Tokyo-Ga: A First Person Journey (A Filmed Diary about Absence)

José Antonio Hurtado

Since his first films, Wenders has been sketching the outlines of a vast filmic cartography that knows no borders, developed over the course of a long and drawn out cinematic odyssey which, if I may be allowed the metaphor, is a veritable journey through space and time. In addition to travelling halfway around the world to make films and elaborating a filmic discourse about movement and displacement, his work is also a symbolic trajectory through the history of film, which is none other than the source that feeds the images of this inveterate cinephile: early cinema, the French New Wave and the whole canon of European modernism, the American classics with John Ford at the head, Fritz Lang and, of course, Yasujiro Ozu[1].

Tokyo-Ga (Wim Wenders, 1985) fits into this model and is yet another milestone in the journey that confirms the wandering nature (as if it were one of his characters) of Wim Wenders, filmmaker. In this film he embarks on a twofold journey, both to the Japanese capital and to the universe of Ozu, one of his sacred cinematic references. Chance and necessity, two raw materials that are consubstantial with the best creations, converge in the origins of this project. On a rainy day some fifteen years earlier, Wenders had the powerful experience of seeing one of Ozu's essential works in a New York theatre: *Tokyo Story* (Tokyo monogatari, Yasujiro Ozu, 1953). Indeed, the experience was so stunning that Wenders

came out of the cinema with tears in his eyes. Shortly afterwards, he had the opportunity of seeing another five titles by this filmmaker presented at the MOMA. He discovered, as if it were a revelation, that the kind of cinema he had been dreaming of –an ideal cinema in which gaze and dream are closely intertwined– but which he didn't believe could exist, was realised in Ozu's images. This explains the words that open the commentary that runs throughout the film (recited, incidentally, in his own voice, a voice that sounds fragile, melancholy, restrained and yet full of emotion) and which are superimposed, like heavenly music, over the opening credits of *Tokyo Story*: "If in our century, something sacred still existed, if there were something like a sacred treasure of the cinema, then for me that would have to be the work of the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu [...] For me, never before and never again since has the cinema been so close to its essence and its purpose: to present an image of man in our century, a usable, true and valid image, in which he not only recognises himself but from which, above all, he may learn about himself"[2].

To turn this profound impression into a need to film something about the Japanese filmmaker, all that was needed was an opportunity. And once again, chance intervened: Wenders was invited to Tokyo to participate in a German film week. Added to this was his desire to continue with his first-hand experience after two significant and magnificent short documentaries made for the television program *Cinema, Cinemas*: *Reverse Angle. New York City, March 1982 / Quand je m'évielle* (1982) and *Room 666* (1982), which, along with *Tokyo-Ga* and grouped under the generic classification of *film diaries*, make up a suggestive triptych which, as a metalinguistic exercise, takes the cinema itself as the object of reflection[3].

And once there, why not Tokyo? Why not Ozu? Although according to Wenders the idea for the film arose spontaneously, he was, in light of all these facts, (pre)destined to take his camera and dive into Ozu's world. This *voyage* took place between 1983 and 1985, from the moment he began filming until the final cut was complete.

Between shooting, which lasted around three weeks, and postproduction, which went on for several months, he went to the United States to direct his acclaimed road movie *Paris, Texas* (1984), the product of the traveller's experience that is one of his identifying signs. His initial idea was to edit both films in Berlin, but it was impossible for him to do what he had proposed, and he only resumed editing once *Paris, Texas* had been presented at Cannes, where it won the Palm d'Or. Because of the time that had passed since his visit to Tokyo, Wenders claims that he couldn't recognise his own images, that it was if they had been filmed by somebody else, and he had great difficulties finding his own subjectivity again, re-encountering the emotional gaze of the film. He also points out that he realised that it was more difficult to make a documentary than a fiction film, because it was harder to shape the images into a coherent and logical order.

Nevertheless, despite its creator's warnings (fortunately unnecessary as the problems he mentions are not evident in the final cut), *Tokyo-Ga* is an excellent work became his third and most complex filmed diary, after the two cited above.

After his *filmic visit* to Tokyo, in the form of an intimate travelogue on the trail of Ozu[4], Wenders went back

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to Germany. It was the return home, to Berlin and to the angels that lived there before (*Wings of Desire*, 1987) and after (*Faraway, So Close!* 1993) the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Before returning to his Germanic roots he answered Ozu's call (as confirmed in the commentary, written by his own hand, that flies over and punctuates the images), although while on the adventure he found himself, like the characters in Sofia Coppola's movie, lost in translation as he tried to capture the Japanese landscape, populated with question marks that are difficult for a foreign gaze to decode.

So, as in all his films, it is the story of a journey; in this case, a journey to a city –but also through time, into the past, in search of one of the greatest and most distinguished names in film history– with the intention of finding traces of the venerated master in contemporary Japan, whose paradigm is Tokyo, a chaotic, strange and vast metropolis with its agglomerations and contradictions.

Although in the commentary he denies that it is a pilgrimage to the *holy places*, Pedraza and López Gandia (1986:7) state flatly that "it doesn't matter what he says: this is a pilgrimage, which doesn't even leave out the visit to the grave of the master, the weeping of his chosen ones, and the exhibition of relics (Ozu's stopwatch, religiously preserved by one of the members of his crew)". In this sense, *Tokyo-Ga* is an extremely personal approach that breathes an explicit devotion, not without its tenderness, to Ozu and what he represents, including the Tokyo of the past shown in his films.

Wenders was driven by a desire to uncover the spirit and atmosphere so characteristic of the filmic portraits of his favourite filmmaker, and to do this he wandered through the city that is Ozu's Tokyo thirties later, taking as his point of reference *Tokyo Story*, some of whose images open and close *Tokyo-Ga* (specifically, the images at the beginning and end of the film). But the Tokyo that Ozu shows in his films, particularly those made after the war, is nothing more than a ghost. Indeed, it was in the process of disappearing, rapidly mutating: Ozu does no more than tell us, through his family stories, of the decline of traditional Japan. And what Wenders finds in its place is a modern, chaotic and artificial world whose ultimate meaning is summed up in the Chinese character written, as an epitaph, on Ozu's grave by his own request: 'MU', which means the space between things; nothingness or the void.

This is why the film exudes from every pore a melancholy sensation of lost paradise. It is an elegy to the twilight of an era: its spirit has been lost in the vertiginous upheaval that has shaken contemporary Japan, a loss that was already foreshadowed in Ozu's images. But the spaces and moods of Tokyo that we can identify in Ozu's films are not irretrievable solely because Japan has changed, but also because cinema itself has changed. Telling simple stories of life from the perspective of Ozu's harmonious and placid *classicism* may no longer be possible in the contemporary context of the wild, frenetic pace of the modern city (a Tokyo dominated by skyscrapers, neon lights and colourful, luminous advertising signs), where the postmodern culture of simulation reigns (epitomised by the imitation food in restaurant display windows) and there is a asphyxiating inflation of images. Because of the inexorable passage of time, the Tokyo that appears in Ozu's films, perhaps more mythical than real, no longer exists, nor does the spirit that embodies his work (Chisu Ryu, his long-time actor, is recognised in the street by a group of women not because he was the protagonist in almost all of his films, but because he had recently appeared in a television programme). Wenders' commentary is an unequivocal testimony: "The more the reality of Tokyo struck me as a torrent of unkind, impersonal, threatening, yes even inhuman images, the greater

and more powerful it became in my mind the image of the loving, ordered world, of the mythical city of Tokyo that I knew from the films of Ysojiro Ozu; perhaps that was what no longer existed: a view which still could achieve order in a world out of order. A view which could still render the world transparent. Perhaps such a view is no longer possible today, not even for Ozu, were he still alive".

It is curious, although I do not believe it is accidental, that when the camera leaves the urban centre and we sense it turning towards the periphery, towards nature, it seems to reencounter the languid tranquillity of Ozu's films, which we can also still find in the manner and gestures of the people he worked with, both the aforementioned Ryu or his director of photography Yuharu Atsuta, who in various interviews offer their perspective on the figure of their maestro and mentor. The meetings with these two take place in locations far away from the everyday noise and safe from the aggressive invasion of the audiovisual universe, for which the omnipresent screens appearing in *Tokyo-Ga* are a clear metaphor. These locations look rather like Ozu's scenery, starting with the presence of the traditional Japanese house. It is a contrast evident throughout Wenders' film: modern city versus tradition and nature; the contemporary artificial images in opposition to Ozu's universe, replete with authenticity; in short, the Tokyo of today compared with the Tokyo of yesterday. These counterpoints are underlined by the music: percussive, metallic and sometimes dissonant when it accompanies the cold and superficial scenes and moments that reflect modern Japanese life, which are reduced to a melancholy *leitmotif*, which is repeated in the film's credits and in the fragments featuring its privileged interlocutors, Ryu and Atsuta, and which establishes a dialogue with the music in Ozu's *Tokyo Story*.

On the other hand, as noted above, the whole documentary is replete with reflections on cinema in general, and especially on the work of the Japanese filmmaker, reflections that Wenders spells out very clearly. An example of this is how the interview with his loyal collaborator Atsuta turns into a splendid lesson on his visual style and work methods. The last images of this conversation invite us, perhaps unintentionally, to reflect on the limits (which in my view are ethical limits) on what can be shown (alluding back to that mournful elegy on the agony and death of another filmmaker, his friend Nicholas Ray, that is *Lightning over Water*, [1980]), those boundaries that cannot be crossed without falling into obscene exhibitionism. How long can an image be maintained without creating an atmosphere that is unbearable for the spectator, and without being accused of a lack of discretion? This is the question that one asks after witnessing and participating in such a great display of

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intimacy, when one sees, close up and in a dramatic *crescendo*, how emotion begins to seize Atsuta and tears run down his face, while he evokes his "cinematic father", until finally he begs to be left alone, and the camera seems to hesitate as if it doesn't know where to go, and finally very timidly it rises slowly until the sorrowful Atsuta is off camera, a movement that ends with an abrupt scene cut. It seems as if we had entered the realm of melodrama. Immediately afterwards and without a break in continuity, this image links, as if trying to find a kinship with them, into the final images of *Tokyo Story*, melodramatic in nature and racked with melancholy[5], which also conclude Wenders' film, in a perfect, circular closure.

Epilogue

Although *Tokyo-Ga* is not as recognized as many others in his filmography, perhaps because it is a documentary or an essay film (situated in that vast and fertile territory of nonfiction), it has the unmistakable stamp of the Wenders universe: its images –as if they were taken from a moving car, in the rain, effects that recur so often in his films– are the result of the most powerful of his gazes. A gaze that is cast onto a landscape that plays an unquestionable leading role in the film: Tokyo, with Ozu's figure in the background (or perhaps in the foreground). And the gaze stops, captivated by the figure of a train, which is something he shares with Ozu, because according to

IT IS THE STORY OF A JOURNEY; IN THIS CASE, A JOURNEY TO A CITY –BUT ALSO THROUGH TIME, INTO THE PAST, IN SEARCH OF ONE OF THE GREATEST AND MOST DISTINGUISHED NAMES IN FILM HISTORY

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Wenders there isn't a single film in his filmography where at least one train doesn't appear. It is a powerful icon which in his films symbolically represents the medium that connects the traditional and the modern, although in *Tokyo-Ga* more than one critic has seen the trains passing one another incessantly in a constant and rhythmic motion as nothing more than beautiful multicolour serpents playing a hypnotic visual game before our eyes.

As I suggested earlier, this film is a travelogue (indeed, the film's subtitle is "a filmed diary by Wim Wenders"), and therefore marked by an intensely personal tone. This is confirmed by the German filmmaker's voice-over and its subjectivisation of the film's images, which, on the other hand, merely aim to show the more or less trite reality of Japan in the 1980s. These images often become pure visual fragments, the product of a gaze that questions its own position. Wenders himself declares at the beginning of the film: "If only it were possible to film like that [...] like when you open your eyes sometimes. Just to look, without wanting to prove anything". It is difficult to find a definition that better expresses the intentions of the film.

Wenders tries to recover the images of his idolised filmmaker, an operation that proves impossible, and in his failure he pays him a straightforward and emotive tribute. And as he does so, especially while filming the vestiges that come to life through the recollections of Ozu's two closest colleagues, he wanders around with his camera through a city that is nothing but layers of information, above all visual information, hypnotic movements (produced both by those metallic balls in the Pachinko arcades and by the countless golf balls hit day and night in enclosed courses) and an accumulation of television images, beginning with the image of John Wayne talking in Japanese in a John Ford western. In a surrealistic tour of a distant foreign culture (in spite of its relentless process of Westernization, or in some cases, paradoxically, because of it), the tireless traveller that is Wenders confronts the empire of signs that is Tokyo, behind which only emptiness is visible.

Through its images, sometimes fascinating, sometimes surprising but always gripping, *Tokyo-Ga*, like all of Wenders' films, speaks of desires and journeys taken to realise them: in this case, specifically, the desire to dive into the ashes of time in order to bear witness to the universe of Ozu, of his unique figure and his long legacy. Of trains and stations along the way, a primordial image in his films. Of cities and highways. Of change and movement. Of the image and its phantasmal character. Of the nature of film and its complex, paradoxical and ambiguous relationship with the world. Of memory and passage of time. Of solitude and its abysses. Of past lives that leave their marks and also their scars. And above all, through the echoes awakened by 'MU', *Tokyo-Ga* speaks of absence. ■

Notes

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1 The theme of travel, understood in a very broad sense, is primordial in Wenders' films. I have discussed this idea previously in the journal *Nosferatu,* and in the book *Paris, Texas* written with Antonio Santamarina.

2 See <htpp://www.wim-wenders.com>. For Wenders, the commentary should be heard in the language of each country (this does not include the interviews, etc., which are left in their original version). He dubbed the versions in French and English with his own voice, but was unable to do so with the Spanish version.

3 At the beginning of the eighties, Wenders lived in the United States, where, due to the hard and conflictive experience constituted by the interminable project of *Hammett* (1978-1982), he suffered a particularly tumultuous period that culminated with the exercise in self-exorcism that was *The State of Things* (1982). In this context of what might be described as professional crisis and creative reflection, and as the consequence of the crossroads at which he found himself, arose these documentary works, which were more than mere assignments.

4 There are other directors who have cultivated the travel genre in search of traces of a cinematic past, such as José Luis Guerín, who, in his fascinating work *Innisfree* (1990), travels to Ireland, to the mythical places where *The Quiet Man* (John Ford, 1952) was shot, to enter into a dialogue with John Ford's Homeric epic.

5 The first of these is a woman crying, which establishes a perfect visual and symbolic rhyme.

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