JAPAN 2021: 100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

Early Spring (Sôshun)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

After the domestic critical and box office success of *Tokyo Story* in late 1953, Ozu found himself taking an uncharacteristic break from directing his own films to help his friend, the actress Kinuyo Tanaka, complete her second film as director *The Moon Has Risen* (*Tsuki wa noborinu*, itself based on an Ozu scenario written in 1947 with Ryosuke Saito). Production on the film had stalled at Nikkatsu because of a 'five-company-agreement against Nikkatsu' which Shochiku, Daiei ,Toho, Shintoho, and Toei had put in place 'to protect the market'. Ozu, recently elected president of the Director's Guild of Japan, was called upon to sort it all out, which involved rewriting the scenario with Saito and Kogo Noda (Ozu's frequent collaborator since 1927 and co-writer on *Early Spring*). Until this unplanned hiatus, only World War II had caused a longer break in Ozu's directing career and it coincided with a host of important developments: the rise of television (which Ozu deals with most memorably a few years later in *Good Morning*); the attempts by cinemas to combat television with colour and 'Scope imagery; Japanese society's transformation to a postwar economy; an uptick of rebellious youth culture and the not-so-distant murmur of rock'n'roll that was about to be so influential.

Change was in the air, Shochiku were experiencing a fall in cinema ticket receipts for the first time in decades, and it is believed that Shochiku executives attempted to encourage Ozu to use younger stars, bigger names, and to appeal to a younger demographic. The subject matter of 'home dramas' was falling out of favour and Ozu was aware of this: 'Recently there has been increasingly severe criticism of the *Ofuna-cho* [home drama] flavour in films. But the traditions of the *Ofuna-cho* are the result of 30 years. They are not going to fall in one morning.' David Bordwell (in his magnificent 1988 bible *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema*) describes how 'science fiction, rock-and-roll musicals, and erotic films made home dramas look old fashioned' and although Ozu was committed to different flavours of the 'home drama' until the end of his career, both *Early Spring* and its successor *Tokyo Twilight* suggest attempts to modernise. *Early Spring* certainly has a different feel: the protagonists are all youngish; there are no dominant parental figures; there is a very noticeable kissing scene (especially to Ozu aficionados); an unexpected suicide; much biting social commentary; and a number of dolly shots (so infrequent in Ozu films that their appearance has the power of a double face slap).

So it was in this changing milieu that Ozu set about writing the scenario for *Early Spring* – his 47th film. Working again with Kogo Noda and taking 87 days just to write the script ('They kidded me at the company saying I'd better call the film *Raishun* [*Next Spring*].') – it turned out to be Ozu's longest ever film and his penultimate shot in black and white.

Early Spring's plot can by described in a few sentences. A young Tokyo salaryman, Shoji – disillusioned with both his job (at a fire brick company) and

his home life (since his young boy tragically died) – half-heartedly engages in an affair with the office flirt 'Goldfish' (named so for her large eyes). He and his wife Masako quarrel and separate, which coincides with him being transferred to work at a rural outpost, where he goes alone. His wife turns up a few days later and they agree to start their life together afresh. On paper, this slight story sounds like it's about very little at all, yet it is beautifully and purposefully constructed over two-and-a-half hours consisting of subtle interwoven character studies, free from the distraction of major plot complications.

White collar salarymen feature in the majority of Ozu's postwar films but it is in *Early Spring* that their behaviour and repetitive lifestyle seems most closely observed, together with a very strong dose of pessimistic social criticism. Ozu said, 'It had been a while since I dealt with the salaryman. I wanted to have a go at representing their lifestyle. The thrill and aspirations one feels as a fresh graduate entering society gradually wane as the days go by. Even working diligently for 30 years doesn't amount to much. I tried to portray the pathos of the salaryman's life as society undergoes transformation...' Toward the end of the film, the broken older man at Kawai's bar expands on this: 'I feel exhausted. That's the life of a salaryman, disillusion and loneliness is all that awaits us. I've worked 31 long years to find that life is just an empty dream.' The irony here is that Ozu himself was a one-company man all his life and at the time he wrote this dialogue with Noda, he too had been 31 years at Shochiku.

The structure of the film urges the viewer to weigh up contradictory accounts and try to piece together who might be telling porkies and why. When Shoji and Goldfish sleep together we don't see them alone again until after the noodle party confrontation when Goldfish turns up urgently at Shoji's gaff. Like the group of fellow workers who begin to guess their secret, we too have to start reassessing our understanding of events because we're not privy to what led to the group's suspicions. David Bordwell describes how we are 'forced to juggle hypotheses. Once gaps are introduced between scenes, temporal ellipses become "elliptical" in the sense that they leave much to the imagination. Such passages suggest that typically Ozu will "flaunt" the gap he creates, letting us notice it and puzzle over it when it occurs.' Ozu's exquisite flaunting game propels the film and reveals an extraordinary set of nuanced possibilities.

Shoji is such a blank canvas, seemingly stubborn, lacking in compassion, and so emotionally constipated that he's slightly annoying – until we discover that he and Masako somehow tragically lost their young son. His subdued behaviour, now perhaps more understandable given the circumstances, seems to suggest that he almost accidentally stumbled into the affair because his mind was elsewhere. Ozu blurs the line so we don't really know what to make of him. Shoji treats his wife with disdain throughout, he's not particularly charismatic, appears to have few redeeming qualities, yet the spectre of the lost child allows us to reel back from thoroughly disliking him. So in addition to being a critique of how young workers can become trapped for life in a faceless company – and how business relationships cannot take the place of family ties – the film is also a study of how the death of a young child demolishes a family unit and scatters Shoji's brain.

I'm interested in how the reception to his previous film *Tokyo Story* made Ozu uncomfortable and in turn influenced *Early Spring*. In trying to better understand Ozu's frame of mind after the success of *Tokyo Story*, I came across a point made strongly and numerous times in a recent book about Ozu by Yoshida Kiju (director of *Eros Plus Massacre*, also known as Yoshida Yoshishige, and who coincidentally started work at Shochiku the same year that *Early Spring* was made). This strange book *Ozu Yasujiro no han eiga* (1998, published in English in 2003 as *Ozu's Anti-Cinema*) discusses, in one of its more coherent passages, how 'Ozu-san was so displeased with the final scene of *Tokyo Story* – appalled at the way viewers found some melodramatic salvation in the form of the deceased wife's gaze cast upon her husband – that he did not prepare a similar finale in *Early Spring*.' Yoshida contends that Ozu was 'profoundly ashamed that *Tokyo Story* was considered to be an ordinary melodrama that makes audiences cry.' It's as if Ozu was annoyed with himself for making *Tokyo Story* 'manipulative', perhaps feeling he'd somehow over-egged the emotion? Tony Rayns has described how *Tokyo Story* is 'an uncharacteristically explicit film for a director who generally preferred more oblique strategies,' and Ozu's main concern for *Early Spring* does seem to be about regaining those oblique strategies. For *Early Spring* he wanted to attenuate the emotional melodramatic rhythms of his previous film: 'I tried to avoid anything dramatic, and instead piled up scenes where nothing at all happens, so as to let the audience feel the sadness of their existence.' These 'piled up' scenes where 'nothing at all happens' are in fact peppered with beautifully drawn character studies; cleverly structured to keep the viewer constantly working, thinking about, and assessing information; and it's all laced with sharp, funny dialogue ('But remember, they all faced bullets together.' – 'With soldiers like that, it's no wonder that Japan lost the war.')

At the end of the film, upon Masako's arrival at Shoji's new rural home, one might expect the newly reconciled couple to have a really good hug, but they do no such thing. Instead, they simply both rise to look out of the window at a passing train. Agreeing that they could be back in Tokyo in just three hours via this train is a tentative acknowledgement that they're starting their life again together. There are then shots of chimneys spewing out acrid (fire brick?) smoke, and there we have it, a cold, barely satisfying ending, but with a flicker of hope. Ozu was probably much happier with this ending, but tranquillity is neither happiness nor despair.

Nick Wrigley, extract from *Early Spring* DVD booklet essay (BFI, 2012)

EARLY SPRING (SÔSHUN)
Director: Yasujiro Ozu
©: Shochiku Co. Ltd.
Production Company: Shochiku Co. Ltd.
Producer: Shizuo Yamanouchi
Production Manager: Tomiji Shimizu
Assistant Director: Kozo Tashiro
Screenplay: Kogo Noda, Yasujiro Ozu
Director of Photography: Yuharu Atsuta
Lighting: Masao Kato
Camera Assistant: Takashi Kawamata
Editor: Yoshiyasu Hamamura
Art Director: Tatsuo Hamada
Set Decorator: Setsutaro Moritani
Costumes: Yuji Nagashima
Music: Takanobu Saito
Sound Recording: Yoshisaburo Senoo
Studio: Shochiku Ofuna

Cast
Chikage Awashima *(Masako Sugiyama)*
Ryo Ikebe *(Shoji)*
Teiji Takahashi *(Taizo Aoki)*
Keiko Kishi *(Chiyo Kaneko, 'Goldfish')*
Chishu Ryu *(Kiichi Onodera)*
Sô Yamamura *(Yutaka Kawai)*
Takako Fujino *(Terumi Aoki)*
Masami Taura *(Koichi Kitagawa)*
Haruko Sugimura *(Tamako, Masako's mother)*
Kumeko Urabe *(Shige Kitagawa)*
Kuniko Miyake *(Yukiko Kawai)*
Eijirô Tono *(Hattori)*
Koji Mitsui *(Sugiyama's ex-army friend)*
Daisuke Katô *(Sugiyama's ex-army friend)*
Fujio Suga
Haruo Tanaka
Chieko Nakakita
Kazuko Yamamoto
Tatsuro Nagai
Keijiro Morozumi
Nobuo Nakamura *(Arakawa)*
Seiji Miyaguchi
Teruko Nagaoka
Junji Masuda
Tsusai Sugawara
Hiroko Sugita
Zen Murase
Nobu Kawaguchi
Hoichi Takeda
Toshio Shimamura
Jun Tanizaki
Asaka Hasebe
Ko Suenaga
Tsuneko Sasaki
Yoko Chimura
Ko Sahara
Shenichi Inagawa
Shosuke Oni
Kentaro Imai
Hideo Matsuno
Hisako Mine
Yasuyuki Suzuki
Masahiko Kanoo
Masahiko Inoue
Akira Chiba
Tami Yamamoto
Chieko Ota
Junji Nakayama
Koichi Yamada

Japan 1956©
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