

***Directed by Yasujirō Ozu,*
by Shiguéhiko Hasumi. University of
California Press, 2024, 356 pp.**

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The films of Yasujirō Ozu have been so universally acclaimed that it may seem as though his work is beyond criticism, as though we have collectively agreed not only on his status as a singular director, but on why precisely his films are considered masterpieces. Ozu's films have become entwined with certain ideas about cinema, as well as about Japan and Japanese culture, ideas so pervasive they seem to precede any viewing of his work and to preclude genuine understanding of the films themselves. Shiguéhiko Hasumi's *Directed by Yasujirō Ozu* offers a defiant perspective on Ozu while making the case for a critical approach to cinema that has long fallen out of favour in European and North American academia. The book has become a cornerstone of Japanese film theory, not only for disentangling Ozu's films from a web of contextual assumptions, but for illuminating a path for Japanese film studies to follow. Originally published in 1983, this is the first time Hasumi's book has appeared in English, translated by Ryan Cook, and with an incisive critical introduction by Aaron Gerow.

"This is the most important book of my life", claims Ryūsuke Hamaguchi, the Oscar-nominated director of films such as *Drive My Car* (*Doraibu Mai Kā*, 2021), as quoted on the back cover of *Directed by Yasujirō Ozu*; "I know of no other film reading experience as devastating and alluring as this one". Such praise hints at the lofty position occupied by both this book and its author. Hasumi has had a noted impact on several generations of filmmakers through his writing and academic teaching. Among his students at Rikkyo University was Kiyoshi Kurosawa; he has mentored Hamaguchi (himself a student of Kurosawa); and he championed Takeshi Kitano when Kitano made his transition to cinema in the 1990s. Hasumi's writing has shaped the environment of film criticism in Japan, which has been positioned as oppositional to, or at least distinct from, European or North American theoretical approaches (xxii-xxiv; xxxiii; Kwon 2023). Discussing Hasumi's influence on Japanese film culture, Hamaguchi emphasises Hasumi's insistence on focused attention by the viewer to what takes place onscreen:

Someone who doesn't precisely remember the details [of what is presented onscreen] is not considered reliable in Japan's cinephile culture. This overall tendency imposes the act of "thoroughly watching" films on the viewer. And honing this capacity of "watching" is directly tied to filmmaking practice, which has really become a core element in Japan's cinephile culture. (Kwon 2023)

Hasumi's background in post-structuralism, having previously translated works by Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, can be detected among the roots of his investigation into Ozu's cinema, and *Directed by Yasujirō Ozu* seems to be something of a rejection of Barthes's

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“The Death of the Author”. Hasumi’s own style is built on “kinetic visual acuity” (xx), and came to be known as “surface criticism” (xxv), focused on evaluating only what is seen while disregarding broader thematic extrapolation or the decoding of implied messages. Hasumi insists on a reading of Ozu as impervious to interpretation, repeatedly noting the lack of subtextual meaning beyond what is evident onscreen. As Gerow puts it, for Hasumi “cinema must be discussed as cinema, bracketing out issues of politics, society, and economy, in order to understand how the film operates as a film” (xxv). Furthermore, Hasumi makes clear that the only context in which a single Ozu film can be placed is that of the system represented by the rest of Ozu’s filmography: “the films of Ozu [...] reflect nothing. Their shots merely relay the look back toward other shots. The films of Yasujirō Ozu do little more than entice us to look at other films by the same filmmaker, or else at any number of films by other filmmakers” (295).

While not explicitly making the connection with post-structuralism, Hasumi does quote Ozu as saying “I don’t think cinema has a grammar” (121), and Hasumi is clear in his rejection of the idea of “style” as a concept in general, and in particular when applied to Ozu’s work. Nonetheless, Hasumi identifies structures and networks of connections across Ozu’s filmography, and suggests that an understanding of Ozu is impossible without acknowledging these structures. However, the nature of these structures is of critical importance. At the core of Hasumi’s approach is a rejection of a critical process whereby Ozu’s style has been defined by “litanies of negation” (10), which have characterised Ozu as a director who selectively discarded cinematic tools in order to create a systemic style built on denial. Hasumi quotes from Donald Richie’s *Ozu: His Life and Films* to illustrate how Ozu’s cinema has typically been defined by an idea of minimalism and austere restraint, with “invariable camera angle, no camera movement, a restricted use of cinematic punctuation” (13–14).

Hasumi’s response to this approach of negation is to focus resolutely on what is shown by Ozu in his films and to build understanding out of these elements alone. In place of the “abstract static patterns” that preoccupy writers such as Richie and Paul Schrader, patterns which “rob the films of their raw life as moving images”, Hasumi substitutes “productive signs” that conceive of Ozu’s cinema as one of “excess” (16). Hasumi’s strategy is one of affirmation, of defining Ozu in the positive, “to strip away the mythical exceptionalism” of Ozu’s films that have been defined “by means of what they lack” (12). Interestingly, Ryan Cook highlights Hasumi’s preoccupation with structures in language, particularly pronoun use (which are infrequently used in everyday Japanese); Hasumi’s impression of pronoun use in French as a “system of exclusion” is linked by Cook to Hasumi’s rejection of critical perspectives on Ozu’s work that define through exclusion or negation. Thus the “interrelationality” of the Japanese language becomes central to Hasumi’s methodological approach to Ozu’s filmography, and to Hasumi’s intent to present Ozu’s cinema as one of “abundance” built on “coexistence and juxtaposition” (xvi).

Of the “abstract static patterns” that are applied to Ozu, Hasumi is particularly incensed by those that impose a lens of cultural interpretation over Ozu’s work. Perceptions of Ozu and his place in Japanese cinema have been defined outside of Japan in part by writers such as Richie, Schrader, and others such as David Bordwell. The discourse around Ozu has become enshrouded with concepts and terminology such as *mono no aware* and *wabi sabi*, that represent in a very broad sense a simplistic idea of an abstracted “Japan” and its aesthetic heritage. As a result, Ozu’s films have become linked with an idea of Japanese aesthetics and culture that can be reductive and superficial, the films themselves shorn of their own integrity to become mere ciphers for generic and misty cultural concepts. What Hasumi objects to is not just the laziness of this critical approach, but its inaccuracy. Hasumi doesn’t single out Western

writers because they incorrectly identify the supposed “Japanese-ness” of Ozu’s work, but rather insists that Ozu’s films do not in any way represent abstract Japanese aesthetics, and to state otherwise “involves a refusal to truly look at his films” (xxvi). Hasumi objects not only to the idea of Ozu embodying some kind of Japanese-ness, whoever is defining it, but also to the process of reducing the complexity and variety of an artist’s work to a handful of signifiers and cultural codes. Instead, Hasumi separates Ozu from pre-defined ideas by showing, through his attention to oft-overlooked details in Ozu’s films, the ways in which Ozu demonstrably deviates from these established perceptions of the filmmaker’s work.

Directed by Yasujiro Ozu is structured around a series of tendencies that Hasumi identifies throughout Ozu’s filmography, grouped in chapters with headings such as “Eating”, “Changing Clothes”, “Holding Still”, “Laughing”; these tendencies frequently reappear across chapters as Hasumi intuitively draws connections across Ozu’s films. This focus on specific details, actions, and patterns that can be readily identified simply by paying attention to what appears on screen is the core of Hasumi’s rejoinder to other critical perspectives that have been applied to Ozu’s films. With a roving, somewhat conversational style of writing, apparently written from memory (xix), Hasumi glides through Ozu’s filmography identifying details both subtle and obvious and uses them to construct often profound theories and perspectives. An investigation into second-floor rooms in Ozu’s later films—“strange spaces that can only be described as drifting in midair” (75)—leads to revelatory ideas about private female and male spaces, their functions, rules, and parallels. Throughout, Hasumi is understandably preoccupied with vision and sight, and discusses everything from the famed mismatch of eyelines in Ozu’s films to the absence of close-ups. His ongoing look at Ozu’s “process of separating the look and its subject” leads to elegantly expressed conclusions (135):

In Ozu, people who are intimate do not face one another directly. They look out at something instead, casting parallel gazes as the camera films them from behind and at an angle. They express their empathy with their backs, their waists, sometimes their legs. Lyricism in Ozu reaches its highest expression through the backs that exhibit exceptional eloquence without so much as a hint of movement. This is why bar counters are privileged settings for the portrayal of friendship among men. (161)

Hasumi further connects such staging with Ozu’s famed use of low camera angles, and his analysis of interior and exterior space in Ozu’s films helps to demystify this overly commented-on feature (137–38). With the domestic architecture of Japanese homes delineated by strong verticals, horizontals, and right angles, it seems only natural that Ozu’s camera would take into consideration the compositional implications of such environments. Ozu himself was clear: “I don’t like looking down on people. High-angle shots look down on people. It’s best to keep the camera level” (314). In this sense, the interview between Hasumi and Ozu’s cinematographer Yūhara Atsuta included as an appendix proves to be invaluable for cutting through the often lofty discourse around Ozu with details of the practical aspects of studio filmmaking, such as Ozu’s preference for 50mm lenses (as opposed to wider) to minimise architectural and depth distortion in the image (306–7). Other details such as the effect camera movement has on the rhythm of both performance and editing go some way to validating Hasumi’s avoidance of reading grand cultural tropes into matters of craft, while revealing the technical considerations behind the specifics in Ozu’s films (323). Similarly, Hasumi’s focus on what can be seen in the onscreen image is supported by Atsuta’s revelation that the presence of hanging objects such as umbrellas in the homes depicted in Ozu’s films were a way to create an unpretentious domestic atmosphere (306).

Another particularly revealing structure analysed by Hasumi is the depiction of weather in Ozu's films. Describing the director as "an auteur of broad daylight" (185), Hasumi notes the almost uniform clear skies across Ozu's filmography. What's more, Ozu's sunlight is the radiance of California or the Mediterranean, of Hollywood and John Ford—"as if Japan were not located in a subtropical climate with a wet season" (183)—leading Hasumi to reject the idea of Ozu as a typically Japanese filmmaker. The absence of seasons, and the foreign nature of the light, invoke nothing of the seasonality so common in ideas of Japanese aesthetic sensibilities, and this point is central to Hasumi's rejection of cultural interpretations by Richie and others who see Ozu as representing something quintessentially "Japanese".

At the same time, while this argument is effective against the specific characterisations of Ozu that Hasumi is debating, his insistence on "how tremendously misguided it would be to call Yasujirō Ozu a typically Japanese filmmaker" would seem perverse if we were to consider anything else that appears onscreen (183). That is, weather is merely one feature of the environments presented in Ozu's films, and can't be taken in isolation. It is true that Hasumi later reemphasises his statement as being in relation specifically to the depiction of Japanese seasonality (205), and his point overall is that concepts such as nationality or cultural aesthetics shouldn't be imposed on artists. At the same time, to criticise others' interpretations by suggesting that the sociopolitical setting of postwar Japan, or the culturally specific examinations of family relationships which also appear onscreen, should be given less weight than the climate when declaring whether or not Ozu is "a Japanese filmmaker" stretches credulity. But here we collide with the sometimes strict, sometimes loose terms and conditions of Hasumi's discourse, and we risk trespassing into the forbidden zone that lies beyond the purely audiovisual. At such moments Hasumi's dogmatic rigidity seems to be blinkered rather than rigorous, the terminology pedantic and contradictory rather than merely idiosyncratic, and the convenience of some of his discursive evasions begins to show.

Elsewhere Hasumi's strident assertions are sometimes undercut by examples he has overlooked. It may seem unreasonable to point out holes in otherwise compelling arguments, but when Hasumi's guiding principle is a "kinetic visual acuity" that demands hyper-vigilance of onscreen details, his willingness to skip past exceptions to his own arguments at times reads as self-indulgent. His almost neurotic fixation on the absence of staircases in Ozu's films—even cinematographer Atsuta seems baffled at Hasumi's insistence—does allow him to construct an insightful observation of private female space in Ozu's films. Yet his categorical framing of his theory, insisting on the absence of domestic staircases, as well as perhaps the fact that he was writing from memory, causes him to either overlook or deliberately exclude obvious examples such as the staircase to the bedroom of Kiyoshi (Hiroshi Kawaguchi) in *Floating Weeds* (*Ukigusa*, 1959). That Kiyoshi is a boy and not a young woman is perhaps inconvenient for Hasumi's argument, but the enthusiasm with which absentee father Komajuro (Nakamura Ganjirō II) bounds up and down these stairs, repeatedly invading the space of a boy who has been told his father is dead, is inarguably significant, and its exclusion by Hasumi seems conveniently selective.

Discussing Ozu's refusal to use "especially cinematic approaches for handling space and time [and] his exclusion of the gesture of approaching", Hasumi states that "Ozu declines to use long shots to depict the exterior, thus preempting the establishment of any far-to-near or outside-to-inside perspective, whether visual or psychological" (242). This is partly true, and it certainly helps illustrate his otherwise perceptive observations about laughter filling empty spaces as a transitional technique. Yet it overlooks the fact that Ozu frequently uses static shots to move the audience step by step into a new location, or to methodically establish the

locale at a film's opening. This can be seen for example in the opening shots of *An Autumn Afternoon* (*Sanma no Aji*, 1962), where such a sequence presents the factory where Shūhei Hirayama (Chishū Ryū) works, progressively bringing the viewer closer to and then inside the building until we arrive in Hirayama's office. Later in the film, similar sequences of static shots allow for narrative transition from one location to another, bringing us into the neighbourhood and finally the restaurant of Hirayama's old teacher Sakuma (Eijirō Tōno), or to the bar where Hirayama meets Kaoru (Kyōko Kishida). That Ozu didn't use wide-angle shots or a moving camera to capture these sequences is beside the point—these sequences clearly involve “the gesture of approaching” that Hasumi categorically claims is nowhere to be found in Ozu.

This particular oversight is unusual because it also serves to debunk another inaccurate and misty concept that has been pinned to Ozu, that of the so-called “pillow shot”. This term, originally posited by Noël Burch and which he extrapolated from haiku poetry, suggests that the sequences of static shots that appear in Ozu's films function as a kind of zen-like breathing space between scenes, and are external to the diegetic flow of the film (292). Hasumi objects to the idea as yet another example of cultural interpretation gone wild, but his insistence that “Ozu makes no attempt to depict movement through intermediary space” causes him to overlook how these shots often function (244). It is abundantly clear that these sequences are neither Burch's free-floating still lives nor merely purely metaphorical images, but are frequently very much part of the diegetic flow, and serve a structural function with regard to space in Ozu's formal system.

What Hasumi never fully resolves is the fact that personal interpretation, even when employing onscreen evidence, can be just as much of a filtering lens as any other extra-textual consideration, and the conclusions drawn from one approach may not be inherently superior or more insightful than the other. A reading of a key scene in *Late Spring* (*Banshun*, 1949) unsuccessfully attempts to assert that an infamous shot of a vase is evidence that the relationship between father and daughter is in fact incestuous. Hasumi's self-indulgence here leads him to construct an argument that borders on ridiculous. If clearly relevant sociopolitical context is out of bounds when discussing a film like *Late Spring*, unconvincing interpretations suggesting incest hardly seem more valid, and suddenly those well-intentioned invocations of *mono no aware* don't appear so out of line.

Throughout the book, the reader must contend with Hasumi's writing style. Cook, in addition to tackling the usual challenges of translating from Japanese to English, describes Hasumi's writing as “a kind of ‘secret code’” (x). Hasumi is known for his expansive, effusive style and his disregard for norms and conventions—his sentences have been known to run for pages, he creates his own ill-defined terminology, and he employs standard terms ambiguously. The result is a loose, improvisatory style that is for the most part surprisingly enjoyable to read. While the text is frequently repetitive and Hasumi is often sidetracked by his own digressions, the effect is to ultimately emphasise connecting structures across Ozu's oeuvre as ideas get picked up and dropped across chapters. Hasumi's rambling is a refreshing break from the uniformly schematic and anonymous style that dominates academic writing these days, and makes for a tonal contrast that soothes the impact of the book's analytic intensity. There is an acoustic warmth and intimacy to the discussion throughout *Directed by Yasujirō Ozu*, and when Hasumi reaches the numerous insights scattered throughout the book, the reader arrives with him, which is to say organically, having followed a sometimes winding discursive route instead of having been prodded through rigid rhetorical structures.

A downside to this effusive rambling is a thankfully infrequent tendency for hyperbole. Suggestions that were an argument in *Floating Weeds* to “continue for even a moment longer, cinema might henceforth cease to be cinema” are distracting for their exuberance (158). Over forty years after it was originally written, it can be difficult to agree with the assertion that Ozu—who even during his lifetime was renowned for his formal conservatism (12)—somehow managed to capture “the climax of cinema itself” (197). Thankfully such florid pontifications are relatively rare, but they do connect to an effervescent rhetorical style that seems to encourage an absolutist perspective and the fleet dismissal of inconvenient ideas. This style, facilitated by his showy insistence on writing from memory, allows Hasumi to be dogmatic when it suits him, and to overlook inconsistencies and assumptions in his own tightly held views.

However, despite its minor inconstancies, Hasumi’s unwavering focus on the artwork rather than the infinitude of potential contexts and connections that can be conjured around it, makes *Directed by Yasujirō Ozu* an illuminating text. Hasumi convincingly argues for Ozu’s films to be seen without the filter of preconceived cultural descriptors or other concepts, so that Ozu (and, by implication, other directors and indeed all artists) can be engaged with on the merits of their work and not as representations of whatever categorisations viewers bring with them. This perspective is at the heart of the book’s contribution to present-day criticism and discourse. Hasumi rejects typical postmodern approaches as “essentially ignoring what is visible, denying the text in front of the critic’s eyes in order to discover something invisible”, stating that such methodologies are “less about the text than what is not the text—especially the ideologies on which criticism [is] founded” (xxv). This approach quite refreshingly puts Hasumi on the side of the director, and suggests an inherent “arrogance” in insisting that artist and artwork both can be pushed aside to indulge the wanderings of the critic (15). Not only for its insightful, inventive, and instructive positions on Ozu’s films, but as a general framework for approaching any text, this English translation of Hasumi’s writing introduces a revitalising perspective, which serves as an antidote to a critical landscape littered with hopelessly abstracted writing, ensnared within thickets of endlessly iterative conceptual constructs.

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Suggested Citation

Franklin, David. “*Directed by Yasujirō Ozu*, by Shiguéhiko Hasumi.” *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 28, 2024, pp. 103–109. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.28.08>.

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