



**UNIVERSITY OF
ILLINOIS PRESS**



**UNIVERSITY
FILM & VIDEO
ASSOCIATION**

To the Disengaged Observer: A Reply to Peter Lehman

Author(s): Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell

Source: *Journal of Film and Video*, Winter 1988, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Winter 1988), pp. 63-66

Published by: University of Illinois Press on behalf of the University Film & Video Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20687810>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

University of Illinois Press and University Film & Video Association are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Film and Video*

To the Disengaged Observer: A Reply to Peter Lehman

Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell

There are so many distortions, muddles, and misrepresentations in Peter Lehman's recent critique of our work on Japanese cinema that it would require at least as long as his original, "The Mysterious Orient, the Crystal Clear Orient, the Non-Existent Orient: Dilemmas of Western Scholars of Japanese Film," (in *JFV* 39.1) to point out all of them. Such an exercise would, however, not be of interest to us or the readers of the *Journal of Film and Video*. Yet, as Lehman's critique is quite misleading on certain central points, we feel obliged to address what we see as his essay's most glaring problems.

Lehman's principal object of attack is an essay we wrote, "Space and Narrative in the Films of Ozu," in the summer of 1975 and which was published in *Screen* a year later. He also has things to say about an essay by Bordwell written in 1978 and published in 1979, "Our Dream-Cinema: Western Historiography and the Japanese Film." We shall try to show that he thoroughly misreads them, but here it is worth noting, first, that he never refers to Thompson's essay, "Notes on the Spatial System of Ozu's Early Films," published in *Wide Angle* in 1977, when Lehman was editor of that journal, even though it contains material relevant to his argument. Secondly, it is easy to forget that in the mid-seventies works by Donald Richie and Paul Schrader were virtually the only ones a westerner could read about Ozu. Noel Burch's *To the Distant Observer* was not published until 1979, and Sato's work was almost completely untranslated.

Recalling this historical context already eliminates some of the pseudo-issues Lehman raises. For example, he chides our

article for having "little interest" in the work of Tadao Sato. We are actually very interested in Sato's work, a fact evidenced by the many references to his writings in Bordwell's forthcoming book, *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* and Thompson's forthcoming study, "Late Spring and Ozu's Unreasonable Style," in *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*. Sato's writings have only become available in translation since we wrote our 1976 article. Lehman also expresses surprise that we did not refer to the concept of "Orientalism" in our 1976 article; but of course, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, from which Lehman apparently himself picked up the term, was not published until 1978. Similarly, he seeks to show that we criticize Richie and Schrader for being "mired in Orientalism." But if we never use the concept, we could not criticize others in its name. In fact we criticize them from a straightforward "Western" perspective: that their critical method, being excessively committed to thematic meaning, does not account for the stylistic data our research reveals. This critique cannot, by and large, be leveled against Lehman, since he prefers to discuss none of Ozu's films and hence will not confront our arguments on the grounds of evidence. (True, a footnote mentions *Floating Weeds*, but it errs in claiming that it lacks the "spatial and editing complexity" we attribute to Ozu. In fact, our article draws several examples from the film.)

We do not invoke this historical context apologetically, since we stand by virtually everything we argued in the 1976 article and in Thompson's 1977 sequel: about the particular spatial devices and systems Ozu uses, about the generally non-causal mo-

tivation of them, about the degree of playfulness and stylistic foregrounding at work in them. Subsequent research and analysis have confirmed our belief that Ozu is unique among not only Western but also Japanese directors in his stylistic systems and principles. Nowhere does Lehman offer evidence against these conclusions. Instead, in the guise of surveying different approaches to Japanese films, he simply juxtaposes other people's opinions with our conclusions.

For instance, Lehman reproduces Joseph Anderson's claim (originally made in an interview with Lehman) that Ozu's style is not unique and that indeed other Shochiku directors, such as Shimazu, employ it. Anderson cites no films. Lehman cites no films. Our reply can thus be simple. We ask Lehman to show how Shimazu's stylistic devices and systems resemble Ozu's. We are confident that the Shimazu films we have seen (*Our Neighbor*, *Miss Yae*, *Okoto and Sasuke*, *A Brother and His Younger Sister*, and *Fighting Fish*) will back up our claims that Ozu's style is idiosyncratic.

Lehman also chastises us for too readily inserting Ozu into the framework of Western film history. Yet he offers no evidence to back up his assumption that Western cinema is not pertinent to Ozu. Perhaps this is the reason he ignores Thompson's 1977 article. This offers evidence that Ozu was aware of Hollywood cinema's stylistic devices and deliberately swerved from them. Lehman instead cites Willemen's claim that Ozu is irrelevant to Western modes. Again, we invite Lehman to produce evidence that would back up Willemen's contention.

Lehman's chief strategy should be apparent: citation of authority. Said, Anderson, Willemen, Oshima, Sato—all are simply juggled together, used to raise the possibilities of other readings. To write this article, Lehman would not need to have

ever seen a Japanese film. It certainly makes research simple to ask Anderson or Oshima what to think about Japanese cinema; but without some grappling with evidence and some sense of what one's critical questions are, that research will inevitably smack of dilettantism and pastiche. More specific to this case, it is certainly odd to criticize "Orientalism" for investing authority in privileged Westerners who know the East, and then cite as irrefutable sources Anderson and Willemen.

Lehman declares that our 1976 article's use of the term "modernism" to characterize Ozu was too ethnocentric in fitting Ozu into a pantheon of directors like Tati and Bresson. He claims that the Japanese themselves regard Ozu as a traditionalist. We would make two points here. First, Ozu was not always regarded as a "traditionalist." Bordwell's book shows that this image of his work emerged only in the forties and especially after World War II, in a broader context of a particular ideology of "Japaneseness." Secondly, in the 1979 article, Bordwell acknowledged that some of Willemen's criticisms of the 1976 article were justified: "A split between 'classicism' (Hollywood) and 'modernism' seems much too absolute. I also think that the Formalist work has been too ahistorical (that is, not Formalist enough). . . . The term 'modernism' has been used too loosely in the Formalist approach" ("Our Dream-Cinema" 54). Lehman nowhere acknowledges this qualification. Instead, he asserts that Bordwell uses a "sleight of hand" to discount Willemen's critique. This trick supposedly consists of not answering Willemen's and Anderson's claim that Ozu's style might be related to traditional Japanese art. But how does one answer such a claim apart from requesting that an actual argument, instead of a vague possibility, be produced? Since Lehman wants to intervene in this controversy, we ask him to produce an argument that *historically* connects the specific devices and systems we have revealed in Ozu's

films with some form of traditional art. Lehman is thereby committed, in our view, to providing a historical mechanism whereby Ozu could adapt these while other directors do *not* do so. We caution him in advance against vague analogies between Ozu's work and traditional art forms, since not only is such a tactic inherently unhistorical; it is also a common recourse of the dreaded Orientalist.

The misrepresentations go on and on. "Bordwell and Thompson risk reducing the text to a clear system of easily observable and knowable patterns which require no special knowledge of Japanese culture" (Lehman "Mysterious Orient" 12). No, it is Lehman's reading which risks this, since we never claimed to be analyzing all aspects of Ozu's work in this article. Temporal structure, Ozu's use of historical motifs, large-scale narrative patterns—all these factors and more would need to be considered. Moreover, the stylistic operations are indeed *observable* without cultural knowledge of the sort Lehman indicates; the issue is whether or not they are causally *explainable* without extratextual knowledge, and this we have not asserted. (Whether they are "easily" observable is a moot point, since as far as we know we were the first to point many of them out.) Finally, here is a quotation from the 1979 article by Bordwell, who purportedly has no interest in film's relation to culture.

Our goal is, eventually, a totalized view. How can we see film style, the film industry, and the social matrix in one complex whole? Nothing less than a theory of art in culture is required (58).

In our 1976 article we had argued that thematizing interpretation is more comfortable than an analysis that grants that style may, if only intermittently, be seen as independent of narrative motivation. But Lehman accuses us of taking an "easy" critical path by elevating the ab-

stract graphic and spatial patterns in Ozu's films to the status of a major structure. This would be true if this were all that we were suggesting. But this is perhaps Lehman's most profound distortion of our article. As the title implies, we wanted only to look at the functions of spatial devices in relation to the narrative. Furthermore, we did not suggest that viewers should ignore the narrative aspects of the films to revel in abstract patterns on the screen. Far from it. We tried to show that Ozu's films are complex and daring because—unlike most classical Western and most Japanese films—they play with narrative and other formal patterns simultaneously. The results are hardly as simple as they emerge in Lehman's account (which in fact shows no detailed grasp of the specific principles we outlined, such as 360-degree shooting space, dominant/overtone interplay, graphic matching, and so on). Our article does not support the sort of hedonistic, conservative formalism Lehman tries to ascribe to it. The general point was that critics find it hard to recognize the possibility of a style's having *effects*, and significant ones, that are not reducible to thematic *meanings*. This is well illustrated by Lehman's recent article, "Oshima: The Avant-Garde Artist without an Avant-Garde Style," which, though nominally about the director's purported lack of a consistent *auteur* style, contains no analysis of style as such at all (58).

To all of this Lehman could still reply that he was simply surveying the problems of ethnocentrism and the Japanese "other" that haunt the field. But everybody knows about these problems, and scholars' awareness of them has increased over the last decade. From our earliest articles on Ozu right up to the present, we have aimed at a greater sensitivity to all factors—textual and critical—that make Japanese cinema interesting. (Indeed, Bordwell sought to raise these issues in the 1979 piece.) One cannot survey the problems in a field by juxtaposing quotations

torn from context, by ignoring the relevant research literature, and by refusing to engage with the evidence. It is remarkable that Lehman can chide us and others (Stephen Heath, Edward Branigan) for disregarding Japanese culture when his own essay does just that.

In short, Lehman's article does not move the field of Japanese film studies in any useful direction. It is too outdated and inaccurate in its discussion of other people's work to function as an adequate outline of the historiographic and conceptual issues at stake, and it is so ungrounded in evidence that it cannot constitute the initial stage of a new research program.

Works Cited

Bordwell, David. "Our Dream-Cinema: Western Historiography and the Japa-

nese Film." *Film Reader* 4 (1979): 45-62.

—. *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987.

Lehman, Peter. "Oshima: The Avant-Garde Artist without an Avant-Garde Style." *Wide Angle* 9.2 (1978): 18-31.

—. "The Mysterious Orient, the Crystal Clear Orient, the Non-Existent Orient: Dilemmas of Western Scholars of Japanese Film." *Journal of Film and Video* 39.1 (Winter 1987): 5-15.

Thompson, Kristin. "Late Spring and Ozu's Unreasonable Style." *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988 forthcoming.

—. "Notes on the Spatial System of Ozu's Early Films." *Wide Angle* 1.4 (1977): 8-17.

Thompson, Kristin and David Bordwell. "Space and Narrative in the Films of Ozu." *Screen* 17.2 (Summer 1976): 41-73.