

Gillian Lionberger

Satomi Saito

Japanese Film 4560

02/25/2022

The Authenticity of Kikunosuke's Emotions

An actor's journey through suffering, success, and romance is the primary plot of Kenji Mizoguchi's 1939 film *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemums*. This film upholds Mizoguchi's signature style of long shots and long takes (Burch 225). While there are many scenes with excellent film technique throughout the film, at 1:01:57 to 1:03:13 there is a long take that particularly enhances the main character, Kikunosuke. Through his usage of long shots, long takes, and composition in this scene, Mizoguchi effectively convinces the audience of the authenticity of Kikunosuke's emotions and enhances his emotional development throughout the film.

In order to fully understand this particular scene, one must understand the context of the scenes previously and after it. Prior to this long take, Kikunosuke is seen discussing with his fellow actor about his despair towards his career; feeling as if he is nothing but a washed-up failure, Kikunosuke discusses leaving Osaka for a smaller town to potentially succeed in, even hinting he might give up acting all together to become a masseur. His lack of motivation and personal drive is plain on his face as he wishes his company farewell before the next scene begins. The usage of long shots and composition in this long take scene proceeds as follows. It begins with a long shot of Kikunosuke and other actors walking down the stairs to leave the theater. Still inside the theater entrance, the scene focuses on the implied star actor of the show being told his fans were begging for his makeup brush, all while Kikunosuke is seen on the stairs

behind him, looking dejected. Hearing the cheers from outside the theater, the shot holds on Kikunosuke's fallen face as he slowly makes his way towards the door, while attempting to hide his dejected emotional state as he gives farewells to his fellow actors and workers. The scene continues, temporarily concealing Kikunosuke from view, and pans over the gates and door of the theater to the outside. Here, the star actor comes into the spotlight once more surrounded by his female fans. Otoku, unbeknownst to the audience, is in the background looking seemingly sad as if she cannot find someone. Kikunosuke and his fellow actors watch the star actor receive admiration from his fans until he rides away into the distance. The actors leave and the scene eventually becomes mostly empty, leaving Kikunosuke and the hidden Otoku. There is a dramatic longshot of Kikunosuke slowly walking away into the distance, dejected, until a surprised Otoku calls out to him. The shot ends with the hopeful and surprised pair equally walking towards each other at the same vertical level. After this scene occurs, Otoku and Kikunosuke catch up with one another and fill in the holes in each other's story. The relief on each other's face that they both wanted to be together is greatly shown. This drives the plot forward to their partnership as Kikunosuke continues his acting journey.

With this scene, the audience is exposed to a wide range of Kikunosuke's emotions: his dejected state, his longing to succeed, and his desire towards Otoku. One effect of this scene being filmed in one take, is the moment feels less fabricated. Without any cuts, the audience believes they are watching the scene play out in real time; having the "awkward" moments most directors would cut makes the actors feel more human and, in turn, more relatable. This is crucial for setting the audience up to experience Kikunosuke's emotions: the more someone can relate to a character, the more they can empathize with them. Further, this film technique connects Kikunosuke's emotions together because they are shown in one contained display. Having one

continual shot of his emotions in this scene, rather than having different cuts for different emotions, allows for the character development to progress more naturally, making it more believable.

The usage of a long take here also introducing an interesting parallel. The part of the scene where Kikunosuke is crossing over from the inside of the theater to the outside, shows he was separate from what he desires, but by crossing over, will come to find what he desires. This theater represents his suffering, as he has had a hard time making it on his own. On the opposite side, the outside represents the success and love he desires because the star actor is seen and heard being praised and a waiting Otoku is there. This change from inside to outside signifies a change in Kikunosuke's story, as soon after this scene, he begins his upward climb, not without hardships, towards his desires. This is a subtle, potentially unintentional, parallel created from continuing the shot through his exit, but it adds to the dramatic feeling of his emotional journey.

There are a couple of impactful long shots used in this scene. While each subscene adds its own unique effect to the overall scene, using longshots in general allows the audience to get a better sense of the actor's emotions because the entire body can be seen. Body language can express a great deal of emotions facial expressions potentially cannot. Seeing the full body, especially in combination with the long takes, makes the scene feel more genuine and believable.

The first of a few interesting long shots in this scene occurs as Kikunosuke is walking down the stairs with his fellow actors. The scene focuses on the supposed star actor, with Kikunosuke in the background. As this star actor discusses his adoring fans, the audience can see Kikunosuke behind him looking longingly towards him; he wishes to be on the same skill level as this actor but can only look on longingly. Had this shot been a close up on the star actor, the

audience would not have seen Kikunosuke's reaction in full, potentially losing some of the emotional despair this shot brings.

Another significant long shot in this scene occurs after the camera pans to outside the theater. Otoku stands in the background, somewhat concealed, as she seemingly looks for something/someone, in this case Kikunosuke. Her waiting in the shadows for him parallels her devotion and genuine care for him; as shown later in the film, she is willing to sacrifice everything, including her life, for Kikunosuke's success. When she finally calls out to him, the audience realizes that she had been there the entire time, perhaps prompting them to re-watch the scene to spot her and thus realizing this parallel.

The final long shot of this scene happens after the star actor rides away, leaving Kikunosuke mostly alone on the dark street. Soon after, he too starts to walk away into the distance, dejection plain in his features. The way the long shot is set up conveys the road towards the end of the frame represents the end of a journey. Kikunosuke makes his way towards the end of the frame, signifying he truly feels like this would be the end of his career, until Otoku calls out and brings hope back to Kikunosuke. The beauty of these long shots is that they work well to convey emotion individually, but also combine to multiply the effectiveness.

While the long take and long shots comprise Mizoguchi's signature style, he also uses effective scene composition, in addition to these techniques, to enhance the emotional impact of the scene even further. Specifically, his placement of extras subtly impacts the audience's reception of Kikunosuke's emotions. In the beginning of the scene, Kikunosuke is surrounded by other actors and workers. There is an implied mutual longing between these actors as they listen to the star actor boast his fame, creating a relatable feeling amongst the actors. While they are not focused on as Kikunosuke is, having these extra actors express this subtly longing makes a

more realistic environment; in a typical theatrical environment, many of the performers feel a sense of jealousy towards one another as they essentially compete for roles. Having other actors emote jealousy further validates how Kikunosuke currently feels because he is not singled out.

As the scene progresses, he is shown to struggle to contain his despair and disbelief towards the star actor's fame as he makes his way out of the theater. By having other actors around, it forces Kikunosuke to contain his emotions for professionalism's sake. Often, people experience emotional distress in public and have to contain it, so seeing Kikunosuke attempting to act normal furthers the relatability of this scene and, again, makes it more believable. If he were alone in this scene, the actor of Kikunosuke might overexaggerate Kikunosuke's negative emotions, which could make it seem superficial and fake.

Later in the scene, when Kikunosuke is walking off into the distance, thinking his career is over, he is practically alone in the street. The contrast from him in the background surrounded by people to front and center alone, puts greater emphasis on the gravity of the moment; this could be the end of his career or a major setback. With the audience's attention fully on Kikunosuke, the surprise of Otoku calling out increases. The two are finally seen coming together, front and center of the shot; they are still alone, though, as this particular scene ends and cuts to their conversation. With this shot consisting of just the two of them, the audience is less distracted, allowing them to focus more on Kikunosuke's and Otoku's expressions, which read as relieved, hopeful, and fond of the person in front of them. The audience can draw the conclusion of the characters' true love based on the full focus on the characters as they come together in this shot.

The amount and quality of techniques in this one-take scene convinces the audience of the abundant emotions Kikunosuke experiences during this time. Mizoguchi effectively utilizes a

long take that contained multiple long shots and interesting scene compositions to express the emotional journey of his character. Not only does Mizoguchi effectively convince the audience of the authenticity of Kikunosuke's feelings, but he also incorporates so many techniques into this one scene, much less the film as a whole, that the audience could re-watch it and still discover a new detail of Kikunosuke's emotion expression. The ability to re-watch a scene and experience Kikunosuke's emotional path, perhaps in a greater effect, proves in of itself the authenticity of Kikunosuke's emotions, not just in this scene, but throughout the entirety of *The Story of the Late Chrysanthemums*.

Work Cited

Burch, Noël. *To The Distant Observer: Form and Meaning In The Japanese Cinema*. Ashgate Publishing. Page 225, 1979.

Mizoguchi, Kenji, Director. *The Story of the Late Chrysanthemums*. Shochiku. 1939.