

*Late Spring*, directed and co-written by Yasujiro Ozu, was released in 1949, which makes it an old film, or a film that has been new for a long time.

I first saw it in 2010, when it was already past its sixtieth birthday. I'd seen a couple of other Ozu films before it, perhaps a dozen Kurosawas, some in cinemas on first release, and a small handful of Mizoguchis. I saw a few contemporary releases, such as *Tampopo*, as a working critic, but I can hardly be accused of being an expert on Japanese film. A box set of Naruse waits serenely by the DVD player, its shrink-wrap reflecting the light without any crinkle of reproach.

So what are the odds of finding new things to talk about in so elderly a product, staple of so many film-studies curricula? Pretty much a hundred per cent, I'd say. I'm quietly confident. This is partly because of the nature of the film itself, glancing, wayward, and partly because of the way Westerners look at art works from Eastern cultures, rather passively assuming their mysteriousness.

In the 1980s there was an act on the London music circuit called the Frank Chickens, two Japanese women who had quite a little following, in

Hackney, in Camden, for their performances of quirky songs (*We are ninja, not geishas / That's not what you expect*). When they came on stage they would acknowledge the previous performers, bowing demurely and saying, 'Thank you for authentic display of traditional folk culture.'

Perhaps Edward Said slipped the Frank Chickens a tenner to insert this neat little mirroring of Orientalist attitudes into their act.

In general, even so, I have doubts about the usefulness of Said's term 'orientalism', as expounded with particular reference to the Middle East in his 1978 book of that name. It reduces all the ways in which cultures can misunderstand each other to mechanisms of control, when history shows us something closer to a hall of mirrors than a shooting gallery. There are so many ways of getting the wrong end of the stick, and relatively few of them go on to involve beating someone over the head with it.

Japanese cinema arrived as an international phenomenon when *Rashomon* won a major European prize in 1951, though David Desser's analogy seems to run away with him when he describes the importance of the moment: 'Admiral Perry and his Black Ships steamed into Tokyo Bay in 1853 and forced the opening of Japan to the West. Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* came steaming into the Venice Film Festival and opened up the West to Japanese films.' It's

true that there were no shots fired on either occasion, but at least Perry was in a position to make threats.

From this distance it's not hard to see that one of the reasons for Kurosawa's impact was that he himself had been so much influenced by American films. His reputation hasn't declined in any dramatic way, but two rather quieter directors, Mizoguchi and Ozu, have come to be seen as part of a more profoundly Japanese tradition.

According to Donald Richie (in his 1959 book *The Japanese Film*, co-written with Joseph L. Anderson), the perception of Ozu as uniquely Japanese worked against his becoming known internationally. It was felt that the West couldn't possibly appreciate anything so 'truly Japanese', but also that trying to get Ozu's excellence recognised, and then failing, would be actively disgraceful. Better not to make the attempt.

Conversely, in 1954, when Kinugasa's *Gate of Hell* won the Grand Prize at Cannes, the domestic press felt mortified rather than triumphant. The film had made no one's 'Ten Best' lists of 1953, so wasn't this foreign accolade in fact an insult, barely disguised? Outsiders seemed to be saying that Japanese critics didn't know their business.

Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (1953) is regularly named one of the best films ever made, but there are plenty of people who, like me, prefer *Late Spring* (*Banshun*) from 1949. The elements that make up Ozu's late

style are fully present. So long after its first release *Late Spring* is still limber and elusive. Being in black-and-white can have a paradoxical effect on the feel of an old film, making it seem undated in other ways because so obviously dated in one, rather as Andy Warhol's white fright wig gave him a spectral look of youth.

What happens on screen isn't the same thing as what happens to the spectators of a film while they watch it, but the question is worth asking: what is it that happens in the film? This is the synopsis given in *The Japanese Film*:

A college professor lives in Kamakura with his twenty-seven-year-old daughter. His wife having recently died, he now begins to think that it is time for his daughter to marry, before she is too old. At last she agrees and they find her a husband. Before her wedding they take a trip to Kyoto, as if to sever old relationships before her new life begins. Then, after she marries, he returns to his now-empty house and his new life alone. This film marked the emergence of Ozu's new postwar style. There was a virtual elimination of plot in the interests of creating character and atmosphere. Yet, with almost no story in the usual sense of the word, the film's development is quite complex.

It becomes easier to emphasise plotlessness if you've whittled plot down yourself, to a barely surviving nub. Most people who have seen the film will flesh out the skeletal family by remembering the heroine's aunt, probably with irritation, since she's the one who puts

the idea of her marriage firmly on the agenda, turning it from a freely floated possibility into something which must be dealt with one way or the other.

There are problems even with so compressed an account. Where is the evidence for the death of the professor's wife being a recent event? I can't find it, however many times I see the film. Perhaps there are visual indications of mourning detectable to a long-time resident of Japan, but the few faint references to the dead woman make her seem distant in time, if only because they are so faint and few.

Donald Richie has spent most of his life in Japan, and started reviewing films for the *Japan Times* in the 1950s. His has been a dominant voice in the interpretation of Japanese films, and Japanese culture generally, but he's a rather inconsistent critic, sometimes seeing the films very clearly, sometimes (particularly in the case of Ozu) treating them as mystical objects.

That meddling aunt emerges prominently from Roger Ebert's plot summary:

Shukichi [Somiya] is a professor, a widower, absorbed in his work. His unmarried daughter, Noriko, runs his household for him. Both are perfectly content with this arrangement until the old man's sister declares that her niece should get married. Noriko is, after all, in her mid-20s; in Japan in 1949, a single woman that old is approaching the end of her shelf life. His sister warns the professor that after his death Noriko will be left alone in the world; it is his duty to push her out of the nest and