FAMILIES, FATHERS, FILM: CHANGING IMAGES FROM JAPANESE CINEMA

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Abstract: Two films from roughly 20 years apart, *Kazoku gemu* (*The Family Game*, Morita Yoshimitsu, 1983), and *Bijitā Q* (*Visitor Q,* Miike Takashi, 2001), present images of the Japanese family and father that work together to create a portrait of the family in crisis. These films, coming at opposite ends of the so-called Bubble Economy, suggest that at root of this crisis is the abdication by the Japanese father of his responsibilities both within the home and within the wider social arena. In short, these films condemn the contemporary "salaryman" as an ineffectual, uncommunicative, and "weak" force within the home, incapable of providing a coherent, inspirational model for his family. This paper will first provide a context in which to read these two films, by analysing the presentation of the family and father in classic post-war films by Ozu, Kurosawa, and Mizoguchi. Against these classic works, this paper will then explore the ways in which the two more recent films cooperate with each other, using satire to criticise the contemporary Japanese family and the apparent "crisis" which faces it, and to show how the perception of this crisis is intensifying.

INTRODUCTION

In many respects, since its inception in the late 1800s, Japanese cinema has been and remains critically concerned with the family, seeing it as continuously on the verge of collapse. The popularly assigned, assumed, or ostensible *cause* of this collapse, however, has undergone considerable change. Pre-war films often attribute blame for the tensions in the family to external forces of urbanisation or "changing economic foundations" (Standish 2005: 48). Post-war films often criticise the figure of the child for being disrespectful of the parents, while presenting the parents as paragons or at least devoted protectors of their offspring. In contemporary cinema, however, extending the opinions of the popular news media (Arai 2000: 841, White 2002: 5), many works critical of the family focus their attention and blame on the father as 'salaryman' (the term for the average, white-collared, salaried employee which has come to be "almost synonymous with masculinity in Japan" (Dasgupta 2000: 192)), presenting him as neglectful, irresponsible, or even absent. This paper will present two such films, *Kazoku gēmu* (*The Family Game*, 1983) by Morita Yoshimitsu, and *Bijitā Q* (*Visitor Q*, 2001) by Miike Takashi, to demonstrate their sharply criti-

cal attacks on the modern, urban father – attacks which utilise absurdity and satire to dissect the father's ineffectuality in the face of inevitable social change. The father exists, in these two films and to a large extent in the mass media understanding of him, as a weak, work-oriented parent who devotes more energy to his office and to avoiding his familial obligations than to the people who depend on him for their emotional growth, moral guidance, and financial support: his children and spouse. Using a thematic and visual analysis, I will situate these films against a context of post-war cinema to show how their pessimistic view of the modern father differs greatly from that of the immediate post-war period, but also how their understanding of the role of the father maintains a vague hope for his redemption.

SITUATION OF THE FATHER IN POST-WAR JAPAN

The history of cinema in Japan, which stretches back over more than 100 years, has 'golden ages' in the silent era, the pre-war, sound era, and the immediate post-war era. Some of the greatest films Japan has produced, however, come from the 1950s, a time when such internationally influential directors as Kurosawa Akira, Mizoguchi Kenji, and Ozu Yasujirō produced some of their most highly acclaimed works. These directors stand as recognised masters of the Japanese cinema, and within their work we can find many films which create a context against which to consider contemporary presentations of the family. Here, I'd like to explore precisely what context I see as important for 'reading' the more recent works by Morita and Miike to which I'll turn in the next section, using these three directors in general and what are arguably their finest cinematic achievements in particular for their accessibility and their recognition outside of Japan.

Kurosawa, Mizoguchi, and Ozu are able to draw great profundity from simple stories, characters, and settings, and many of these of course centre around the family – virtually the entirety of Ozu Yasujirō's opus, for example, is directly related to the problem of change in the contemporary family. Films such as *Banshun* (*Late Spring*, 1949), *Bakushū* (*Early Summer*, 1951), *Ohayō* (*Good Morning!*, 1959), and *Kohayagawa-ke no aki* (*Autumn for the Kohayagawa Family/The End of Summer*, 1961) all centre around the figure of the father as the patriarchal pillar of the family. Through their simple though direct plots they examine the social/temporal forces causing change in both that pillar and the family as a whole.

A representative film here is *Tōkyō monogatari* (*Tokyo Story*, 1953). It tells the tale of an elderly couple (Ryū Chishū and Higashiyama Chieko) who

come to Tokyo to visit their affluent children, but who, in doing so, come to realise the distance that is more than geographical which separates them. The parents feel disappointment at the way their children have changed – towards them, but also as people in general. As Linda Ehrlich (1997: 67) writes, part of this disappointment comes from Ozu's presentation of the "city-as-evil … [holding] too much competition, too little opportunity" which leads to "callousness" on the part of the children. After the death of the mother, the children do come to realise their neglect of their parents and regret that this realisation has come too late, but – cautionary tale though it is – the film does not close with an inspirational message for its audience. Rather, it presents its view of social change – from rural to urban, from close family ties to isolation and alienation – as inevitable. As David Desser (1997: 21) writes, "if *Tokyo Story* is melodramatic in terms of its didacticism, teaching us to respect our elders, for instance, it is also realistic: life goes on no matter what one does". The hope, however slight, that this film holds out is not necessarily for 'the family' (in a social sense) per se, in that the responsibility for carrying on the tradition of the family (in a particular sense) here falls to the daughter in law (Hara Setsuko), wife of the son killed in the war. Rather, the film asserts that human compassion and social obligation, while still possible, no longer rest upon the foundation of the family but now assume the individual and individual choice as their basis in a construction which the viewer cannot help but feel is weaker than that which it is poised to replace.

This social pessimism is shared in the work of Kurosawa Akira whose *Ikiru* (*To Live*, 1952) presents us with a highly critical look at the relationship between parent and child, here between father and son, estranged even though they share the same house. This powerful, humanist work follows the protagonist, a civil servant named Watanabe Kanji (Shimura Takashi), who discovers he has only a few months left to live, on his search for existential meaning. Watanabe is ultimately able to achieve his two-part goal of creating a park in a depressed part of Tokyo and of finding an enduring meaning for his life – becoming what Satō Tadao (1982: 126) has termed one of Kurosawa's "noble fathers" – but this accomplishment remains a personal validation of his individuality in which his son (Kaneko Nobuo) is unable to share. While the film resists the easy solution of a happy ending – refusing a reconciliation between father and son, a recognition on the part of his superiors and co-workers of Watanabe's efforts to build the park, or even a last-minute cure for Watanabe's illness – it reaffirms the fundamental correctness of Watanabe's social conscience as well as his basic, constant, and profound, though silent, love for his child. In this sense *Ikiru* is conservative in its view of the responsibility and propriety of the role of the father in providing a moral lesson – even if it's one

that the father himself learns almost too late – to his children, and the children's duty to respect and at least try to appreciate not only the lesson but the parent (here specifically the father) as well. Resolutely urban in its setting, *Ikiru* also maintains a critique of urbanisation as at least in part to blame for the decline in social cohesion with which its story deals, and to blame as well for some of the familial tensions which it shows. Urbanisation here, as in Ozu's *Tōkyō monogatari*, is a detriment to the family and a source of decay in the social fabric.

And yet despite the acknowledgement in *Ikiru* of Watanabe's distance from his son as a (partial) result of his having buried himself in his work, ultimately the discourse of social decline in *Ikiru* and *Tōkyō monogatari* places responsibility clearly at the feet of the younger generation, the children who, having become "shallow and flippant" (Satō 1982: 128), neglect or (wilfully) misunderstand their parents. This stands in contrast to Doi Takeo's (1973: 153) insistence on the weakening of the father-figure in the immediate post-war period. For both Ozu and Kurosawa, the parents represent a warmth of personal relations, dedication, drive, and an obligation to their fellow countrymen which their children either do not or can not feel. One may argue that while these qualities serve these characters well *as citizens*, they fail them *as fathers*, and in part this is justifiable, for both *Ikiru* and *Tōkyō monogatari* do on occasion present criticisms of the father – something especially clear during an extended flashback sequence in *Ikiru* in which Watanabe recalls the many instances on which he had disappointed his son. Nonetheless, these films ultimately redeem the figure of the father as still deserving of respect, care, and even admiration.

This is clear also in Mizoguchi Kenji's politically allegorical *Sanshō dayū* (*Sanshō the Bailiff*, 1954), which presents a similar view of the parent as paragon, an optimistic, though also nostalgic, icon for the possibility of social improvement. Mizoguchi's film, adapted from the short story by Mori Ōgai (1862–1922), contains a number of significant changes from its progenitor which space here will not permit me to discuss. The most important of these, however, serve to emphasise the role of the father (played by Shimizu Masao) in the moral maturation of the son, Zushio (Hanayagi Yoshiaki). The film, set at the end of the Heian period (794–1192), tells the story of an aristocratic family on their way to be reunited with the father, a governor exiled from his domain for having refused to permit the conscription of his peasantry into what he sees as disruptive and unnecessary military service. Despite the setting of nearly eight hundred years prior to the film's production, the work through its allegorical presentation is highly critical of the period of militarism and the close association between exploitative industry and a corrupt government through which Japan had passed in the decades before *Sanshō dayū*'s release.

This criticism is clearest in Mizoguchi's enhancement of the role of the father in his film, something far weaker in the original short story. The additions Mizoguchi makes create the father as a strongly moral, socially committed, fiercely independent man who retains his humanistic compassion for the people whom he governs. As we meet the principal characters, the family on their way to rejoin the father, we also meet him in flashback. On the day of his departure into exile he instructs his son in his central tenets: that all men are equal; that a man without mercy is but a beast; and that a leader must be hard on himself but merciful to others. These three beliefs resound powerfully within the post-war reality of the film's production, and as I've argued elsewhere (Iles 2005) point to an essentially optimistic view of a benevolent-dictatorship model of government in which a vanguard safeguards the happiness of the general population while postponing its own comforts. This governmental model is essentially paternalistic, in keeping with the emphasis which Mizoguchi places here on the figure of the father as enlightened, benevolent, compassionate, and morally superior to his era. That this view of the father is redemptive goes without saying but it is also critical of the governmental reality of the decades preceding the film's release, pointing out as it does a potential for governance which Japan at that time (indeed, even at *this* time) had not fulfilled. Yet despite this social hope for governmental redemption, this undeniable optimism which contributes much to the pathos of the film's close, it is still the father from whom the son inherits his morality; it is the father from whom the son inherits his legitimate social position. Society's amelioration comes from the family; and to the family *from the father* come continuity, security, morality, fortitude, and an awareness of responsibility.

In essence then these are the values which these (admittedly select) immediate post-war films permit us to see: that the figure of the father, while perhaps on the edge of cataclysmic change, remains the source of stability and emotional security for the members of his family; that from their parents, children are able to learn morality and social responsibility; and that from the family comes social structure, tradition, yet also hope for society's improvement in the future – "a beautiful relationship between a parent and a child is the most secure form of social order" (Satō 1982: 129). That post-war cinema promoted these values is not surprising, for Japan during the first half of the 20th century had undergone tremendous hardship and transformation. The immediate post-war period was one of equal hardship and transformation but also a time during which there was concrete evidence of the need for social cooperation and mutual assistance. I'm not suggesting here that post-war film was uniformly optimistic or supportive of a view of familial propriety (indeed under the oc-

cupation of SCAP from 1945–1952 there was a conscious effort to 'democratise' the family and its representations by encouraging equality between genders and generations (Satō 1995: 163–67)), nor even that these films themselves were wholly optimistic of Japan's future, but rather that during this period the social will to *hope* for a better tomorrow was perhaps at its greatest in Japan's recent history. That the family remained at root of this hope is to be expected – and one of the requirements of this hope was that Japan's families, through a continuing respect of the authority of the father, maintain a sense of continuity with their structures, thereby redeeming aspects which had emerged as problematic during the pre-war and war periods.

But this essence, this fundamentally optimistic view of the family and father, has changed considerably in the 50 years since Kurosawa's *Ikiru* and Mizoguchi's *Sanshō dayū* – and the root of this change lies in the view of the father as no longer a paragon or source of moral education but instead absent, incompetent, or unknown. Doi's (1973: 152–53) 'fatherless society' has indeed come to be – not fully within the time-period of his writing, however. Essentially, the issues which inform the films to which I now turn stem not from Romit Dasgupta's contention that "most men do not or cannot measure up to" an ideal of masculinity (Dasgupta 2000: 191), but rather from the abdication by the father of his responsibility within his home, an abdication which very often the father's emotional, moral, or even physical absence will signal.

The two films to be discussed here were released roughly twenty years apart, but they are linked by thematic similarities and a socially-critical attitude characterised by an occasionally vicious satirical stance. Morita Yoshimitsu's *Kazoku gēmu* (*The Family Game*, 1983), and Miike Takashi's *Bijitā Q* (*Visitor Q*, 2001) each centre their narratives around 'typical' contemporary, urban families headed by salarymen. Both films use absurdity to highlight their social criticism – absurdity of setting, absurdity of behaviour, absurdity of language. Both films, too, concentrate their satire on the figure of the father to present him as anything but the paragon and pillar he had been in the post-war films which held him as a source of moral and parental authority.

THE FATHER IN THE CINEMA OF THE EMERGING BUBBLE ECONOMY

Morita's *Kazoku gēmu* was his first commercially successful film. It tells the story of a middle school student preparing for his transition to high school, thus providing much opportunity for a critique of not only the father/family structure but the Japanese educational system as well.

Shigeyuki (Miyagawa Ichirota), the younger of the family's two sons, is one of the lowest-scoring students in his class, and so his parents (played by Itami Jūzō and Yuki Saori, father and mother, respectively) have decided to hire one more private tutor (Matsuda Yūsaku) out of the line of tutors they've already tried. The tutor, in contrast to the boy's father, becomes close to him, sitting with him while he does his homework, disciplining him (sometimes physically quite roughly) when necessary, but first and foremost, making it clear to the boy that his attention, concern, and even affection are devoted to him.

Under the careful guidance of the tutor, the boy's marks steadily and dramatically improve, until he achieves scores sufficiently high to allow him to move on to the better of his high school choices. He gains confidence in himself, as well, and is able to overcome antagonism from the class bully, a former friend whom rivalry and pressure had driven to enmity. However, while the boy's progress is improving, his father remains a distant, detached, and critical observer – not a participant – in his youthful development. In fact the father, rather than devoting his own time to his son's education, has done what, for him, is most expedient: he has offered the tutor a financial incentive to help Shigeyuki study. The father's attitude, that money is the central requirement for a solution to the problem of his son's poor achievements at school, commodifies his involvement in his boy's life, and transforms his relationship with his son into a commercial venture, an investment opportunity which, he hopes, will pay off in the dividend of a good high school. It is against this attitude that the tutor's careful attention to Shigeyuki stands in contrast, for his attitude is one of true fraternal, even parental, concern. But despite the example which the tutor sets for the father, indeed, for the whole family, their relationship with each other remains strained by distance and lack of communication.

Although the family lives together in a small apartment located in a newly-built complex of reclaimed land in Tokyo Bay, and although they inhabit this space in claustrophobically-close proximity to one another (a condition which the film's cinematography highlights, emphasising close-ups indoors and long shots out of doors), they demonstrate an almost insistent lack of intimate communication with each other. Tanaka Eiji sees much influence from Stanley Kubrick in Morita's work, specifically in his willingness to explore the leading edge of cinematic technological innovation "not simply to create newness for its own sake – he makes no distinction between the newness within film and the newness of real life, and by introducing the newest technologies this way, he is able to make us see film as something still not fully comprehended" (Tanaka 2003: 122). In *Kazoku gēmu*, shots of the emptiness around the apartment complex and the

fields, through which the boys walk on their way home from school, awaiting new construction sites, highlight the 'newness' of the family's living space, but this 'newness' does not appear vibrant with an optimistic hope for the future. Rather, the claustrophobia of the family's apartment and yet their fundamental disconnection from each other are harbingers of a social crisis looming on the horizon.

That Morita presents a caricature of the Japanese family is apparent from the first frame, in which we meet the members of the Numata family seated side by side along a narrow dining table, not speaking, but instead concentrating with disturbing energy on eating their meal. The soundtrack presents a noisy symphony of slurping and chewing – acoustically, the film is recorded very 'close' to the characters, with a microphone capable of highlighting the tiniest sound of daily life to the extent that these sounds interfere with the ability of the characters to communicate. Shigeyuki, in voice over at the very beginning of the film, says that "everyone in the family is deafeningly loud", thus indicating the basic lack of communication between them all. This is how the smallest sounds are caught by the microphone: deafeningly loud, to the point of drowning out what any of the characters might try to say. We do see instances of family members trying to speak with one another, but these scenes utilise two techniques to present the characters as isolated from not only each other but us as well.

The first technique occurs when Shin'ichi, the older brother, waits for a female classmate – his conversation with her co-worker is not recorded, despite the obvious ambient sounds around them. The microphone 'chooses' not to give us access to this small conversation. This same technique occurs again when Shin'ichi and his mother are seen talking about the soundtrack to Audrey Hepburn's film *My Fair Lady* (1964, George Cukor). Midway through their conversation as they listen to the song *I Could Have Danced All Night* all but the ambient sounds of the room fade away, leaving the characters isolated in a silent 'bubble' to which we have no access. The second technique also involves isolating the characters, but here, it is a spatial/visual isolation, and we do have access to their conversation. The most poignant example of this technique uses the mother and father – even though they go out to the privacy of the family car in order to speak openly, the conversation they have is one dominated by the mother rather weakly regretting the lifestyle she has, and asking the father at least to try to come home a bit earlier. The father remains silent, smoking. The camera presents the characters here from a middle distance, cutting between shots inside and outside of the car, placing our gaze ever further away from the mother and father as they, too, move ever further away from finding a durable solution to their separate disappointments.

In another scene which 'isolates' a character, we see the father eating his breakfast in extreme close-up about to "suck up" the yoke of his fried egg, only to discover that because the egg has been overcooked, he can't do it. He complains to the mother that he can't "suck up" the yoke – *chūchū dekinai*, he says, in a pun that echoes the sound of *chū*, the word representing a kiss with which young women may sign a letter or – now – a cell phone text message (similar to the string of "x" and "o" at the end of an English letter, representing hugs and kisses). Not only, he seems to be saying, can't he "suck up" the yoke, but more significantly, he can't "kiss", can't be intimate. While Keiko McDonald (2006: 142) may characterise this exchange as an instance of the "hard-driving executive sublimating desire for escape into infantile dependency", more is at stake here than the father's need to avoid his familial responsibilities: his statement amounts to a confession of his emotional failure. This is also only the second shot in the film which presents the father in close-up, the first having come at the very beginning when the family members are being introduced.

Typically the father is presented in medium shots, despite the overwhelmingly claustrophobic closeness of the film's setting; the father's arrival home, his time in the bath, even his conversations in the car with his wife and the tutor are all seen in medium shots, dominated by ambient sounds. In contrast to this, we see the tutor in several scenes in close-up, either with other family members or alone. The scenes which present the tutor with other characters also utilise a more 'balanced' sound – ambient sounds and conversation are in a more 'natural' mix. Moreover, we see the tutor in several very physical embraces with his girlfriend, and, too, we see him being quite physical with Shigeyuki: sitting near him, teaching him to wrestle and box, placing his hand on his bare thigh after Shigeyuki has been beaten up by friends of the classroom bully, even – on their first meeting – kissing him on the cheek. This physicality is in no way sexual but is in every way creative of a close bond of trust and respect between the two. Through this physicality, but also through the intellectual and emotional commitment which the tutor demonstrates for Shigeyuki, he is able to legitimise his position as a substitute father-figure for not only the boy but his older brother, Shin'ichi, as well. The tutor provides a clear, alternative relationship marked by presence – emotional and physical – which the father is unable to match. This is apparent in his physical presence for the boy, but also in the cinematic text which brings us close to the tutor through the device of the close-up.

The cinematic text also uses proximity effectively to present changing degrees of closeness between family members and spectator throughout the film, commenting in this way on shifts in the family's degree of communication. For most of the film, as I've said, the father is presented in

medium shot or else from a greater distance, appearing in close-up only twice, while other family members and the tutor are typically presented closer than medium distance. This patterning changes on occasion, depending on the location of the characters – when Shigeyuki is in class or outside being bullied, the camera maintains a medium distance or greater. So, too, when the tutor and Shigeyuki are practicing boxing outside or are walking together, the camera affords them a measure of privacy by presenting them from a distance. When Shin'ichi visits the girl to whom he's attracted, the camera stays farther than medium distance – even the soundtrack occasionally fades out, leaving their conversation a private matter from which the spectator is cut off.

However, the final quarter of the film begins to change the patterning of camera distance, starting with the scene of the celebratory dinner to congratulate Shigeyuki for entering the better high school. Here, the entire family is presented in a middle-distance shot, seated side by side along the narrow dining table that dominates their small kitchen. The tutor is seated in the very centre of the table – and thus in the very centre of the frame. As the dinner progresses, the father offers the tutor money to 'cure' Shin'ichi's falling grades, resorting to his favourite expedient of solving problems through financial means rather than through physical or emotional involvement. At this point, the tutor, in a fantastic bit of absurdity, begins literally to destroy the dinner – tossing food and spilling wine liberally on the family members, finally striking each one and overturning the table onto their collapsed bodies, then bowing politely and taking his leave. This entire scene, lasting many minutes, is presented from a fixed camera position, slightly below seated-level and perpendicular to the long table.

The next scene shows the aftermath of this destruction, as the family together clean up the mess made by the tutor. This is the only instance in the film during which the family is presented together in close-up, as they pick up the fragments of shattered plates and glasses, the camera moving among them, coming to rest occasionally on their hands or on the debris of their meal. After this point, however, till the end of the film, the various family members are presented in only medium distance shots. We see the two boys in their classes, once again daydreaming. We see Shin'ichi, shot completely in medium-long distance, being attracted by a group of martial artists practicing in disciplined unison. This distancing of the spectator from the family by the camera is especially pronounced in the final scene, at the family's apartment, on a lazy afternoon. The two boys have drifted off into midday naps, while the mother wonders why a helicopter continues to buzz overhead outside the building – and of course the father is once again absent from the setting. This sequence is shot entirely from

an elevated position, looking down from middle-distance onto the characters, here emphasising our now separate situation from them, and our receding sympathies for this family which has lost its one best chance to work together to build a meaningful set of relations. With the departure of the tutor, the outsider able to set a good example of devoted attention, the family reverts to its earlier, uncommunicative mode, having passed more or less unchanged through a situation that had the potential to change it for the better – and the father now completely absent from the home.

DESTROYING THE FAMILY, SAVING THE FATHER

Miike's *Bijitā Q* (2001) also presents a family visited by a similar outsider, a figure who in a similar though more ethically ambiguous way becomes a surrogate or substitute for an absent father, but this film is far more vicious in its satirical critique of the Japanese family. This visitor is an anonymous young man (Watanabe Kazushi), bearded and mostly silent, who on first meeting the father (Endō Ken'ichi) strikes him violently in the head with a large rock – something he does twice to the father, and once to the daughter, as well. The family consists of the unnamed father, a soon-to-be-unemployed television journalist, his heroin-addicted wife Keiko (Uchida Shungiku), their daughter Miki (credited only as Fujiko), a teen-aged prostitute (she engages in *enjo kōsai*, or "compensated dating"), and their son Takuya (Mutō Jun), a middle school student who, to make up for constant bullying from his classmates, beats his mother brutally and spends most of his time locked in his room.

The plot is simple but compelling – and also quite disturbing, as it follows the father on his quest to create a video news report on contemporary youth that will win him the favour of his supervisor, thus safeguarding his job. In the course of the film, however, the stranger effects a great change in the family, inspiring in them familial love, respect, and the will to defend one another from the trials that best them. The film ends with the family huddled together suckling at the mother's breasts – a tremendous change from the opening scenes, which see the father paying his own daughter for sex (while filming them together the whole time) and the son beating his mother relentlessly. This is not an 'easy' film, but rather an absolutely absurdist assault on the notions of middle-class domesticity which, once observed closely, emerges as anything but 'normal'. The aim of the film is – as the visitor Q does to the father – to strike the spectator over the head in order to awaken him or her to the absurdity inherent within the structure of the contemporary family, a structure the film suggests is crumbling under the weight of its own shortcomings and the

weight of its own members' lack of communication – weights the family desperately tries to deny and ignore.

The lack of communication here is every bit as central as in Morita's *Kazoku gēmu* – in the first scene with the father and daughter in a love hotel, the father asks his daughter about her 'work': how often she's done it, why she doesn't study instead, and so on. The daughter of course doesn't answer, but rather teases the father, tempting him, and snapping digital photos as his expression changes from nervous hesitation to desire. When the father and the stranger are at the family dining table, eating the dinner which the mother has served them, the father describes the visitor to the son as his friend who'll be staying for a few days – nonchalantly neglecting to explain or even mention the heavy bandages which cover the wounds on his head, and scrupulously ignoring his son's cursing and striking the mother for having carelessly allowed commercials to be recorded along with his favourite TV programme.

Here, too, we have the father escaping to his car for privacy away from his family – he watches the video he'd filmed of himself trying to interview a group of teenagers about "young people today", a video which recorded his humiliation as the teenagers assault and strip him (we learn later that he had actually aired this video on his news programme). And here, too, we have the visitor forming a bond with the son through physical contact, in contrast with the negligent distance his father maintains, and the fearful desperation with which his mother treats him. As bullies bombard the family's home with fireworks, the father, frantically video-taping the spectacle as part of his documentary project, bellows into the microphone that he doesn't know how he should feel, how he should react to this vandalism – he says explicitly that although he doesn't know how to react, he *does* know that his family is being destroyed. It is precisely this lack of response that forms the crux of the familial dilemma for the contemporary urban father – his reactions are typically so prescribed that, now, in the face of an extraordinary situation, his faculty to respond is paralysed almost beyond hope.

That the father is exponentially more communicative to his imagined TV 'audience' – encapsulated within the mini-DV camera he carries with him – than his own family, even at the height of the vandals' attack, is indicative of his inability to respond to a reality that must exist as an unmediated present. For the father, it is this unmediated, immediate 'now' that exists as the site of his failure (specifically sexual, as he admits finally to himself at his point of self-realisation), and thus is the thing from which he continually flees. Through fleeing from the present he also flees from his family and from an awareness, an acceptance, and a solution to his own ineffectuality. That the route of his flight is through the device of me-

diated sight and communication – the video camera, which also becomes his confessor and ultimately accepting, non-judgmental confidant ("Some things truly are strange", the father quips to the camera) – helps to focus the film's attention on the role of the media as a barrier to open, spontaneous, interpersonal communication (immediate, unmediated), for after all it is of the essence of the media to *mediate*, to stand in place of an interlocutor physically and emotionally present to the one hoping to communicate. *Visitor Q* thus doubly includes the media in its social critique – through the father's profession as a journalist, but also through his flight away from his responsibilities through the media's mechanism which he carries with him at all times.

In this way Miike's choice to shoot *Visitor Q* on digital video itself becomes a meta-narrative comment on the function of the news media in contemporary Japan. Tom Mes (2003: 207) in his book *Agitator: the Cinema of Takashi Miike*, suggests that "the perception of the video image as being closer to reality than film is something the director deliberately appeals to, employing it to draw the audience closer to the events portrayed", and to a certain extent this characterisation of the visual appeal is justified. However, Miike's decision here has further ramifications: by utilising the instruments of the news media explicitly to comment on those media, Miike's critique serves to co-opt the look of 'mediated' reality and insidiously subvert the opinions held by the spectator regarding the social milieu in which s/he lives. Part of this process involves direct quoting of the nightly news: in one brief sequence, on the night of the visitor's first arrival at the family home, while the son beats the mother, the visitor switches TV channels to watch a news report about the naming of a baby raccoon recently born at the zoo. This, the diegesis tells us, forms the substance of reporting: trivialities and items designed to reassure the viewing public that their social reality is comfortable, normal, and 'cute', while distracting them from the immediate and urgent issues around them. Another part of the process involves the absurd willingness of the father to broadcast his own humiliations as an exposé of the 'truth' of that social reality's decay: this becomes an escapist reaction to his inability to prevent the destruction and decay of his own family, exactly the type of infantile regression Keiko McDonald identified in the father of Morita's *Kazoku gēmu* but here a pathological, wilful denial of individual responsibility and failure. The association between the father and the media thus becomes a twin-pronged attack on each institution's culpability for what the film presents as a directionless decline in familial and social cohesion, strength, solidarity, and even sanity.

That this decline is the responsibility of the father is a point which the film makes repeatedly – and the root of the father's failure, as I've men-

tioned, is his sexual inadequacies, specifically, his problem of premature ejaculation which leaves him incapable of satisfying his sexual partners (his daughter, his wife, and his lover, the female co-worker (Nakahara Shōko) whom the father ends up murdering late in the film). The father himself speaks of his sexual inadequacies to his 'video audience' during his moment of epiphanal breakthrough: this comes when he has murdered his lover and, before butchering her corpse, attempts a frenzied necrophilia, admitting to the video camera that he feels more energised than he has in years. The mother, too, undergoes a sexual transformation at the hands of the visiting stranger, who helps her to discover that her breasts are still lactating. This discovery revitalises the wife (the father remarks that he hasn't seen her so alive since they first married) and transforms her into someone actively able to resist her son's beatings.

Sexuality here emerges as an essentially intimate form of communication, a mechanism for self-discovery and the communication of that discovery to another person – this is contrasted with the sexual exchange rooted in financial commodification between the father and the daughter at the film's outset, an exchange which the father insistently characterises as "wrong" despite his eagerness to engage in it. Too, that earlier sexual exchange between father and daughter ended in the father's humiliation for the premature termination of the sex act, before the daughter could be physically satisfied (she compensates for it by doubling her price, expressing her strongest disappointment when she learns her father doesn't even have enough money to cover her regular fee). The father's realisation of his sexual dysfunction becomes the first step in his transformation into a man able to reconnect (emotionally and, by implication, physically) with his wife – he also becomes a defender of his son, rescuing him from the bullies (whom the father and mother together murder). Sexual dysfunction and the 'resurrection' of the father's sexual ability are symptomatic metaphors for the father's physical, psychological, and emotional transformation and his acceptance of his responsibilities within the family. It is quite significant, of course, that only after his sexual transformation does the father go from addressing his video camera predominantly, to expressing himself to his wife openly and with enthusiastic excitement – his need for mediation in his relationships has vanished with his discovery of his 'restored' physical masculinity and his re-installation as the head of his family.

The mother's transformation is no less complete than that of the father, and hers, too, is effected through a fundamentally sexual experience (an experience essentially dependent upon her sex), the discovery that her breasts still produce milk at the caress of the stranger. This discovery brings the mother obvious and tremendous satisfaction – she tells the

stranger that she has realised she is not defined by her pronounced limp, nor by her disappointing homelife, but that she is simply *a woman*. This acceptance of her 'normalcy' liberates her, and allows her to accept herself as a mother, homemaker, and wife. It is not my intention here to pursue what constitutes gendered social 'normalcy' in Japan for either the father or the mother, beyond the range of what the film expresses as 'proper' for these characters: for the father, it is 'proper' for him to act with determination and physical resolve to safeguard his family; while for the mother it is proper for her to accept her 'function' as a nurturer – something we see in the final scene, in which the mother suckles her husband and daughter on her newly productive breasts.

This notion of 'normalcy' extends to the family's children, as well: the son, lying in a pool of his mother's milk, thanks the stranger for coming to their family in order to 'destroy' it – to destroy it in its dysfunctional incarnation to enable its successful reconstruction – and promises that from the very next morning he will begin to study in earnest. He has returned to the 'normal' role of a young middle school student, serious and concerned with his upcoming entrance exams. The daughter, too, returns home (after soliciting the stranger on a city street, and after being hit on the head by him with a grapefruit-sized rock). She returns to her 'normal' family, a tearful smile of gratitude and promise playing about her bruised face as she greets her mother, nude, cradling the father in her arms and inviting her daughter to join them in a blissful, secure, familial embrace.

The film's final scene, of the father and daughter lying on either side of the mother, and suckling at her breasts, is an absurdist exaggeration of the nuclear family, but a sympathetic, touching, and very moving one. While it is possible though I insist mistaken to see this scene as suggesting a degree of infantile escapism on the part of the father – "the fact that the father drinks from the breasts that are meant for the children… serves as the final confirmation of his ineptitude … his wife is stronger than him and he willingly reverts to the position of a child in her presence" (Mes 2003: 213) – it more strongly serves as an acknowledgement of the resurrection of the family, a resurrection which after all includes the father as well. It is not that "he has recognised and accepted his failures and is able to live with them", as Tom Mes (2003: 213) suggests, but rather that he has found a way to overcome them, and is also able now to accept and appreciate his wife in her role of nurturer. The father has reclaimed for himself the position of head of the family through his reinvigorated sexuality and through his acceptance of his wife's sexuality, as well, and the family will emerge from this episode stronger, more committed to one another, and 'normal'.

CONCLUSION

These two films are certainly not the only examples of a social critique of the family centred on the figure of the father, and while they each indicate a shared thematic concern for the future of the social institution of the family itself, they are not exclusively representative of attitudes toward their subject. Nonetheless as I've shown they represent a trend in the attitudinal transformation toward the family/father underway in contemporary cinema, an attitudinal shift that is quite pronounced in comparison with films from the post-war period. The problematisation of the 'masculine' here is central to this shift, and given that it is the salaryman model of masculinity which is most unambiguously at stake during Japan's now extended period of economic transformation (from the powerhouse of the Bubble years to the more fragile situation in which competition from other Asian nations, especially China, has begun to erode Japan's export-driven economy), it is the salaryman who receives the brunt of media/critical attention.

In contrast with the immediate post-war period and the period of reconstruction which lasted until the mid-1960s, during which the salaryman-as-father was seen – as I've shown through the context of films by Kurosawa, Mizoguchi, and Ozu – as a driving force of moral guidance, now the salaryman-as-father is an object of satirical ridicule. The salaryman exists as a "manifestation of a culturally privileged, hegemonic masculinity created and recreated through socioeconomic and cultural institutions and practices" (Dasgupta 2003: 119) but it is precisely this image of 'masculinity' as a source of morality and leadership which now, during Japan's contemporary period of social and moral re-evaluation, is most called into question. This has certainly been the case in Japan in the past twenty years, as the institution of the family has come to re-examine its structure and its future.

These two films, *Kazoku gēmu* and *Bijitā Q*, coming as they do at opposite ends of this twenty-year period, indicate that the critical dissection of the father/salaryman figure, and the blame which this figure is made to accept for perceived social ills, have certainly not abated. On the contrary, the fervent absurdity into which Miike Takashi has thrown the character of the father allows his film to stand as a brutal attack but one which still offers a ray of hope for the redemption of the father – a redemption that can come through active, committed involvement with the family, marked by emotional and physical presence. That these two films both suggest a solution based on presence is not surprising, for they each speak from a standpoint of desire: desire for solidarity and mutual, familial support. Each film speaks from a standpoint that valorises communication and

commitment, seeing the strength of the family as the foundation of the community, society, and nation.

Other films offer a more optimistically redemptive, even apologetic view of the father, but space here does not permit their discussion. That these two films start out first with a condemnation and destruction of the existing family structure and father-figure in order to offer an opportunity for reconstruction indicates the great hope for that reconstruction which even iconoclastic directors like Miike still hold. Media attention which sees the family in crisis is not in itself a proof of that crisis, but rather a proof of the hope for the future and for the future of the father still carefully preserved within the wider social consciousness. Beneath their absurdities and satire, these films too nurture that hope.

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