

## Ozu's frames: Form and narrative in *Late Spring*

Ozu Yasujiro's *Late Spring* / *Banshun* (1949) depicts the reluctant but inevitable path towards marriage of twenty-seven-year-old Noriko (Hara Setsuko) in an exploration of the slowly simmering tensions embedded in the minutiae of humble domestic experience – principally between the stability of routine and the inevitability of change caused by life's inexorable march forward. Noriko desires the stability of her current life, enjoying an amicable relationship with her father, Somiya (Ryu Chishu), along with a rare degree of independence. But now in her 'late spring', the pressure to conform to the expectation of marriage builds, as does the inevitability of change. Marriage represents a complete rupture in Noriko's life, by which she would lose the unconditional affection of her father's company as well as much of her independence. Yet the film's intention is not to simply denounce the institution of marriage as oppressive of Noriko's autonomy, but to portray, with even-handed sympathy, how she negotiates such tensions: between modern liberties and traditional sensibilities, filial affection and marital obligation, routine and disruption, stability and change. With restraint, poise and sensitivity, the film is empathetic to Noriko's resistance, vacillations and eventual submission, leaving us with the deeply poignant sense of loss shared by father and daughter as an inextricable consequence of life's inevitable patterns of change.

*Late Spring's* nuanced consideration of these themes is presented in a reserved and understated style without recourse to formal flourishes or melodramatic performances. The film's characteristic formal features, including a persistently low camera height, 'straight-on' angles, a 360-degree shooting space, sparse use of camera movements and sequences of 'transitional' shots between scenes are those that would come to define Ozu's distinct aesthetic, as catalogued by Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell in their pioneering *Screen* article (1976). However, as I will discuss, the exact functions of Ozu's formal rigour have long been points of critical disagreement. Whereas Thompson and Bordwell suggest Ozu's techniques are purely modernist, functioning in spite of narrative concerns, Robin Wood robustly argues that Ozu's techniques are in fact crucial to our understanding of narrative and characters, working 'to guide our concentration firmly upon them and define a particular way of regarding them' (1998: 108).

In Wood's sketch of what he considers to be Ozu's most effective techniques he identifies the use of frames within the cinematic frame – internal frames fashioned from décor, doorways and *shoji* screens. A related feature is Ozu's tendency to preserve 'the intactness of the cinema frame', for characters to enter and exit the image from behind internal frames, rather than break through the boundaries of the image (Wood 1998: 109). Such trends in Ozu's treatment of spatial composition and movement are certainly striking across his post-war films, and are particularly salient in *Late Spring*. However, besides suggesting a general stylistic gesture towards the still life or portrait (a rich association I will develop later), these techniques do not figure in Wood's analysis of the film. Despite their arresting presence, the nature and function of internal frames in *Late Spring* have not yet been properly examined.

It is my contention that the frames in *Late Spring* are a vital component of the film's careful visual patterning, one of a number of sophisticated and symbiotic formal devices woven into the film's narrational strategies, such that they come to bear on our understanding of the narrative, our empathy with its characters and the film's nuanced exploration of its thematic centre – Noriko's uncertain trajectory towards marriage, negotiating the tension between stability and change. First, I

will situate my argument within the debates surrounding critical treatment of Ozu's aesthetic, attempting to reconcile the rupture between form and narrative in both culturalist and formalist approaches. I will then present four encounters with frames in *Late Spring*. The initial device of internal frames will be expanded into four iterations, a multivalent concept with interdependent effects, intimately connected to the broader formal strategies of the film. My essay will elucidate how *Late Spring's* frames structure space, modulate movement, create a motif of the portrait and activate actionless spaces in ways that determine our understanding of the narrative and its complex themes.

### Framing Ozu

Ozu's restrained, methodical style has long been a site of critical contention. In examining a prominent formal strategy such as frames in *Late Spring*, we must consider the grounds on which it might be interpreted. On the one hand, we might speculate that the internal frames as a graphic element echo a kind of quintessential Japanese aesthetic, perhaps imitating the arrangement of space in *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints. Indeed, this has been the approach of culturalist critics, who have sought to decipher Ozu's aesthetic by postulating its cultural sources. Donald Richie's early and influential monograph opens with the claim that Ozu was the most 'Japanese' of directors – pointing to a resemblance with *sumi-e* ink drawings and *waka* poetry to illustrate his 'real Japanese flavour' – whose sole subject was the 'Japanese family in dissolution' (1977: xiii, 1). Similarly, Paul Schrader's description of Ozu's 'transcendental' style argues for the 'unmistakable' influence of Zen philosophy, such that Ozu's 'personality, like that of his characters, merges with an enveloping sense of *mono no aware* [the pathos of things], and [...] becomes undistinguishable from it' (1988: 38).

These accounts have been criticised for essentialising (and Orientalising) Ozu's style. Bordwell has astutely observed that aesthetic concepts such as *mono no aware* are historically contingent; to invoke them without sensitivity to their shifting historical meanings is to misrepresent them, and Japanese aesthetics generally, as fixed and homogenous (1988: 26–29).

Wood criticises Richie's discussion of 'Japaneseness' for painting Ozu as unambiguously conservative and traditional (1998: 99-100), whilst Thompson similarly resists the assumption that Ozu paints a sentimental picture of the Japanese family in terminal decline; 'Ozu's vision of family life is far from the simple, traditional, nostalgic one that most Western critics attribute to him' (1988: 325). Although Jinhee Choi argues these culturalist approaches may not be as essentialising as their critics suggest, offering not a direct causal explanation but a 'heuristic value' to account for Ozu's aesthetic sensibility and its effects (2018: 8), they nonetheless fail to consider how this sensibility shapes our understanding of narrative, and risk abstracting the films beyond their principal explorations of the personal, prosaic dramas that animate everyday existence.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, *Late Spring's* frames might strike us as a kind of modernist pictorial game, a Mondrian-esque play with intersecting lines and fields of space. This would fit with strict formalist approaches that have argued for a complete severing of Ozu's formal rigour from narrative concerns. Thompson and Bordwell's thorough compendium of Ozu's techniques explicitly places them in a dialectic with what they describe as the classical Hollywood paradigm – the subordination of spatial and temporal structures to the logic of narrative causality. They claim, 'Ozu's films diverge from the Hollywood paradigm in that they generate spatial structures which are not motivated by the cause/effect chain of the narrative' (1976: 45). The effects of such disruptions to narrative logic, however, are considered to be indifferent to narrative concerns. Rather, they are evidence of Ozu's style as 'parametric' – style built from a set of predetermined, 'arbitrary' choices (parameters) unrelated to narrative that 'create a complex stylistic play to engage our perception' (Thompson 1988: 344). It is certainly true that some of Ozu's techniques, such as transitional shots and still lifes, do not progress narrative action; however, to reduce them to purely spatial exercises fails to recognise how, as I will argue, they in fact shape our experience of Ozu's films and their narratives.

The Japanese critic and theorist Hasumi Shigehiko criticises both Richie and Schrader's engagement with Ozu through Japanese aesthetics and Zen, and Thompson and

Bordwell's characterisation of him as a modernist.<sup>2</sup> Dismissing such positions as interpretive myths, Hasumi instead argues that we must turn to the difficult task of re-looking at Ozu's films free of associations, such that we might begin to notice their 'infinitely open meanings'; for Hasumi, 'looking at Ozu is ideally a form of de-mythologizing, a resistance to dominant, often national meanings, one that makes one see anew' (Gerow 2018: 47). Having surveyed the contested critical ground on which Ozu's work has been discussed, it is my intention here to argue for the intrinsic relationship between *Late Spring's* style and its narrative. In considering the functions of frames, I suggest that Ozu's rigorous aesthetic is essential to what affects us in our experience of the film – the complex and nuanced exploration of Noriko's reluctant but inevitable journey towards marriage, navigating tensions between routine and disruption, stability and change – in the hope that we might see it anew.

### Frame one: Structuring space

The use of frames within the cinematic frame is an ever-present feature of the meticulously composed images of *Late Spring*. Internal frames are produced by the clever and methodical arrangement of elements in the mise-en-scène: in interior scenes, it is primarily doorways, furniture and *shoji* screens, whilst in exterior scenes, it may be railway infrastructure or the architecture of a streetscape. This works in tandem with the careful positioning of the camera (its own framing), such that these elements take on a strong graphic quality, as dominant vertical and horizontal lines intersecting the image at perpendicular angles, dividing the space into a collage of squares and rectangles. Importantly, it is amongst these squares and rectangles that characters enter and exit the image, appearing and disappearing from within the limits of the image.

Let us take two exemplars. First, Noriko's arrival at the tea ceremony. The camera peers from the far end of a hallway into another room, such that the subjects of the shot (the women formally seated around the ceremonial apparatus) and the space they are in only occupy only a fraction of the whole image (a common occurrence across the film).



In the foreground, a screen obscures the right extremity of the frame, whilst on the left is a series of slatted sliding doors along the length of the corridor. Their horizontal lines direct our eye towards the centre of the image where the women are gathered, neatly enclosed by the architectural beams supporting the structure. The vertical poles in the image clearly demarcate fields of space: the framed space of the ceremony, the hallway and the immediate foreground distinguished by the screen on the right; we can certainly sense here the

pictorial quality of a collage of squares and rectangles. Noriko enters the image midway along the left-hand side of the corridor. Importantly, the framing of the shot denies us a view of the space outside the hallway, where she enters from; rather, she appears from between the vertical poles in the image, and immediately her figure is framed by the architecture, drawn into the central space outlined by the composition.

Our second example is when Noriko runs into her father's friend, Onodera (Mishima Masao), in Tokyo. The obliquely angled shot looks out onto the street between three dominant lines at varying distances from the camera, drawn by the concrete and glass structures of the shopfronts. The windows filled with metallic goods take up more than half of the image, whilst the entire left fringe of the frame is encroached upon by a concrete column, leaving only a narrow gap through which to observe the street. Noriko emerges in the background from behind the central pole into the centre of this gap, before walking across the street and towards the camera, where we see her greet Onodera. In both this shot (exterior, obliquely angled) and the opening of the tea ceremony (interior, frontal), Noriko has entered the image internally and moved not across but *through* depth in the frame. The sense of space in these shots is narrowed by the compositions which obscure the fringes of the frame; rather than surveying the space, our eyes are directed inward, into depth, to the space where Noriko will emerge from behind an internal frame.

The immediate effect of internal frames in their structuring of space is to create a sense of interiority, filling the image with inanimate but compositionally integral objects that focus our gaze inwards, away from the limits of the frame that border the world beyond. As such, the film's internal frames, in relation to the frame of the image, diminish our sense of off-screen space, as characters so frequently emerge from within, rather than breaking through the boundaries of, the image. This spatial configuration constitutes a formal pattern, organising space and movement in the film – adherence to or deviation from which both create narrative significance.

Concomitant with this sense of interiority is the association of spaces structured by internal frames with the stability and routine of domestic life. In the above examples, Noriko has travelled into Tokyo for a doctor's appointment and to buy her



father new collars, and her participation in the tea ceremony is a premise to meet with her aunt, Masa (Sugimura Haruko), who duly gives her a pair of trousers to repair.<sup>3</sup> In another early scene, Noriko assists Somiya with simple domestic tasks upon his arrival home. As Noriko prepares the dinner and assists Somiya to change into his kimono, they move between the living room, kitchen and bathroom, playfully passing in and out of shot behind internal frames formed of doorways

and screens. The intrigue of the scene is how Noriko gradually reveals the details of her trip to the beach with Hattori (Usami Jun), whom Somiya thinks might make a good husband for her; unbeknownst to him (and the viewer, also seduced by the possibility of a budding romance), Hattori is engaged, of which Noriko is fully aware. The suspense of Noriko's teasingly evasive answers to Somiya's questions is heightened by the characters slipping in and out of view. Yet their





fluid, unimpeded movement around the house as they complete their chores suggests the familiarity of routine, briefly criss-crossing paths, toing and froing as they pass household objects to each other, choreographed like a dance. As Andrew Klevan writes, the film presents these 'cat and mouse negotiations in terms of a pattern of exits and entrances [... by which] the film can establish the interlocking rhythms of the two characters in the home' (2001: 143).



These rhythms of domestic movement unfold within and behind the internal frames built into the mise-en-scène. The effect is not to suggest entrapment in domestic servitude – on the contrary, Noriko is content with this lifestyle – but to align these quotidian patterns of movement with the routine and stability of domestic life. The internal frames thus establish a spatial norm suggestive of the norms of Noriko's everyday life, departures from which carry narrative significance.

### Frame two: Movement within and breaking beyond the frame

Indicative of the synthesis of *Late Spring's* formal strategies, we have already touched on what is the subject of our second frame: movement, of both characters and camera. The predominantly static camera is one of Ozu's most distinctive stylistic traits; the very occasional camera movements in *Late Spring* are thus prominent as departures from the film's prevailing aesthetic scheme. Importantly, the film distinguishes between different *registers* of camera movements and the resulting impressions of movement in the image, determined by the relationships between internal frames and the cinematic frame.

The train sequence features three instances of camera movement, along with several more conventionally static

landscape shots, intercut with interior shots of Noriko and Somya on their journey to Tokyo. Two of these moving shots have the camera attached to the side of the train, whilst the third mimics the view of a passenger looking out the window, its perspective fixed as the world passes by. Wood regards the train sequence as 'a sudden burst of energy' that celebrates 'Noriko's personal autonomy' (1998: 117); however, the sequence's impression of movement and its relationship to Noriko's independence are more nuanced than he suggests. Whilst the soundtrack is certainly sprightly, it is significant that in all three instances movement is imparted not by the autonomous mobility of the camera but by the motion of the train. Here, movement passes *through* the static frame, which is locked onto the rhythms of the train's movement – its daily journey, as if the camera were a passenger. Furthermore, the sequence employs internal frames to structure its images, akin to the frames in the scenes I described above, though here they are cleverly created by the camera's framing of railway infrastructure. In the shots affixed to the side of the carriage – which itself takes up the right side of the frame, counteracting movement as an unmoving, constant element in the composition – the succession of passing telegraph poles, reaching up the left side of the image and over the train, form a tunnel of frames through which the train travels. This extends to the







wider, static landscape shots. Most are positioned close to the tracks, the passing train framed amongst the telegraph poles and overhead wires; even when the camera is further away, looking through a window, it continues this spatial patterning, dividing the image into squares and rectangles through which the train travels. The effect of this sequence's internal frames and related constraints on movement is to invoke this journey as one of everyday ritual. Even in this scene of travel,

the extremities of the image are de-emphasised and our focus turned inward. As a representation of Noriko's independence, the freedom of travelling to Tokyo is a routine experience, such that we sense not the exhilaration of Noriko's autonomy but the relative freedom afforded by her domestic circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

A different effect is achieved in the bicycle sequence, in which Noriko and Hattori accompany each other on an impromptu ride by the beach. As I mentioned, Hattori's engagement is unknown to us at this point. We view this scene intrigued by its romantic potential, encouraged by the soundtrack's swooning *ritardando* transition from jaunty to tender variations on the theme over a suggestive shot of two bicycles parked on the dunes, before a passage of flirtatious dialogue ensues. The sequence builds momentum through various types of camera movements. Beginning with a static transition shot of the sea, the film cuts to a lateral tracking shot moving along the beach, recalling a similar impression of movement from the train sequence – as if fixed to a vehicle, the landscape moving through the frame. The film cuts to separate medium close-ups of Noriko and Hattori. We are yet to see that they are riding bicycles: the movement suggested by the wind in their hair, the occasional jolt of their torsos and brief appearances of the passing landscape at the very bottom of the frame is offset by their fixed central position and low



angle framing against an empty sky. Movement is muted, such that the impression is less of the characters moving through space, than space moving behind them, through the static frame. This effect is loosened in two tracking shots that follow. The first of these follows the pair as they ride away from the camera, whilst the second leads as they ride towards it. Here, we can now perceive motion against the backdrop of a flat landscape and broad sky – a rare expanse of negative

space – but it is still tempered, as the pair remain centred, receding or advancing in *depth*, our eye still focussed inwards. Nonetheless, momentum gathers here, leading us to the sole panning shot in the film.

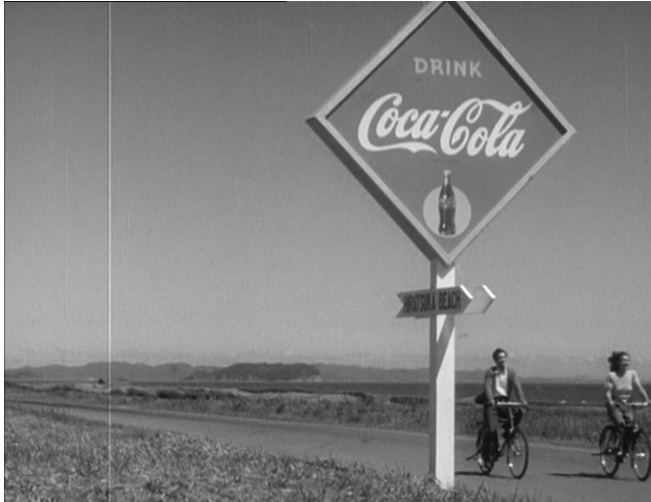
The pan begins with Noriko and Hattori in long shot just to the right of centre frame, panning right as they ride away from the camera along a thin band of road set against the expanse of the ocean and a distant mountain ridgeline. Panning from a fixed position, we get the rare sense of Noriko and Hattori

traversing space and the camera's frame moving through the world, autonomously uncovering what lies beyond its limits. It's a stark contrast to the shots in which movement appears to 'pass through' the frame, suggesting passive, transient motion within the confines of the image, locked into a single viewpoint. Whereas such shots function by counterbalancing movement with something static – something in a stable relation to the fixed borders of the image, such as the carriage in the train sequence – in this pan we get a sense of the image

connected to the world beyond. This effect continues in two subsequent long shots of the pair from opposite sides of the road in which they break through the frame of the image and laterally traverse the open landscape, free of the patterns of frames that divide space in other scenes. Their entering and exiting through the boundaries of the frame, a rarity in the film, connects their movement to off-screen space – where the characters have been or will go, somewhere in the world beyond, not contained within the image we see.







This sequence is certainly important for suggesting Noriko's freedom – that she can take a spontaneous jaunt with a man, enjoying a capacity for movement and leisure unavailable to most women. But within the film's broader patterning, this scene is more significant as an anomalous event, one that exists outside the confines of Noriko's everyday routines, those marked by enclosed, framed spaces. The interplay of movement and the cinematic frame inverts the quality of interiority created by internal frames throughout the rest of the film, allowing both the camera and Noriko to move through the world, connecting the sensation of movement to the revelation of off-screen space. The film's aberrant movement is suggestive of the excitement of potential change – of the apparent romantic temptation of Hattori, with whom Noriko has an obvious affinity.

But this potential exists in tension with the stability of Noriko's life with her father. Like Somya, we are playfully misled by the suggestion of an erotic charge; Noriko knew all along. Her coquettish charm in this scene, pushing back her hair and giggling about being 'the jealous type,' is predicated on this knowledge. Noriko is free of inhibitions because she knows there will be no consequences.<sup>5</sup> It does, however, catch Hattori's attention, leaning in closer to Noriko as they flirt on the dunes. When he later attempts to escalate the relationship, inviting Noriko to a violin recital, she declines out of



consideration of his fiancée, to avoid the potentially scandalous repercussions. After her refusal, the sequence concludes with two slow tracking shots in which Noriko remains statically centred – the exploratory movement of the bicycle sequence reverting to an impression of movement *through* the frame – followed by her turning a street corner in long shot, once again exiting via an internal frame. We return to the quality of interiority, the diminished sense of off-screen space, as Noriko evades the possibility of disruption and change in

favour of maintaining her lifestyle with her father. Here, as throughout the film, the interplay of movement with internal frames and the cinematic frame is presented in different registers that reflect Noriko's autonomy in constant negotiation of routine, stability and change.



### Frame three: Noriko's portrait

The pathos of *Late Spring* comes from the *inevitability* of change, despite Noriko's resistance to it. Her eventual submission to change is where the film finds its poignant emotional centre, that of life's inexorable march forward. The film incrementally builds this sense of inevitability through the motif of the portrait.

Internal frames direct our focus away from the extremities of the image; the breadth of the image is curtailed in favour of an impression of verticality. For example, when Aya (Tsukioka Yumeji) visits, Noriko goes downstairs to the kitchen where she is framed by a doorway in long shot; or after she has met Mrs Miwa (Miyake Kuniko) at her aunt's, we again see her in

a doorway. In both instances, the clear lines of sight created by the compositions draw us into the narrow fields of space in which Noriko appears – spaces that impress their verticality, gesturing towards a portrait orientation.<sup>6</sup>

From this initial association, the portrait motif emerges as a subtle pattern across the film. Following his wedding, Hattori brings a gift to the house, a wedding portrait of him and his bride received by the housekeeper, Shige (Takahashi Toyo). A close-up over-the-shoulder shot of the photograph shows us the couple's wedding attire and rigid poses – framed by the photograph, but also by their new status as husband and wife. Shige says, 'I always figured he'd marry Miss Noriko one day.' Shige expected to see Noriko occupying the place of

the bride in this portrait, hinting at the failed opportunity of a romance with Hattori, but also at the social expectation of her eventual marriage.

After Noriko succumbs to pressure and accepts an arranged proposal, she indeed moves closer to occupying the space of a wedding portrait. This is conveyed by the appearance of two mirrors, internal frames that gesture towards the portrait through their framing of Noriko's reflected image. The first mirror appears at the beginning of the Kyoto



sequence, as Onodera asks Noriko about her engagement. She is seated in front of the mirror, but we only see part of her shoulders and hair. When she stands and exits the shot, her reflection is caught in the mirror, keeping her in the shot even as she crosses the edge of the frame, such that her exit is from *within* the internal frame of the mirror. Her movement into off-screen space is contained by her reflected image, visualising a tension: the still unmarried Noriko, enjoying her final

trip with her father and the last of their amicable life together, but now enclosed by the frame of the mirror, suggestive of her becoming an *image*, to be framed in a wedding portrait.

This initial move towards framing Noriko's image is completed by the second appearance of a mirror on her wedding day, within which we now see Noriko's full portrait reflected back to us. Noriko's desire to hold on to her stable lifestyle with her father, that which enabled her independence, has

yielded to the inevitable. Both Klevan (2001: 147) and Wood (1998: 119) make the point that this shot gives us Noriko's *reflection* rather than her true self, and the repeated view of the now-empty mirror at the end of the scene conveys the loss of her independence and mobility. Indeed, Noriko's image has become that of 'wife' in a direct echo of the wedding portrait we saw earlier: like Hattori's bride, Noriko is rigidly posed, weighed down by the elaborate wedding regalia, immobilised by her new social role. When the mirror is emptied, Noriko's image now belongs to the wedding portrait that we know will be taken later that day. Rather than a blatant entrapment, the subtle patterning of the portrait motif works to suggest the inevitability of Noriko's marriage, her preordained place as a wife in a wedding portrait, despite her resistance to it and the deep feeling of loss it will cause, the very tension and poignancy at the film's heart.



#### Frame four: Framing shots

A unique feature of Ozu's style that has been the source of much critical discussion is his peculiar use of spaces devoid of human action to bookend and interrupt scenes. These shots – often of landscapes, empty rooms or objects arranged in the manner of a still life – are usually spatially contiguous to the scenes they precede or proceed (often forming transitional sequences between them), but have been thought to be

extraneous to narrative. Thompson and Bordwell characterise these as 'intermediate spaces' that exceed narrative economy and demonstrate an 'interest in the *spaces between points of narrative action*' (1976: 46). Noël Burch famously described them as 'pillow shots' akin to the role of 'pillow words' in classical Japanese poetry. Wary of the specificity of each instance of this device, Burch suggests they '*suspend the diegetic flow*', presenting the diegetic spaces they cushion 'out of narrative context [...] as a pictorial space on another plane of "reality" as it were' (1979: 160-61). Whilst they might at first appear excessive in that they do not directly advance the narrative, these shots are far from functioning on an entirely separate plane. Taking up Klevan's suggestion that *Late Spring's* transition shots be seen as 'framing devices' that 'inflect the viewer's perspective on the [narrative's] human incidents' (2001: 144), I would similarly posit the film's actionless spaces as frames that modulate the shots, sequences and narrative elements with which they are contiguous, shaping our engagement with narrative, character and emotion.

As an exemplar of such framing shots and their evocative effects, let us consider one of the film's most complex moments: the (in)famous still life shots of the vase during the Kyoto sequence that have been the source of a persistent critical conundrum.<sup>7</sup> Having turned in for the night, Noriko attempts to express to her father how the prospect of his remarriage had bothered her, but when she turns to him, Somiya has rather quickly fallen asleep, perhaps deliberately avoiding the topic. The film cuts from Somiya back to Noriko, who returns her gaze upwards, adjusting her head on the pillow. Her expression gently shifts from slight concern when looking at her father (having broached, unsuccessfully, a difficult subject) to a pleasant but thoughtful contentment as she stares at the ceiling, at which point Somiya's soft snoring enters on the soundtrack. Then comes the first cutaway to the still life of the vase, sustained for seven seconds. The film cuts back to Noriko, whose expression is still pensive, but now decidedly concerned. She once more adjusts her position, turning her face away from the camera, moving her hand (barely visible in the previous shot) closer across her body. Light glints in her glassy left eye as she makes this gesture, and it's not quite clear if a tear swells. Over the course of this

movement, we witness an astounding passage: from concern to anxiety; to uncertainty and fear; to resignation and sadness. Each emotion emerges from the subtlest shifts in expression, accumulating across the duration of the shot. By the time the film cuts to the second view of the vase, we are left with Noriko's quietly turbulent emotional state. Somiya's snoring continues over this final shot of the vase, held for ten seconds. The solemn score enters midway through, providing a bridge to the subsequent shot of the Ryoan-ji rock garden.



Amidst what is a remarkable performance of subtlety and restraint by Hara Setsuko, these still lifes act as framing shots that inflect our engagement with Noriko's complex state of mind as she continues to wrangle with imminent change. Indeed, this moment is key to the film drawing us into Noriko's tumultuous negotiation of the tension between her desire for stability and the inevitability of change.

On a surface level, the still lifes frame Noriko by virtue of montage, immediately following each of the emotionally





charged medium close-ups. But the film goes further. The shot of the vase itself is peculiar, much of it obscured by shadows, and framed at a slightly oblique angle, unlike so much of the frontal framing that characterises the film's interiors. A boundary between the left and middle thirds of the image is marked by a strong vertical pole. It intersects two further wooden beams, one that emerges from the shadows of the left foreground, the other marking out the raised tatami on which the vase stands, running across the image then

receding towards the wall behind, into which is set a *shoji* window with elliptical sides. Here we can see internal frames at play: a frame is traced around the vase, down the vertical pole, along the edge of the raised platform, framing it against the *shoji* window, which itself forms another internal frame. Echoing Noriko's frequent appearances within internal frames throughout the film, the link between Noriko and the still lifes implied by montage is strengthened by the continuation of one of the film's dominant pictorial patterns.



An important effect of the vase shots is their temporal ambiguity. Of course, these still lifes are not exactly still, but filmed in duration. Behind the vase, we see silhouettes of spindly vegetation through the *shoji* window, gently swaying in contrast to the static forms of the interior. The duration of the shots (seven and ten seconds) far exceeds the time required to perceive them. Our engagement with them moves from deciphering their content and composition to registering their *impression* of passing time – the *sensation* of time itself. Alongside the tea ceremony and Ryoan-ji rock garden sequences, this is one instance in the film in which ‘time itself seems to elongate [...] becoming [...] serenely indistinct and undefined’ (Pigott 2008: 13). The still lifes of the vase evoke temporal ambiguity, as we register the feeling of passing time with a warped sense of its duration, without attachment to any specific action, any movement forward. The temporal qualities of these shots echo the aural qualities of Somiya's snoring – a drone, monotonous and formless, a sound without rhythmic markers to indicate temporal passage, the *continuous* accompaniment to a night's sleep. As they frame and thus inflect the views of Noriko's shifting emotional state, the still lifes suggest that this is a long night of restless contemplation for Noriko, whose complex emotional passage endures well beyond the four shots of this sequence, stressing the difficulty of reconciling her desires with her impending marriage.



As well as framing Noriko, these still lifes are themselves framed by shots of the Ryoan-ji rock garden that follow them. There are pictorial continuities between the vase and the garden: the vase stands alone on the bare tatami, meticulously framed, much like the rocks standing in the sparse field of pebbles, arranged with curatorial precision. Given Ozu's propensity for graphic matches, we can claim that these are deliberate continuities drawing a link between the garden and the vase.<sup>8</sup> Without getting lost in its Zen origins, it is worth noting that from wherever one stands to view the Ryoan-ji rock garden, at least one of the rocks remains hidden; we are reminded of the limitations of our perception, that we can shift positions for new perspectives, but that we can never comprehend the totality (Burch 1979: 160; Parks 2016: 299–300). The shots of the garden that frame the vase, and thus Noriko's complex emotional state, conjure a sense of that which can't be entirely comprehended or resolved: Noriko's anxieties, swirling around thoughts of her uncertain future, as yet unable to relinquish her independence and submit herself to the inevitable, unable to reconcile her desires and her obligations. Moreover, the rock garden implies a state of permanence: there will be no immediate or simple resolution to Noriko's emotional turmoil, but rather, these are tensions that will persist, that Noriko must endure and continue to negotiate throughout her life, well beyond the change to come through marriage.

When Noriko humbly kneels before her father on her wedding day, we are reminded of the still lifes through another pictorial echo: like the vase, Noriko kneels on a tatami, whilst the elaborate graphic patterns of her exquisite wedding kimono recall the intricately decorated ceramic of the vase.<sup>9</sup> This moment affirms that the vase is not an arbitrary object, but one which, amidst the swirling, vacillating waves of Noriko's emotions, suggests her fear of marriage taking away her mobility and independence, becoming the ossified *image* of 'wife' (that of the wedding portrait) through its connotations of what Klevan insightfully describes as 'ornamental lifelessness' (2001: 137). The still lifes of the vase do not carry definitive, concrete meaning. Rather, their arresting power comes from their function as *evocative* framing shots that draw out and enrich Hara's delicately nuanced performance,

inflecting our understanding of this moment through their temporal ambiguity and graphic patterning with other images across the film.

### Ozu's frames

*Late Spring's* deeply affecting narrative is presented in a restrained style that eschews overtly expressive devices and

excessive cinematic rhetoric. Where both vague culturalism and strict formalism have been insufficient, my approach has sought to reconcile the film's rigorously systematic aesthetic with its profound emotional gravity through the four encounters with frames I have presented. It is clear that Ozu's frames – symbiotic and multivalent, interconnected in their form and function – are integral to the film's narrational strategies, shaping our understanding of the narrative and



its characters. In regulating space and movement, building a motif of Noriko's portrait and evocatively inflecting our experience through framing shots, the frames of *Late Spring* are essential to its nuanced and poignant exploration of its thematic centre: Noriko's vacillating journey towards marriage, and the endless negotiation of tensions between freedom and obligation, routine and disruption, stability and change.

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**1** This concern motivates the analyses of both Wood (1998: 112) and Klevan (2001: 167n10).

**2** Hasumi's book *Director Ozu Yasujiro (Kantoku Ozu Yasujiro, 1983)* has not been translated into English, but its arguments have been explicated by Gerow (2018).

**3** Thompson explains that, by 1949, the tea ceremony was becoming an increasingly popular social event, far removed from its origins as a privileged aesthetic experience (1988: 325).

**4** This view is affirmed by Klevan, who discusses the repetition and extended duration of shots in the sequence as exceeding the function of establishing tools, providing only similar visual information about the journey so as to emphasise its ordinariness (2001: 139).

**5** This is discussed by Wood (1998: 118).

**6** Wood hints at this effect, describing internal frames as 'intensifying the general tendency of [Ozu's] style toward the still life or portrait' (1998: 109).

**7** This debate has been chronicled by Nornes (2007). For their individual interpretations, split along the culturalist / formalist divide I have discussed, see Richie (1977: 174), Schrader (1988: 49-51) and Thompson and Bordwell (1976: 64-65).

**8** Ozu's use of graphic matches is discussed by Thompson and Bordwell (1976: 66-70). However, I disagree that this technique functions independently of narrative.

**9** The only other occasion Noriko wears a patterned costume is during the tea ceremony, which, unlike the wedding kimono and vase, features a delicate and sparse floral pattern with minimal contrast.