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# Playing with Postmodernism: Morita Yoshimitsu's Family Game

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# JAPANESE CINEMA: TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

*Edited by Alastair Phillips  
and Julian Stringer*

## PLAYING WITH POSTMODERNISM

Morita Yoshimitsu's *The Family Game* (1983)

Aaron Gerow

In most discourse on Morita Yoshimitsu's *The Family Game* (*Kazoku gēmu*, 1983), the title is emblematic, a metaphor for the family reduced to role playing in which individual worth becomes quantified in terms of class rankings. A seemingly average married couple, Mr and Mrs Numata (played by Itami Jūzō and Yuki Saori respectively), hires a tutor named Yoshimoto (Matsuda Yūsaku) to help their youngest son Shigeyuki (Miyagawa Ichirōta) with high school entrance examinations, as if all they care about is which school he can enter. The tutor, from a minor college himself, does succeed in getting the boy into a good school, but as if criticizing the family's, if not society's, hypocrisy, wreaks havoc upon the celebration party they put on. Communication ends in failure and relationships are rendered impersonal amid a strict social hierarchy, noisy consumerism, and a vacant industrial landscape. In this discourse, Morita becomes a biting social satirist, taking skilful jabs at contemporary Japan. There is, however, another discourse I would like to pursue that exists alongside this, one evident in these comments by the critic Ikui Eikō (1984: 38–9):

*The Family Game* is introduced as depicting the contemporary face of the family through the examination war in an ironically humorous manner. Yet themes that can be explained in words are, to Morita Yoshimitsu, no different from the ordinary plates they sell at the supermarket. What is really important in his films is the strange spice that has been added, the world of wry humor.

What Ikui implies is that the game here is not simply confined to the world of the characters, or to words themselves, perhaps because it extends to the cinematic sign itself and a certain take on (spicing of) the social critique it propounds. Maybe, one can say, it is not just the Numata family playing a game here, but Morita himself, a game that necessarily involves the audience as well.

This second discourse does not necessarily negate the first (e.g. by arguing that Morita is not truly a satirist), rather, it takes one step back and attempts to relocate this satire, asking what contexts are involved in defining or not

defining *The Family Game* as a critique. It is these contexts, I would contend, ones centered around 1980s Japan and a certain discursive engagement with postmodernism, that not only complicate interpretation of a text that itself questions interpretation, but also makes set contexts essential in its play of criticality. By combining an analysis of the often contradictory critical reception of the film, interviews by Morita, and other contexts brought to play in the film, with the text's own problematization of signification, we shall see that Morita's game, which extends far beyond *The Family Game*, plays with words and interpretations, framing the social critique just as that critique becomes the frame necessary for his game.

One of the central terms intersecting with the text and its game is 'post-modernism',<sup>1</sup> but observers differed over whether or not Morita was criticizing this state. Keiko McDonald (1989: 61), for instance, inserts the word in the title of her essay on the film, and focuses on the 'impersonal, competitive post-modern society' that she sees as criticized in the text. Citing Jean Baudrillard, Osabe Hideo (1984: 34) labels *The Family Game* the first film he has seen to 'specifically depict the structures of a society of sign consumption', in which reality is reduced to mere simulations. As with MacDonald, Osabe senses criticism in the film's stance: 'By inserting one strange invader or challenger into the family, the director depicts the dangers hidden beneath today's bright, white world with an eccentric style' (Osabe 1985: 20). Yet Osabe carefully refrains from asserting any intentionality – saying 'whether or not the author is conscious of it or not' – and claims as well, in a telling play of words, that if this is 'family as simulacrum', Morita's text itself is a 'simulation' (1984: 35).

The critic Kawamoto Saburō (1985), one of Morita's staunchest promoters, goes one step further to praise Morita less for his critique of postmodernity, than for his ability to (re)present it. Citing Morita's *oeuvre* in the context of Japanese cinema and culture, Kawamoto asserts that Morita stands out precisely because he presented a new cinema that represents a new age. If the celebrated Nikkatsu *roman poruno* (romance porn) of director Kumashiro Tatsumi (e.g. *Street of Joy* [*Akassen Tamanoi: nukeraremasu*], 1974; *The Woman with Red Hair* [*Akai kami no onna*], 1979) showed women tenaciously struggling at society's margins, Morita's *roman poruno* – *The Stripper of Rumor* (*Marubon: uwasa no sutorippā*, 1982) and *Pink Cut: Love Hard, Love Deep* (*Pinku katto: futoku aishite fukaku aishite*, 1983) – presented classless sex workers who happily ply their trade with none of the sweaty, physical presence of Kumashiro's heroines. If youth films of the 1960s and 1970s focused on angry, frustrated teens burning with hunger and desire, the three contented heroes in *Boys and Girls* (*Shibugakitai: bōizu to gāruzu*, 1982) lightly play truant in a brightly empty landscape. Thus if Japanese cinema of the 1970s was always 'full', piling on detail to represent a heavy reality of emotion and sensuality, Morita's minimal aesthetics of 'less' is satisfied with a light, abstract world. To Kawamoto, this 'transparency' is new to Japanese cinema and reflects a 'new sensibility' concomitant with what in contemporary discourse was called 'the new human species' (*shinjinrui*).

In an interview with Morita, Kawamoto tries to delineate *The Family Game* through this difference. He aligns Morita with new playwrights of the 'fake'

such as Noda Hideki and contrasts the film with the critically acclaimed 1970s television home dramas of Yamada Taichi: 'I think Yamada's world is a copy of reality whereas yours turns reality into a fiction' (Morita and Kawamoto 1983: 57). Kawamoto was not the only critic to make much of the Japanese title of Morita's 1981 35mm debut, *No yōna mono* (it means 'something like . . .'). An item in Morita's film is only 'like' what it is; not the actual thing, but only its simulacrum. To Kawamoto, everything in Morita's films from living spaces to the landscape seems designed, with the Numata house appearing like an unlive showroom dwelling.

Kawamoto does not fail to find criticality in the film, but asserts an approach fundamentally different from previous cinema. A teacher publicizing everyone's test scores and throwing the worst out the window would, in a 1970s social problem film, be condemned through shots of humiliated students, but here all the students enjoy this practice. It is Morita's 'theatrical space', Kawamoto argues, that 'is the best means of criticizing or nullifying today's examination system. Theatricalizing it in this way is better than treating it seriously' (Morita and Kawamoto 1983: 58). Nevertheless, Kawamoto (1985: 30-6) asserts that 'deep within Morita Yoshimitsu is a bright sense of emptiness, a sense that unified world principles have been lost'. Without values that are certain, 'Morita Yoshimitsu less delves into deep meaning than enjoys deforming, rearranging, mixing and mismatching a world that appears on the surface'. If this is the extent of his critique, then more than condemning postmodernity for 'decomposing human beings into "human beings"', 'Morita Yoshimitsu bravely and brightly enjoys that' (Ibid.).

The year of *The Family Game*'s release, 1983, was the cusp of the first wave of discourse on postmodernism in Japan. It was thus not unusual to see the film being taken up as a marker of the age by commentators in fields other than film criticism. Yoshimoto Takaaki (1985), one of the most influential post-war intellectuals, found in the film 'the skill and the strength to self-assert clearly in images the sense, fashion, and lifestyle of the contemporary world, announcing the coming of a new age'. The sociologist Mita Munesuke (1995: 28) used *The Family Game* to illustrate his three broad divisions in post-war Japanese social history. If Japanese before and during the high growth economy defined their reality first through 'ideals' and then through 'dreams', attempting to change reality according to those visions, in the post-high growth era, from the mid-1970s on, they no longer try to shape reality, but just remain content with reality as 'fiction' (*kyōkō*). To Mita, the Numatas' dining table, shaping a unidirectional gaze among family members, is not unrealistic, but rather 'accurately fixes the un-reality, the "un-naturalness" or fictionality of reality itself in an age where families now watch television when eating. The sociologist Sakurai Tetsuo (1983: 206-13), in delineating a similar epochal shift, groups Morita with writer Murakami Haruki and musician Sakamoto Ryūichi in a generation that, disillusioned by the radical student movement of the 1960s, came to distrust 'earnestness' (*omoiire*), if not meaning itself. He thus connects them to a culture-wide rejection of meaning, a celebration of meaninglessness, but one that still critiques, rather than simply rejecting, signification. The

problem to Sakurai, however, is that their audiences often mistake this critique for the utter rejection of meaning, thus giving corporate power or conservative ideology room to maneuver.

Not a few blamed Morita himself for commodifying characters and the body in the film. Many note the film's use of various signs to mark the characters: the father and his soy milk, the mother and her leatherwork, older brother Shin'ichi (Tsujita Jun'ichi) and his telescope. If Kawamoto cites this as an indication of people transformed into signs, Murakami Tomohiko (1984: 60-5) argues that these signs add little or nothing to the characters; they are mere information, a list of extras attached to a catalog of characters. Lining up these characters at the table is equivalent to the commodity catalogs central to 1980s consumer culture, turning, Murakami says, *The Family Game* into a counterpart of Japanese fashion magazines. This is possible because the signs of characters have become separated from their bodies. It is said that Morita's cinema empties the body of its physicality, so much so that Yamane Sadao (1993: 23-4) claims that *Kitchen* (1989) achieves the impossible of creating a 'plastic Ozu Yasujiro' in which the body itself has been expunged.

Whichever position one takes, it is clear that contemporary criticism, while celebrating *The Family Game* overall, was sometimes divided over whether the film was a critique of postmodernism, or rather embodied that condition. Morita's own statements on two primary images, the Numatas' table and the industrial landscape Shin'ichi sees from Mieko's window - both of which numerous critics have taken as critiques of contemporary society - only complicate matters. When Kawamoto remarks that the film depicts a young generation that, like Shin'ichi, can find beauty in such a landscape, Morita adds, 'I like it myself. I don't think it's empty at all' (Morita and Kawamoto 1983: 58) As for the table, the director admits, 'I like eating lined up side by side . . . I prefer it when there's no one facing me. I like it that way, and that's the only reason why [I used that table]' (Morita 1985: 61). While director's comments should always be viewed critically, especially with such a playful cineaste as Morita, they again complicate the process of fixing an interpretation of the text.

One of *The Family Game*'s fascinating aspects is that the issue of its own interpretation is anticipated or even doubled by its own thematic foregrounding of the problems of interpretation, if not of signification itself. Interpretation is frequently pursued by the characters and urged upon the spectator. The mother wants to know the meaning of everything, from Shigeyuki's silence while studying to his storming out of the apartment. The audience is also confronted with many conspicuous signs, such as the toy rollercoaster or the helicopter, which seem to demand elucidation. Yet just as these symbols are often hard to read, interpretation is shown to be a problem in the film. Yuriko (Kobayashi Asako), for instance, who has been shown in the film watching Shigeyuki in class, calls Shigeyuki stupid for interpreting her confession of love as a trick set up by Tsuchiya. On several instances, characters disagree on interpretations. For instance, after Shin'ichi expresses his envy of Mieko at being able to view the industrial landscape everyday, Mieko immediately follows with another interpretation: it's just 'ordinary' (*beibon*). These conflicting interpretations are

further complicated by our spatial unease during the scene. The strangeness of Mieko's home (the entrance seems to be in a department store; the living room, with its window showing mere color, is spatially ambiguous; and her room is reachable only by elevator) warps our own interpretation of the landscape as Shin'ichi's point of view. Later appearances of the same landscape divorced from a subjective structure further detach it from his vision.

Shigeyuki's prank of writing 'twilight' (*yūgure*) in his notebook is another moment complicating interpretation. Some commentators have attempted to connect the word to Shigeyuki's situation – for instance, his immanent 'long drawn-out purgatory' of exam hell (McDonald 1989: 62) – but the play of interpretation in the scene also deserves analysis. Shigeyuki's writing is presented in a combination of extreme close-up, shots of various landscapes colored by the setting sun, and a loud collage of sounds (the pencil, the bus, etc.). The rhythmic montage between the word and the landscape shots is practically a montage of association, as if the images presented are the definition or referent of the word. That reading is problematic, however. Not only is it impossible to visualize an abstract, inherently relational temporal concept as 'twilight' through mostly still images of specific objects, the images do not even fit some of the dictionary definitions of the Japanese term (which, for instance, stipulate that twilight is a period of time *after* sunset). The barrage of sound, literally grainy as the graphite scratches across the paper, reminds us, in Barthesian terms, of the 'grain of the voice' or, perhaps, the grain of the photographic image that refuses the confines of meaning. The tutor Yoshimoto tops off this complication of meaning by responding to the mother's query as to whether '*yūgure*' must mean something with, 'No, it's not that. It's just a prank'. He effectively declares that the word or action means nothing other than playfulness.

A further analysis of the scene reveals it to include an investigation of the processes of signification itself, especially in relation to repetition. Shigeyuki's act is a rejection of the principle of rote learning: that, by repeating a word often enough, one can fully grasp its meaning. He does facetiously declare at the end that he now has complete comprehension of *yūgure*, but his repetition, if not also the repeated montage we see, is essentially meaningless, tearing the signified away from the signifier. In some ways, his act is an assertion, one echoing the novels of Shimizu Yoshinori, that entrance examinations are not about meaning but rather about grasping the structure (the game) of signifiers. What is interesting is that Yoshimoto's act of slapping him is less a rejection of that assertion and a restatement of the centrality of meaning, than an alternative form of repetition. Repetition is one of the central devices in *The Family Game*, especially in the way a character is repeatedly tied with an object or action. In some cases, this creates significant structures, such as when the association of the soy milk with the father renders Yoshimoto's request for soy milk, after the mother asks him to report Shigeyuki's change of school preference, an ironic declaration that he has been made father of this family. Yoshimoto's act of slapping is a more playful, if not less meaningful, form of repetition. Certainly it has various functions in the film, denoting the tutor's otherness, contrasting with the mother's coddling, and foreshadowing the violent dinner scene, but its

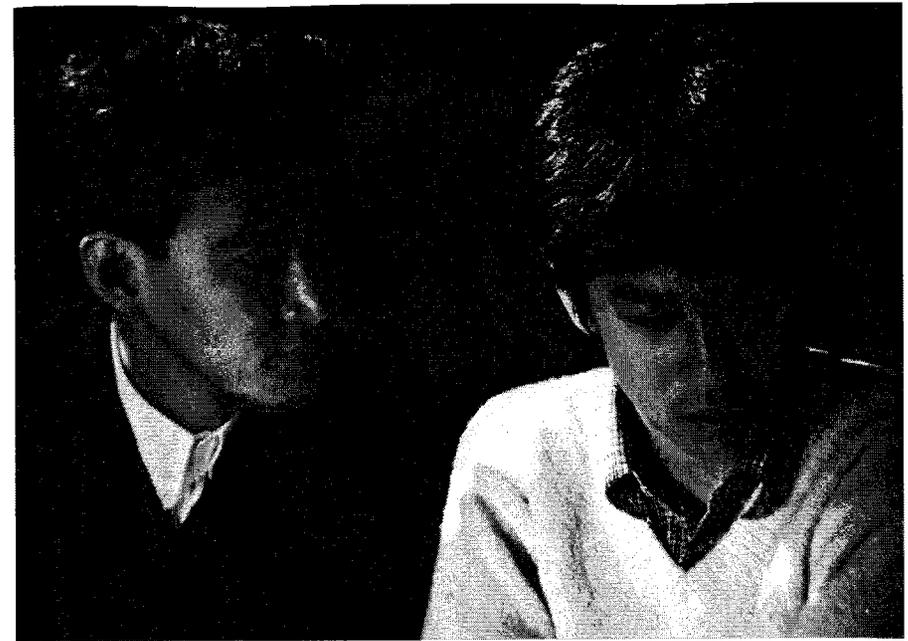


Figure 22 Breathing and slapping: Yoshimoto and Shigeyuki in *The Family Game* (1983). BFI Stills, Posters and Designs.

meaning has again been subject to conflicting interpretations, from McDonald's (1989) positive view of it as warm-hearted discipline to Marie Thorsten Morimoto (1994) locating it within the inherent violence of the knowledge system.

One must look more closely at how the slapping 'signifies' in the film. The slapping is unlike Shigeyuki's act of exact repetition, writing the same thing over and over again without variation. First, it is preceded by a curious action: Yoshimoto noisily breathing in through the nostrils. The breathing and the slapping become associated in the film, as if the breathing 'means' a slap is coming, but not through mere repetition. Shigeyuki is able to figure out this 'meaning' before the second act occurs, precisely because Yoshimoto's breathing was unusual; simply put, the extraordinariness of the act created a gap of meaning (the sense that it must mean something because it differs from the usual) which the slap then filled. This 'meaning' does not remain stable, however, precisely because Yoshimoto, and eventually Shigeyuki, do not exactly repeat it. They insert delays, feints, and other blows on subsequent occasions, playing with the meaning. The last act of slapping at the dinner table in fact takes place without Yoshimoto even breathing noisily. Seemingly these variations are not so much variations of meaning, as tricks to fool the opponent (which Yoshimoto uses to the full at the dinner table) and challenge their interpretation of the moment, if not the very act of trying to read meaning into actions themselves.

Significantly, *autourist* readings of Morita have focused on a similar 'slippage

(*zure*) from set formulae' (Murakami 1981: 62) as central to his playful filmmaking. Morita's humor, if not his filmmaking as a whole, is often termed 'off-beat'. He assumes or establishes a certain rhythm or structure, only to shift it slightly through twists and deformations. *The Family Game* abounds in such examples, from Shigeyuki gargling coffee to the parents having intimate talks in the car. The locus of these slippages is certainly the tutor, who can provide a catalog of eccentric actions and dialogue: touching the father's hand, blurting out 'I'm a tutor' when the subject of his dandruff comes up, eating an apple peel (rare among Japanese), and so on. Whether we consider the slippages in the film to be significant – functioning, for instance, as alienation devices that expose hidden norms – in part depends on how we read Yoshimoto's role in the film.

The tutor is without a doubt different, as discourse on the film has labeled him an 'alien', 'stranger', 'intruder', 'trickster', and 'challenger'. In directing his actors, Morita composed a precise 'résumé' for every central character except Yoshimoto; little is known about him or where he is from (only his girlfriend's apartment appears in the film). He is seemingly from another world, traveling to the Numatas' home by boat and insisting, in a *gesellschaft* society where people are defined by apartment numbers, on a *gemeinschaft* where everybody knows each other's name. One can argue that he is alien even to the society of signs. When asked by Shigeyuki to read the beginning of *Narrow Road to Oku*, a classical Japanese text, he does not get it wrong, but reads the old usage of *kana* letters as is (e.g. *kuwakaku* or *kwakaku*) instead of transforming them into modern pronunciation (*kakaku*). Several commentators have noted how, especially in his ambiguous sexual actions (assuming roles both maternal and paternal, both heterosexual and homosexual), he appears to cross borders and transgress social or sexual roles (see Osabe 1985; Knee 1991; Morimoto 1994).

One is still left with the question of his significance or criticality. Adam Knee's (1991: 45) reading is rather unequivocal, seeing in Yoshimoto the 'denial and defiance of the context and values of the Numatas' lives', but one can argue that that is truer of the original novel than of the film. In Honma Yōhei's work (1984), Yoshimoto is eccentric, but more serious and goal-oriented than in the film. His stated aim is to fashion the stuttering, drooling, and smirking Shigeyuki into an individual who expresses his own opinion, acts upon it, and defeats others in a competitive society. It is precisely because he has this clear goal that the tutor declares defeat at the end: there is no violent dinner scene, but rather the realization, after the necessity of reporting Shigeyuki's preference to the school, that his efforts have come to naught. His thoughts are much clearer in the novel because of his close relationship with Shin'ichi, who is the narrator in Honma's version. Shin'ichi shares Yoshimoto's critical perspective on the family, and in fact provides considerable analysis as to why the family is malfunctioning. He is the enlightening consciousness in the novel, albeit a tragic one, knowing full well why this family is defective, yet being unable to act against it.

In the novel, Shin'ichi is much like the camera of classical cinema, constantly using lenses to observe people with an analytical perspective that discerns their thoughts and emphasizes narratively important actions. Morita's film exchanges

this camera for one that is more detached, playing up the ambiguities of figures such as Yoshimoto by downplaying questions concerning his goals and thoughts. Just as the tutor appears to take different sides, first helping Shigeyuki pass his examinations and then attacking the family, Morita's camera does not restrict itself to one perspective, but playfully varies it. Not a few observers have remarked on the flatness of the film's space, especially the frontality of the shots of the dining table. But the dinner table is in fact shown in a variety of ways: from the side, in a diagonal forward track, in a low-angle circular camera movement, using inner frames, and finally in a high-angle crane shot. This is the same kind of playful repetition that Yoshimoto teaches Shigeyuki. Thus to Aoki Makoto (1983: 64–5), if 'Morita Yoshimitsu neither condemns nor laments this "something like a family"', it is in part because he 'sends in an unknown, invader-like tutor' who just 'exposes, disturbs, and then leaves'.

Aoki and others still perceive a critical function for Yoshimoto amid this ambiguity, but it is a criticality tempered by its function in the film and its context. Consider, for instance, the place of the critical in Morita's career. Frankly, Morita never lived up to expectations that he would become the new social satirist of Japanese cinema. While *Keiho* (39: *Keihō dai-sanjūkyū-jō*, 1999) is a social problem film and *Copycat Killer* (*Mobōhan*, 2002) and the 'You Idiot' (*Baka yarō!*) series parody society in their excess, most of his work consists of romances and commercial star vehicles that have received little critical praise. Morita himself strongly shunned such labels as satirist, proclaiming himself the 'robot of the Japanese film world' who not only does not have his 'own world', but who is also 'nothing' – 'I myself don't exist' (Morita 1983: 120–1). In his own discourse, *The Family Game* was another in his 'catalog' of films, one aimed at awards and one that helped him make his infamous declaration, through advertisements he took out in film magazines in 1984, that he was a 'pop director' (*ryūkō kantoku*). From an *auteurist* perspective, Morita is best seen as a filmmaker carrying the formal experimentation of his 8mm days into commercial cinema. His camera or sound style can shift significantly from film to film, from the long takes of *And Then* (*Sorekara*, 1985) to the digital collages of *Copycat Killer*. If *The Black House* (*Kuroi ie*, 1999) explores the line between horror and comedy, *Haru* (1996) investigates the extent to which written words can compose a film. Perhaps Morita is like Yoshimoto himself, repeating his stylistic experiments, but in a cinematic game of feints that throws his viewers off balance.

This repetition, however, can be connected to what the philosopher Nibuya Takashi (1999), in referring to 1980s Japan, calls the 'age of repetition'. If the decade of the 1970s was the era of change, the 1980s was born of the growing realization that nothing was really different despite all the variation. Repetition was its own trap, but it also freed one of the need to change, and thus artists such as musician Matsutōya Yumi, Sakamoto Ryūichi – and perhaps Morita Yoshimitsu – succeeded by masterfully manipulating variation within a repetition of the same. *The Family Game* ends with nothing changed, a conclusion that can be read as pessimistic, but that also confirms that 'slippages' in the film depend upon an unchanging structure. The game of slaps provides excitement

precisely because there is a basic form through which the variations can be read; even if Shigeyuki might be trying to change that form – by getting the last slap – Yoshimoto leaves before that happens, ensuring that the structure remains unchanged. One can also say that Yoshimoto rejects Shigeyuki's facetious test answers because that game goes beyond the limits, undermining the function of a test itself, rather than playing within its boundaries (which is what Yoshimoto seems to prefer). The question is whether any of Morita's slippages twist the structure enough to bring it down. Certainly writers such as Murakami do not think so, nor does Suzuki Hitoshi (1984), who astutely indicates one of the film's central contradictions. If it is satire, he says, it is so because it pokes fun at the 'weak circle' of the family. But the concept 'family', Suzuki argues, is inherently unrepresentable in cinema (even if one can manage to get actors with actual familial resemblance). The family Morita creates to criticize the family is then already a 'weak circle' itself; his satire is insufficient because it assumes or copies what it is out to condemn.

This assumption of a framing structure in satirical play reminds us of Asada Akira's (1989: 273–8) description of infantile capitalism. In criticizing postmodernism in 1980s Japan, Asada argues that the childlike play of Japan's capitalism of purely relative competition still necessitates an aegis protecting the children as they play. He suggests that this is the emperor system (echoing Karatani Kōjin's argument that Japanese postmodernism never deconstructed such structures as the emperor), but with *The Family Game* we can also call this the 'family' or even 'criticality'. These are some of the main structures that allow Morita (or Yoshimoto) to play his own games; they set the framework against and also within which variations can be made. This gets to the heart of one of the central ambivalent terms in the text: the game. To many critics, it is the game (as family) that is being criticized in the film, but this elides the status of the film's own games. Morita's game, I would argue, depends on the critical equation of the family with the game, both so that that assertion can be played with, and also so that games can be pursued amid the protection of a fixed structure. Both Morita and Kawamoto (1983; cf. Morita and Tsukushi 1984: 43–7) argued that *The Family Game* demanded new forms of film criticism, ones that went beyond the then prevalent demand for critical realism, but the film skillfully provides fodder for such a demand, while also engaging in the cinematic play that would enthrall the new generation of critics raised by Hasumi Shigehiko, Yamane Sadao, and others.

*The Family Game* deftly weaves between being called a socially critical text and an exercise in mere commodified play. Morita's game, one that extends into contexts of reception and criticism, encompasses both these discourses and encourages the audience to play with the tension between alternative interpretations. For despite the film's problematization of interpretation, it actively encourages spectator input in the text. This is evident in the use of sound. Although *The Family Game* features no music track, it is an extremely musical film, and not simply because of its rhythmicity: music is repeatedly cited in the text, from Doris Day's 'Teacher's Pet' to Togawa Jun (an eccentric rock singer who plays the neighbor), from Aki Yōko (a famous singer-songwriter

who appears as Yoshimoto's girlfriend) to Oscar Peterson's rendition of *My Fair Lady*. When the mother and Shin'ichi listen to Peterson's album, and all we hear is silence, Morita is establishing both a model for spectator involvement (i.e. we supply the music) and an alternative to all the sounds that invade every space in the film.

This playful use of silence and music is in some ways the lesson Morita offers us in the film. Remember that Shigeyuki's act of rote repetition was, in his words, a way of 'making a boring time enjoyable'. This is his means of coping with the postmodern era, but Yoshimoto rejects it. His lesson – really the only thing he teaches Shigeyuki in the film – is the more enjoyable game of adding one's shifts and feints into the repetition. Nothing really changes, but this game is one of those 'certain kinds of know-how' that Morita mentions, a way of 'switching the tensions and rhythms of life' that he puts into his films as an offering for young people (Morita and Tsukushi 1984: 43–7). In these terms, Morita's game of variation and repetition is an attempt to provide the postmodern equivalent of Miriam Hansen's vernacular modernism (2000: 12), a 'horizon in which both the liberating impulses and the pathologies of [here post]modernity were reflected . . . transmuted or negotiated'. Neither a complete celebration nor a rejection of postmodernity, *The Family Game* posits a playfulness beyond its textuality that, for better or worse, may have been one possible way of coping with postmodern Japan.

#### Note

- 1 Defining the term 'postmodernism' is difficult, given not only the debates over its meaning in Europe and the US, especially over whether it represents the radical undermining of the Enlightenment's grand narratives and myths of subjectivity and meaning or instead consumer capitalism's ultimate rendering of reality into a simulation composed of pastiche without parody, but also the problems in applying the concept to a non-Western nation such as Japan which lacks an Enlightenment or a similar experience of modernity. The book *Postmodernism and Japan* (Miyoshi and Harootunian 1989) discusses these problems in detail. Critics who used the term in reference to *The Family Game* exhibited these same problems and rarely used the concept with precision. What is important here is that they generally used the term to denote a new attitude toward the filmic image, one different from the past and ambivalently related to the creation of political meaning and commodity culture.

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### Morita Yoshimitsu Filmography

#### 8mm films

- POSI-? (1970, 20 min.)
- Hex (1970, 3 min.)
- Sky (1970, 3 min.)
- Film (Eiga, 1971, 40 min.)
- Seaside (1971, 3 min.)
- Eating (1971, 3 min.)

- Midnight (1971, 5 min.)
- Light (1971, 15 min.)
- Mother (1971, 3 min.)
- Weather Report (Tenki yobō, 1971, 30 min.)
- Nude (1971, 3 min.)
- Film (1971, 3 min.)
- Telephone (Denwa, 1971, 5 min.)
- The Art of Perspective (Enkinjutsu, 1972, 90 min.)
- Physical Check-up (Kenkō shindan, 1972, 20 min.)
- Industrial Belt (Kōjō chitai, 1972, 35 min.)
- Tokyo Suburban Belt (Tōkyō kinkō chitai, 1973, 35 min.)
- Painting Class (Kaiga kyōshitsu, 1974, 30 min.)
- Girl's Taste (Shōjo shumi, 1974)
- The Steam Express (Suijōki kyūkō, 1976, 80 min.)
- Live in Chigasaki (Raibu in Chigasaki, 1978, 85 min.)

#### 35mm films

- Something Like Yoshiwara (No yōna mono, 1981)
- Boys and Girls (Shibugakitai: bōizu to gāruzu, 1982)
- The Stripper of Rumor (Maruhon: uwasa no sutorippā, 1982)
- Pink Cut: Love Hard, Love Deep (Pinku katto: futoku aishite fukaku aishite, 1983)
- The Family Game (Kazoku gēmu, 1983)
- The Third-Year Affair (Sannenme no uwaki, 1983)
- Deaths in Tokimeki (Tokimeki ni shisu, 1984)
- Main Theme (Mein tēma, 1984)
- And Then (Sorekara, 1985)
- All For Business' Sake (Sorobanzuku, 1986)
- House of Wedlock (Ubohho tankentai, 1986)
- You Idiot! I'm Mad (Baka yarō! Watashi, okottemasu, 1988)
- Love and Action in Osaka (Kanashii iro ya nen, 1988)
- Man of 24 Hours (Ai to Heisei no iro-otoko, 1989)
- Kitchen (Kitchin, 1989)
- You Idiot! 2: I Want to Be Happy (Baka yarō! 2: Shiawase ni naritai, 1989)
- You Idiot! 3: Strange Guys (Baka yarō! 3: Henna yatsura, 1990)
- Happy Wedding (Oishii kekkon, 1991)
- You Idiot! 4: You! I'm Talking about You (Baka yarō! 4: You! Omae no koto da yo, 1991)
- Last Christmas (Mirai no omoide: Last Christmas, 1992)
- I've No License! (Menkyo ga nai!, 1994)
- Haru (Haru, 1996)
- Lost Paradise (Shitsurakuen, 1997)
- You Alone Can't See (Kiriko no fūkei, 1998)
- Keihō (39: Keihō dai-sanjūkyū-jō, 1999)
- The Black House (Kuroi ie, 1999)
- Colorful (Karafuru, 2000)
- Copycat Killer (Mohōhan, 2002)

*You Idiot! V: What's Bad About Sexy?* (*Baka yarō! V: Etchi de warui ka*, 1994)

*You Idiot! V 2: I'm a Problem* (*Baka yarō! V 2: Watashi, mondai desu*, 1994)

As actor

*Tokyo Biyori* (*Tōkyō biyori*, 1997)

*Sleepless Town* (*Fuyajō: Sleepless Town*, 1998)

## TRANSGRESSION AND RETRIBUTION

Yanagimachi Mitsuo's *Fire Festival* (1985)

*Donald Richie*

*Fire Festival* (*Himatsuri*, 1985) is a film about transgression and retribution, about nature revenging itself upon destructive modern man. At the same time, as its director Yanagimachi Mitsuo has often stated, the film is not about ecology. This is not a paradox. Yanagimachi is observing life as it is, not as it ought to be. Mankind and the natural world are opposed because man must live off it and hence despoil it. Ecological concerns are feeble in the face of this fact. Saving the earth is possible only through the eradication of an overweening mankind so therefore the central theme of Yanagimachi's film is the necessity of a personified nature killing the transgressive protagonist and his entire brood.<sup>1</sup>

Before making *Fire Festival*, Yanagimachi noted that his previous films were similarly about the opposition between person and environment. The unconstrained biker in *God Speed You, Black Emperor* (1976) pollutes wherever he is; the violent newspaper-boy in *A Nineteen Year Old's Map* (*Jūkyūsai no chizu*, 1979) plans enormous destruction; and the junkie trucker in *A Farewell to the Land* (*Saraba itoshiki daichi*, 1982) shoots up in the desert he has made of the countryside. Though none of them slaughters his family (the trucker merely murders his wife) they are all pictured as possessed. In the absence of any further evidence, these protagonists could be seen as possessed merely in the sense of being psychologically disturbed. But in *Fire Festival*, Yanagimachi supplies the required evidence – the possession is literal in that the protagonist is taken over. After we have witnessed the appearance of nature as a deity in the film, we can no longer believe in mere psychological disturbance.

Yanagimachi has also argued that there are similar 'irrational elements which now seem to have been something on the order of the divine' in his other films.<sup>2</sup> In *God Speed You, Black Emperor* there are supernatural scenes of the mother's new religion; in *A Nineteen Year Old's Map* there are long, preternatural sunrises and paranoid hallucinations; and in *A Farewell to the Land* there is the eclipse of the sun, the mysterious death of the little boys and their supposed resuscitation through the shaman. In making *Fire Festival*, however, Yanagimachi wanted to develop the relationship between nature and man further, and so he added