André Scala, philosopher and author of a book on the Dutch painter Pieter de Hooch, compares, in a surprising reading, the films of Naruse Mikio (1905-1969) with a few fundamental parameters of the seventeenth century Dutch school of painting[1].

ANDRE SCALA

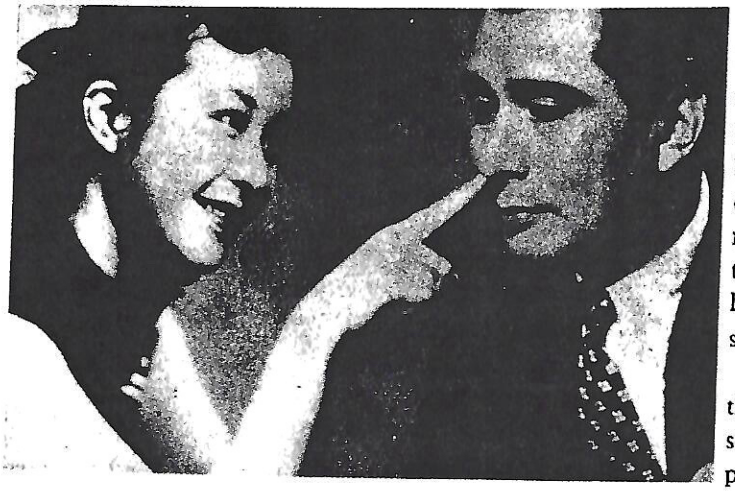
NARUSE AND SOME DUTCH PAINTERS

Along with directors like Ozu Yasujiro and Gosho Heinosuke, Naruse Mikio[2] is known for his profound insights into vicissitudes in the life of the average person, the *shomin*. Naruse - orphaned at the age of fifteen and largely self-educated - knew many of the hardships his cinematic protagonists later endured (a quality Phillip Lopate refers to as "earned pessimism"[3]). His career stretched from the latter half of the silent film era to the 60s, an era when the 'restructuring' of postwar Japanese society was being re-examined.

Naruse's cinematic style is marked by sudden transitions from one condition to another (as in life itself). Another great director, Kurosawa Akira, referred to this masterful editing style as "a deep river with a quiet surface disguising a fast-raging current underneath"[4].

Dutch genre painting, at its peak from approximately 1610 to 1670, emphasised realistic, everyday events, but it cast them in a remarkable light. To these artists, the art of painting nature and everyday life could be viewed as imbued with moral values and a disguised symbolism.[5] The laughing figures captured by Frans Hals (1580-1666), the increasingly philosophical portraits of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-69), the delicate colour and light of the paintings of kitchen maids and women lost in the reading of a letter by the 'Sphinx of Delft' Johannes Vermeer (1632-75) or by Pieter de Hooch (1629-after 1684), all mark the anti-Mannerist style of this period.

At the end of *Yama no Oto* (Sound of the Mountain, 1954), old Shingo and his daughter-in-law Kikuko are walking in the garden of the capital. Shingo is surprised that everything seems so vast. Kikuko replies that it is because of the vista, the perspective: "a well-thought-out vista makes things appear larger," she recites in the manner of an interior monologue, like a lesson she has learned. This singular conversation is, by its intention and its composition, emblematic of Naruse's art. It expresses a tension between the illusory fullness of the visual perceptions and the inner concentration emphasised by the dialogue. The without and the within have no common boundary; they are completely separate. Seeing and speaking do not take place in the same space. Naruse borrows this dialogue from the novel by Kawabata Yasunari from which the film is adapted, but he changes the wording somewhat: "It is a result of perspective; from here, the park appears deeper still.... It is optical effect. The edge of the grass and the inner paths all outline the gentle curves."



Meshi (Repast, 1951)

In the book, the perspective is said to produce an effect of depth by the use of curves in the road; in the film we discover a rectangular alley and are at a loss to perceive the 'vista' that enlarged objects and exalted the protagonists. The perspective which gives the impression of a greater depth, and thus of the greatest possible movement, is different from the one that makes things larger than they are. Objects usurp space and, by this usurpation, exaggerate space in all directions. The vista that Naruse has chosen is not the dimension of the possible; it is without a future.

There are a number of reasons to evoke the connections between Holland and the Orient. And the relations between these two worlds, whose beginning coincides with that of the Golden Age of Dutch painting in the seventeenth century, are formed by complex and reciprocal influences which lead to numerous hypotheses in the aesthetic realm: what influence, for example, could the discovery of Chinese painting have had on the brief eccentricity of Dutch art? Claudel, who was very familiar with these two worlds, would sometimes suggest connections between "these suites of rooms, these alleys and corridors of Pieter de Hooch and Vermeer, this mirror like a secret eye where something exterior and excluded is painted," and "the countryside in superposed stages or zones representing the successive states of exploitation by the eye and by the mind (*la pensée*) in more and more simplified lines and tints" of Chinese painting.[6] According to Claudel, the Dutch and the Oriental share the same "philosophy of perspective" - not the one which translates distant connections and gives illusions of depth (a perspective which the Dutch nevertheless knew well and which the Japanese would have waited for until the goodwill of the eighteenth-century Portuguese missionaries).[7] No, not that perspective, but the other one or its other side, the one which produces a movement (that the spectator will have to complete), a movement about which F Cheng said: "The movement of distance in space is in fact a circular movement which returns and which, by the inversion of the perspective and the look, transforms in the end the relationship of the subject-object."[8]

Is it via the slant of Chinese painting that a particular Japanese film finds some resemblance to Dutch genre painting? Perhaps. The question deserves to be investigated thoroughly if only because of the complex connections between Chinese painting and Japanese cinema.[9] Nevertheless, it would appear that an aspect of Japanese cinema, the *shomingeki*, offers a likemindedness of themes, motifs and formal problems with seventeenth-century Dutch painting. From a necessarily abstract point of view, this likemindedness considers that genre painting and films work in their own way among three elements: the everyday, the relationship between the looks and the acts of the protagonists, and composition.

Dutch genre painting (of Hooch, Vermeer, Ter Boch, etc.) has as its subject the life of the Dutch, their acts and their everyday activities. In each case

Okasan (Mother, 1952)

the subject is not adequate enough to make a pictorial problem out of the everyday. The composition, therefore, must allow one to distinguish a servant who holds a broom from a Judith who brandishes a sword; otherwise the servant could well be an allegory of cleanliness. If the problem presented itself in this way to the Dutch, it was because the representation of the personages was in general dominated by three great forms: the portrait, (hi)story[10] and allegory. Three aspects challenge the essence of genre painting: the ordinary nature of the moment of the scene, the atmosphere of familiarity, and the anonymity of the figures. Thus, it is a particular aspect of time that has to be presented. But the presentation of a moment in time could not be direct. Motifs are there to affirm it and, more particularly and without any paradox, space will engage it - space and the relationship of the figures to space.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of the composition of the quotidian was brought out by Alois Riegl[11] who speaks of the opposition between (hi)story painting and genre painting, and translates it into an opposition between painting of the will[12] and painting of attention. No doubt Riegl borrows the terms of this opposition from Schopenhauer's definition of (hi)story painting: "the adequate objectification of the will by means of a purely spatial phenomenon...." (Hi)story painting, in that it is action painting, subordinates to the characters the space which surrounds them. All the elements of space converge to become the favourable or unfavourable place of an act: space is the accomplice or the enemy. And, in every figure, there is something which resists the expanse or produces with it a shock, willpower. Will (desire) finds in space an obstacle, and the representation of a voluntary action or an act determined by a transcendental will, as (hi)story painting often is, isolates the figure from what surrounds it. Or in what amounts to the same thing - space clings to the ends of the figure presented not with what surrounds it, but for or against that which surrounds it. If several forms are arranged in the painting, all of them are arranged by the principle of action, and the space between them is thus subordinated. It is exactly this intermediate space that Riegl sees liberated. How indeed to give unity to a composition with several characters in it when action is absent? Riegl responds by entrusting all the figures with an attention that surrounds them in such a way that all the parts of the composition are perceived in all directions by the figures. Thus the space between them is freed of all possible or projected action; space becomes truly intermediary. It is a matter here of optical space to the degree that the figures have an optical rapport with it. If it is difficult to know what the figures are looking at, they at least hold under their eyes the space that connects and surrounds them.

In genre paintings, however, the figures do not place themselves but act (a lace worker, a mother who delouses her child ...). And when one wonders what the figures are doing, one knows that the final word is not in the task to which they devote themselves, because, in fact, they do nothing other than but see. All that is painted has, in a certain way, already been seen by the figures. Everything and much more, for the look of these figures, as in "The Lace Maker" for example, does not scrutinise the act but makes an angle with it, stays away from it or is tangential to it. From this comes this impression of absorption and exteriority which express recurring themes of absent looks and sightings in the work of Hooch or Vermeer. To link the presentation of the quotidian of a given moment, of the momentary with an optical situation of figures, was the highpoint of Dutch genre painting.

Tsuma yo Bara no Yo ni (Wife! Be Like a Rose!, 1935)

In its own way, cinema too has contained an opposition similar to that which has distinguished (hi)story painting from genre painting, both by its themes and also by its form. Nowhere, indeed, and particularly in Japan, has one been able to make post-World War II cinema like the cinema before the war, apart from such precursors as Ozu. When Deleuze

analyses this change which he calls 'crisis of the action-image', he asserts the connection between the currently quotidian and ordinary frames, and the situations which become purely optical where the protagonists are no longer actors but rather spectators of what they do.

In the films of Naruse from this postwar period the word 'world' is one the protagonists encounter most often. It changes faster than the blinking of an eye (*Meshi*/Repast, 1951); men are not strong enough for it (*Repast*); it is unchangeable (the resigned mother who does not even change her kimono in *Inazuma*/Lightning, 1952). The point is not that the world changes. It is to understand what is new and, above all, who can live in this new world. This is a difference with Ozu. The new world is not necessarily the world of youth (it is the brother, the old brother, small agriculturist, who endures the new world in *Iwashigumo*/Summer Clouds, 1958). In what ways does this new world change? One does not know too much but what one knows is that work, love, family, the earth are no longer the same. A widow would like to give her lover back to the legitimate woman, but who will give her back her husband (*Sound of the Mountain*)? An old man dreams of marrying his son to the neighbour's daughter to join their land; his son prefers to leave for the city; what then will become of the land (*Summer Clouds*)? The war changed everything, but so did the law: agrarian law, the law on familial responsibility, legal changes destined to make Japan enter the capitalistic world under the pressure of the conquerors. The new laws, and law in general, is not perceived by Naruse as an interdiction, but rather as a positive, principle of action. The question he always poses is: what effect is a new law going to have on people's lives? Naruse has often been reproached for not having made political films, of having (like the characters in *Ukigumo*/Floating Clouds, 1955) looked on as the streams of workers singing the Internationale passed by. But his characters exist in the daily detail of servitude, often effaced under the events of ordinary life. It is not that the world passes them by; rather, its changes pass through them, wrecking, in the process, the constitutive principles of their identity.

With Naruse, daily life does not take the form of a nostalgia for a lost world, and nature is not even there any longer to ensure a sense of permanence or consolation. Nature is sometimes the occasion of an exaltation (the walk along the beach in *Summer Clouds*), but most of the time, as the titles indicate (*Summer Clouds*, *Floating Clouds*, *Lightning*, *Sound of the Mountain*), it is the receptacle of forms, the reservoir of phenomena and of metamorphoses that occur too early or too late in the lives of the characters.

When Naruse declares: "Nothing much happens in my films and they end without concluding, like life," or when he admits his tenderness for the men who attempt to live in the middle of an infinite space and time, the question is to know how he expresses these declarations in terms of form. In *Floating Clouds*, there are strange flashbacks recalling the war in Indochina and the budding love of the two heroes. These flashbacks[13] are distinct from the present narrative not only by a whiter light but also by a game of looks which distinguishes the postures. In the flashbacks, the characters exchange honest and enveloping looks; in the present narrative, they can no longer look at each other and speak at the same time - they appear absorbed, cut off from one another and from themselves, distracted or pensive. Their eyes are lowered, fixed, or lost in empty space; the looks are neither exchanged nor connected (the double theme of the false links of the look and the absence of shot/reverse shot), the profiles to which one speaks are always lost. Walks have a somnambulant quality which is translated by oblique-angle travelling shots that begin only after the characters start moving, or again by travelling shots where the crossed crowd emerges from the shade as if its visibility were possible only from a certain distance, as if the shade was not just the effect of backlighting but the night in the world which envelops the protagonist. The world can neither be my will nor my representation. And yet cinema still appears capable of doing what the characters are no longer able to do; that is probably why Naruse's heroes like going to the movies so much, even if the movies are sad.

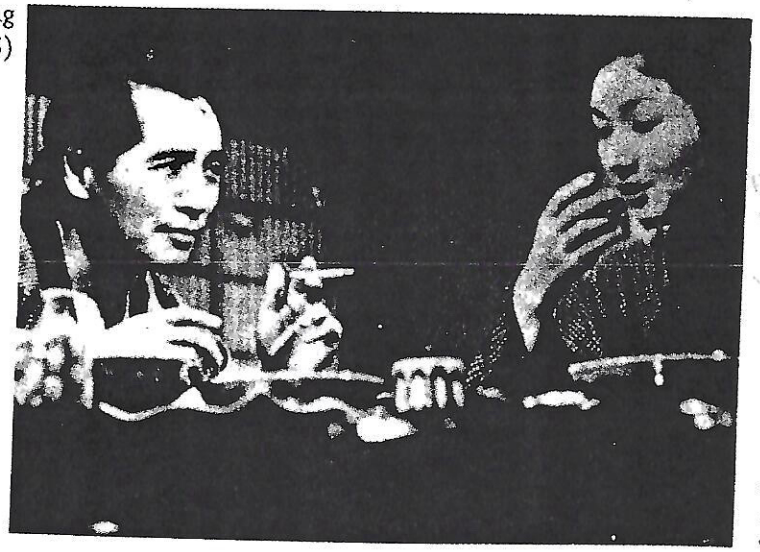
The ordinary becomes problematic, subject to question. (The piercing question of *Repast* is: Do I look happy or unhappy? What is happiness? Happiness is no longer something to attain but the object of an uncertainty, of a suspense, of a belief which has the form of suspense, like this 'suspense economy' to which the exasperating niece aspires in her love of poor men and that she will exchange for the suspenseful love of a rich man who finds women too complicated.) Values disappear (parents cannot be indefinitely responsible for the marital unhappiness of their children). It is not that there are no more values, nor that happiness is no longer possible; rather, it is that one no longer knows which signs to recognise it by. It is a crisis of the criteria of recognition. Existence itself becomes oblique, and the angle of the camera becomes oblique with it. The

ordinary is to be conquered: the quotidian is not that which escapes but what has escaped - not the insignificant but what is not yet insignificant. One can no longer even say "It's nice outside," nor simply look at a sunflower. The world passes through the ordinary and the characters are seeking a new ordinary. From this arises their pensive, absent, abstract look which is not the image of a consciousness but the abolition of the very frontier, and of the connection, of the interior and the exterior, of the subject and the object. That is why the theme of sneezing and nose-bleeds returns so often - the nose is the exterior inserted into our interiority.

If on the one hand the quotidian offers us the world under the mode of the look, the world on the other hand deprives the quotidian of its ordinary and commonplace insignificance. The world changes and this change affects the quotidian in a way that strips it of its form and content. Therein lies the tragic nature of Naruse's characters, their "eternal nullity"[14] as Laforgue would say, and nothing, neither pillow shots nor still life will, like with Ozu's films, restore what the world has stolen. What remains are the shreds of existence, disconnected from one other, the egotism of men, the attempts of women, the spaces between them so free that they cannot traverse them ... not even with a look. The kisses themselves have already been exchanged and the extraordinary interior monologue of *Repast* uttered by the woman while her husband sleeps in the background gives to the sound a power of disconnected spaces. "Life is filth, but you are my whole life" is the cry of Naruse's characters.

In these disconnected, syncopated spaces ... the surface and breadth conjure up an all too-optimistic depth, shape of a belief, or of a perspective illusion that does not take place; the looks of characters have always gone beyond what they were directed at; they undergo the unnoticed part of the quotidian. Thus, the infinite, when it is earned, is earned by amplification, repetition or intensification of the quotidian, like at the end of *Summer Clouds*. It follows a process that one finds at the end of *The Earth Trembles*, where the woman in the rice-field pushing her harvesting machine will ceaselessly separate rows of paddy that the eye unites with the horizon.

Ukigumo (Floating Clouds, 1955)



NOTES

1. This article first appeared in *Cahiers du Cinéma* 466 (April 1993), pp. 52-55.

André Scala wrote *Pieter de Hooch* (Paris: Editions Seguier, 1991/and served as editor and translator of *Traite de la reforme de l'entendement* by Benedictus de Spinoza (Paris: Presses pocket, 1990).

2. Japanese names are given in their traditional manner, with surnames first.

Among Naruse's better known films are *Tsuma yo bara no yo ni* (Wife! Be Like a Rose!, 1935), *Okasan* (Mother, 1952), *Ukigumo* (Floating Clouds, 1955, based on a short story by Hayashi Fumiko), *Onna ga kaidan o agaru toki* (When a Woman Ascends the Stairs, 1960), and *Yama no oto* (Sound of the Mountain, 1954, based on a novel by Yasunari Kawabata).

3. Phillip Lopate, "A Taste for Naruse", *Film Quarterly* XXXIX: 4 (Summer 1986), pp. 11-21.

4. Ibid., p. 12.

5. Not only was the subject matter democratised during this period, so was the distribution of paintings in the Netherlands. As an independent Protestant country, the Netherlands encouraged private ownership of art, rather than a monopoly held in the church. Middle-class shopowners were likely to own a fine painting. This democratisation of ownership contributed to the new focus on the commonplace as fit subject for paintings by great masters.

6. Claudel, *La peinture Hollandaise*. Paris: Gallimard, 1967.

7. Noël Burch, *To the Distant Observer : Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema*. Paris : Gallimard, 1982: p. 97.

8. F Cheng, *Vide et plein*. Paris: Point Seuil, 1991: p. 105.

9. Noël Burch analysed these often conflicting connections (op. cit.). For the connections between Chinese painting and Mizoguchi, see G Deleuze, *L'image-mouvement*. Paris: Minuit, 1983: pp. 253-263.

10. *Histoire* in French is both 'history' and 'story'.

11. A Riegl, *Das Hollandische Gruppenportrait*. Vienna, 1902.

12. *Volonté* is translated as 'will, willpower' or fig. 'pleasure or desire'.

13. Douchet analysed these flashbacks in *Trafic* no. 2.

14. *Eternullité* is a word made up of the words *éternel* and *nullité*.

Translated from the original French and with an introduction by Michèle LeGault and Linda C Ehrlich