**Some thoughts on watching films**

Stories are the stuff of life. They allow us to reflect on all sorts of issues at a safe distance as we engage with the characters, cry with them, laugh with them, get cross with them and generally share their experience. How they deal with the issues they come across may frustrate us, or give us new insights; cause us to laugh or cry; result in us hurling abuse at the screen or willing there to be a happy ending. And through it all we can encounter God in all sorts of unexpected places if only we take time to look.

Questions to ask yourself

- What did you think of the film? What do you like most? Least?
- Which incidents made you think or feel most strongly? How well did you think the film treated those incidents?
- What issues did the film raise for you?
- What character(s) do you most identify with and why?
- Does the film have any echoes of Christian beliefs or stories from the Bible? Does it support or challenge Christian values?

**Some facts about the film**

- The director, Yasujiro Ozu, never married and lived dutifully with his mother all his life. He died of cancer in 1963, two years after his mother.
- *Tokyo Story* is generally considered by critics and film buffs alike to be Ozu's "masterpiece" and is regarded by many as not only one of Ozu's best films but one of the best films ever made. John Walker, former editor of Halliwell's Film Guides, placed it at the top of his list of the best 1000 films.
- Like all of Ozu's films, the pace is slow. Important events are often not shown on screen, only being revealed later through dialogue. The film is notable for its use of the "tatami-mat" shot, in which the camera height is low and remains largely static throughout. One film critic wryly noted that the camera moves once in the film, which is "more than usual" for an Ozu film.
- Because of Ozu's style of shooting at eye-level from the floor, all the sets had to be constructed with ceilings.
- Yasujiro Ozu and his longtime collaborator, Kogo Noda, spent 103 days at a country inn in Chigasaka working on the screenplay. After that, shooting and editing advanced extremely quickly, with the result that the film was in production only for a total of four months.
Tokyo Story

Tokyo Story was made in 1953 and tells the story of an elderly couple, Shukishi and Tomi Hirayama, who live in the small coastal village of Onomichi, Japan, with their youngest daughter, schoolteacher Kyoko Hirayama. Their other three surviving adult children live some distance away, either in Tokyo or Osaka. As they have not seen their children for some considerable time, they decide to pay them a visit. However, rather than be made welcome, they are confronted by indifference, ingratitude and selfishness as the children try to figure out what to do with their parents whilst still continuing with their own day-to-day lives. In contrast, it is their widowed daughter-in-law who treats them with kindness.

Directed, and co-written, by Yasujiro Ozu, Tokyo Story is a serene and contemplative look at the breakdown in the relationship between grown children and their elderly parents. The film concerns itself with problems many of us must face: the struggle to maintain a self-fulfilling life independent of parental expectations, the changes in relationships wrought by time, and the inevitability of separation and loss. Ozu does not point the finger at either parents or children but, like many of his films, offers a thoughtful meditation on the transitory nature of life.

Honour thy father and thy mother

Honouring one's parents is one of the ten commandments, but how well do we do it? Will there always be tensions between the generations? What hopes do you have as a parent regarding your children? And, as a child, how do/did you feel towards your parents?

Disappointment

At one point, Kyoko, the young daughter, comments to the daughter-in-law, Noriko, "Isn't life disappointing?" Noriko smiles and says "Yes, it is," reminding us that we cannot avoid the sadness of life but, through her smile, perhaps accepting that that's okay and that is just the way things are. Do you agree? Has your life been disappointing? If so, in what way? How have you coped with such disappointment?

Expectations

Throughout the film, the various characters have different expectations of each other, many of which are not fulfilled. How do we cope with the expectations placed upon us? And how do we deal with those unfulfilled expectations, either for ourselves or for others?

Finally ...

Which character did you sympathise with most? Why? Are you happy with the way your character behaved, or do you wish they had done something else? If the latter, how much are those tensions part of your own life?

Yasujiro Ozu: Tokyo Story

A review

Those brought up on the energetic diet of American cinema may find it hard to appreciate the quietest art of the great Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu. He has been called the poet of family life, capable of taking the seemingly trivial and making great drama of it. Nothing was too small to be significant.

Ozu steadfastly peers into the hearts and minds of his characters until we feel we know them intimately. And the loyalty of those who love his work is as absolute as his own conviction. The number of film-makers who have made pilgrimages to his grave (marked simply by the Japanese word for nothing) runs into dozens.

Ozu started making films in 1927 and was one of the last to forsake the silent cinema. Much of this early work has been lost or destroyed. But we know from examples that he wasn't always as calmly contemplative as he was in his late work, which reached the west only in the 60s. He could make boisterous comedies and earthy chronicles of family life, containing outrageous sight gags. In the last stretch of his life, however, he had refined his art so much that it hardly seemed like art at all.

His most famous film, and certainly one of his masterpieces, is Tokyo Story. In it an elderly couple are taken to visit their grown-up children in Tokyo. Too busy to entertain them, the children pack them off to a noisy resort. Returning to Tokyo, the old woman visits the widow of another son, who treats her better, while the old man gets drunk with some old companions. They seem to realise they are a burden, and simply try to smooth things over as best they can. By now the children have, albeit guiltily, given up on them; even when their mother is taken ill and dies, they rush back to Tokyo after attending the funeral. A simple proverb expresses their failure: "Be kind to your parents while they are alive. Filial piety cannot reach beyond the grave." The last sequence is of the old man alone in his seaside home, followed by an outside shot of the rooftops of the town and a boat passing by on the water. Life goes on.

The film condemns no one and its sense of inevitability carries with it only a certain resigned sadness. "Isn't life disappointing," someone says at one point. Yet the simple observations are so acute that you feel that no other film could express its subject matter much better.

Ozu shoots his story with as little movement of the camera as possible. We view scenes almost always from the floor, lower than the eye level of a seated character. He insisted that no actor was to dominate a scene. The balance of every scene had to be perfect. Chishu Ryu, who often played the father in Ozu's films about family life, once had to complete two dozen devoted to raising a tea cup.

Tokyo Story was followed by eight other films, all of them as masterful, and a group named after the seasons, including Early Spring and An Autumn Afternoon. Each was about the problems of ordinary family life. While their conservative nature made younger more polemical Japanese directors, such as Imamura and Oshima, impatient, their universality has come to be recognised the world over. Ozu was the most Japanese of film-makers, but his work can still cross most cultural barriers.

Derek Malcolm

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