

On Three Films That Touched Me  
Robert S. Griffin  
www.robertsgriffin.com

This past year, I saw three old Japanese films by the same director that touched me more than any in my memory. The three films, and I watched them in this order and recommend you view them in this order, are: *Late Spring* (1949); *Tokyo Story* (1953); and *Late Autumn* (1960). The director was Yasujiro Ozu (1903-1963). *Late Autumn* is newly on DVD, and the other two have been available for some time. I believe you can see them for free. Netflix, an Internet company that mails DVDs to you that you mail back after you have watched them—check their web site—usually has a free introductory offer for two weeks or something, and you could sign up for that and put these three films on your list.

These are very private films, about parents and children and marriage and the passage of time and the cycle of life. Ozu's low-placed, stationary camera records ordinary people, quiet and reserved, anonymous, unknown to the world, dealing with turning points in their lives. What they go through won't make headlines or change the course of history, and these events will live only as long as the memories of those involved (as will what truly matters in our own lives). These films depict respect, care and concern, fidelity, sacrifice, decency, courtesy, sincerity, gentility, sadness, aloneness, and loss, and the need to love our own for whatever time we have with them—not at the top of the list of themes in contemporary film. All three feature the actress—lovely, radiant, human—Setsuku Hara.

I feel as if I am different for having seen these three films, that the person I am, the entity I experience as me, has shifted, that I'm more sensitive and softer in a good way and more grounded than before. I believe if I had seen these films when I was young—I'm old now—I would have viewed life differently and lived it differently than I have. I wish I had known to see them back then; time has run out for me; I can't start over, it's too late.

I realize that others might have a very different experience with these films than I have had. Art involves an exchange between a particular artistic creation and a particular human being at a particular point in his or her life. The meaning and impact of any

work of art is a function of both what the art is like and what the person who experiences it is like. While I think these are superb films and recommend them, especially *Tokyo Story*, I'm not at all certain you will take to them as I did because I don't know what you are like or where you are in your life. Primarily, I am reporting my experience with these three films for you to take into account as you decide what films to see in the future.

Ozu was one of the two most renowned and influential directors in the history of Japanese film along with Akira Kurosawa. I think it is fair to say that Kurosawa (*Rashomon*, *Seven Samurais*, *Ran*) is given more attention and acclaim by film historians and critics than Ozu, but Kurosawa's films leave me cold—they seem distant, intellectual exercises somehow, not truly artful. I realize that says as much about me as it does Kurosawa—the art-as-an-exchange idea. Some have deprecated Ozu for making the same film over and over, even using the same actors. I can see why they say that, but I think if you open up to Ozu, let him in, give of yourself to his work, his films are not the same at all. They revisit the same situations and themes and, indeed, the same actors reappear, but the result is a richer, deeper experience and understanding of what Ozu cared about. Repetition—or better, seeming repetition—served Ozu's art.

With life as brief as it is, with time so limited, a writer or artist, anyone who expresses himself or herself publicly, should do so about truly important things. I think it is indisputable that Ozu dealt with truly important things.

*Late Spring* (1949) is the film that established Ozu's reputation. An aging widower knowing his daughter won't take a husband but instead will care for him tells an innocent lie to nudge her out of the nest. *Tokyo Story* (1953) is about grown children who shuffle their aging parents off to a health spa when they come to visit, a decision that comes back to haunt them. *Late Autumn* (1960) is a bookend of sorts to *Late Spring*. The daughter in *Late Spring* (Setsuko Hara) is now the mother of a grown daughter. The daughter is facing the decision of whether to leave her widowed mother for marriage. While I recommend all three films, viewed in chronological order, if you only have time for one of them, I recommend *Tokyo Story*. I consider it one of the truly great films in the history of cinema.

I hope it isn't giving too much away to pass on the last lines of *Late Autumn* that have stayed with me. (You might want to stop

reading here.) Setsuko Hara's daughter has been urging her to re-marry so she won't be lonely when the daughter leaves home. For a time, the mother seems to be going along with the idea. Finally, she says to the daughter, "I'm fine as I am. I don't want to climb that mountain again. I've had enough." At that point, the daughter leaves to go on an errand. We spend the next minute or so with the mother in the silence and with her aloneness, and we get a sense of what life will be like for her when her daughter does marry and move on with her life. I'll remember that sentiment ("I don't want to climb that mountain again") and that silence for a long time.