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ARTICLE

In the Style of Ozu: Critical Making and Postwar Japanese Cinema

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Interest in modern and contemporary Japanese visual culture—whether through film, art history, or literature—is growing among students who already have an exposure to and love for Japanese popular culture via visual media such as manga, anime, video, and social media. In combination with student demand for courses that engage with the visual, there is institutional demand for innovative courses that offer experiential and active learning approaches to critical inquiry. This pedagogical essay introduces the concept of “critical making” and the importance of new modes of student assessment that engage with creative acts of making. It discusses the development and application of a semester-long student filmmaking project in Postwar Japanese Cinema and concludes with a critique of the project and the broader implications for including critical making in East Asian studies courses that emphasize the study of visual culture. This student film project reflects my background and training in Japanese art, cinema, and visual culture—not in filmmaking or media production—and is just one example of how to approach the study of postwar Japanese cinema through the lens of critical making.

Keywords: critical making; Ozu; postwar Japanese cinema; Japan; film project

Introduction

“Critical making”¹ is a term used to describe the linkage between conceptual reflection and technical making. The act of critical making “highlights the reconnection of two modes of engagement with the world that are typically held separate: critical thinking traditionally understood as conceptually and linguistically based, and physical ‘making,’ goal-based material work” (Ratto 2014). As such, a “critical maker” is someone who employs critical making as a mode of analysis and critique. In recent years critical making has gained currency with scholars who are interested in “. . . acts of making across the arts, humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, inhabiting the space between making and knowing, construction and interpretation” (McGrane 2015). On a pedagogical level critical making is an approach to teaching that encourages students to simultaneously engage with critical thinking and physical making by exploring “how hands-on productive work—‘making’—can supplement and extend critical reflection on technology and society” (Hertz 2012).² The primary emphasis of critical making is focused on the process rather than the final product or result. On a practical level it has nurtured a new wave of makers, or “maktivists,” who seek to use technology in the service of social change and cultural understanding (Mann 2014). Digital and non-digital approaches to making range anywhere from boat building to Google Glass, from DIY philosophies to data mining, and from 3D printing to the adaptation of traditional forms into new media.³

¹ “Critical making” is a term developed by Matt Ratto, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Information and the Director of the Critical Making Lab at the University of Toronto. <http://criticalmaking.com/>

² This definition comes out of a larger scholarly text, *Conversations in Critical Making*, which was originally released in 2012 by Teleharmonium and revised and updated in 2015 for CTheory Books. The text is edited by Garnet Hertz and brings together individuals working at the intersection of critical thinking and hands-on practice. The content of the book is a series of interviews with leading theorists and practitioners of critical making. <http://pactac.net/ctheory-books/blueshift-series/conversations-in-critical-making/>

³ For more information on the scholarly discourse and pedagogical practices of critical making see the following: <http://conceptlab.com/criticalmaking/>
<http://criticalmaking.com/>
<http://make.berkeley.edu/>

When applied to a film studies course, critical making can become an important tool for assessment by exposing students to aesthetic forms of cinema through the collaborative, social, and artistic tasks of filmmakers and media producers, i.e. creation as a means of interpretation. By introducing the concept of critical making through its application in the form of a creative assignment in which students produce a short film in the style of Japanese filmmaker Ozu Yasujirō (1903–1963), I hope to illustrate new forms of student assessment that emphasize the study and analysis of postwar Japanese cinema through the act of making. Within the context of my Postwar Japanese Cinema course, critical making can facilitate the study of historical and cultural developments in Japanese cinema as well as highlight the important ways in which filmmakers use the visual structures of cinema to influence, impress, and persuade the viewer of their message.

Short Film Project

In any film course there are always multiple learning goals used in teaching the history and discourse of cinema, such as developing analytic vocabulary for close reading, attending to the cultural dynamics that affect our viewing and understanding of film, examining the historical and/or theoretical context that has shaped the film industry and apparatus, and articulating and writing about film. Within my Postwar Japanese Cinema course, however, my primary objective was to provide students (majors and non-majors alike) with an introduction to Japanese films and filmmakers through the lens of visual culture with an emphasis on art and technology. In order to achieve this objective, it was necessary to develop a method of assessment that both integrated the concepts of critical making and allowed students to focus on the following four learning goals: 1) study key aspects of the history and development of postwar Japanese cinema; 2) develop critical and analytical tools for looking at, reading, and writing about film; 3) understand how the visual structures of cinema impact narration, character development, image production, and audience reception; and 4) experience the social and creative tasks of filmmakers and media producers.

When designing my Postwar Japanese Cinema course, I wanted to develop a new method of student assessment that did not involve writing a research paper or taking

an exam. While tests and research papers have significant value as tools for assessment, they encourage a form of “solo learning” or “solo performance” (Wolf, Bixby, Glenn, and Gardner 1991) that is not inherently part of the film industry, its history, or even the medium itself. A film is almost always the product of a cooperative endeavor. From all phases of production to screening the final-cut in a movie theater or festival, film and filmmaking encourage various levels of social and cultural collaboration with regard to creation, reception, circulation, and overall meaning. My goal was to expose students to the aesthetic and structural forms of cinema through the collaborative, social, and artistic components of media producers. In essence, I wanted to facilitate the interpretation and understanding of Japanese film aesthetics through the process of creation.

This concept of creation as a means of interpretation was something that first came to me while participating in a digital humanities faculty seminar on making. One of the major questions this seminar asked was, “How do our critically engaged methods of pedagogy enhance interdisciplinary approaches to the material and digital object across knowledge terrains and institutional boundaries?” (McGrane 2015). As I attempted to answer this question within the context of my own teaching and research, I thought about how I could better empower my students to utilize digital modes of technology to become critical makers. A Japanese Studies colleague gave me the initial idea of including a media production component as a major form of assessment. My colleague required students in her Japanese Cinema class to collaborate with students in a Video Production class to create a short film (Furukawa 2013). This approach split the division of labor along the lines of conception and development by the students in the Japanese Cinema class and execution and production by students in the Video class. However, because critical making “focuses on the lived experience of making and the role it plays in deepening our understanding of the socio-technical environment” (Ratto 2015),⁴ in order for my students to become

⁴ Interview June 13, 2012. Edited by Matt Ratto, Garnet Hertz, Amelia Guimarin, Jessica Kao, and Maroof Moral. First published in “Critical Making Interviews” (Telharmonium, 2012). Revised and updated in *Conversations in Critical Making* (CTheory Books, 2015).

critical makers it was imperative that they execute the entire creative process—from conception to completion—themselves. Thus, building upon what I had learned in the faculty seminar on critical making, my primary goal was to introduce a creative project that engaged in the act of making so that students would not only learn how film production can supplement and extend critical reflection on postwar Japanese cinema and society, but also gain a greater sense of breadth and depth in their understanding of postwar Japanese history and culture through the process of producing a short film from start to finish.

Why Ozu?

Admittedly, this filmmaking project was a complete pedagogical experiment. I had no prior experience in filmmaking or media production. My strengths as a scholar and teacher are in the visual, historical, and theoretical analysis of Japanese cinema and visual culture. Because this course did not require any previous experience in filmmaking or media production, it was imperative that I establish a manageable framework for students with regard to successfully completing a semester-long film project. While this course examines films by a number of important Japanese filmmakers, including Kurosawa Akira (1910–1998), Mizoguchi Kenji (1898–1956), Honda Ishirō (1911–1993), Itami Juzo (1933–1997), Miyazaki Hayao (b. 1941), and Kawase Naomi (b. 1969), I required students to model their short film on the work and style of Japanese filmmaker Ozu Yasujiro (1903–1963). This decision was based on a few key elements.

First, Ozu is one of the most influential and famous filmmakers in the history of Japanese cinema and has been called—somewhat problematically—the most “Japanese” of all Japanese filmmakers. His career spanned Japan’s pre and postwar periods, beginning with the establishment of the Japanese film industry in the 1920s and continuing through the Pacific War and the U.S. Occupation, and ending during Japan’s postwar reconstruction. All of Ozu’s films fall within the *gendai-geki* or “contemporary film” genre. More specifically, within this genre Ozu was interested in *shomin-geki* or “common people’s dramas.” *Shomin-geki* films focus on the daily life, problems, and melodramas experienced by the middle and lower classes of Japanese society. Marriage, death, the dissolution of the traditional Japanese family, and the

fraught relationships between older and younger generations are among some of the major themes in Ozu's work. Scholars have described Ozu's postwar work as, "a chronicle of the experiences of different generations, from student days, to early parenthood, to middle age nostalgia, and, finally, to the disillusionment and indifference of grown-up children in their old age" (Jacoby 2008).

My second reason for choosing Ozu as a model for my students is that his filmmaking style is quite unusual. Film scholar David Bordwell observes, "Ozu's films seem stylistically simple. . . [however] when looked at more closely they emerge as very odd indeed. . . . Put another way, Ozu's style is undeniably unusual, yet his films pose no drastic problems to narrative comprehension" (Bordwell 1988). What Bordwell is referring to here is Ozu's emphasis on the visual and how his elevation of image over text adheres to a specific set of cinematic devices that create an extremely legible visual aesthetic and style. For instance, the formal aspects of Ozu's films are comprised of low camera angles (**Figure 1**), 360 degree use of space, static camera, "pillow shots" (or empty shots, **Figure 2**), minimal lighting (**Figure 3**), direct camera shots (**Figure 4**), and a preference for working in black and white film, to name a few.



Figure 1: *Late Spring* (1949), dir. Ozu Yasujirō – low camera angle.



Clip 1: *Late Spring* (1949), dir. Ozu Yasujirō – 360-degree use of space.
Available for download here: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s1>.



Clip 2: *Late Spring* (1949), dir. Ozu Yasujirō – static camera.
Available for download here: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s2>.

The precise uniformity and repetition of Ozu's filmmaking style has been described by scholars as technically "remarkable" (Jacoby 2008). As a result, Ozu's films are not only stylistically compelling for students to emulate, but they provide an ideal historical, narrative, and structural framework for this creative assignment.



Figure 2: *Late Spring* (1949), dir. Ozu Yasujirō – pillow shot.



Figure 3: *Late Spring* (1949), dir. Ozu Yasujirō – minimal lighting.



Figure 4: *Late Spring* (1949), dir. Ozu Yasujirō – direct camera shot.

In conjunction with this assignment, students studied three of Ozu's postwar films: *Late Spring* (*Banshun*, 1949), *Early Summer* (*Bakushū*, 1951), and *Tokyo Story* (*Tokyo monogatari*, 1953). Known as the "Noriko trilogy," the main character in all three films is a young woman in her twenties named Noriko, played by the actress Hara Setsuko (1920–2015). While there is no direct narrative continuity between the films (they are not sequels), all three deal with similar themes concerning the dissolution of the traditional Japanese family—whether through marriage or death—and the fraught relationships these life events create between the older (prewar) and younger (postwar) generations. Additionally, in terms of cinematography and the formal aspects of Ozu's filmmaking style, these three films are extremely similar and create a visual and aesthetic continuity that, once one is familiar with it, is easy to recognize.

To contextualize the historical moment in which these films were made and to guide student analysis and interpretation, I assigned a number of primary and secondary source materials, including Ozu's film script (in translation) for *Tokyo Story* (Ozu & Noda 2003); historical texts on the Pacific War (1931–1945) and U.S. Occupation (1945–1952) such as *A Concise History of Japan* (Walker 2015) and *Mr. Smith goes to Tokyo: Japanese Cinema Under the American Occupation* (Hirano 1992); biographical

material on Ozu's career and filmmaking style, *Ozu* (Richie 1974) and *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (Bordwell 1988); and analyses of the thematic, narrative, and stylistic elements in Ozu's work, *Cinema East: A Critical Study of Major Japanese Films* (McDonald, 1983), *Reframing Japanese Cinema: Authorship, Genre, History*, (Nolletti and Desser 1992) and *Cinematic Landscapes* (Ehrlich and Desser 2008).⁵

Pedagogical Challenges

Integrating a short filmmaking project into a Japanese Cinema (or Asian Cinema) course can be challenging due to the highly technical nature of this assignment as well as the need to provide students who are unfamiliar with Japan's film culture with additional information regarding the socio-historical context and critical discourses of Japanese cinema. In most cases this requires striking a balance between more standard cinema studies learning goals, such as developing the methods, terminologies, and tools of formal and critical analysis, and the historical and cultural contextualization of Japan and/or East Asian studies courses. In addition, faculty must have knowledge and/or hands-on experience of filmmaking that is translatable to an undergraduate classroom of students who have little to no background in media production.

When conceiving of this project I had no prior film production experience. This creative assignment was an experiment that took my students and me outside of our academic comfort zones. None of the students in this course had any background in Japanese film or film production. Group work can be difficult if people do not get along or agree on the artistic, technical, and logistical decisions required of this film project. The time frame for this project was also relatively short—only fifteen weeks to write, cast, direct, edit, and produce a short film.

Because there were a number of moving parts that necessitated a balance between the course content and technological requirements demanded of a short film project, it was crucial to develop an effective rubric for assessment. My assessment needed to evaluate the pre-production, production, and post-production

⁵ This list of primary and secondary source material of films and texts is by no means exhaustive. For a more complete list of visual and textual sources related to Ozu and the study of cinema in general please refer to the "Further Reading" and "Sample Syllabus" in the appendix.

components of the filmmaking project, as well as reflect how this multi-dimensional assignment fit into semester-long learning goals such as analyzing, interpreting, and writing about postwar Japanese cinema. Since this was not a traditional filmmaking course, the assessment rubric I developed did not adhere to a strict set of technical or aesthetic media production requirements. Instead, the learning outcomes of this project were primarily measured on the foundational elements of critical making that emphasize the process and not the final product. Thus, the focus was on the *process* of creating a short film in dialogue with other assignments, such as reading the screenplay for *Tokyo Story*, and student-led film analyses of scenes in *Late Spring*, *Early Summer*, and *Tokyo Story*. Weekly writing assignments and discussions of other postwar films and directors facilitated the overall development of critical looking, thinking, and writing about postwar Japanese cinema. Ultimately, whether or not students could successfully recreate Ozu's static camera work, 360-degree use of space, or pillow-shots was secondary to their engagement with and understanding of how these formal aspects influenced the plot, narration, characters, and themes of a film. The emphasis was not on "getting the shot right" but, through the act of making, on understanding the cinematic building blocks of a scene and how they are used by Ozu to structure the narrative and overall messages of his films.

The assessment rubric was divided into three sections that reflected the three phases of the filmmaking process: Pre-production, Production, and Post-production. The requirements of the pre-production phase consisted of developing and writing a script, creating a frame-by-frame storyboard to illustrate the narrative, and making a prop list. The production phase included scouting locations, recruiting actors, and directing photography. The post-production phase involved editing the film, adding music (non-diegetic), creating sub-titles (if necessary), and adding beginning and ending credits. The grading of each phase was assessed based on the following criteria:

Pre-production

1) A completed script submitted by the deadline. (example: *Broken Fall* Film Script (2014), dirs. Cruz Arroyo, Maho Okumura, and Lauren Pronger - DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s5>)

- The script is formatted correctly and according to the standards discussed in class.
- The narrative engages with themes/plots found in Ozu's films.
- The narrative has a clear beginning, middle, and end.

2) A completed storyboard (examples: *The Chill of Autumn* storyboard (2015) dirs. Simon Balukonis, Sofia Licata, Daisuke Nakayama, and Scott Pollara – DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s6>; and *Drifting Leaves* storyboard(2015), dirs. Jessica Feng, Cooper Vaughn, Carlos Vergne, and Rachel Xiao – DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s7>) submitted by the deadline.

- The storyboard depicts the entire film and includes every shot.
- The storyboard conveys the camera angles and placement in such a way that on the day of the shoot anyone would be able to set up the camera without additional guidance or instruction.

3) A completed prop checklist submitted by the deadline.

- The prop checklist includes locations for the production phase.

Production

1) Students must show evidence of teamwork.

- Division of labor (scouting locations, directing, acting, set-up/break-down of scenes, shooting footage, etc.) by submitting a written statement that outlines what each member of the film group has contributed to the production phase.

2) All of the footage is filmed and submitted by the deadline(s).

- Images are in focus, actors are visible, audio is clear, tripod was used, etc.

3) The footage is shot with an eye towards some aesthetic similarity to Ozu.

- Students must demonstrate their understanding of the course mate-

rial and their ability to critically read the visual components of cinema through the inclusion of one or more formal elements of Ozu's films, such as 360-degree use of space, low camera angles, static camera, "pillow shots," etc.

Post-production

- 1) The Rough Cut, Fine Cut, and Final Cut are submitted by the deadlines set for the film project. During the editing process the Rough Cut, Fine Cut, and Final Cut show evidence of improvement.
 - Each film group responds to and incorporates feedback from faculty and classmates into the final two drafts of the film.
 - Each film group attempts to improve the audio and/or video quality of the short film based upon feedback from classmates and faculty.



Clip 3: *The Chill of Autumn* (2015), dirs. Jessica Feng, Cooper Vaughn, Carlos Vergne, and Rachel Xiao – fine cut; and *The Chill of Autumn* (2015), dirs. Jessica Feng, Cooper Vaughn, Carlos Vergne, and Rachel Xiao – final cut Reproduced with permission, all rights reserved.

Available for download here: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s8>.



Clip 4: *Rain in the City* (2015), dirs. Emily Bishop, Robert Carpenter, and Atalanta Henderson – fine cut; and *Rain in the City* (2015), dirs. Emily Bishop, Robert Carpenter, and Atalanta Henderson – final cut. Reproduced with permission, all rights reserved
Available for download here: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s9> .

- 2) Groups will make a formal presentation of the film.
 - Presentations will include film screening and discussion of project.
 - Groups will be prepared to analyze the narrative, thematic, and visual elements of their film in relation to course content (historical, cultural, and aesthetics of postwar Japanese cinema as well as of Ozu).

Since this filmmaking project was essentially a production course for beginners, there was less of a focus on grading towards technical achievement in regard to cinematography, editing, construction, artistry, audio work, etc., and more focus on the basics. That is to say, is the image in focus? Was a tripod used? Can we clearly see the actors and hear what they are saying? Does the narrative content make sense in relation to the way in which Ozu constructs his postwar films? Does the visual content of the film adhere to some of the formal and/or aesthetic elements—360-degree use of space, low camera angles, static camera, “pillow shots,” and minimal dialogue, etc.—that Ozu’s postwar films are known for? Additionally, at each phase of the filmmaking

process there were class readings and discussions, scene analyses, and writing assignments either directly related to the film project and Ozu or indirectly related through the study and comparison of Ozu with other postwar Japanese films and filmmakers. All of these in-class assignments were integrated into the course as a means of both supporting and enhancing the short-film project.⁶

Planning and Execution

A semester-long creative project of this magnitude requires a significant amount of planning and organization by faculty and students. This is not a project to start half-way through the semester. It requires development of and adherence to a rigorous production schedule that must begin during the first or second week of the semester. It is also a project that requires a significant amount of technical support and/or training. If institutional support and access to digital media specialists who can train students in using the hardware and software required for this project are available, I strongly encourage this collaboration. If this type of support is unavailable, there are a number of text and web-based resources that introduce basic filmmaking practices and techniques. I recommend *The Bare Bones Camera Course for Film and Video* (Schroeppel 2015), which is the text used in most introductory filmmaking courses, and *On Filmmaking: An Introduction to the Craft and the Director* (McKendrick and Cronin 2004), which is more conceptual in nature but extremely useful in helping students think about how to construct a narrative. This book is far less technical than others but it has a lot of staying power.

I was fortunate to have the institutional support of a digital media specialist to collaborate with on this project, and my first step was to meet with the Instructional and Information Technology Services (IITS) staff to map out a schedule. Because this creative assignment was a significant component of the course, I had to consider the most effective way to integrate the production timetable into the preexisting structure of a 200-level course that met for 90 minutes twice a week. In consultation with the digital media specialist in IITS, I developed a schedule that spanned the entire

⁶ For further details regarding additional course assignments and project schedule please refer to the "Sample Syllabus" in the appendix.

fifteen-week semester, divided into three primary phases as outlined in the assessment rubric: 1) Pre-production, 2) Production, and 3) Post-production. Students were split into four filmmaking groups and a total of eight in-class lab sessions were scheduled. These lab sessions provided an opportunity for the digital media specialist to introduce and train the students in the filmmaking software and equipment required for the project.

In the pre-production phase we used the scriptwriting software Celtx. This is the best option for beginners because there is a free web-based (downloadable) version for students, and it does all of the formatting for them. Proper formatting is absolutely critical to screenwriting, and there are very specific rules that must be followed. As for storyboards, students can make their own templates simply by drawing six boxes on a sheet of paper (two rows of three) with lines underneath each box for students to label the shot number and provide a brief description. You can also search on-line for numerous ready-made storyboard template options to download and print.

For the production phase, students used Panasonic HDC-TM40 cameras. These introductory hand-held cameras are almost completely automatic (used primarily for recreation and travel) and are relatively inexpensive and great for beginners. However, in future iterations of this project I intend to use the Canon XA10. This camera has more manual control and allows for better image and sound quality (something that students struggled with when using the Panasonic HDC-TM40). The Canon XA10 has XLR inputs, which allows for advanced microphone plug-ins and offers far superior sound quality to that of the Panasonic HDC-TM40.

During the post-production phase, we used Adobe Premiere Pro video editing software, which was taught to the students by the IITS digital media specialists. Although Adobe Premiere is an advanced editing system, it is fairly simple to train students and get them up and running quickly. Additionally, as opposed to programs like iMovie, Adobe Premiere allows for more overall control during the editing process. That said, there are numerous alternative editing programs to choose from. Most educational institutions support basic video editing programs such as iMovie and/or Camtasia. However, if you are looking for more advanced editing options, you may consider Final Cut X. In addition to the in-class lab sessions, there were

out-of-class assignments for all three phases of the film project, such as scriptwriting, storyboarding, location scouting, shooting, and editing, with deadlines for rough-cut, fine cut, and final cut screenings of the films.

During the weekly scheduled class periods, through a variety of reading, discussion, scene analysis, and short presentation assignments, students were asked to consider how Japanese filmmakers like Ozu use the formal and technical structures of cinema such as cinematography, sound, editing, and mise-en-scène to impress and persuade the viewer of their narrative messages. During each stage of the film project I encouraged students to develop a language for looking by honing their skills at visual and critical analysis. For instance, students were required to analyze the technical aspects of filmmaking (cinematography, sound, editing, or mise-en-scène) in films like *Late Spring*, *Early Summer*, and *Tokyo Story*, as well as those by Ozu's contemporaries such as Kurosawa's *Rashōmon* (1950) and *Stray Dog* (1949), and Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu* (1953). As a class we investigated the ways in which these technical details affect narration, plot, themes, and characters. By presenting their formal analysis of cinematography, sound, editing, or mise-en-scène on a postwar Japanese film, students gained a greater understanding of how Japanese filmmakers use the visual language of cinema to investigate issues of truth, beauty, identity, nationhood, and even humor in an attempt to answer fundamental questions regarding life and death in Japan's postwar period. Furthermore, by integrating their production experience with different approaches to studying postwar Japanese cinema, such as examining its relationship to literature, politics, religion, gender, and the atomic age, students were able to comprehend the ways in which film and filmmaking operate on a number of different social and cultural registers within Japanese society.

Mid-Semester Assessment

At the halfway point of the semester I implemented mid-semester course evaluations as an assessment tool. I drafted a one-page questionnaire with two goals in mind. The first was to help me gain a better sense of how the course was going, determine areas for improvement, assess student learning, and revisit course expectations. The second was to encourage students to take stock of the course at the halfway point, and to think more deeply about their own critical engagement and contributions to the film pro-

ject and the class in general. The student responses were extremely generative. I was able to gain an incredible amount of information that helped me revise and revamp the course during the second half of the semester. With regard to the short film project, the mid-semester course feedback alerted me to some of the inevitable issues that come with working in groups. To varying degrees, all four of the student filmmaking groups were dealing with problems relating to compatibility; the allocation of work and division of labor; and differences in opinion regarding artistic, stylistic, and narrative choices as well as those relating to leadership and time management. In most cases, I was able to address individual concerns as well as those of the larger group, and solve the problems students were experiencing before they became too big to fix. Additionally, through this evaluation process, students were able to reflect upon their role in the class and take some ownership of their behavior and commitment to the success of their film projects and the course as a whole. In a few instances this resulted in the students working through their differences without faculty intervention.

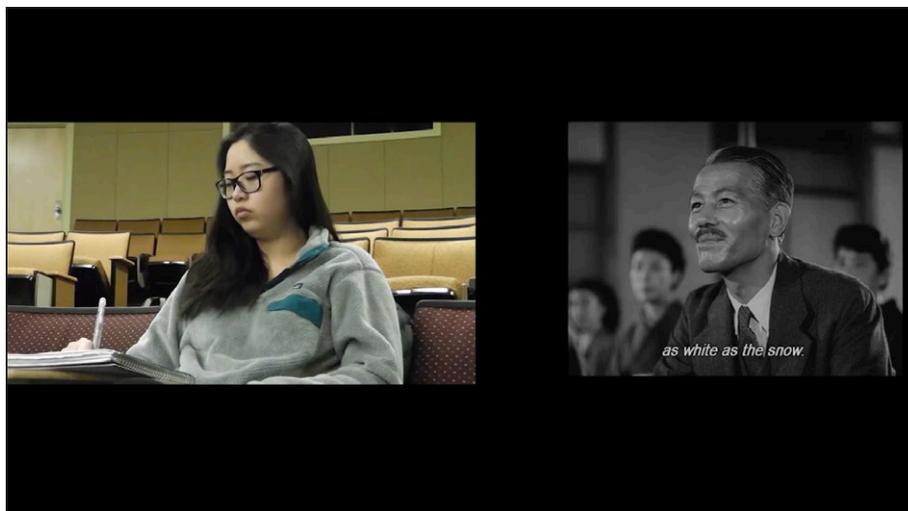
Final Results and Assessment

Although the theory behind critical making emphasizes process over product, and in some cases even resists the exhibition of objects that emerge from critical making projects (Ratto 2015), as an educator it was important for me to assess the end result in relation to the process. My rationale, which departs somewhat from critical making theory, was that assessing the final product in conversation with the process of making would bring to light important insights not evident during the film's production. Additionally, exhibiting the final product(s) was vital to linking acts of making with forms of social engagement that connected our coursework with the broader College community.

The most immediate result from this creative assignment was four short narrative films (7–10 min. in length) in the style of Japanese filmmaker Ozu Yasujiro. For a group of fourteen students with no experience in film production, the final results were excellent. All of the student films adhered to the pre-production, production, and post-production guidelines outlined in the assessment rubric. After screening the final cut of the films in class it was clear (to me and to the

digital media specialist) that the students had learned a significant amount about the various components and stages involved in the filmmaking process. Students displayed their technical understanding of Ozu's filmmaking style through the integration of some of his formal elements such as the 360-degree use of space, low camera angles, static camera, pillow shots, minimal lighting, and direct camera shots of characters. In terms of Ozu's thematic concerns, the narratives of the four short films—all of which centered around the dissolution of the immediate family—conveyed thoughtful and nuanced interpretations of the plight of the middle classes of society. They also illustrated the universality of Ozu's themes of marriage, death, the fracturing of the family, and the fraught relationships between older and younger generations. It was extremely interesting to see how students adapted Ozu's melodrama and made it relevant to their own experiences as college students and young adults.

In terms of evaluating the student film projects, I approached it from two standpoints. The first was the technical aspects of film production, which I have discussed



Clip 5: *Drifting Leaves* (2015), dirs. Jessica Feng, Cooper Vaughn, Carlos Vergne, and Rachel Xiao – 360-degree use of space; *Late Spring* (1949), dir. Ozu Yasujirō – 360-degree use of space (film clip). Reproduced with permission, all rights reserved. **Available for download here:** <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s10>.



Clip 6: *Rain in the City* (2015), dirs. Emily Bishop, Robert Carpenter, and Atlanta Henderson – low camera angle; *Tokyo Story* (1953), dir. Ozu Yasujirō – low camera angle (film clip). Reproduced with permission, all rights reserved. **Available for download here:** <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s11>.



Clip 7: *Broken Fall* (2014), dirs. Cruz Arroyo, Maho Okumura, and Lauren Pronger – opening sequence; *Tokyo Story* (1953), dir. Ozu Yasujirō – opening sequence (film clip). Reproduced with permission, all rights reserved. **Available for download here:** <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s12>.



Clip 8: *Broken Fall* (2014), dirs. Cruz Arroyo, Maho Okumura, and Lauren Pronger – pillow shot (film clip); *Tokyo Story* (1953), dir. Ozu Yasujirō – pillow shot (film clip). Reproduced with permission, all rights reserved. **Available for download here:** <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s13>.



Clip 9: *Autumn Leaves* (2014), dirs. Amanda Benoliel, Rita Lin, Minyang Liu, and Ruoyi Wu – minimal lighting (film clip); *Late Spring* (1949), dir. Ozu Yasujirō – minimal lighting (film clip). Reproduced with permission, all rights reserved. **Available for download here:** <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s14>.



Clip 10: *Drifting Leaves* (2015), dirs. Jessica Feng, Cooper Vaughn, Carlos Vergne, and Rachel Xiao – direct camera (film clip); *Late Spring* (1949), dir. Ozu Yasujirō – direct camera (film clip). Reproduced with permission, all rights reserved. **Available for download here:** <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s15>.

above and outlined in the filmmaking rubric. The second was student-driven critique and reflection of their critical making experience. In addition to submitting the final cut of their film and presenting their work to the class, students submitted a 5–6 page analytical statement that addressed the specifics of the filmmaking process. In this paper, each student had to explain the scope of their project as well as provide an analysis and critique of the various phases of producing their film. In their written statement, students were required to explicitly cite scholars and cinematic concepts relating to Ozu as well as important historical and theoretical developments shaping postwar Japanese cinema. Students were also required to submit a 3-page personal statement that was more reflective in nature. In the personal statement students were to think critically about their individual role in the filmmaking process, what they learned, and how this project contributed to the overall learning goals for the course. It was through this analytical critique and self-reflection of the process *and* the end result that students gained greater insight into the rationale behind this creative project and its relationship to postwar Japanese cinema.

For most students, this film project successfully foregrounded the historical, theoretical, and cultural aspects of postwar Japanese films and the filmmakers they studied throughout the semester. The project also provided greater understanding in regard to how films are made and the ways in which filmmakers use the visual language of cinema to create a work of art. Students gained an appreciation for the possibilities of communication inherent in the cinematic medium. As I suspected, some students found group work difficult, whereas others enjoyed the collaborative process. All of the students, however, acknowledged that filmmaking is by nature a cooperative endeavor and that it would be impossible to execute a project like this alone. They valued the learning experience—both the difficulties and the successes—that came at each stage of the production process. All of the students expressed a sincere sense of personal investment in the project and pride in its completion. For many, it had never occurred to them that they could use the medium of film as a mode of analysis as well as a means through which to display their knowledge and achievement of course learning goals.

The penultimate component of this creative project was hosting a public film screening at the end of the semester. After the final-cut submission deadline, I scheduled a screening for all four films and invited the College community to attend. Students in the course were encouraged to invite their friends and teachers (many of whom starred in the films) to attend the screening. The public film-screening component to this creative assignment was important for two reasons. First, it extended the filmmaking laboratory beyond the confines of the classroom and onto the school's campus, allowing students to showcase and discuss their work with a broader community of critical makers. Second, it encouraged them to think about their short films as works of art that were not merely the product of a class assignment but engaged in a broader conversation about the importance of critical making. The quality and content of all four films were strong enough to stand on their own and facilitate a dialogue about the importance of creating shared experiences through the integration of new technologies, like digital media, into the classroom. It also encouraged students to submit their work to the annual juried student film festival hosted by the College and regional Film Institute each spring.

Conclusion

By developing a creative project that engages in the act of making, students learn how film production can supplement and extend critical reflection on postwar Japanese cinema and society. This filmmaking project not only provided a new approach to standard forms of student assessment in relation to the course learning goals, such as studying key aspects of the history and development of postwar Japanese cinema; developing critical and analytical tools for looking, reading, and writing about film; understanding how the visual structures of cinema impact narration, character development, image production, and audience reception; and experiencing the social and creative tasks of filmmakers and media producers, but also offered new modes of helping students interpret Japanese film aesthetics through the hands-on experience of being critical makers. I believe that the pedagogical components of critical making enhance student learning by helping them make deeper connections between the materials they study in the classroom and the physical world around them. As the field of critical making continues to grow, it will be important to facilitate interdisciplinary approaches to the study and interpretation of East Asian art, culture, history, language, and society. By developing a curricular approach to the study of Japan through creative projects, we can enhance broader student understanding and cultural exchange between East Asia and the rest of the world. I intend to continue revising and refining this filmmaking project as the central component of my Postwar Japanese Cinema course.

Additional Files

The additional files for this article can be found as follows:

- **Further Reading.** DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s3>
- **Sample Syllabus.** DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s4>
- **Broken Fall film script.** DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s5>
- **The Chill of Autumn (2015).** DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s6>
- **The Chill of Autumn Storyboard.** DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s7>

- **Late Spring – 360-degree use of space.** DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s1>
- **Late Spring – Static camera.** DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s2>
- **The Chill of Autumn (2015).** DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s8>
- **Rain in the City (2015).** DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s9>
- **360-degree use of space.** DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s10>
- **Low camera angles.** DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s11>
- **Static camera.** DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s12>
- **Pillow shots.** DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s13>
- **Minimal lighting.** DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s14>
- **Direct camera shots of characters.** DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.236.s15>

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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