

Exotic Aesthetics:

Long Take Style and Staging in the Films of Mizoguchi and von Sternberg

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Ever since the West discovered and first began to celebrate Japanese cinema, critics have tended to talk of distance, emphasising always the barriers, gaps and obstacles that obscure our appreciation of films from the East.¹ So remote are the societies, the argument goes, so far removed the cultures, that any Western engagement with Japanese filmmaking must remain mediated by that country's mysterious customs and alien preoccupations. In the seminal account *Transcendental Style In Film*, for example, Paul Schrader analyses Ozu's filmmaking by way of the Zen etherealism that he contends is the determining factor of the director's style. Using a similar approach, Donald Richie's *Ozu* suggests that films such as *Tokyo Story* (1953) represent above all the values of traditional Japanese society – even Ozu's favoured waist-high camera framings, Richie claims, serve to replicate the pose of a person seated on Japanese *tatami* matting. Most forcefully of all, Noël Burch argues in *To the Distant Observer* that it is radical abstraction – a method categorically opposed to the codes of European and American cinema – that underpins the finest work of Eastern masters such as Kurosawa, Mizoguchi and Ozu.²

But need we accept the premise that cultural 'distance' is the best, or most salient approach to Japanese filmmaking? To respond to this open question, this essay aims to re-orient the contours of the East/West cinematic debate. Specifically, I will frame a discussion of these two filmmaking traditions through a comparison based more centrally on film style: between the work of Kenji Mizoguchi and Josef von Sternberg, on the one hand, as well as the two systems, classical Hollywood and Japanese, from which their work derives. Robin Wood is one of many critics who has noted Mizoguchi's open admiration for the work of von Sternberg;³ but this essay seeks to develop the link further, by outlining the crucial commonalities – as well as some telling divergences – within each director's staging, editing, and use of performance. Focusing on two famous films from a similar time-period – Mizoguchi's *Sisters Of The Gion* (1936) and von Sternberg's *Shanghai Express* (1932) – my discussion will hinge in particular on the notion of flamboyance, a term that has frequently been applied to the work of both these idiosyncratic directors. Indeed, as we will discover, the idea of a bravura style, or what I shall call an exotic aesthetic, actually opens up some key points of similarity between both directors' work, especially through their shared predilection for the long take.

Since much criticism of Japanese and Hollywood cinema has invoked issues of difference and disjuncture – many writers going so far as to declare the two film cultures to be completely

estranged – we should begin by outlining some ways in which *Sisters Of The Gion* and *Shanghai Express* actually resemble each other. Firstly, at a narrative and thematic level, the films have in common a striking concern with the plight of women. They feature active, passionate female protagonists, whose fates nonetheless collide with the manipulations of powerful men. Such subject material is, of course, typical for Mizoguchi and von Sternberg, both of whom made their reputations on telling stories of beautiful, vulnerable, occasionally capricious heroines. In this light, von Sternberg remains best known for his extended cycle of collaborations with Marlene Dietrich, in films such as *Morocco* (1930), *Blonde Venus* (1932) and *The Scarlet Empress* (1934). Mizoguchi is often labeled a feminist director, and made many films – notable examples being *My Love Has Been Burning* (1949) and *The Life Of Oharu* (1952) – which bitterly criticise the oppression of women.⁴

The plot of *Sisters Of The Gion* depicts the trials of two sisters, Omocha (Isuzu Yamada) and Umekichi (Yoko Umemura), whose social roles, as low-status geisha, leave them dependent upon the support of unreliable men. Although Umekichi remains hopeful about the future, Omocha is cynical about their prospects and declares openly that she seeks only to manipulate men in order to attract a rich patron. As Mizoguchi's narrative unfolds, both women become victims of the patriarchal system to which they are subordinate. Umekichi is abruptly deserted by her lover Furusawa (Benkei Shiganoya), despite her abject dedication to his needs. And Omocha fares worse: when she spurns her would-be suitor Kimura (Taizo Fukami) for his wealthy superior Kudo (Eitaro Shindo), she is not only left abandoned but also seriously, and perhaps permanently, maimed by the after-effects of his violent revenge, when he shoves her from a car at high speed.

Shanghai Express also deals with a pair of disenfranchised women, both of whom are forced to trade on their sexual and physical allure in order to survive. Madeleine/Shanghai Lily, played by Dietrich, von Sternberg's iconic star, is introduced to us as a "coaster," an adventuress who travels across China in search of male benefactors. During the train journey that ensues, she shares a room with her oriental counterpart Hui Fei (Anna May Wong), who also has a sordid past. Both women are social outcasts, and both fall victim to the machinations of men. We see them treated callously: Madeleine is repeatedly rejected by Harvey (Clive Brook) and Hui Fei is mauled and eventually raped by Chang (Warner Oland). However, where *Sisters of the Gion* ends bleakly, at a point of despair for the plight of Omocha and Umekichi, *Shanghai Express* is more

hopeful about the fate of its female protagonists. When Hui Fei takes violent revenge upon Chang (reversing the trajectory of Omocha's demise) she is actually rewarded for murdering him. And after Harvey has begged forgiveness and confirmed his devotion to her, Madeleine is eventually reconciled with her suitor, in a romantic union apparently on her terms.

Two pairs of women, victimised, faced with prostitution and social degradation. The thematic common ground that links these films prompts us to consider another compelling point of convergence, or dialogue, between Mizoguchi and von Sternberg, which emerges at the level of their visual style. As we will see, the notion of an exotic aesthetic is important here. David Bordwell has noted the tendency of Japanese cinema from 1925 to 1945 to feature a form of pictorialism: a complex, dynamic visual system that included aperture framing (arranging shots through open windows, doors, etc.), staging in depth and a use of elaborate composition. It is through Mizoguchi's grasp (and mastery) of this stylistic tradition, Bordwell concludes, that we can begin to estimate the achievements of his 1930s career.⁵ Equally, if much less systematically, much of the critical work on von Sternberg has also emphasised the overtness or blatancy of his style. David Thomson, for example, calls him a poet and a fantasist whose films create "a surrealist artifice"; the same premise led Laura Mulvey to make her famous pronouncement that von Sternberg's films display a fetishistic approach to cinema.⁶

Despite the different cultural contexts of Mizoguchi and von Sternberg's careers, there are, nonetheless, a clear set of shared motifs that characterise their bold approach to stylistic design. The most important factor of which, I will argue, is a propensity for the long take. Featuring just 124 shots in its 69 minute running time, *Sisters Of The Gion's* average shot length (ASL) runs to an extraordinary 33.5 seconds. *Shanghai Express*, on the other hand, has 478 shots in 81 minutes of screen duration, giving it an ASL of 10.2 seconds. (Although von Sternberg frequently favours longer takes, this ASL is lowered by a number of rapid-cut montage sequences that periodically propel the narrative.) Within the organisation of this long take style, my analysis will reveal how both Mizoguchi and von Sternberg justify – but also flaunt – the absence of cutting with a virtuoso use of deep space, which often relies on a fluent mobile frame as well as a necessarily rigorous blocking and staging of the actors' movements.

The opening sequence of *Sisters of the Gion* is a quintessential example of Mizoguchi's technique, in which he withholds edits, reveals contiguous spaces with a tracking camera, and makes subtle thematic connections between consecutive events. Under lively music that bridges in from the titles, we open on a diagonal long shot of the interior of a room, empty except for a folding screen. The camera begins to track right, revealing stacks of furniture and household junk; a porter adding to a pile appears in the background-right. The track continues to the right and we now see an auctioneer handling items before a boisterous crowd. And still the camera moves right: past the empty space behind this group, beyond the back of the room that is littered with papers and detritus; until

finally we begin to pan, and the frame accelerates as it moves across images of darkened rooms and attendants tidying crates and broken boxes. One minute and four seconds into this opening shot, the image at last dissolves into a medium long-shot of Furusawa and his assistant contemplating bankruptcy (and this second shot of the film will outlast the first by thirty-four seconds).

Perhaps taken to its limit by the outrageous crane shot that opens Orson Welles' *Touch Of Evil* (1958) – a three-minute-and-twenty-second take which weaves us through a labyrinth of Mexican backstreets – it is common practice for a confident director to begin with a stylistic flourish, one that serves as a declaration of intent. And Mizoguchi here does lay out a paradigm for what is to follow. Across the opening pair of long takes, then, his interest is in preserving a continuous geography, while the uninterrupted activities therein represent, in sequence, a trajectory of ruin. So Mizoguchi moves us left-to-right through the vestiges of a once-private home, towards the profiteering mob that embodies the economic forces that have invaded the disgraced man's life. It is on these terms that we then dissolve to Furusawa, understanding both his loss and the harsh imperatives of money-making that will underline this narrative, both for him and, inevitably, also for the geishas.

After the first dissolve, *Sisters of the Gion's* second long take picks up and develops this motif. In medium-long shot, Furusawa sits with his head bowed in shadow. Next to him but slightly closer to the camera, his junior clerk, Sadakichi, squats at frame right, facing back-left towards his erstwhile superior. The faces of both men remain partially obscured – here and elsewhere, Mizoguchi often denies the viewer access to the faces of his actors. Instead, it is the mobile frame within a single take that amplifies Mizoguchi's representation of shame: the camera arcs right, opening up a new axis of diagonal space through a gap in the wall panels in the background. In medium-long shot, we now see revealed Furusawa's wife, who angrily packs her bags, spitting criticism at her husband as a nurse crosses to her left, cradling a small child. More poignant familial details of Furusawa's fall from grace are shown to us; and to the scrutiny of the clerk are added the disdainful remarks of Furusawa's wife – insult atop injury.

Cut to the third shot of the film, of forty seconds' length, in which Mizoguchi elaborates further the repercussions of economic failure. With the camera framing the doorway, Furusawa's wife gets to her feet, turns, and stalks into the background – now all of Mizoguchi's actors have their backs turned to us. As the couple trade barbs, Furusawa stands, paces to the rear of the second room, grabs his hat, then turns to deliver an impromptu ultimatum – "I can't bear looking at you anymore!" – before exiting frame right. Timed perfectly to coincide with his departure, his wife gestures frantically and lets out a broken sob, while Sadakichi jumps nervously to his feet in the foreground plane, filling the gap at the right edge of the image. As we can see in the course of just these three shots, *Sisters of the Gion* beautifully demonstrates how Mizoguchi derives thematic intensity from the long take.

Using tracks and pans, and the three characters' immaculately-choreographed humiliation, the film alerts us to the three-fold consequences of Furusawa's professional and personal demise.

Working within the context of a different studio system, in North America, von Sternberg also showed a preference for strategically-deployed long takes⁷ – in fact, his films repeatedly call attention to them, as dazzling hallmarks of his ingeniously-crafted style. For throughout his career, let us not forget, von Sternberg remained endlessly ambitious, and, like other high-profile Hollywood filmmakers – figures such as Lubitsch, Wyler, Hitchcock and Welles – he realised that cultivating the impression of directorial flair was a way of individuating his films and a useful means of self-promotion. (A dangerous tactic: asserting your directorial personality in the Hollywood studio era could – and eventually did for von Sternberg and Welles – lead to conflict and unemployment just as easily as plaudits and acclaim.) One famous publicity still, taken in 1934 and reproduced in von Sternberg's scathing autobiography, *Fun In A Chinese Laundry*, neatly encapsulates his arch directorial persona. It shows the Austrian émigré alongside Lubitsch, a fellow European aesthete, on the set of Cecil B. De Mille's *Cleopatra*; and both men seem quite openly unable to contain their mirth at the vulgarity of the filmmaking going on around them.

So once more, then, we return to the concept of an exotic aesthetic, and the structural impact of a long take style for both Mizoguchi, in Japan, and von Sternberg, in Hollywood. For as in the first scenes of *Sisters Of The Gion*, the opening of *Shanghai Express* also showcases an artfully composed sequence shot. More broadly, a stylistic template is again carefully established, within which a mobile frame and extremely dynamic composition will be prominent elements. Von Sternberg's film fades up on the chaos of a Peking railway station, and a trio of seven-second shots that use rapid, right-to-left tracks to emphasise the pace and disorder of the boarding platform. Each time, as the camera moves we see a principal action – a train window being wiped; Hui Fei being carried to her carriage in a sedan – that is partially obscured by passersby in the foreground. From shot to shot, moreover, von Sternberg packs each layer of the frame with a hectic bustle of incidental activities: baggage carriers straining with packages, good-byes being exchanged, engineers inspecting the engine, and so on. More audaciously still, von Sternberg even blurs the distinctions between shots, with slow dissolves and a match on speed of the camera's movement to elide the actual edits themselves.

Mizoguchi's opening shots run longer and are more precisely staged, whereas von Sternberg's, perhaps, strive for sheer kineticism. But just like his Japanese counterpart, von Sternberg saves a long take for the centerpiece of the first scene, to instantiate an important narrative motif. So in shot five of *Shanghai Express* – at one minute and seven seconds, the longest take yet – we cut to the station's office, where the matriarch Mrs. Haggerty (Louise Closser Hale) attempts to buy her ticket to Shanghai. Obviously a fish out of water, she

squints suspiciously at the official, fumbles for her money, then turns to deliver a steely glare at an impatient local who jostles behind her. When she heads to the train itself, the camera tracks left to follow her, revealing the entrance to the crowded platform that we saw previously, and, behind this, the waiting throng. Framed throughout in long shot, we see Mrs. Haggerty enter the mêlée. In terms of visual design, von Sternberg here clearly contrasts the ordered and civilised pretensions embodied by Mrs. Haggerty with the mass of different classes, ethnicities and moralities within the China that *Shanghai Express* depicts. Presented to us here in a single long take, the tensions between the European 'refined' and the Oriental 'exotic' will form the backdrop of von Sternberg's drama.

As the duration of a shot increases, so does the need for precise blocking and staging become more acute. Indeed, a corollary of Mizoguchi and von Sternberg's long take shooting style is their near-constant manipulation of space. Across edits, and as their camera moves, they carefully open up a series of vistas and axes of action in order to sustain aesthetic contrasts within the image. Added to which – like Renoir's decision to build a vast château for *La Règle du jeu* (1939) and Carné's insistence on shooting much of *Le Jour se lève* (1939) in a tiny tenement bedroom – their choice of setting also plays a vital role in the array of options permitted them for their camera set-ups. In *Shanghai Express*, the Express train itself, becoming almost a character in its own right, both facilitates and limits the range of staging strategies that are available to von Sternberg. In fact, the film overall is very much characterised by an emphasis on strong horizontals and shallow planes of action, with people concomitantly framed-within-the-frame by geometric apertures. Just before the train journey begins, for example, Salt (Eugene Palette) and Chang pause to discuss the fortunes of China (and the merits of American jewelry) while hanging out of the train windows, and they are shot from outside, with only their faces and upper torsos visible through the openings in the carriage. Similarly, when the train gets underway, von Sternberg lends extra tension and claustrophobia to the uneasy reunion of ex-lovers Madeleine and Harvey by keeping the actors' upper bodies framed within the windows of the train compartment in which they have unexpectedly met.

In a sense, von Sternberg parallels directors like Bresson and Dreyer here – he deliberately limits his shooting options, and instead develops minute stylistic nuances over the course of the film. So whereas Bresson pared down the performances of his actors to minimalist extremes, and Dreyer was known on occasion to film almost entirely in close-up,⁸ von Sternberg often drastically restricts his action by setting it in very cramped spaces, contingent on tight, lateral axes of staging. Take, for example, a crucial early confrontation in *Shanghai Express*, when Hui Fei and Madeleine are disturbed in their train cabin first by Harvey, and then by Reverend Carmichael (Lawrence Grant). Shot from the interior of the compartment, the image is divided into three: the central door, with a gramophone in the middle foreground, and a

large window to either side. First, Madeleine raises the blind on the left window, opening up the left third of the image plane. She remains in awkward proximity with Harvey in the centre section, while Hui Fei gazes implacably from the right. Next, Madeleine moves across to her right to allow Harvey to exit frame left; then she moves to the centre to play a racy gramophone record. Hui Fei steps into the compartment and goes to the right quadrant before, as a finale, Carmichael appears from off-right to stride across all three sectors in the rearground, tutting disapprovingly as he goes.

Von Sternberg's great skill here – it becomes a kind of game, although one that only maestros can play – is in orchestrating the movements of his actors while keeping them in such obvious confines and not resorting to edits. (His focus again is on the drama of people of different social stations being uncomfortably thrust together.) Again, also, his staging depends crucially on the horizontal planes of the train corridor and the narrow compartment in front of it. A connection with *Sisters Of The Gion* can be established here, for Mizoguchi is equally insistent on blocking his actors within apertures and compartmentalised spaces, as we have already seen in our discussion of the film's opening shots. The long take staging of Mizoguchi, though, by contrast, is crucially linked to dynamic compositions across *diagonal* axes, as well as a remarkable use of off-screen space.⁹

Consider the extraordinary scene from *Sisters Of The Gion* in which Omocha dismisses the hapless Furusawa as being unworthy of her sister's devotion. In a single take of two minutes and ten seconds, Mizoguchi first establishes the deep space of Umekichi's house. Shooting diagonally across the sisters' living room, he opens up a plane of action from foreground-centre to the door at the very rear-left of the image. First, Omocha enters and is joined by Furusawa in long shot at the middle of the room. They sit at her table, dine and drink *sake*, which she serves. (The use of the table, as always in the 360-degree spaces of Mizoguchi, functions as a focal point for us to retain our bearings.) Dressed in a drab, matte robe, he is barely visible, whereas she glimmers in a glossy, silvery-white kimono that reflects the dim lighting. Smiling shyly, Omocha gently broaches the fact that he has become a financial burden to Umekichi, and concludes that: "I think you've guessed what I'm going to say." Before he can protest or even respond, she scuttles out of frame right while he stands and moves uncertainly towards her. She then reappears with his coat proffered before her, moving him into the background towards the rear left of the shot and the open front door. Allowing Furusawa only a brief pause for a final snack from the table, Omocha quickly ushers him out into the night.

Here and elsewhere, Mizoguchi's long take staging is oriented to a diagonal axis of deep space, and he will refrain from cutting even when his actors are performing crucial actions either off-screen or with their backs to the camera. This same distinctive technique appears in the scene where Omocha is visited by Kudo (Eitaro Shindo), whom she charms into becoming her latest patron. Their encounter (which is

actually the crux of *Sisters of the Gion's* narrative, pivoting the drama and precipitating Omocha's eventual downfall) develops without any recourse to editing – or indeed closer views of the actors at all – but instead from the way Mizoguchi stages the action within one uninterrupted take. In a high-angle medium-long shot, we see Omocha first settle Kudo down on the platform that is adjacent to her house's front door. Reluctantly, while blustering, he accepts her invitation, then is lured further and further into her house: across the threshold and into the living room, then next to the table upon which she obligingly serves him *sake*. Finally he settles down to dine with her, and then when she comes to sit beside him, their alliance is made. Not only is the choreography of the actors precise, by necessity, but it is also perfectly attuned to the narrative trajectory: the more Kudo ventures into Omocha's lair, the more, quite literally, he is beguiled.

In both these two scenes, notice that Mizoguchi allows Omocha, the catalyst of the action, to leave the frame completely, without any use of cutaway shots. In fact, both her exits are timed to occur at the exact moment when her schemes gather momentum: in the former, when she goes to retrieve Furusawa's jacket; and in the latter, when she moves off-screen to prepare *sake* for her unwitting benefactor-to-be. Both times, it is only the lilting sound of Isuzu Yamada's voice¹⁰ that preserves Omocha's role in the diegesis. Obviously, these pivotal moments underline the role that off-screen space plays in Mizoguchi's blocking of actors. They also indicate the ways in which the focal point of his compositions often becomes much looser and more flexible than within the classical Hollywood tradition.

Mizoguchi will occasionally take this use of off-screen space to flagrant extremes, opening up and extending his action well outside the camera's range. Early in *Sisters Of The Gion*, for example, another long take (this one lasts a minute and thirty seven seconds) shows the two women strolling through the town beside a temple, discussing their different beliefs. Again, their movement is staged diagonally, in a three-quarter long shot that tracks left-to-right to keep the characters centred. As they walk, Umekichi reacts to Omocha's cynicism: "We can't get along in his world talking like you do!" They make a perfunctory bow to a statue, then turn and pivot left, as Umekichi crosses to the other side of her younger sister. Omocha now offers some spirited rejoinders: "But when have they [i.e. men] ever treated us like human beings, even once?" Having developed such a measured staging logic, Mizoguchi then abruptly changes course. First, as the camera's tracking movement stops, Umekichi simply wanders out of shot front-left, while Omocha continues to direct her retorts off-camera after her. Next, immediately after Umekichi's exit, an (unseen) acquaintance addresses Omocha from off-frame right, and she now turns to begin another conversation, this time towards off-frame left.

Sustaining his long takes by rejecting insert shots or cutaways, Mizoguchi's style relies substantially on off-screen space. Comparing this to *Shanghai Express*, we can begin to chart out the limits of each director's long take and deep

staging maneuvers. A good case in point takes place near the climax of von Sternberg's film. After Harvey has been imprisoned by guerilla forces, Reverend Carmichael berates Madeleine for her wanton behaviour and urges her to pray for his release. She complies, and von Sternberg sets in motion the film's most elaborate moment of deep staging. Shot in a single take, it starts with Madeleine and Carmichael in plan-américain, standing in a lean-to in front of the halted Express. She tosses her coat over her shoulder and moves right, crossing in front of and then circling back behind the Reverend, before exiting through the entranceway visible at midground right. Then, with the camera panning to follow her, Madeleine passes from left to right (we glimpse her briefly through the building's windows) and finally boards the train. Next – and here for the first time in the film von Sternberg uses a *third* plane of horizontal action – we see her walking still further to the left inside the train, and eventually entering her compartment. Now in extreme long shot, she turns out the overhead light and clasps her hands in prayer.

Now as we have seen already, Mizoguchi would undoubtedly have allowed this scene to continue within a single take. Although Madeleine's retreat into the train leaves her only barely visible to us, recall that Mizoguchi does not oblige his actors to remain close to the camera or even in the frame itself while vital narrative events are unfolding. (An amazing parallel case of Mizoguchi's bold but elliptical style occurs in *The Life of Oharu*, when a glint of light, which flashes for a fraction of a second on a knife in the bottom-right corner of the frame, is our only clue that Oharu means to kill herself.) By contrast, however, von Sternberg's scene climaxes with a series of cut-ins that emphasise the critical actions of the sequence: first to a medium close-up of Carmichael studying Madeleine intently; next a tighter shot of her in soft-focus prayer; and then a repetition of both images in still-closer framings. What we might conclude is that although von Sternberg does favour the long take for dramatic effects or motifs, his style, unlike Mizoguchi's, does not preclude a use of faster-cut close-ups in order to highlight – or reiterate textually – a narrative pay-off, such as Madeleine's heartfelt act of contrition.

We do need though to contextualise von Sternberg's use of close-ups to the classical Hollywood tradition in which he worked. For the American studio system, notoriously, maintained only a limited tolerance for the full extent of what I have been calling thus far an exotic aesthetic. Already by the early 1930s, indeed, von Sternberg's extravagances on-set and on-screen were causing tensions with Paramount, and his control over successive projects grew fraught. Professional relations did not turn sour as quickly as Welles' debacle at neighbouring RKO a few years later, but the stylistic ostentatiousness of both directors was increasingly resisted by their employers.¹¹ As V. F. Perkins has pointed out in the case of Welles' butchered *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), moreover, any post-production studio interference tended to manifest itself most ruinously with the interruption, or curtailment, of long takes, through the insertion of gaudy close-ups, imposed so as to remove 'ambiguity' from the

action.¹²

Speaking more generally, the classical Hollywood style itself – von Sternberg's insistent and defiant flourishes notwithstanding – did tend to prize absolute clarity. The Japanese filmmaking system, on the other hand, permitted Mizoguchi, once he had established himself as a director of flair, a greater autonomy and more room for stylisation, even a certain amount of obfuscation by Western standards. Take the case of transition shots. Von Sternberg's narrative relies heavily on images of the train's noisy passage as punctuation devices: periodically, there are close-ups of screeching wheels, clanging pistons and hissing steam. To certain Japanese directors, this kind of structuring imagery was redundant and avoidable. Early in his career, Ozu, Mizoguchi's contemporary, famously devised what Burch later called his 'pillow shots,' which are visual interludes, showing chimney stacks, drying laundry or intermediary landscapes, that neither demarcate geography nor clarify a temporal ellipsis.¹³ Mizoguchi's response was even more extreme: in *Sisters of the Gion* (and many of his other films) he simply eliminated transitions altogether. The film requires hard work simply to detect the passing of diegetic time, but Mizoguchi oftentimes deliberately blurs the divisions between non-consecutive moments. In several instances, in fact, there are question-and-answer conversations between Omocha and Umekichi that apparently continue across edits, on different days.¹⁴

If von Sternberg's film prefers clarity as a point of reference, it is frequently in terms of highlighting the human face and preserving the frontality of its actors. Another point to remember here – a less onerous obligation for *Shanghai Express* as a product of the classical Hollywood system – was the film's need to showcase Dietrich, its glamorous leading lady. From this perspective, von Sternberg's directorial style, unlike Mizoguchi's, is much more attuned to the privileged presentation of his stars. Many critics have noted the extent to which von Sternberg's films return almost endlessly to studies of Dietrich's face, in contemplation, repose, or stasis. Throughout *The Blue Angel* (1930), *Morocco*, *The Scarlet Empress* and *Shanghai Express*, these star close-ups are often masterpieces of *mise-en-scène* in and of themselves. We see Dietrich's features radiant with make-up, shrouded in diffusion smoke, filmed through softening gauze on the camera lens, and bathed in hazy fill lighting. James Naremore has described sections of the von Sternberg-Dietrich dramas as consisting of nothing more than a series of posed attitudes, and "static, composed 'cut-out' pictures."¹⁵ Unsurprisingly then, the device von Sternberg favours for capturing emotional highpoints is an artfully-composed set of facial close-ups. The scene of Madeleine and Harvey's first encounter in *Shanghai Express* is typical stylistically: it develops the characters' simmering attraction with shot/reverse-shots, then cuts faster and more tightly on each actor's face as the intensity of dialogue increases.

By contrast, we have already seen how *Sisters of the Gion* features a motif of actors turning their backs to the camera in order to represent social and personal shame. The film also has

frequent recourse to framing characters in distant long shot or else having them move off-screen completely. Mizoguchi uses closer views only rarely, but it is nevertheless instructive, in conclusion, to consider their appearance as another point of stylistic and thematic confluence between our two directors. *Sisters of the Gion* features medium close-ups less than a dozen times, yet they function as a distinct set of stylistic cues to alert us to moments that dictate the fate of the female protagonists. As such, they become much more frequent towards the film's climax, appearing in scenes that propel the narrative towards Omocho's downfall. During her hospitalisation, after a rejected suitor has taken violent revenge upon her, Mizoguchi, like von Sternberg, raises the visual stakes by consistently framing his camera more tightly on the facial reactions of his actors. Lingering in proximity to the anguished expressions of Omocho and Umekichi, in particular, underlines the emotional trauma of the uncompromising final scene. Confined to a hospital bed now, totally incapacitated, Omocho delivers her final speech as Mizoguchi tracks slowly into the closest shot of her in the entire film. This style lends a sharply didactic emphasis to her last lines, "Why are we made to suffer so?...I wish there weren't any geisha! I wish they never existed!"

Rather than treat them as directors utterly separated by cultural distance, this essay has discussed Mizoguchi and von Sternberg by way of their stylistic echoes, resonances and parallels. As we have seen in *Sisters Of The Gion* and *Shanghai Express*, there is a similarly complex and meticulous handling of staging, and an especially artful use of the long take. The notion of an exotic aesthetic, then, becomes especially illuminating to our understanding of Mizoguchi and von Sternberg as stylistically inventive directors; it provides an underlying unity to the range of filmmaking strategies adopted, with variations, by these two iconoclastic figures. By consequence, charting the relationship between Mizoguchi and von Sternberg's style also helps us broaden our understanding of the possibilities and limits of deep staged, long take cinema as a distinct stylistic tradition that exists, irrespective of the directors' national origins. A comparison of two such apparently disparate directors, then, can ultimately cast new light on the accomplishments of both.

Notes

¹ My thanks to David Bordwell for his insightful and detailed comments on an earlier version of this paper.

² Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style In Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); Donald Richie, *Ozu* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974); Noël Burch's *To The Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema*, translated by Annette Michelson, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

³ See Wood's *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) p. 232.

⁴ Wood's excellent essay, 'Kenji Mizoguchi: Overview and *Sisters Of The Gion*,' in James Quandt (ed.) *Mizoguchi The Master* (Ontario: Cinematheque Ontario, 1996) p. 8-9, raises

a number of related points here.

⁵ David Bordwell, 'Visual Style in Japanese Cinema, 1925-1945' in *Film History* Vol. 7, 1995.

⁶ David Thomson, *A Biographical Dictionary Of Film* (Revised Edition. London: André Deutsch, 1995) p. 779; Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' in *Screen* 16:3, 1975. Mulvey also repeats the oft-cited comment made by von Sternberg that he would have preferred his films to be projected upside-down, so as to foreground visual style at the expense of plot.

⁷ See Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985) p. 62, for a discussion of von Sternberg's credentials as a long take director. Although its 10.2 second ASL puts it only slightly above the classical Hollywood norm for the early 1930s, *Shanghai Express* does, as I mentioned earlier, alternate much longer takes with faster-cut sequences, such as shot-reverse shot conversations or montage sequences. This strategy is also evident in many other von Sternberg films, such as *Morocco* and *The Devil is a Woman* (1935) in particular.

⁸ Films to compare here are Bresson's *Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé* (1956) – one of the director's many such exercises in restrained performance – and Dreyer's famous study of faces in close framings, *La Passion de Jeanne D'Arc* (1928).

⁹ See also Wood's indispensable essay 'Mizoguchi: The Ghost Princess and The Seaweed Gatherer,' in *Film Comment* 9: 2, March/April 1973; reprinted in Wood, *Personal Views: Explorations in Film* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1976).

¹⁰ Part of the achievement of Isuzu Yamada's performance is realised simply at the level of her vocal range. When she speaks to her sister, her cynicism is projected by harsher, deliberately staccato enunciation; to her conquests, her delivery is higher-pitched, a warbling and coquettish flutter.

¹¹ Von Sternberg was eventually fired from Paramount by his erstwhile colleague Lubitsch. He became a director for hire and never regained the prestige of his late 1920s and early 1930s career.

¹² See Perkins' enlightening *The Magnificent Ambersons* (London: BFI, 1999). The shot discussed in detail (p. 59-63) is the famous long take of Lucy (Anne Baxter) and George's (Tim Holt) farewell stroll along a boardwalk, into which RKO abruptly edited a close-up of Baxter's tear-stained face, drastically undermining the subtleties of the preceding conversation.

¹³ Burch's essay 'Approaching Japanese Cinema,' in Stephen Heath and Patricia Mellencamp (eds.) *Cinema and Language* (Los Angeles: AFI, 1983) along with much of his published work on Ozu, elaborates on this concept.

¹⁴ Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu Monogatari* (1953) provides another demonstration of this process. Near the finale of Genjuro's encounter with the ghostly Lady Wakasa, Mizoguchi dissolves from shot to shot but leaves the dialogue between the characters apparently continuous.

¹⁵ James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) p. 140.