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Japanese Postmodernism, Infantile Capitalism and the Family Unit in Yoshimitsu Morita's *The Family Game* (1983)

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Study of Yoshimitsu Morita's 1983 film The Family Game *(家族ゲーム) has long focused on the film's criticism of the middle-class nuclear family of 1980s Japan through searing satire. Marking the end of postwar politics and new economic heights, the 1980s brought with it the need to redefine and reify central concepts such as the family, and educational excellence became one of the lines of reference. Caught up in the educational rat race, the film's Numata family make efforts to project the illusion of family without meaningful connection to one another. Building upon previous analyses of satire and the family in the film, this article applies postmodern theorist Akira Asada's concept of infantile capitalism to analyse the intersection of the film's economic context with the family structures it criticises. Asada's theory of infantile capitalism outlines the economic mode of 1980s Japan as mimicking familial social structures in its attitude towards both work and social hierarchies. Through a close reading of* The Family Game*, this article argues that the criticisms levied by the film at the Japanese middle class family's obsession with education is part of a larger conversation with the postmodern paradigm and the very definition of the family. The trends criticized by the film and theorists of the 1980s did not stop with the end of the decade but instead continued, highlighting this moment in time as pivotal to understanding the continued intersection between family and education in Japan.*

Described by critic Takaaki Yoshimoto as "announcing the arrival of a new era ("新しい時代の到来を告知していた"; 207; my trans.), Yoshimitsu Morita's genre bending 1983 film *The Family Game* (*家族ゲーム*) speaks to the specific milieu of 1980s Japan and the consolidation of a very particular ideal of family growing in the popular consciousness of the time. As implied by the title, the film revolves around the arrival of the tutor Yoshimoto, whose presence exposes family as a game that the Numatas play at. Coinciding with the first wave of postmodern discourse in Japan (Gerow 242) and the publication of Akira Asada's popular book, *Kōzō to Chikara* (*Structures and Power*), the film's tale of the Numata family uses absurdity and humour to both reflect the historical contexts of production and to comment on them, particularly the subject of family and its ties to education. The concept of

family is always historically and culturally contingent, defined by the socio-political headwinds of a particular moment. In 1980s Japan, a postmodern paradigm in which meaning is increasingly fragmented and older narratives no longer hold the same weight, saw the concept of the family grasping for new meaning. The intersection throughout the '80s of the economic growth of the Bubble period, a national campaign of education designed to surpass Western countries, and a normative nuclear family structure became formative influences on the development of the postmodern family. Thematically, *The Family Game* criticises the middle-class nuclear family of the 1980s at the micro level for its fabricated, alienating nature, which is a function of the economic paradigm of 1980s Japan as laid out by Asada's concept of infantile capitalism. Using infantile capitalism as a theoretical lens, this paper will argue that education as represented in *The Family Game* fragments the Numata family, effectively critiquing the structure of the 1980s Japanese nuclear family unit and its successive structures. To begin, this paper will outline Asada's theory of infantile capitalism and how it is replicated within the Numata family in *The Family Game*. This will be followed by a brief description of the film's plot to contextualize my close reading of the text, which analyses the father, the mother and, finally, Yoshimoto (the tutor) in relation to infantile capitalism, illustrating the film's criticism of normative family goals in this era.

Family as Paradigm: Postmodernity and Consumption in 1980s Japan

Family in the 1980s can be understood not only as a set of biological and social relationships between individuals but as a consumptive unit, an economic model, and the producer of new Japanese citizens in a deviation from previous individual-nation relations. Understanding this emerging conceptualization of family requires situating the legacy of wartime Japan in relation to postmodern and present-day understandings.

The culture of 1980s Japan was greatly influenced by the economic bubble it was experiencing, creating a large group of consumers looking to spend, and the failures of both the 1960s student movements and the 1970 Anpo Security Protests (over the US-Japan Security Treaty), which reduced widespread political activism. The Japanese Government, having succeeded in separating economics from political discourse in the 1960s (Smith 369), characterized the youths of the 1980s as decidedly apolitical, channelling their energies into

consumerism (Amano 48). The apogee of 1980s consumerism coincided with what was dubbed "the final settlement of postwar politics" (Amano 2). At a far enough temporal distance from the war, the nation's international image began to evolve beyond one of a vanquished former aggressor; this was a change that was especially pertinent in a landscape that had been shifted by increasingly available technologies and intensifying international flows of capital. The end of its postwar reputation also precipitated the question of how Japan was to define itself in this new era.

With this departure from the narrative of national recovery and the shift in the perception of socio-economic distribution came attempts to redefine nation and the pathways to ideal citizenship – including the role family had to play in both functions. In 1986, Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone gave a speech to the Liberal Democratic Party. During this speech, he took a rambling turn across time and the globe, trying to piece together a diachronic narrative of Japanese excellence springing from literacy, based on Tadao Umesao's theory of Japanese parallel development (Ivy 22). Nakasone, who took power in 1982, was seeking a definition of Japanese identity that could hold up under the scrutiny of the era now that the old national paradigm had seemingly been put to rest. If, as Jean Lyotard asserts, the postmodern is characterised by "incredulity towards metanarratives" (xxiv), with metanarrative understood as an overarching organizing principle for smaller narratives, then Nakasone's remarks can be interpreted as a reaction to the undermining of the nation as a metanarrative and part of a search for how to construct a new subjectivity (*shutaisei*). Wartime understandings of the subject in relation to the national body (*kokutai*) were disrupted and the nuclear family unit arose to take the place of the nation in orienting space within Japanese society. The educational superiority and literary tradition that Nakasone attempted to connote with his new conceptualization of Japanese identity was the priority of this orienting family unit, despite the anachronic nature of such an assertion. Lacan's schizophrenia, as interpreted by Frederic Jameson in defining the postmodern, is useful here. In simple terms, the Lacanian schizophrenic no longer understands the signifying chain and their world erodes into fragments of unconnected signifiers, a linguistic slippage that keeps the schizophrenic in an eternal present, unable to comprehend their own historicity (Jameson 72). Synthesizing Lyotard and Jameson for the purposes of this paper, I define the postmodern as a state of fragmentation and discontinuity that is the direct result of challenging old

metanarratives. The constitution of meaning out of such fragmentation is a complimentary and integral pursuit under this paradigm but the effect of such disconnection means that what arises in the place of the old metanarratives does not have to be coherent or truthful (i.e., fictional). In this way, the so-called educational or literary superiority posited by Umesao's parallel development theory is a present moment projected onto the fragments of the past in order to try and make sense of the postmodern subject in the present. The 1980s Japanese nuclear family was recruited for the purposes of this enterprise, rewriting the past both metaphorically, in its attempt to produce educated children, and literally, in its standardisation of education.

Education as a point of differentiation at both the national and familial level is part of a larger 1980s social trend in which Japanese superiority was defined by its ability to be different (Bernier 110). In analysing Nakasone's speech, Marilyn Ivy argues that it exhibits the ahistorical trans-geographical delirium defined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* in its attempt to define a specific and competitive Japan of the current age (22–23). The "consumption of knowledge", as Ivy puts it, and the establishment of Japan as an educated society become key points in the inscription of the Japanese subject as proscribed by the Government – an institution no longer confronted en masse by politicised youths. It is this nationally enforced zeal for standardised education that *The Family Game* interrogates and which is a central concept in Akira Asada's economic figuring of the period.

Most relevant to this study of *The Family Game* is Asada's linkage of the postmodern philosophies of the 1980s and 1930s and his concept of Japanese infantile capitalism. Both of these discourses reflect the intersection of ideology and economics with family during the 1980s. Asada draws parallels between the 1980s postmodernism and the 1930s *kindai no chōkoku* (overcoming modernity) nationalist discourse (Yamamoto 116). The discourses of the 1930s conceived of Japan in a series of binary oppositions such as West/non-West, colonised/coloniser and modern/premodern, creating a position which would have allowed Japan to integrate these discourses into a pan-Asian empire (Yamamoto 116). Greatness in education can then be measured in a 'Japan/the rest of the world' paradigm as well as at a more individualistic level, the prestige reflecting back onto the individual family unit. Similarly, in the 1980s, the economic, technological, and cultural domination of Japan across Asia revived these *kindai no chōkoku* discourses (Yamamoto 116). Nakasone's speech is an

example of this resurgence, positioning Japan in opposition to the West. Asada notes in particular the resurgent applicability of Kitaro Nishida's "place of nothingness" ("mu no basho"; 276; my trans.) philosophy in Bubble Japan. The *mu* Nishida refers to is an empty "transcendental center *[sic]*" (Asada 277), which replaces contradiction with peaceful and atemporal subsumption. Under Nishida's historical construction, the ultimate empty centre is the emperor; Asada proposes the manager or company as the Bubble era equivalent (276-7). The passive centre of the company is an integral part of Asada's Japanese infantile capitalism, a centre that gets replicated in the middle-class nuclear family's home.

Borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari, Asada defines three stages of global capitalist trajectory: elderly capitalism, adult capitalism, and infantile capitalism. "Elderly capitalism" is a system developed in places that already had transcendental value systems with a centralised subject (king, God, etc.) against which the individual locates themself to find value (Asada 274). Industrial "adult capitalism" is where transcendental value is held by entrepreneurs whose actions determine economic flows, creating a system of relative competition wherein everyone competes with their neighbours, a competition that becomes internalised against the self (Asada 274). It is this competition with the self that creates the subject under adult capitalism. Asada's argument is that Japan has not reached the point of internalising competition with the self, remaining "other-oriented" and in a state of relative competition; in other words, Japan's relationship to production aligns with infantile capitalism (Asada 275). The 'children' of infantile capitalism require a protected space for play (i.e., work), one not structured by strict hierarchy but a centreless place that at least appears to be horizontally organized (Asada 276). Returning to Asada's reading of Nishida's *mu no basho*, the company becomes the place of nothingness in which to play.

Asada goes a step further and locates a similar empty place of protection within the home: the Japanese family exists within a space of maternal *amae* (indulgence/dependence), which the mother is forced to provide for her husband and children (276). Later, this role will be examined in the context of Mrs. Numata. Beginning in the 1960s, the government espoused the idea that women, as good wives, should take care of their husbands so their focus could exclusively be on the company; as good mothers, they should prepare their children for education (Bernier 112). Shuttled from protected space to protected space – school to home, home to work – there is no need to become an 'adult'. The same economic

spread throughout Asia that prompted the connection to the 1930s discourses de-incentivised the progression from 'infant' to 'adult' (Asada 277-8). Education becomes a primary concern of the urban, middle class family unit because, unlike the rural, trade-based intergenerational families of the recent past, they have no land or means of production to pass down to their descendants (McDonald 138). Under the post-1947 employee recruitment strategy, young people are headhunted straight out of university by prospective employers, with the understanding that they will remain with the company until retirement; special consideration is given to the graduates of top universities (Rohlen 87). A good job, economic stability, social status, and respect are the result of a good education, therefore Japanese parents are concerned about adversely affecting their child's education (Rohlen 78, 81). Education becomes a national and familial concern, defining not only the individual subject but the nation as well. Family mirrors company and company mirrors nation in the construction of the protected space for infantile subjects, where all conflict is subsumed into an ahistorical and apathetic affect. *The Family Game* interrogates these intersections between family, education, and society in the Japanese postmodern era.

Reproducing Infantile Capitalism in *The Family Game*

The Family Game revolves around the academic triumphs (and disappointments) of older brother Shinichi and younger brother Shigeyuki. Mr. and Mrs. Numata, worried that Shigeyuki's poor grades and low interest in academics will effect his upcoming high school entrance exams, hire a tutor, the university student Yoshimoto, whose no-nonsense style of discipline eventually convinces Shigeyuki to apply himself. However, Shigeyuki is still reluctant to aim for Seibu High School, where his parents want him to attend. Meanwhile, Shinichi, the 'good' child, is left relatively unattended and eventually starts skipping school and develops a crush on a girl, which he fails to act on. Shigeyuki achieves the marks needed to attend Seibu and, to celebrate, the family has a dinner party. Seemingly fed up with Mr. Numata and the request to now tutor Shinichi, Yoshimoto starts a food fight and upends the table. The film ends with Shigeyuki, now at Seibu High School, having stopped applying himself once again. Broadly speaking, Morita's film centres on the dysfunction of a specific urban nuclear family and its symbiotic relationship to the pursuit of education.

The dysfunction of the family unit and the individual's inability to find purpose or connection is explicitly framed as a result of participating in the 'family game', a damning criticism of the structure of infantile capitalism that it replicates. The pursuit of education is repeatedly constructed as singular in purpose: achieving the grades necessary to go on to a good high school, to then go on to a good university, to then secure a position at a good company. It is a large-scale replication of the middle-class nuclear family structure. Aaron Gerow argues that just as the framing structure of a protected place facilitates the 'play' of infantile capitalism, so too does Morita play within the structures of film and satire (248). *The Family Game* does not strive for total realism; its criticisms of the structures it depicts lies in the slippages between the real and the constructed. Munesuke Mita classifies the 1980s as the age of fiction ("虚構"; 27; my trans.), an apropos title considering the creative anachronism Nakasone's speech and the fictive game that family becomes. In his discussion of *The Family Game*, Mita argues that though the film centres on the family, arguably one of the last sites of the "substantial" or "meaning" in contemporary society, the film subjects it to the fictionalising power of the time (27–28). However, it is through this fictionalising gaze that the critique of real world familial and economic structures is made. Morita uses the Numatas to show the failure of the postmodern paradigm to produce meaningful subjects.

Mr. Numata, played by Juzo Itami, is a peripheral figure. He exists at mealtimes and late nights but is otherwise fairly abstracted from the day to day of raising the boys, a pattern of behaviour that continued in salarymen long past the 1980s (Nakatani 94). The most significant role he takes in raising his children is to engage Yoshimoto as a tutor, promising him a bonus for Shigeyuki's grades going up (*The Family Game* 6:40). Through formal techniques, Morita links Mr. Numata to motifs of infantility in the home. The first motif arrives with the beginning of the film credits. Mr. Numata is introduced sucking on the runny yolks of two sunny-side eggs (*The Family Game* 1:08). His preference for vaguely breast shaped eggs is one he expects his wife to already know, berating her when his eggs are cooked too long and he cannot slurp them in a later scene (*The Family Game* 1:11:55). Aside from eating, he bathes in the womb-like atmosphere of the bathtub, sucking on a carton of soy milk (*The Family Game* 32:48). The milk and the tub are two other motifs that reinforce his childlike image. His expectation for Shigeyuki and Shinichi to do well are in part a comparison to his own successes (McDonald 141–42) – an adherence to the other-oriented competition of infantile capitalism – as well as

a source of narrative conflict. Despite this, he takes very little real responsibility for the family. His limited communication is always done side by side with other characters, he never faces them head-on (Maeda 22). He is happy to reap the social benefits of the family facade as long as it does not infringe on his enjoyment of the protected home space. Mr. Numata is the quintessential worker under Japanese infantile capitalism, returning to the protected space of the family and the indulgent atmosphere Mrs. Numata is expected to create.

Mrs. Numata is indulgent with her children and her husband but it is a detached sort of indulgence rooted in conflict avoidance. In one of the earliest scenes, Shigeyuki fakes being sick to avoid taking a test and Mrs. Numata allows him to stay home despite her clear understanding that he is faking (*The Family Game* 2:08). She avoids conflict and maintains the protected space but it appears to be as much for her own benefit as for her family's. The degree to which she willingly fosters this dynamic is ambiguous. In the most intimate scene between the parents, they sit side by side in the car not making eye contact as they discuss the logistics of the family. Mrs. Numata wonders aloud why they were in such a hurry to have children and Mr. Numata responds that there was no helping it because she became pregnant (*The Family Game* 50:05). Moreover, Mrs. Numata shows far more interest in her hobby of leatherworking or reminiscing about a film she saw with Mr. Numata while they were engaged – before the boys were born – than in her children (*The Family Game* 20:39; 40:06). She is tied so completely to the apartment that she is only shown outside of it seated in the building's parking lot inside of the family's car and at a parent-teacher conference to confirm Shigeyuki's choice of high school (*The Family Game* 1:11:24). This scene, too, shows her ambivalence as she has very little idea of what schools are 'good' or 'bad'. She ends up naming Jingu High, where Shigeyuki has expressed interest in going to escape his bully, over Seibu High, where his father wants him to attend.

Mrs. Numata performs poorly at the role of *kyoiku mama* (education mother), whose responsibility of educating her child is intrinsically tied to her identity as a mother; neglect of this duty is unthinkable under this paradigm (Rice 87). Rather than taking responsibility for her mistake, she asks the tutor Yoshimoto to go fix the mistake as he drinks the father's soy milk (*The Family Game* 1:22:55-1:24:30). Under infantile capitalism, Mrs. Numata's role in the family is to provide them with *amae* or an indulgent dependence in the home space. Any responsibility extending beyond that is one that she would rather push on to others. Despite

the focus put on the education of her children, her interest in it is subordinate to her interest in things unrelated to her role in the family, only going as far as delivering snacks while Shigeyuki studies. By making her "notably ineffective" (McDonald 142) and uninterested in teaching her children to be capable adults, Morita criticises the parental paradigm that infantile capitalism necessitates to perpetuate itself. Mrs. Numata's coddling and her indifference produce a tension between the effect of the *amae* space and the desired result (e.g., capable adults).

The figure of Yoshimoto serves to further highlight the insufficiencies of the family facade. As noted by Keiko McDonald and Hisanori Maeda, Yoshimoto parallels the hero of the Western film – a stranger rolling into town and upending the situation, only to resolve it and leave – though rather than resolution, Yoshimoto instead leaves only questions behind him (143; 26). Yoshimoto is an opaque character; the audience is only shown his girlfriend's apartment and told that he attends an unimpressive university. He is a liminal figure on the cusp of transitioning out of the educational conveyor belt but due to the lack of information about him, it is uncertain where that will take him. His assumption of an educational role in tutoring Shigeyuki brings with it a familial role as well. In their first tutoring session, Yoshimoto kisses Shigeyuki on the cheek (*The Family Game* 8:54). This moment has been read in multiple ways, but most pertinent here is Maeda's reading of it: "he takes the place of the parents and raises [Shigeyuki]" ("両親に代って茂之を引き受け、彼を育てるのである"; 22; my trans.). Having seen the mother's ineffective indulgence and the father's unwillingness to take responsibility despite his desire to appear as having done so, Yoshimoto takes on the responsibility of not only teaching Shigeyuki what is necessary for examination but also the maternal/paternal knowledge of life.

Contrasting Mrs. Numata's coddling, Yoshimoto slaps Shigeyuki (*The Family Game* 28:09). It is a violent, discordant shock that disrupts the emptiness of the home space, which is meant to subsume such eruptions. This eruption is the catalyst for a new understanding where respect between Yoshimoto and Shigeyuki is earned through an education in disruption. Yoshimoto teaches Shigeyuki to create discord to resolve issues and that it is better to move on instead of leaving things in suspense out of a desire not to apply himself. An example is when Yoshimoto teaches Shigeyuki some karate so that he can defend himself from his bully Tsuchiya (*The Family Game* 58:44), encouraging him to deal with the situation

definitively. Yoshimoto's lone figure teaches Shigeyuki to both see the structures of education and family that feed into each other so that Shigeyuki can understand that his rebellion is facilitated by the indulgence given to him.

Interestingly, Yoshimoto does not dissolve or break down these structures himself. Gerow argues that what Yoshimoto seems to prefer is to play his own games within these structures, rather than do away with them, highlighting the ambiguity of the film's structural criticisms (248). His final moment of disruption only momentarily does away with the Numata's facade. Their moment of connection as they clear away the debris of the food fight is only a moment and, after Yoshimoto's departure, they fall back into their prescribed roles; they abandon meaningful connection in favour of empty tranquillity. Yoshimoto's function is to make visible the invisible structures of infantile capitalism and their extension into the home space, exposing the meagreness of the facade and emptiness behind it. The multi-storey apartment building the Numatas live in, which is mirrored by the family of Shinichi's crush sitting similarly in a horizontal block, imply that this family game is one that extends beyond the Numatas and across the substrata of middle-class nuclear families (Maeda 23). One man does not change this postmodern paradigm but he does make it ridiculous through enunciation.

The 1980s and Beyond

Despite tutor Yoshimoto's disruption to the Numatas and the middle-class nuclear family they model, this disruption is temporary, forecasting future trends in both family structure and educational ideals. The resumption of the educational conveyor belt, Shigeyuki and Shinichi's apathy, Mr. Numata's absence from the family life for work and Mrs. Numata's occupation of the home space mimics the reality of how family structures and the value of education were replicated into the 1990s and onwards. Perhaps because of economic stagnation after the Bubble 'popped' and a move away from infantile capitalism, nostalgia for the former economic prosperity and the middle-class family that seemed to flourish under it prevented the image of the nuclear family, with its gender divided parental labour, from totally fading away. Gender discourses of the 1990s, reflecting the changing conception of masculinity as layoffs and the scarcity of salaried company positions became increasingly

common, popularly advocated for a continued division of labour. This division would continue to see mothers as responsible for the day to day raising of children and fathers as meant to instil family values in children once they were out of young adolescence (Nakatani 96).

By the 2000s, public surveys revealed a general consensus that fathers should be more actively involved in the raising of children, including educational efforts. Yet, a positive attitude towards fathers involved in domestic labour was not held by as much of a majority (Nakatani 97-8). The bullying that Shigeyuki experiences became a much more publicized social issue, with concerns over the excessive indulgence of mothers – as in the case of Mrs. Numata – and the absence of the father – as exemplified by Mr. Numata – cited as potential key causes in public discussion (Nakatani 96). Revealed by sensationalised news stories of bullying and suicides, the limits of maternal *amae* and the ways in which a philosophy of central nothingness fails the members of that society are drawn into stark relief.

Looming in the distance of Shinichi's – and Shigeyuki's by extension – future is the university entrance exams. Then and now, this period in a student's life is referred to as *juken jigoku* or "examination hell" (Rohlen 77; Samuell 46), a term that reveals its gruelling nature. The employment of a private tutor by Mr. Numata reflects the value of passing a standardised entrance exam to the family as a whole and reflects a larger trend of investing in private educational activities outside of the school. *Juku* or cram schools have existed since the 1960s (Samuell 69). In 1976, forty percent of fourth, fifth and sixth graders – the same demographic as Shigeyuki – were attending *juku* while one in ten high school students were attending *yobiko* (*juku* specialising in passing the university entrance exam) nationally (Rohlen 104). By 2011, eighty-two percent of high schoolers reported having participated in out of school educational activities while in middle school, including attending *juku* and working with private tutors (Entrich 94-5). The criticisms levied at a temporally specific family formation by *The Family Game*, particularly middle-class and nuclear, can be applied to the idea of family that continued to evolve from it, even beyond the framework of infantile capitalism.

Conclusion

Yoshimitsu Morita's film satirises the urban nuclear family of 1980s Japan, using humour and absurdity to great effect. When read through the lens of Akira Asada's infantile

capitalism, the film highlights the intersection between the structures and ideologies of postwar, postmodern Japan at work, at home, and in public. Mr. Numata is the culmination of the system, a salaryman who returns to the protected space of the home to engage in infantile behaviours even as he expects his children to follow the same system of educational progression into work. Mrs. Numata ambiguously creates the indulgent home space but this indulgence makes her ineffective as a parent. Her overindulgence of her children highlights the paradox of the 'education mother' who must both be concerned with their child's education yet cannot collapse the illusion of the indulgent home space. Yoshimoto exposes the absurdity of such structures but ultimately does not change them, the rupture itself getting subsumed into the empty central space of the home and the nation. *The Family Game* presents no solution but instead demonstrates the possibility of playing within the system and the potential to construct a postmodern subject only if one is willing to direct the same incredulity attached to modern metanarratives to the postmodern structures being put into place to replace them.

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