

The "*Tokyo Story* (1953), directed by **Yasujirō Ozu**, with a screenplay written by Ozu himself in collaboration with **Kōgo Noda**, is a film of exquisite sadness, a masterpiece of minimalism, and one of the most human and moving films ever made, with a permanent place on lists of the greatest achievements of world cinema, although it was initially considered "too Japanese." The film focuses on the generation gap, following an elderly couple from the countryside who travel to Tokyo to visit their adult children and highlighting the contrast in the way the two parents are treated by them and by their widowed daughter-in-law. The film explores the alienation of elderly parents from their children in modern Japan in a dazzlingly modern way that is at once classically Japanese and universally comprehensible. Ozu's film resonates not only with Japanese audiences but also with viewers from different cultures and backgrounds, as it addresses universal themes of family relationships, social change, and the inevitable passage of time. It is worth recalling the earlier exercise in our course on Shakespeare's King Lear.

Ozu's directorial style is characterized by the use of static shots, low camera angles, and the absence of traditional editing techniques. This distinctive approach creates a contemplative atmosphere in the film, allowing the audience to reflect on the characters' emotions and the underlying themes of the film. Ozu's attention to detail and his focus on the subtle nuances of everyday life make

"Tokyo Story" a deeply moving experience of introspection.

What better introduction to the atmosphere of Ozu's film than to listen to a little of its enchanting music.

Takanobu Saito – Theme and Nocturne from Tokyo Story – Frisia Ensemble.mp3

PLOT OF THE FILM

A retired couple, Shukichi and Tomi, live in quiet Onomichi in western Japan with their youngest daughter, Kyoko, an elementary-school teacher. They have five adult children, four of whom are alive. They are gentle country people, almost childlike themselves in the calm, smiling way they speak to one another. This heartbreakingly modest couple, in the evening of their lives and during a suffocating summer, decide to undertake a difficult journey to Tokyo to visit their eldest son and his wife, meet their two grandchildren for the first time, visit their eldest daughter and her husband, and see their widowed daughter-in-law.

Their eldest son, Koichi, is a family doctor who runs a small practice in a Tokyo suburb, while their eldest daughter, Shige, runs a hair salon. Koichi cancels a small day trip he had arranged for his parents because he needs to make an emergency house call and spontaneously decides that his wife cannot take them out herself while leaving the house. Later, Shige secretly tells one of her clients that her parents are "just some friends from the countryside." Koichi and Shige have neither much time nor much space for their parents, whom they regard as disrupting the busy routines of their lives, leaving the elderly couple feeling neglected and out of place.

At the beginning of our 1st excerpt, Tomi speaks to her indifferent little grandchild, who met her as his grandmother only a few days earlier. Tomi wonders whether she will still be there beside him when he grows up. For an instant, you can see the anxiety in her eyes. Only in front of this uninvolved child can she openly express her fear of death. Was this visit always intended to be a painful, unspoken farewell, or will the strain of the journey suddenly damage her fragile health? In the next scene, Shige, who is in turn hosting her parents, Shukichi and Tomi, scolds her husband for buying expensive treats for them and worries about where and when she or her husband will be able to take them out for some entertainment.

1st excerpt.mp4

Their widowed daughter-in-law, Noriko, wife of their middle son, who went missing and was presumed dead during the Pacific War, is the only one who takes an interest in them and truly sympathizes with them, doing everything she can to entertain them. She takes time away from her demanding office job to take Shukichi and Tomi sightseeing around metropolitan Tokyo. She treats them with kindness and courtesy, not out of obligation, but because she genuinely feels it. Noriko truly loves them as if they were her own parents—partly because they are her only reminder of her late husband, and partly because she simply loves them. It is as simple as that.

Feeling uncomfortable that they do not have time to look after their parents' entertainment, Koichi and Shige pay for their parents to stay at an inexpensive hot-spring resort in Atami, but the parents return hastily to Shige's home in Tokyo because the crowds and intense nightlife of Atami disturb their sleep. Tomi also suffers an unexplained dizzy spell. Upon their return, the disappointed Shige explains that she sent them to Atami because she wanted to use their bedroom for a meeting. The elderly couple must leave for the night. They spend the afternoon in a park before separating to find accommodation for the night.



In the 2nd excerpt, Shukichi and Tomi return earlier than expected from the Atami resort to their daughter Shige's home and finally decide to return to their home in Onomichi, after spending the night separately outside Shige's house, where she will have other guests. At the end of the scene, before parting for the night, they look together at the view of the metropolis.

2nd excerpt.mp4



Tomi goes to stay with her daughter-in-law Noriko, with whom she deepens her emotional bond, and advises her to remarry. Meanwhile, Shukichi gets drunk with some old friends from Onomichi whom he has found in Tokyo. The three drunken men chatter about their children and their lives. A policeman brings Shukichi and one of his friends to Shige's hair salon. Shige is furious that her father has fallen back into alcoholism, as in the past, when his drinking had overshadowed her childhood.

The elderly couple comments on how much their children have changed. For their part, the elderly parents find it difficult to keep up with the harsh pace of modern life and return to their home in Onomichi earlier than planned, intending also to see their youngest son, Keizo, when their train stops in Osaka. Tomi suddenly falls ill during the journey, so they decide to get off the train and remain in Osaka until she feels better the next day.

In the 3rd excerpt, Shukichi and Tomi are at the home of their youngest son, Keizo, in Osaka and realize how much their older children, Koichi and Shige, have changed in Tokyo, contrary to the expectations they had as their parents.

3rd excerpt.mp4

When they return to Onomichi, Tomi becomes seriously ill. Koichi, Shige, and Noriko rush to Onomichi in time to see Tomi, who dies shortly afterward. Keizo arrives too late because of professional obligations.

In the 4th excerpt, Tomi dies surrounded by her husband, Shukichi, her two older children, Koichi and Shige, her younger daughter, the teacher Kyoko, and her daughter-in-law, Noriko. Her youngest son, Keizo, does not arrive in time to see his mother alive. Shukichi becomes the focal point of the film's mysterious confrontation with death and mortality in general. Despite his grief at Tomi's death, he wisely accepts death at an appropriate age as a natural fact of life. His gentle, soothing smile never seems to leave him, even when he speaks about the saddest and most painful things. Tomi dies, but he never cries. How does he feel about his wife's death? How did he feel about her when she was alive? Perhaps he is close enough to death that he has already said farewell to life and to his own identity.

4th excerpt.mp4

5th excerpt.mp4

In the 5th excerpt, Keizo withdraws from his mother's funeral because of his guilt and confesses to Noriko that he was not a good son and that no one can take care of their parents when they die.



In the final excerpt, after the funeral, Koichi, Shige, and Keizo have already left their father's house that same day. Only Noriko has remained to keep Shukichi, her father-in-law, company, together with her sister-in-law Kyoko, who criticizes her older siblings for their selfishness toward their parents. She believes that her three siblings do not care how difficult life will be for their father now that he has lost their mother. She is also upset with Shige, who had hurried to ask for some of their deceased mother's clothes as keepsakes. Noriko replies that although she understands Kyoko's disappointment, everyone now has a life of their own, and the growing gap between parents and children is inevitable. She persuades Kyoko not to be too hard on her siblings because one day she will understand how difficult it is to take time out of one's life for one's parents. The film is partly about the sad and commonplace fear of disappointment at the end of life: in this scene, Kyoko asks Noriko, "Isn't life disappointing?" and Noriko sadly agrees. In an earlier scene, Shukichi, while drinking with some old friends, reflects on the terrible, unspeakable feeling of being disappointed by one's children. And yet disappointment is not the film's central theme. There is nothing disappointing about Noriko's heroic and majestic integrity in expressing her love for Tomi and Shukichi.

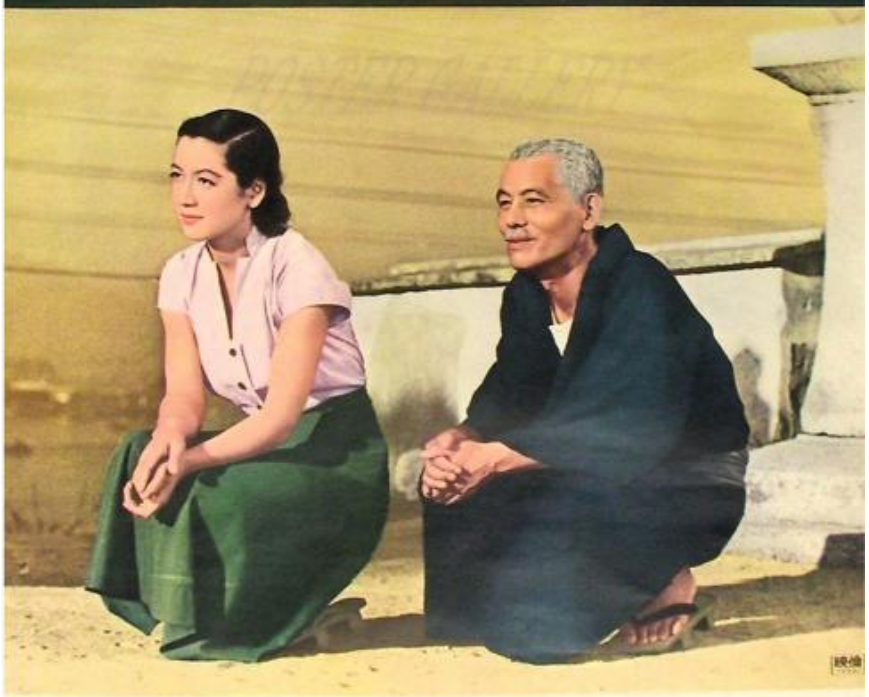
After Kyoko leaves for the school where she teaches, Noriko is now the only one who sits with her father-in-law and tells him that she too must return to Tokyo that afternoon. Shukichi tells her that she has treated him and Tomi better than their own children did, even though she is not related to them by blood. Noriko replies that she considers herself selfish because she was not constantly thinking about her lost husband. Shukichi attributes her self-criticism to her humility and gives her a watch belonging to the late Tomi as a keepsake. Noriko cries and confesses her loneliness. Shukichi encourages her to remarry as soon as possible, wishing her happiness. Noriko travels thoughtfully from Onomichi back to Tokyo, looking at the keepsake from her mother-in-law, while Shukichi remains behind, accepting the loneliness he must endure.

6th excerpt.mp4

名匠小津安二郎の映画芸術！

東京物語

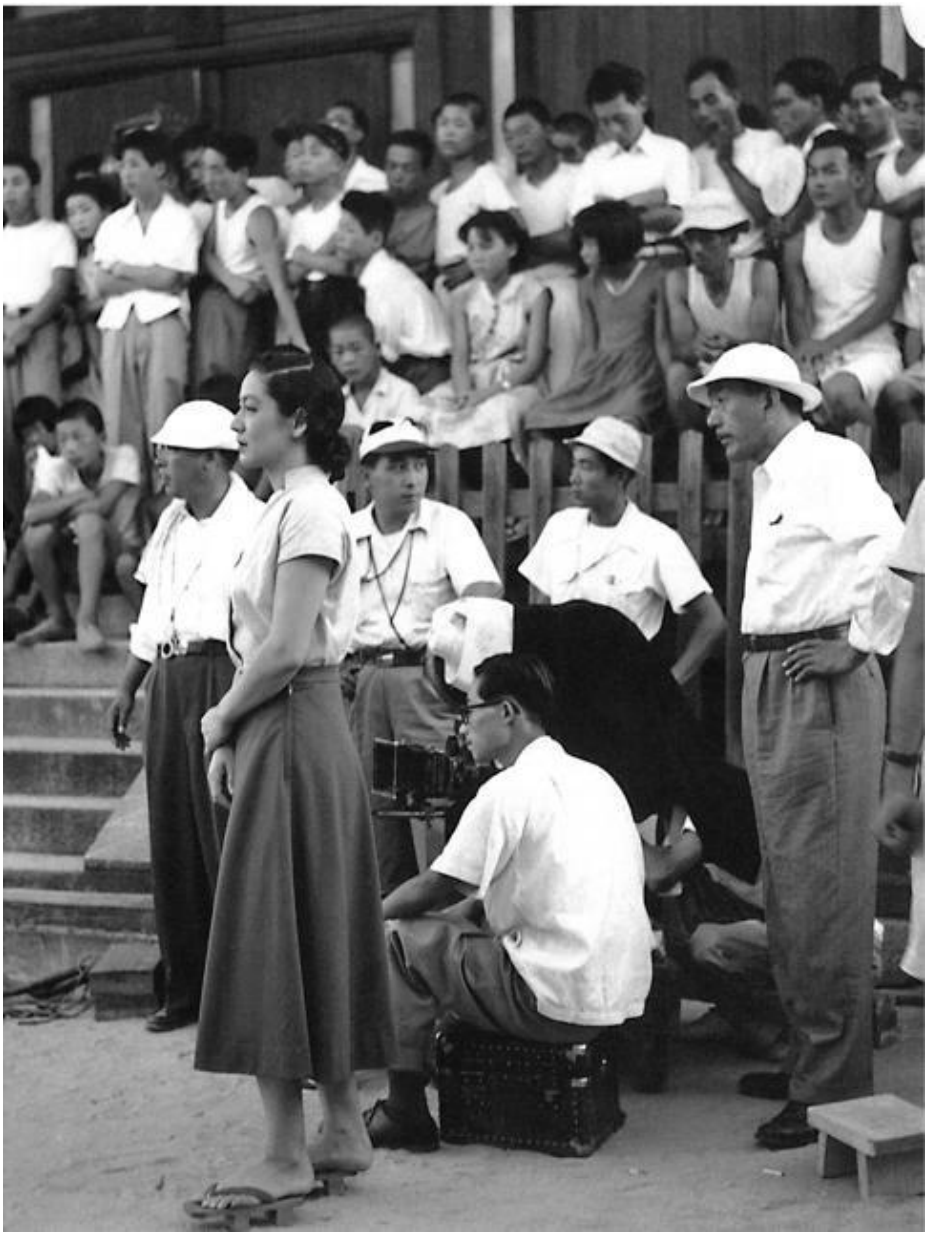
いつの世にも変らぬ、人の心の豊かさと、せつなさ！しみじみ描きつくす、人生の哀歓……



原　節子　笠　智衆・東山千栄子
香川京子・杉村春子・山村　聡・三宅邦子・大坂志郎
東野英治郎・中村伸郎・十朱久雄・安部　徹

■監督小津安二郎　脚本野田高梧・小津安二郎　撮影厚田雄春

松竹映画



Actress Setsuko Hara on the left and director Yasujirō Ozu on the right, during the filming of "Tokyo Story."



The concluding part of the famous “Noriko trilogy,” in which the great Setsuko Hara, with her heartbreakingly dignified, courageous smile shining and trembling, portrays three different heroines named Noriko.

Her smile is so dazzling that, when it disappears, it is as if a gunshot has been fired.



“Tokyo Story” combines, with exemplary skill, the deepest meanings of human existence with the grandeur of simplicity. The actors portraying the elderly couple also give remarkable performances that capture the essence of their characters’ quiet resignation and emotional depth. The rupture of family bonds, the inevitable and unbridgeable generation gap, Japan’s unresolved post-war trauma, the violent Westernization of Japanese society, the fading of the old world of courtesy and respect, and the dominance of a new model of life characterized by individualism and frantic haste, in which there is no space or time to meet oneself and others—these are the key ideas that dominate the pinnacle of Yasujirō Ozu’s directorial journey.

With penetrating sensitivity, without sentimentality and without any intention either to condemn or to forgive, Ozu explores these themes so dear to him. With cinematic austerity, in which movement comes from people or from nature, through silence or through spare and suggestive words that nevertheless say a great deal, with no heroes but with timeless human figures, the director transforms a seemingly simple story into a masterpiece of frustrated expectations and disillusionment, a journey in search of love and meaning, like life itself. Ozu's penetrating camera, anchored low as always, captures all the underlying conflicts and unseen moments of bitterness and disappointment, turning the looks and faces of the characters into a map and mirror of the human condition.

A brilliant example of Shōshimin-eiga, the movement in Japanese cinema that depicts the stories, dilemmas, and problems of ordinary people in the contemporary lower-middle-class environment, "Tokyo Story" functions as a mirror of a society undergoing rapid and abrupt transformation. A true model of inner rhythm and economical storytelling, in which the most pivotal events are either implied afterward or left to be understood outside the frame, "Tokyo Story" weaves gentleness together with existential anxiety about the passage of time and the impossibility of communication.

Indicative not only of Ozu's minimalist cinematic style but also of an entire school of Japanese cinema that demonstrated that genuine cinematic magic emerges only from the "essentials," "Tokyo Story" is more than a classic film. Heartbreaking like the gap between two generations that share nothing except the blood that binds them, tender like the gaze of two elderly people toward a daily life that is harsh and alien to them, honest like the terror of a world that is constantly changing and, in its frantic progress, forgetting the human element, "Tokyo Story" will forever remain a reminder of how cinema can capture the most unspeakable "whys" of the human species, ultimately offering the most generous answers.

