

## Original Paper

# Yasujirō Ozu's Cinematic Language and the Aesthetics of Healing

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the unique cinematic language and healing aesthetics of Yasujirō Ozu by comparing his film style with that of classical Hollywood. Unlike Hollywood's focus on plot-driven action and emotional conflict, Ozu utilizes "intermediate space", "360-degree rule", "low-angle shots", and "graphic configuration" to depict serene everyday life, breaking away from classical Hollywood's narrative conventions and establishing a novel Japanese visual experience. The following findings reveal that Ozu creates a distinct healing effect through meticulously designed spatial compositions and narrative rhythm. Rather than relying on dramatic conflict, this effect emerges from spatial ambiance and visual stability, offering viewers a space for emotional buffering and psychological rest. Drawing on environmental and Gestalt psychology, this study delves into the therapeutic mechanisms within Ozu's cinematic language and analyses its profound influence on modern Japanese healing cinema.*

### **Keywords**

*Ozu, healing genre, Japanese aesthetics, intermediate space, 360-degree rule*

## **1. Introduction**

Classical Hollywood cinema, in both its production process and style, established a systematic paradigm. First, spatial elements must serve narrative action and avoid diverting viewers' attention from the storyline, while filming typically adheres to the "180-degree rule", with dialogue scenes often using the "shot-reverse-shot" technique (Thompson & Bordwell, 1976). Characters are expected to be goal-oriented, advancing the plot through a classical editing style that follows a "cause-and-effect" chain, with spatial composition deliberately rendered "invisible" (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2020). In

short, the classical Hollywood style centers on “invisible” spatial continuity and a cause-and-effect narrative chain, creating a seamless viewing experience driven by goal-oriented characters.

In contrast, Yasujiro Ozu’s films, such as *The End of Summer* (1961), introduce a distinct storytelling approach that produces a different emotional experience. Through careful depictions of everyday life and various technical choices, Ozu creates a sense of calm and healing for viewers. Rather than focusing on intense narrative progression, he emphasizes subtle emotional relief in his handling of space, character portrayal, and emotional expression. This unique style has profoundly influenced the development of Japan’s “healing” film genre.

This paper uses the classical Hollywood narrative style as a comparative tool to explore how Ozu’s techniques of spatial composition and narrative intervals create a unique healing effect. By doing so, it reveals the far-reaching impact of Ozu’s personal style on the aesthetics of healing in cinema.

## **2. Comparative Analysis: The End of Summer (1961) and Classical Hollywood Cinema**

### *2.1 Intermediate Space*

In *The End of Summer*, Yasujiro Ozu skillfully incorporates a unique cinematic language by placing sequences of static shots between scenes. These shots, often depicting landscapes, narrow alleys, or everyday Japanese architecture, are referred to by scholars as intermediate space (Thompson & Bordwell, 1976). In classical Hollywood cinema, this approach is rare as the emphasis is typically on narrative action, with any non-essential visual elements avoided to keep the audience focused on the storyline. Intermediate space in Ozu’s work functions not only as a transition between shots but also as a poetic expression. These seemingly unrelated static sequences create a visual and emotional experience, breaking away from the traditional expectation that every shot or scene directly contributes to advancing the story. By offering the unique aesthetic that transcends conventional storytelling, Ozu allows viewers to experience the poetry of everyday life in the narrative’s pauses.

To construct these intermediate spaces, Ozu uses four main techniques: focus, color act, cutaway, and transition. By manipulating focus and color, Ozu directs viewers’ attention to seemingly insignificant details within the frame; through cutaways, he shifts their gaze from the core plot to peripheral spaces, subtly suggesting the passage of time; and with transitions, he smoothly connects different spaces through a series of shots, crafting delicate intermediate spaces throughout the film (Thompson & Bordwell, 1976). In *The End of Summer*, transitions are widely used, setting a clear contrast with classical Hollywood’s editing standards, which typically follow a strict “cause and effect” chain with scene transitions managed by fade-ins and fade-outs. Ozu, however, prefers the straight cut, yet his approach is far from abrupt. Through carefully designed shot sequences, he achieves visual continuity between seemingly unrelated scenes, skillfully creating rich intermediate spaces between shots.



**Picture set 1. “Barrels” Transitional Scenes**



**Picture set 2. “Bank and Ancient Tower” Transitional Scenes**



**Picture set 3. “Ancient Tower and Green Mountain” Transitional Scenes**

For example, the first set of transitional scenes in the film presents barrels of various sizes in an alley, captured from different angles and accompanied by background music to create a unique atmosphere. The second set of scenes employs a long shot to depict the contrast between the modern building housing a bank and an ancient tower, visually juxtaposing the new and the old. In the third set, a medium shot again presents the tower, followed by a separate static shot of the mountain framed by lush green trees, creating a sense of visual depth and continuity.

This unique technique is more than just a substitute for traditional “fade-in” and “fade-out” transitions; on a deeper level, it reflects the Japanese aesthetic concept of *mono no aware*, rooted in Zen Buddhism’s awareness of impermanence (Railey, 1997). *Mono no aware* does not merely denote sadness but is a “sensitivity to things” (De Bary, 1995). Japanese artists often use imagery such as a waning moon, falling cherry blossoms, and withering leaves to convey this delicate emotion, establishing an emotional resonance between characters and their surroundings—an aesthetic Ozu’s cinematic language perfectly embodies. At the same time, this technique creates both intermediate spaces and narrative intervals, inviting the audience into a space for contemplation beyond the immediate story and visuals. Through these transitional shots showing contrasts between new and old, near and far, the audience can feel not only the passage of time and the shifts within the family but also a subtle sadness for life’s impermanence.

In classical Hollywood film style, objects are typically presented only to the extent required by their narrative function, without drawing extra attention. However, in this film, Ozu frequently uses what could be called “hypersituated objects”—these objects appear on screen with significance that goes beyond their basic narrative role, becoming key elements in constructing intermediate spaces (Thompson & Bordwell, 1976). This approach is especially evident in transitional scenes and cutaways, where these objects often take on symbolic meanings. For example, after a scene where the father lies bedridden with family members visiting him, Ozu inserts a cutaway shot of a gravestone, subtly foreshadowing the father’s eventual fate.

Thus, transitional scenes create intermediate spaces that do more than simply link one scene to the next; they deepen the film’s unique emotional atmosphere. These spaces give viewers a moment to pause and reflect, with each shot standing as a visual poem on its own. In these subtle details, we could see Ozu’s deep grasp of traditional Japanese aesthetics and his unique and innovative approach, inviting viewers into a richly layered and contemplative experience.

## 2.2 360-degree Shooting Rule

Next, we turn to the 360-degree rule. Before exploring this technique, it is essential to understand the conventional 180-degree shooting method. In classical Hollywood cinema, the 180-degree rule plays a crucial role, allowing the camera to move within a semi-circle around the action—this approach, particularly popular in fictional genres, ensures spatial consistency between shots (such as in dialogue scenes), preventing shifts in the background that might distract the viewer and maintaining the narrative’s focus (Thompson & Bordwell, 1976).

However, Ozu deviates from this convention by moving beyond the 180-degree rule to embrace the 360-degree technique, a stylistic choice he applies throughout *The End of Summer*. The 360-degree rule permits the camera to capture the entire circle around the scene, rather than restricting it to a half-circle. This method becomes evident in scenes like the one in which Akiko, the eldest daughter, returns home

and meets her sister Noriko and son. Here, the camera reveals all four walls of the room, offering a complete sense of the setting's layout.



**Picture set 4. Dialogue Shot with the Camera Positioned between Characters**

In addition, Ozu's approach to 360-degree shooting includes a distinctive technique: positioning the camera at the center of a scene or between characters, often with actors facing the camera directly. This method is quite rare in conventional cinematography, but could create a uniquely intimate viewing experience, allowing audiences to quietly observe the characters' emotions and interactions without breaking the narrative boundaries. Ozu's use of the 360-degree rule not only became a hallmark of his personal style but also had a profound impact on Japanese cinema and broader Eastern filmmaking, in clear contrast to the 180-degree shooting space typical of Classical Hollywood films. Rather than being confined to maintaining spatial continuity or advancing the narrative, Ozu's method opens up a more expansive viewing space, inviting audiences to retain their own self-awareness while watching, with more room to reflect, imagine, and engage with the nuances of the story (Thompson & Bordwell, 1976).

### 2.3 Low-angle Shots

Another distinctive feature of Ozu's style is his frequent use of low-angle shots. In classical Hollywood cinema, the camera is typically positioned at a natural human height of around 5 to 6 feet, centring on characters to ensure visual continuity and create an accessible and immersive narrative for viewers (Bordwell et al., 2003). However, in *The End of Summer* and many of Ozu's other films, the camera is frequently placed at a lower level, capturing characters and scenes from a slightly upward angle.

This unique technique has two main motivations: one is Japan's tatami culture (Bordwell, 1988). In traditional Japanese households, people often sit directly on the floor, so many family activities naturally unfold from a lower viewpoint. Thus, the low-angle shots provide a more culturally authentic setting for storytelling. Beyond cultural context, the other reason reflects Ozu's artistic vision: he believed that viewing characters and scenes from a low angle created a sense of calm and tranquility, aligning with his poetic approach to everyday life.

#### 2.4 Graphic Configuration

Ozu's films are also noted for their unique approach to graphic configuration, a technique that is not a necessary element in classical Hollywood films. Through an analysis of *The End of Summer* and other works, we can see that Ozu frequently relies on graphic matching to create visual cohesion between scenes, which involves establishing a visual link between consecutive shots by repeating similar elements, such as lamps, furniture, or character positions (Thompson & Bordwell, 1976). Since the 360-degree shooting style can lead to highly varied backgrounds across shots, and the use of straight cuts may result in abrupt transitions, strong visual connections become essential for maintaining coherence (Thompson & Bordwell, 1976). For instance, before the first family dinner scene in *The End of Summer*, Ozu introduces a series of transitional shots featuring a blue lampshade. This same lampshade reappears in the dinner scene, creating a subtle visual echo. Additionally, in many dialogue scenes, characters face the camera directly, creating varied backgrounds across shots. In such cases, the characters themselves act as abstract graphic elements, preserving visual continuity.

#### 2.5 Everyday Family Narrative

A final area of comparison lies in the narrative property of this film versus that of classical Hollywood cinema. Traditional Hollywood films generally feature goal-oriented plots, where characters' actions are closely tied to a central objective, ensuring a clear narrative drive. In contrast, Ozu's works, including *The End of Summer*, often center on the everyday lives of ordinary families, exploring themes such as father-daughter relationships, sibling bonds, and marital affection (Bock, 1978). This narrative choice is closely linked to Ozu's personal life experiences. As a deeply filial son, Ozu had a profound love for his mother, and this affection is fully reflected in his films, forming a central theme within his work. Furthermore, this focus on daily life aligns with the Japanese aesthetic of *Yūgen*, a concept inspired by Zen's notion of emptiness, which celebrates the beauty of what is hidden and the profound depth beyond visible things (Tsubaki, 1971). By depicting everyday routines and employing a slow narrative pace, Ozu creates a broader inner space for the audience to experience unspoken emotions, rather than through direct dialogue or dramatic scenes. This approach contrasts with the intense emotional outbursts and clear-cut plot conflicts typical of classical Hollywood films. In Ozu's films, it is the seemingly mundane moments, silent exchanges, and unresolved mysteries that offer audiences a subtler and more profound emotional experience—an embodiment of the "unseen" power that *Yūgen* seeks to express.

With these distinctive filming techniques and narrative approaches, Ozu elevates the ordinary rhythms of daily life into a profound art form in *The End of Summer* and many of his other works. Simple scenes of family dinners, casual conversations, and leisurely walks become, under Ozu's lens, deep explorations of life's impermanence and the complexities of family relationships. This unique style, which ritualizes everyday life and imbues ordinary scenes with poetic depth, not only established a new

aesthetic paradigm in Japanese cinema but also opened up fresh narrative possibilities for world cinema.

### 3. Therapeutic Functions of Filmic Techniques in Ozu's Cinema

Ozu Yasujiro's cinematic style lays the groundwork for both the visual aesthetics and core values central to the modern Japanese "healing" genre. Building on prior research on Ozu's unique style, the following discussion will apply theoretical frameworks to deconstruct the therapeutic impact of his approach and analyze its influence on *Our Little Sister* (2015) and *Little Forest: Summer/Autumn* (2014) such Japanese contemporary healing films.

Ozu creates an "intermediate space" through static cutaways and transitional scenes, using spatial stillness and intentional blank spaces to provide an emotional buffer that allows viewers to step away from life's busyness and intense emotions, guiding them into a more nuanced emotional experience. It is widely recognized that moments of intense joy or sorrow are common techniques in traditional cinema, providing audiences with emotional value and experience within a short viewing time. However, neuroscience research indicates that experiencing such emotional extremes leads to heightened neural activity and a higher energy demand, potentially resulting in neural fatigue with sustained stimulation (Ishii et al., 2014). Further, studies by Baumeister and others (1998) have shown that self-regulatory resources are limited, meaning that handling intense emotional experiences requires substantial self-control and psychological energy. This can lead to "ego depletion," leaving individuals feeling fatigued or even emotionally hollow after prolonged stimulation.

Ozu's work disrupts this pattern with his intermediate space, crafted through quiet and straightforward narratives. This provides viewers not only with emotional pacing but also acts as a tool for emotional regulation. Through static spatial compositions and environmental depictions, audiences become attuned to subtle emotions often overlooked in daily life, fostering a deep sense of inner resonance. This aligns with principles in Environmental Psychology, which suggest that tranquility in space and surroundings promotes emotional regulation and psychological recovery (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Compared to intense emotional highs and lows, the "stillness" in these spaces encourages viewers to discover subtle emotional comforts.

Additionally, Slow Art theory offers a complementary perspective on this emotional experience, suggesting that a slow narrative pace and static visuals allow viewers to connect more deeply with emotions, achieving an internal emotional satisfaction through aesthetic immersion (Reed, 2017). Ozu's intermediate space, which moves beyond mere plot progression, avoids the psychological energy depletion caused by intense emotional stimulation. Instead, it facilitates subtle emotional resonance and internal healing, providing viewers with a space for emotional release and stability—ultimately achieving the therapeutic effect associated with the "healing" genre.

Let's examine how the 360-degree rule and low-angle shots complement each other to create a healing effect in cinema. The 360-degree shot not only expands the spatial scope of the frame but also enhances the fluidity of movement, resulting in softer storytelling and a more natural, realistic film experience. In terms of low-angle shots, Bruce Block (2020) mentions in his book that this technique brings viewers closer to the characters' experience, especially by simulating the daily perspectives of characters in family narratives like *The End of Summer*. This approach strengthens the audience's connection with the characters' world.

From the perspective of environmental psychology, low-angle shots often reduce the perception of spatial distance, especially in enclosed or indoor settings. This makes the camera's presence feel subtler and enables a more direct interaction with the characters. By lowering the angle, the psychological distance is reduced, making the scene feel more intimate and approachable. Edward Hall's concept of "Intimate Distance" (1969) proposes that as physical proximity increases, emotional exchange becomes easier and more natural. In films, low-angle shots create a closer spatial distance between characters and viewers, enhancing a sense of psychological intimacy.

Together, these techniques contribute to a "healing" cinematic experience. The 360-degree shot allows viewers to sense an open interaction between characters and their surroundings, evoking a feeling of spaciousness that releases spatial limitations and gives a visually "healing" sense of expansiveness. Meanwhile, low-angle shots shorten the perceived distance between characters and viewers, fostering an emotional connection and sense of calm within this open space. These techniques work hand in hand, visually constructing the healing atmosphere characteristic of Ozu's films.

Similarly, the extensive use of graphic configuration in Ozu's films also plays a significant role in creating a healing effect for audiences. According to Gestalt psychology's principle of "visual constancy", viewers tend to seek visual patterns and consistency when faced with constantly changing scenes and images, which helps maintain a sense of cognitive stability (Koffka, 1999). By linking different times and spaces through the repetition of similar graphic elements—such as lamps, furniture, or character placements—Ozu allows the viewer's visual system to naturally identify and match these repeated elements. This visual stability helps viewers maintain a sense of psychological constancy and security amid the film's shifting narrative and scene changes. In a rapidly changing world, these visual symbols provide a familiar order for viewers, offering a "constant space" within the film to rely on. This constancy can help reduce emotional fluctuations, offering a sense of calm and comfort that is visually and psychologically healing.

While graphic configuration creates visual constancy, viewers experience this stability on a visual level. Ozu's choice to forgo Hollywood's goal-oriented narratives in favor of everyday life narratives builds an emotional and psychological sense of familiarity and stability. Norman (2004) suggests that recognition of familiar everyday settings and emotional connections brings viewers psychological

reassurance. In *The End of Summer* and many of Ozu's films, the main scenes depict everyday family interactions, such as eating, chatting, or walking together—scenes that are deeply familiar to audiences. As a result, viewers naturally project their own experiences onto the characters' lives, achieving a sense of emotional resonance. This resonance differs from the intense emotional response elicited by Hollywood's strong plots and dramatic conflicts; instead, Ozu's focus on the genuine, continuous flow of daily life provides a familiar and stable emotional environment for the audience. This familiarity and sense of safety open a path for comfort and healing.

Taken together, the two key features of Ozu's films—graphic configuration and everyday life narratives—offer viewers both visual constancy and emotional coherence. This dual stability effectively alleviates viewers' real-life anxieties, providing a healing experience during the film.

In the realm of contemporary Japanese healing films, Ozu Yasujiro's influence is unmistakable. Take *Our Little Sister* and *Little Forest: Summer/Autumn*, for instance; these films both carry forward Ozu's core cinematic language and aesthetics of healing. In *Our Little Sister*, director Hirokazu Kore-eda avoids dramatic conflict, instead using a calm narrative atmosphere and gentle pacing to depict the everyday interactions and subtle details of life among four sisters. This seemingly simple approach allows viewers to become naturally immersed, slowing down to experience the delicate emotions woven into the story. Visually, *Our Little Sister* also reflects Ozu's style, particularly through the use of low-angle shots in indoor scenes. This technique not only continues Ozu's intimate visual perspective but also reinforces the genuine warmth of family bonds, allowing the audience to experience the peaceful and authentic feeling of connection alongside the characters.

*Little Forest: Summer/Autumn* further develops Ozu's "intermediate spaces" technique, using reserved portrayals of nature and farming activities to create a psychological respite for viewers. Through extended shots that capture the changing seasons, the film not only offers visual pleasure but also provides a slow-paced space for viewers to settle their emotions. These environmental shots gently draw viewers away from the pressures of daily life, inviting them to relax into a natural rhythm. In scenes of farming and cooking, the film crafts a calm atmosphere through simple, focused routines, allowing viewers to find an inner peace within these everyday rhythms. Unlike traditional films that rely on emotional conflict, *Little Forest* responds to modern audiences' desire for calm and enduring emotional experiences with its low-stimulation, slow-paced narrative. This approach keeps Ozu's aesthetic alive in contemporary cinema, offering audiences psychological comfort that transcends everyday stress.

#### 4. Conclusion

In *The End of Summer* (1961), Ozu Yasujiro's unique cinematic language is evident in the plain everyday scenes of family life alongside carefully crafted spatial design. This cinematic language is

reflected not only in technical innovations—such as crafting intermediate spaces with the use of negative space, employing the 360-degree rule to break from the traditional 180-degree rule, creating intimacy through low-angle shots, and establishing visual continuity with graphic configuration. More importantly, these techniques seamlessly merge with Ozu’s emphasis on narratives centered on everyday life rather than goal-driven action, all with the aim of providing a psychologically safe space where viewers can rest and reflect throughout the film.

The transitional shots in Ozu’s films, referred to as intermediate spaces, may appear to be simple landscape scenes, yet they provide viewers with emotional pauses and moments for reflection. The 360-degree shooting rule expands the viewer’s visual field, creating a sense of openness and spaciousness, while low-angle shots are not only aligned with the Japanese custom of sitting on the floor but also foster a viewing experience that feels both equal and intimate. Additionally, the use of graphic configuration and family everyday life narratives throughout the film builds a dual sense of visual and emotional stability for the audience. These techniques elevate Ozu’s films beyond mere artistic expression, establishing a unique “healing aesthetic” that gently soothes and reassures.

From *Our Little Sister* (2015) to *Little Forest: Summer/Autumn* (2014), we see this aesthetic tradition continuing and evolving in contemporary Japanese cinema. These works carry forward Ozu’s unique approach to space and time, as well as his attention to the small details of daily life. In today’s fast-paced society, this slow, detailed narrative style and the affectionate gaze on ordinary life offer viewers a rare opportunity to pause and breathe. This perhaps explains why, in an age of information overload and rapid tempo, Ozu’s healing aesthetic has not become outdated but instead demonstrates even greater relevance.

In traditional formalist film studies, technical analysis often stops at the level of technique itself. However, by analyzing the connection between Ozu’s audiovisual language and its emotional impact, we uncover a more meaningful possibility: film techniques can serve not only the narrative but also have a direct effect on the viewer’s psychological experience, creating a lasting healing effect. This creative philosophy, which combines technique, aesthetics, and psychological healing, not only enriches the possibilities of cinematic language but also offers a valuable direction for the development of modern cinema.

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