Gesture and Anti-gesture in Ozu’s Cinema

Some cinema uses its photographic basis to resist or look through the theatricality of gesture. It casts the light of time over faces and bodies, whose gestures deflect the ache of being. If the cinema comes out of photography as much as it does the theater, then it may catch subjects between gestures, or reveal them despite their gestures, or foresee them stripped of gestural theatricality altogether because prone to pain, dying, and death. In such a cinema, the gesture undoes itself. Ozu’s films do this. In _An Autumn Afternoon_ (1962), _Tokyo Story_ (1953), and _Late Spring_ (1949), his cinema helps us to see what his characters do not, performing as they do the social graces, those exquisite gestures of custom, deflection, or bad faith. His camera invites us to see his characters not seeing; the pathos of their fates turns such satire into sympathy.

If there are two ways in which the camera sees what characters do not, then Ozu’s work involves both to undo gesture. First is a literal sense of what film alone can see. The actors gesturing in a film are no longer, and never were only, the characters they play: they are people as recorded in the past, never the same, perhaps now dead. Film sees what the actors, and hence the characters, cannot, because such bodies and faces are both gone and still there as we view them, and this temporal split that the screen enforces affects our perception of them. Such bodies and faces are doomed: this is film’s open secret, its vision, and its pathos. No matter what the actors do, the camera sees them as they cannot see themselves, as _having_ lived, even while so
alive to us. Artists such as Ozu who are sensitive to this filmic perception make use of it in every frame. The second sense of the camera seeing what the characters cannot is artistic, not literal, and one that every dramatic art has conventions for staging, but that acquires additional power in film because of the first sense. We see an actor’s small gestures amid larger ones and interpret them as private, as hidden emotions, while other actors fill their roles of oblivious relatives, neighbors, friends. Ozu merges these two cinematic powers in his anti-gestural vision: when a character makes a gesture, his being unnoticed, or failing to notice others, as the case may be, is seen in time’s light, the fact of which blends satire and tragedy to pathetic indistinction.

Ozu’s cinema of anti-gesture, of gestural grace that fails in ways only the camera sees, entails the prevalence, not lack, of such grace in his films. This grace has long been observed by critics, who note that Ozu’s characters behave as if always observed by others; their behavior is “public,” in Sato Tadao’s word, or “presentational,” in Noël Burch’s. Burch goes so far as to relate this presentational quality to the overtly gestural art of the tea ceremony, without, as far as I am aware, doing a reading of the actual tea ceremony that begins the action in Late Spring. Yet Ozu’s use of a ceremony must complicate any comparison between it and the characters, since its literal appearance is artful and formally gestural to an extent his characters rarely are. While Ozu’s characters are presentationally graceful, what they present are the day’s most ordinary actions, with the slight strain and almost humorous futility of expressing sociability in an animal body. A tea ceremony or similarly artful ritual only heightens, not elides, this difference. Late Spring features not one but two extended scenes of traditional art forms of gestural ritual—the tea ceremony and a Nō play. In its comparative staging of art and life, the film shows the tension
between gesture and anti-gesture, between a way of being that would simplify existence through
gesture and one hopelessly resistant to such simplification.

The tea ceremony is the first scene of the film, after a sequence of serene yet subtly
disorienting shots of a train station, architecture, and natural scenery. The film comes to focus on
two characters, Noriko and her meddlesome aunt, kneeling side-by-side, first in chatter until the
ceremony begins with an announcement and silent bows, then, moments later, in oddly switched
places. In between is a shot of the host’s ritual gestures. The switch of positions is ambiguous, if
not inexplicable, and you may disbelieve your eyes, or consider it a postproduction mistake. The
camera has been keying on the host, and this enforcement of ritual all but overrides our
confusion. Ozu’s discontinuities are peculiar; many, such as mismatches in dialogue scenes and
cutaways to random objects, arouse critical discussion. This one has been less controversial,
perhaps because it is embedded in ritual, because the bodies take the form of ritual gesture. Such
discontinuities are not violations of decorum that the actors perform, by, say, bad or inappropriate
gestures. They are put in the film’s framework of perception by directing and editing and
merged with the formal serenity. Their uncanniness is thrown back on the viewer, who assumes
an ambiguous perspective of serenity and its disturbances, and whose wish to lose himself in the
film cannot quite absorb these ruptures. The world of being in Ozu’s cinema is of a piece with
our world because it is uncanny—because we have continually to perceive and feel about it. The
medium close-up of Noriko kneeling on the wrong side of her aunt is held at slightly gratuitous
length. This confirms for us her abstracted discontinuity and at once makes her all the more
concrete. This liminal paradox of Ozu’s cinematic perception is like nothing else I know in the
arts for the isolation of being, at once shared and unshareable, it throws back on us. And as
happens in the cinema when a shot is held, actors become people, doomed in time. [clip]

The scene at the Nō play functions as the film’s center, the drama-within-the-drama in
which the theater and the cinema are exquisitely and disturbingly interlaced, an excruciating
unfolding of gestures and the things that gestures hide. Noriko, played by Setsuko Hara, and her
father, played by Chishu Ryu, attend the play as their relationship is about to change. He wants
to marry her off after years of neglecting this duty. She has resisted the custom and wants to
remain his live-in daughter, a matron to him in her deceased mother’s absence, at once modern in
her rejection of marriage and traditional in her domestic duty. The seeming contentment she has
attained by this sublation of a split identity, her way of being a woman as gender roles change, is
complicated by her unexpressed desire for an engaged man, a longtime assistant to her father.
And he desires her, and also never brings himself to express this. His engagement has dragged
on for three years, almost comic evidence that his heart is not in it, while he and Noriko glow
with happiness in each other’s company. Father and daughter have come to the play after he has
finally persuaded her to meet an eligible man. To convince her that he will get along fine
without her, he has lied to her about his own intention to remarry. All of this is under the surface
as they sit watching the gestures on stage and listening to the droning cadences. The woman he
is pretending to marry is also there; when he notices her, he bows, then resumes watching in even
greater joy than before. Noriko spots the woman, bows like her father, then resumes dying on
the inside in even greater agony. Never have a father and daughter been so far apart in such
loving proximity and gestural refinement. The two mime their separate feelings with wordless
expression, in as moving a display of cinematic acting as exists. No one in attendance, least of
all her father, sees her in pain; but we, inhabiting this cinema, see her, and, hence, see others not seeing, and hence, know the blindness of manners and gestures in our own midst. [clip]

Ozu’s seeming analogy of theatrical masks and human faces is complicated by cinema’s reality that character and actor, a role and a real man, cannot quite be pulled apart, which brings about a paradox: a film actor’s face calls to mind a non-actor whose face is just reflexively true to his feelings. The scene exploits this paradox by contrasting the fixed Nō mask with Chishu Ryu’s beaming face, which becomes an almost unwatchable mask over her pain, all the more so because of her sacrifice to sustain it. The tragedy of such a mask—for the blindness of deep, reflexive joy looks as fixed as a Nō mask—is of two hearts in opposite fits of feeling, the father’s oblivious to hers, the daughter’s aware of both. His elation stems from his fatherly lie, and continues it. She misreads his joy as pertaining to the woman. Both have graciously bowed to her. In the father’s case, the gesture fills the heart; in the daughter’s case, crushes it. A camera sees such faces, and such hearts; Ozu builds the contrast between ritual and feeling as the very enactment of cinematic perception.

Ozu’s camera fixes on the Nō performance for as long as it does on Chishu Ryu and Setsuko Hara; what might this further suggest about the theater, gestural performance, and the cinema? It serves to differentiate two modes of theatricality, the gestures of art and the gestures of life. The Nō theater is as stylistically remote from life as any dramatic art in the world. As Donald Keene describes it, “The actors scorn as ‘theatricality’ any suggestion of realism […]. The characters in the Nō plays are hardly more than beautiful shadows, the momentary embodiments of great emotions.” Such a theater of extreme stylization operates through oblique, suggestive means of representation, in which the viewer feels by imagining. The slow gestures,
wistful poetry, and droning music cumulatively heighten this imagining. By contrast, the gestures of life require no special skill and no training but what almost everyone undergoes from birth in his culture. We can scarcely communicate or cope without them—so much so that they often hide as much as they say, as we also learn early on. A wave or bow is a mark of this social humanity, and this is what Ozu’s camera sees when it turns from the stage and back to life, albeit a performance of life by actors in their bodies. Waves and bows are what his camera sees through, as the emotions that they hide or miss are not gesturally spoken, because cannot be: people suppress their feelings because they gesture so ably instead.

While the interplay of theater and cinema provokes this question of gesture, Ozu’s dramaturgy of actors doing ordinary things centers his anti-gestural vision. Much of what they present or display is animal functioning under the weight of living: dropping the head not in a bow, but rather in fatigue or despair; walking unsteadily with age or drink; bobbing and vibrating on a bus or train; and doing all the things of keeping alive or of just being: eating, drinking, smoking, dressing, undressing, sweeping, sitting, lying down. Non-actors would do these things too self-consciously; a documentary would lack the formal design that supplies contrastive tension. In a filmic performance of, say, eating and drinking—crucially in a space of manners and well-placed objects—the act loses the charm of an act and gains the allure of sympathetic vulgarity. The camera that waits long enough, and Ozu’s does, witnesses the moment when acting is indistinguishable from existing, an effect unique to cinema among the arts. Since so much of an Ozu film lacks conventional action—as David Desser says, it substitutes “dailiness” for dramatization—almost every frame allows such witnessing. Ozu films the man or woman alive within a temporal flow of gesturing: the closer the ways of gesturing and living are, as in
chewing food or smoking, the funnier and sadder the mirroring shock of living. If I had to pinpoint something about Ozu’s actors that makes their characters so real, and thus their inner lives so vivid in ambivalence and longing, it would be this cinematography of vulgar grace.

To achieve their anti-gestural vision, these films use their basis in photographic realism: what André Bazin says about long takes in deep focus inducing ambiguous perception; what Stanley Cavell writes about cinema allowing us to see the world without having to be in it; what Kendall Walton means by describing film as “transparent,” a window to some piece of the world as it was. Each usage in its way makes us aware of time’s passage; if gestures, especially polite ones, sublimate the body’s needs and processes into manners, deflecting mortality, then merely filming them can reflect their pathos. Ozu’s mise en scene is not, however, only of actors performing oblivious manners, or presenting vulgar dailiness to undo those manners. As Tyler Parks, following Andrew Klevan, argues, it uses non-human objects to reflect time’s disquiet. Parks devotes his analysis to Ozu’s famous cutaways to objects that dislocate the story space. Parks says these dislocations of space and time illuminate the “horizon,” in his word, of the human sphere, “evoking a sense of universal transience through the suggestion of forces of life at nonhuman scales.” Horizon is nicely suggestive of perception at a threshold of awareness that implicates one’s self-conscious being, and of the way in which such a cinema can focus the situations of characters as a wider, even universal, effort to perceive on the part of us viewers.

Cutaways notwithstanding, I wish to stress those discontinuities that appear within a seemingly conventional sequence or narrative flow, and their anti-gestural sense in Ozu’s realist cinema. In the opening sequence of *Late Spring*, there are three shots of a train platform, subtly disordering the establishing convention of widest to narrowest. The film begins with the
medium shot of the platform, followed by the wide shot down the tracks, ending with a shot of the railway signal. This disordering is more suggestive of a person’s view when waiting for a train, the familiarly anxious psychology of standing on a platform then looking down the tracks. What is really strange about it, though, is that no person is there. Ozu’s camera functions impersonally to establish the setting and psychologically to implicate the human perspective. This in turn initiates the most unshakably impersonal, and disquieting, view—that of the human contemplating inhuman scales of time, as when the same camera cuts away to buildings and nature. No shot of Ozu’s is ever, or ever only, a character’s point of view; it is mingled with this inhuman perspective, whether fixed on people and their graces, on the things people build that outlast them, or on the stuff of the cosmos, such as trees, rocks, and waves.

*Late Spring* has just two shots in which the camera moves—extended tracking shots—and they are anti-gestural in my sense of the term, because they even more vividly personalize and depersonalize the perspective. The most memorable instance is when Noriko and Hattori, her long-engaged friend, share a joyful bicycle ride by the sea. The scene begins with a tracking shot of the ocean, set to bouncy music, implying a rider’s point-of-view. The shot is held for so long, however, that no rider could maintain its view while keeping to the road. As it lengthens, the shot begins to counter the personal perspective it initiated, and the ocean, waves breaking and breaking, becomes its meditative content, a cosmic setting of human brevity. To reiterate this tension, and to deepen the sadness of missed chances by recalling Noriko’s day of bliss, the last shot of the movie fixes on the ocean at night, waves breaking. This follows a shot of Noriko’s father, drunkenly slumped at home in his own loss after her wedding, which we never see.
As ambiguous as any gestures in Ozu, as brimming with vulgar grace, and as finely edged with sympathetic satire, are those involving drink and drunkenness, perhaps a suitably appealing subject for this gesture of a conclusion. I joke with my students that you can tell where you are in Ozu’s career by how much the characters drink. It is no joke: by *An Autumn Afternoon*, the last film, the male characters drink in almost every frame they appear. They drink beer, they drink saki, they drink whiskey, pretty much in that order as the film advances. They pour it into tiny glasses, as is their custom, and perhaps to convince themselves it is not so much, and drink and pour and drink and pour and drink and pour. I have never seen so much drinking in a film, or in one director’s oeuvre, and probably never will. All the polite pours and subsequent swallows are themselves a constellation of gestures that distill Ozu’s vision, and tweak it. The manners around drinking cover vulgar existence before no longer covering it. And they embody leisure anxious in the shadow of labor. But unlike other manners, those around drinking permit the revealing of one’s heart—the exception that proves the rule, since the ritual of drunkenness wears off, reverting again to all the heartbreaking gestures of life.