Japanese film has long occupied a central place in thinking and appreciating world cinema. The work of Yasujirō Ozu has garnered the most attention in the last few decades, with the 2012 Sight and Sound Poll placing his *Tokyo Story* (*Tokyo monogatari*, 1953) and *Late Spring* (*Banshun*, 1949) at numbers three and fifteen in the critics’ poll, and the former as number one in the filmmakers’ poll. There seems to be a never-ceasing flow of writing on Ozu, with several books and numerous articles appearing in English in the last decade. Yet largely absent from this effluence of discourse in English have been the voices emerging from Ozu’s own locality, despite the fact that dozens of books have been published in Japanese. While recent years have seen academics from Japan actively publishing in English (as well as American or European scholars writing in Japanese)—a trend that should render national divisions in film studies problematic—the fact that there is yet a fundamental imbalance in flows of
film scholarship reminds us that geopolitical divisions still reign. Among the scant English translations of Japanese writings on Ozu, Kijū (Yoshishige) Yoshida’s *Ozu’s Anti-Cinema* is a miraculous exception.¹ But the fact that Yoshida is a noted New Wave film director is significant, since it has been works of filmmakers that have tended to appear in English in book form.

This tendency reveals that voices from Japan have been listened to mostly to the degree they serve as local informants or provide autobiographical background to Japanese film. Historically, it has more or less been left to the Euro-American scholar to provide the supposedly real analysis and theoretical interrogation of the texts. For too long, the situation has resembled Edward Said’s outline of the European Orientalist: “for whom such knowledge of Oriental society as he has is possible only for the European, with a European’s self-awareness of society as a collection of rules and practices.”² This has especially been the case in the more abstract realm of film theory, and not just in relation to Japan. The histories and major anthologies of film theory have long devoted the majority of their pages to European and North American male theorists, offering little space for other regions—or races, genders, or ethnicities. One can understand that Noël Burch’s claim that “the very notion of theory is alien to Japan; it is considered a property of Europe and the West”³ is one strategy for him to construct Japanese culture as resistant to, and thus as a critique of, Western logocentrism and its cinematic equivalent, the classical Hollywood cinema. However, it also replicates the standard, almost ethnographic hierarchy between the Western theorist and the Japanese local informant.

That is why I believe this publication of an English translation of Shiguéhiko Hasumi’s *Directed by Yasujirō Ozu* is so important. Hasumi is not just a film critic/scholar, but also one of the leaders of the intellectual world in Japan since the 1980s. With a PhD from the Sorbonne, he was trained as a scholar of French literature and was central in the introduction of poststructuralist theory to Japan, from Roland Barthes to Michel Foucault. As a thinker, he was central to debates from the eighties on about textuality, signification, interpretation, and narration. As an academic, he eventually became president of the University of Tokyo, itself Japan’s most prestigious university. His activities have extended even into literary creation, actually winning the Yukio Mishima Prize at age eighty for one of his novels. The point, however, is not to assert his pedigree, but to underline how profoundly influential Hasumi has been in Japan and, to a degree, outside of Japan as well. This influence is evident first in how he dominated discourse in Japan on cinema in the eighties and nineties, with his book on Ozu in particular both reviving interest in the director and defining how to approach him. As a teacher offering a popular class at Rikkyō University, he also directly taught a generation of filmmakers, from Kiyoshi Kurosawa and Masayuki Suo to Shinji Aoyama and Kunitoshi Manda, who have acknowledged their debt to him in their approach to cinema.4

*Directed by Yasujirō Ozu* is then not just an interpretation of Ozu’s oeuvre, but an exploration of what makes cinema cinema. It is a work of film theory, but one that defines itself through its difference from dominant trends in both Ozu studies and film studies/theory. One Japanese film critic this book often quotes is Tadao Sato, who is both the critic most translated into English up until now and the author of a history of Japanese film theory that questions even the definition of


CRITICAL INTRODUCTION xxiii
theory. As I have argued elsewhere, Japanese film theory is marked by a “theory complex,” in which film theory is often pursued in a self-conscious fashion that interrogates theory itself. Hasumi is not the first to do this. One can see thinkers ranging from Yasunosuke Gonda to Jun Tosaka and from Midori Osaki to Michitarō Nagae proffering varied critiques of how film is studied and theory is done. Hasumi can be considered the epitome of this, given his own background in the high halls of academia.

Directed by Yasujiro Ozu in many ways defines itself through its difference from other studies, and thus from its context. Film criticism in Japan had long been divided into two camps often defined by politics: if impressionist critics such as Tadashi Iijima and Fuyuhiko Kitagawa used their own cultured sensibilities to elaborate on the effects of a film and its value as cinema—an atomistic and often apolitical approach—ideological critics like Akira Iwasaki and Kazuo Yamada, often aligned with left-wing movements, analyzed films for their political implications and hidden ideologies. Hasumi’s film criticism operated as an intervention against this division. Hasumi himself came to prominence as a film critic in journals such as Cinema 69, which was one of three influential but short-lived magazines at the end of the sixties that staked out the then-current divisions in criticism. While Kikan firumu (Quarterly of Film), which was centered on Toshio Matsumoto, concentrated on experimental cinema, Eiga hihyō (Film Criticism), edited by Masao Matsuda, pursued a committed radical politics that


Matsuda himself willingly called “partisan criticism” (goyō hyōron). The Cinema journals, which also involved critics such as Sadao Yamane and Tetsurō Hatano, pursued a critique that became the core position of Hasumi and like-minded writers: that cinema must be discussed as cinema, bracketing out issues of politics, society, and economy, in order to understand how the film operates as a film. At the same time, Hasumi also had a role in the academicization of film studies in Japan, carrying on from earlier semioticians like Susumu Okada and Keiji Asanuma (who also studied in France), and helping found Japan’s first academic society for the study of the moving image, the Japan Society of Image Arts and Science, although he eventually left it.

Hasumi initially came to fame in the broader intellectual sphere with his conception of “surface criticism” (hyōso hihyō), which was a fundamental attack on many predominant forms of textual interpretation that seek to delve beyond the surface of the text to extract a meaning supposedly hidden underneath. He charged such forms of criticism with essentially ignoring what is visible, denying the text in front of the critic’s eyes in order to discover something invisible. Such criticism, Hasumi argues, is less about the text than what is not the text—especially the ideologies on which criticism was founded. It was not uncommon to criticize Hasumi’s “surface criticism” for divorcing politics from textual reading, but strictly it was a different politics, one that, stemming in part from a disillusionment with the sixties’ radical politics and its claims of authority, critiqued universal abstractions and metanarratives that restricted the inherent creativity of criticism and film viewing.

Directed by Yasujirō Ozu is in many ways “surface criticism” of Ozu. It famously opens with a critique of previous approaches to Ozu, especially those offered by David Bordwell, Donald Richie, or Paul Schrader.

To Hasumi, not only the effort to locate what is Japanese or what is modern in Ozu, but also the very attempt to describe what is “Ozu-esque” (Ozuteki) involves a refusal to truly look at his films. While one may question why it is primarily non-Japanese scholars who bear the brunt of his approbation, Hasumi is not disparaging them for mistaking the Japanese-ness of Ozu. We ourselves should not read this book to somehow access the “Japanese” view of Ozu, because Hasumi, rejecting such Orientalism, resolutely refuses such abstractions and avers that Ozu’s films show nothing of the Japanese aesthetic values of shadow, nothingness, or the seasons, but rather, through a meteorological brightness likened to that of John Ford’s Monument Valley, represent cinema itself (chap. 7).

Hasumi is particularly critical of accounts of Ozu as a minimalist, as a director who subtracted from the full array of cinematic devices—for example, ceasing to move his camera—thereby creating a rhetoric defined by terms of lack and negation: about what Ozu was not doing. To Hasumi this creates a false image of Ozu as a maker of films that are defined by stillness, monotone, restraint, or austerity, when to Hasumi they are often overflowing with abundance, motion, variation, even violence—shaped not by negativity but positivity. The rhetoric of negation also, to him, fundamentally misunderstands cinema. When he states that it is impossible to show two sets of eyes looking at each other in cinema, most readers would scratch their heads. Of course we see that in cinema repeatedly. But as Hasumi argues in chapter 6, most filmmakers use either camera movement or editing to make up for the fact that a single shot of two people looking at each other can never fully show where their eyes are looking. Most filmmakers, to Hasumi, attempt to avoid this fundamental limitation by inserting temporal sequencing—showing one looker and then another—a fiction that masks their own impotence. To Hasumi, Ozu is the rare filmmaker who, through his famous shot/reverse shot structures with “incorrect” eyelines, exposes the impossibility of the look and thereby
takes cinema to its very limits. It is at this point where cinema almost ceases to be cinema that Ozu’s films, to Hasumi, shake the audience with a profound and infinitely abundant cinematic experience, one that at times can be shocking—even cruel and violent.

Directed by Yasujirō Ozu includes many close discussions of Ozu’s cinematic techniques, but it is not an account of Ozu’s film style. As part of his critique of the Ozuesque, Hasumi rejects the notion of style itself, both for its formalism (reducing Ozu to set formal effects) and for its refusal to see that Ozu—as well as cinema itself—can never be reduced to generalized patterns or rules of filmmaking. Ozu is cinematic to the degree that there never could be an “Ozu style.” His critique of such accounts of Ozu stems not just from his poststructuralist deconstruction of logocentric epistemology, but also from his understanding of cinema as uniquely resistant to such forms of film study. Due to its motion and temporality—its fundamental presentness—cinema to Hasumi always slips away at the moment one attempts to grasp it. To truly watch cinema is to confront the basic problems of language, time, and meaning. That somewhat terrifying prospect is, to him, one reason film criticism and film studies turns its head away and speaks of something else—Japan, modernism, or politics—rather than facing the film itself.

Hasumi’s alternative to this might strike some as odd, if not old fashioned: elaborating the thematic system in Ozu’s oeuvre. This poses a challenge to many used to Euro-American film studies of the last few decades, which has long moved beyond interpreting the “themes” of a movie. However, it is imperative when one reads a work from outside one’s theoretical tradition, especially from outside the Euro-American sphere, which has been defined so long through an almost imperial dominance enforced by repeated declarations that what others do is not theory, to check one’s assumptions at the door and use this as an opportunity to possibly deterritorialize theory.

Hasumi’s thematics is actually a complex if not brilliant solution to various problems in film study. When he speaks of themes such as
“eating” or “looking,” he is not attempting to divulge Ozu’s philosophical stance towards those actions. Instead, he notes first that such actions, events, or moments recur throughout Ozu’s cinema, though sometimes with more frequency in some periods (thus his tendency to focus on “late-period” Ozu). The author will note where they appear in each film’s narrative, in part because their narrative function is one aspect he considers (e.g., the use of laughter to begin a scene in a new location), but the cinematic power of these themes comes from their relationship with other instances at other moments, beyond both the individual narrative and the individual film. Thematic structures, which can and will condense narrative structures, enable Hasumi to see abundance and not lack, and they free film analysis—as well as cinema itself—from both narrative and the ideology of the closed text, if not the rule of time (chaps. 2 and 5). He celebrates conjunctures when multiple moments resonate, crossing the borders of texts and the march of time, to reinforce the continuous present that cinema ultimately is, before foreign things such as stories, language, or meaning are affixed. These also remain on the surface of the film: every theme is clearly visible, without a hidden subtext, even though some themes might require a trained eye. This also avoids the functionalism of purely formal analysis, while maintaining a cinematic focus on the audiovisual. Hasumi is not just looking for sameness in themes but rather tends to focus on certain moments. One example is the appearance of the staircase at the end of An Autumn Afternoon—in an oeuvre where, with rare exceptions, it is the invisibility of staircases that fundamentally shapes domestic space (chap. 4)—when difference manifests itself and a theme is twisted. As he repeatedly states, he is interested in both the coexistence and juxtaposition of elements in Ozu’s work—in resonance and paradox.

Hasumi also uses these juxtapositions of themes to rebuke purveyors of the Ozuesque for not really having watched the films. Those who state that Ozu is a director of quietude who does not move his
camera miss how movement—and its dialectical relationship with the act of stopping and holding still—are crucial to the Ozu world (chap. 6). When Hasumi claims that pretty much every declaration about Ozu can be disproven with a contrary example from his films, this does not mean anything goes, but rather that an approach to Ozu—and to cinema as a whole—must show a “sensitivity to difference” (chap. 9). Defining the uniformity of Ozu means that *A Hen in the Wind*, a film often considered “un-Ozu-like” but a crucial film for Hasumi, is ignored and never gets a North American DVD release. Failing to *really* watch Ozu sometimes means others cannot watch him either.

Throughout this book, there is a strong undercurrent of existentialism that makes this study not just an account of Ozu, or even a theory of cinema, but a call for renewed ways of living in the world. The verb *ikiru* (to live) appears repeatedly throughout the work in a way that stresses not only that Ozu’s cinema is a matter of living but that our watching is as well. In subtle language, the prologue critiques not simply the intellectual stances of those promoting the Ozuesque but also their approach to existence, as if claiming Ozu is defined by stillness or negative rhetoric were indicative of their own inability to accommodate change and affirmation. First and foremost, Hasumi’s call that we actually look at cinema urges us to truly see and engage with the world. While he might object to this, there are affinities between Hasumi and Russian formalism. One could first state that his approach to themes is not dissimilar to Bordwell’s formalist poetics, identifying a norm and then its deviation—though while Bordwell’s deviations often serve to reinforce the norm, Hasumi invariably questions the very concept of the norm. On the other hand, and more importantly, Hasumi broadly shares the formalist call for art to help us see anew, to break free of conventionalized perception, but he urges that of not just artists but of viewers and scholars as well.

What is also existentialist about this confrontation with a world seen anew is that, to Hasumi, it is fundamentally both terrifying and
absurd, defined by nonsense and even, as Ryan Cook emphasizes in his analysis, “stupidity”—which “abandons subjectivity and knowledge and submits to cruel stupidity in order to encounter cinema as change and movement.” Hasumi himself had previously written about the impossibility of film criticism: “Words should, before anything else, not take the existence of cinema as a given, but must be released towards the path where cinema might exist, and at the moment they manage to illuminate to a certain degree the shell of that point, they must be prepared for their own death.”

That is why this book is often a perilous, but thrilling tightrope walk between extremities. Some readers might protest that after objecting to the Ozuesque in the Prologue, he uses the term in his own analysis throughout. Others might wonder why a translator of Barthes, who was famous for declaring the death of the author, is deeply engaged in a laudatory exegesis of a single auteur—right at the time much of Euro-American film studies was critiquing auteurism. Hasumi is well aware of these problems, but in his mind they did not solve the core dilemmas of the critic. Just as cinema is defined by limits, by impossibilities that cannot be overcome but only recognized in a game of looking into the abyss, writing on Ozu cannot avoid categories like the “Ozuesque” that language necessarily imposes. Just as Derrida playfully declared there is no outside of the text, there is no outside of Ozuesque discourse, which therefore, to Hasumi, enjoins us to position “ourselves within the gap between things Ozuesque and the films of Yasujiro Ozu” and play “its continuous movement as a game” (chap. 7). Hasumi is less engaged in an auteurist celebration of Ozu than in finding in Ozu the occasion to critique notions of the auteur, thereby, as he says, “sacrificing auteurist unity” (chap. 3). Against the conception of auteurs as free artists flaunting convention to establish their own personal
