligns with the “sociological” aspect of documentary style. [3]

In *Tokyo Story*, the film’s steady, static shots evoke a sense of poetic beauty and delicacy within tranquility. For example, the film opens with several fixed, natural landscape shots of the countryside, setting the stage for the “family” theme. These scenes are rich in Japanese cultural flavor, serving as an introduction to the environment. This exemplifies the “poetic” aspect. Ozu’s empty shots are like paintings, with meticulous attention to the composition’s completeness and perfection in form. The seamless transitions between shots, where the beauty of each frame is continuously sustained, prevent any jarring breaks between scenes. The transitions are handled with a methodical precision, cutting between the environment and characters and back to the environment using different shot scales. This adherence to “technical” principles is another point where Ozu’s style shines. Moreover, Ozu’s unique and distinctive approach is evident in his use of camera angles. His camera is often positioned at a 45-degree angle, slightly tilted upward, and placed at a low height relative to the characters. This low-angle shot typically results in a sense of reverence and emphasis on the subject, creating a distinctive and memorable effect.

Japanese biographical film master Tadao Sato once commented on Ozu’s filming style: “Japanese people are accustomed to sitting on the grass with their upper bodies leaning forward, so shooting from a low angle gives the subject a sense of dignity and stability.” [4] This reflects a respectful attitude towards the common people, who are often the subjects of his films. This low-angle perspective is also a highly pure and objective documentary-style portrayal. In Bazin’s theory of the long take, he mentioned that “deep focus shots bring the relationship between the audience and the image closer than their relationship with reality.” The use of deep focus shots allows the audience to see the full scope of the “family” and the actions of the characters, with sequences of continuous shots providing a truthful depiction of life. [5] To achieve realism and authenticity, Ozu imposed very strict requirements on the actors’ expressions and movements, insisting that the actors occupy fixed positions within the composition of the frame. Each character appears before the audience in an orderly manner. Ozu also provided specific training on posture, ensuring that the way a single character or multiple characters appeared in a scene adhered to the requirements of the role and Japanese tradition. This meticulous attention to detail resulted in a smooth and harmonious progression of events, akin to real life. For instance, after learning that the elderly mother is critically ill, the children all return to the town of Onomichi from Tokyo. A long take (deep focus shot) captures the family sitting together for a meal, with their seating arrangements and postures clearly displayed to the audience. Another striking example is after the mother’s death when the children, dressed in mourning clothes, kneel in a row. The expressions and postures of the characters at this moment are fully revealed, vividly conveying their inner emotions to the audience. Ozu’s traditional, orderly, and rigorous style permeates the composition of every scene in the film. During conversations between characters, Ozu often uses close-ups or medium close-ups to shoot the dialogue from the front. The most frequently seen front-facing shots are of Noriko, the second daughter-in-law, whose every subtle expression is marked by traditional, elegant, and restrained smiles. The front-facing shots of their dialogue make it appear as if the characters are speaking directly to the audience, making the audience the main focus and allowing for a more profound experience of the emotional expression. The film features several tracking shots, the first of which is particularly special. It begins with a tracking shot outside a traditional Japanese house, stopping behind the elderly couple as they sit on the lawn. This moment occurs just as the couple decides not to trouble their eldest son and daughter, choosing instead to find separate places to stay. The two sit on the lawn, waiting for time to pass until Noriko finishes work. This tracking shot serves two purposes: it introduces the changing environment and contrasts with the previous static shots, emphasizing the long passage of time. The film intertwines a large number of static shots with occasional tracking shots, allowing the audience to fully immerse themselves in Ozu’s deeply personal cinematic style. Ozu also repeatedly used two particular shots: at both the beginning and end of the film, neighbors pass by the window and converse with the elderly couple. The framing of these two shots is identical, with the couple’s sitting posture and the neighbors’ positions remaining unchanged. The only difference is that the elderly mother is no longer alive, leaving the elderly father alone

in the same spot, conversing with the neighbors. Apart from these conversations, the repeated shots visually express the sense of “everything has changed, yet nothing remains.” Ozu directly and unreservedly conveys to the audience the bewildering helplessness of life slowly fading away over time.

4. Conclusion

Yasujirō Ozu’s uniqueness lies not only in his mastery of documentary-style filmmaking but also in his integration of Japan’s traditional cultural essence into his films. He inherited and practiced the theoretical principles of realism and documentary style from around the world, drawing inspiration from everyday life. He avoided depicting the inner activities of characters, rejected dramatic narratives, and used long takes to emphasize the authenticity of societal depictions. However, the new feature he introduced to the documentary style was situating the narrative within the unique context of the transition from a “society of acquaintances” to a “society of strangers,” [6] a shift particularly evident in Eastern cultures. The narrative focuses on “family” as the central unit, expanding to address broader social issues, with Ozu’s cinematic language articulated through 45-degree low-angle shots. Through this approach, Ozu expresses his personal concern for “life,” “family,” and “society,” focusing on a timeless and enduring theme. In Siegfried Kracauer’s theory of documentary thought, he mentioned two main tendencies in film: “realistic and formative.” Yasujirō Ozu, with his distinctive perspective, found the most appropriate cinematic narrative and stylistic language, making it a unique and revered personal style admired by future generations.

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