

# *The Effect of Smell in the Representation of Family in Post-war Japanese Films*

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## **Abstract**

This study aims to examine the effect of smell in the representation of family in Japanese films in the 1950s and 60s. Previous studies on Japanese film have largely concentrated on analyses of the medium's visual and auditory elements instead of its olfactory qualities. This is because it was thought that a person's sense of smell is too subjective. Therefore, this paper explores the importance of smell in Japanese films with a focus on the representation of family. Previous studies have focused on smell in fiction, such as that on Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-1927), wherein it was found that smell is often associated with memory. This paper focuses on the connections between smell, presentiment, and intimacy. By referring to Chantal Jaquet's *Philosophie de l'odorat* (2010), I analyze post-war Japanese films that represent family relationships, such as Yasujiro Ozu's *Early Spring* (1956), Mikio Naruse's *A Woman's Place* (1962), and Keisuke Kinoshita's *Times of Joy and Sorrow* (1957). When these films depict characters, who has presentiments—whether or not it is a desirable feeling—the character's sense of smell hints at a future event. A link between smell and intimacy was also found. For example, there are scenes in which characters experience a smell together, thereby implying intimacy. Therefore, although it may be true that the olfactory sense is less objective, smell can represent psychological and temporal proximities that extend beyond time and space. Smell thus plays a very important role in the representation of family in Japanese films.

Keywords: Japanese Film, Family, Yasujiro Ozu, Mikio Naruse, Keisuke Kinoshita  
Smell, Chantal Jaquet

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## Introduction

This study aims to examine the effect of smell in the representation of family in Japanese films in the 1950s and 60s. Chantal Jaquet, a French philosopher, noted that the sense of smell is generally not regarded as important; rather, a combination of vision and sound is assumed to be the main model by which the world around us is recognized and comprehended, and they are useful in clarifying the work of physiology (Jaquet, 2015, p. 1). Therefore, in a cultural context, smell has a low priority and it is rarely the subject of academic inquiry. The same tendency is observed in film studies. Yasujiro Ozu is a typical example of a director whose films have certain visual characteristics, such as pillow shots and reverse shots. Tadao Sato, Edward Branigan, and other scholars have noted the importance of the effect of the cinematography in his films. Most film studies have focused on visual representation because of the theory that states that film is solely a visual art. In addition, studies on Japanese film have also concentrated on analyzing vision and sound instead of smell because the latter has been thought to be too subjective; on this point, Jaquet has written that the sense of smell seems to be culturally suspicious (Jaquet, 2015, p. 3).

Although the sense of smell is individual and subjective, these features are not always unworthy of examination. In other words, an individual or subjective sense of smell may be important in describing a character's feelings. In fictional works, such as novels or video pieces, individual narratives, events, or memories are as important as objective facts in telling the story. It is important that the memory that is connected to the smell or taste are too much subjective not to explain others. This "subjective" is very effective in first-person narrative fiction. How does smell have an effect on fiction? Smell has three effects: memory, presentiment, and intimacy. First, smell often has the effect of evoking a specific memory in a person. This phenomenon is very famous and is called the "Proust effect." As is commonly known, this name originates from Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-1927). In this story, there is a moment in which a piece of madeleine is dipped into "her own cup of tea or tisane" (Proust, 1992, p. 63), thereby vividly evoking the character's memory of a past event. This moment shows us that the smell and taste of the madeleine with tea was able to connect to a memory. Proust described situations where memories are stimulated by smell and taste as follows:

Undoubtedly what is thus palpitating in the depths of my being must be the image, the visual memory which, being linked to that taste, is trying to follow it into my conscious mind. But its struggles are too far off, too confused and chaotic; scarcely can I perceive the neutral glow into which the elusive whirling medley of stirred-up colours is fused, and I cannot distinguish its form, cannot invite it, as the one possible interpreter, to translate for me the evidence of its contemporary, its inseparable paramour, the taste, cannot ask it to inform me what special circumstance is in question, from what period in my past life. (p. 62)

Proust described the memory stimulated by madeleine and tea as follows:

[W]hen from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more immaterial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long

time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection. (pp. 63–64)

This quotation reveals that the smell and taste of madeleine and tea have the power to evoke a character's memory which is impossible to report or translate. These passages explain that the sense of taste connects to the sense of smell very well, and it also has an effect to evoke the memory as much as a smell can.

This paper focuses on presentiment and intimacy through their connection to smell. By referring to Jaquet's *Philosophie de l'odorat* (2015), I analyze post-war Japanese films that represent family relationships such as those by Yasujiro Ozu, Mikio Naruse, and Keisuke Kinoshita.

### **Smell as Presentiment**

When post-war Japanese films depict a character's presentiments, it is their sense of smell that hints at a future event, whether they experience it as a desirable feeling or not. Therefore, smell is an effective narrative device in fiction writing. In post-war Japanese films, smell tends to appear as a presentiment of affairs or quarrels in relationships.

Jaquet noted that the standard for judging whether a smell is comfortable or not depends on personal feelings. She writes that smell has an effect on the representation of hatred and love. The pattern of hatred was represented in the sense of smell, which excludes someone whose smell is uncomfortable (Jaquet, 2017, p.57). Therefore, the standard for judging a smell relies on subjective feelings.

In Mikio Naruse's *Repast* (1951), the smell of nuka was a symbol of an undesirable future. The main subject of the film is the relationship between the wife and husband. Michiyo Okamoto, the protagonist, is worried about her relationship with her husband, Hatsunosuke, and their way of life. In the film, Michiyo's gaze does not meet her own and she does not walk with him. It is clear, therefore, that their relationship is frigid. Furthermore, after a visit from their niece Satoko, Michiyo's anxiety increases. As some sequence described, Satoko approached Hatsunosuke both physically and psychologically. Michiyo felt so lonely and uncomfortable that she ran away from their home and returned to her parents' house but, finally, Hatsunosuke went to pick her up and their relationship recovered. In the first scene, Michiyo smelt the foreign rice while serving it into her husband's bowl (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Mikio Naruse's *Repast* (1951)

It is clear that smelling the rice was an uncomfortable sensation for her. Underlying this scene is the historical background of Japanese people being forced to eat foreign rice because of a bad rice crop in Japan under the influence of WWII. In the film, however, the presence of foreign rice on the table reflects not only this social background but also the future arrival of her niece, Satoko. After this sequence, Satoko arrives at her house because she ran away from her own home. When Satoko reaches Okamoto's house, Michiyo is anxious about the lack of food. Satoko's presence threatens their way of life as well as Michiyo's sense of purpose as Hatsunosuke's wife. Satoko has gone out with Hatsunosuke, stood and walked in the same space with him (Figure 2), and has eaten out at a restaurant with him face-to-face (Figure 3).



Figure 2



Figure 3

Evidently, the two women's relationships with Hatsunosuke are, at that moment in time, at odds with one another. Eventually, a pivotal incident occurs at home when Michiyo is absent. While taking care of Satoko, who has a nosebleed, a bit of blood falls on Hatsunosuke's shirt (Figure 4).



Figure 4

Naturally, Michiyo immediately notices this when she reaches home. She is livid and runs away to her parents' house. It is important to note here that the nosebleed is one of the physical symbols used in the film. There had hitherto hardly been any physical contact between wife and husband; in contrast, her niece had been in quite intimate proximity with him.

In Kasyo Abe's analysis of the film (2005), he focused on the scene wherein Michiyo smelled the rice and he said "women smell something" (p. 150). This means that he regarded Michiyo's female physicality as a body that smelt something. Furthermore, he analyzed that the very act of smelling made Michiyo aware of Satoko's nosebleed, convincing her of the intimate state her husband and niece had been in (Abe, 2005, p. 150). According to Abe (2005), "a wife sees through her husband unilaterally and he never sees through his wife." "This unequal" carried the climax when Michiyo ran away from home (Abe, 2005, p. 150). Abe's observation leads us to think that the very act of smelling permitted Michiyo to presage that something bad would happen by the outsider (Satoko) and allow her to see through her husband's duplicity. It is clear that in the earlier scene, wherein Michiyo smelt the foreign rice (i.e. an "outsider"), it is suggested that in the future she would distrust her niece as an outsider too. She is very sensitive to smell and could thus find blood from the nosebleed on her husband's shirt. Therefore, the foreign rice symbolizes her niece as an outsider, and an undesirable smell indicates that the future event of her visit would not be desirable for Michiyo.

Smell fulfills the same function in Keisuke Kinoshita's *Times of Joy and Sorrow* (1957). In this film, smell is a presentiment of a quarrel between the husband and wife and their eventual separation. Shiro Arisawa, a lighthouse keeper, and his wife Kiyoko move from place to place. Even though they have two children, they have to move to Nagasaki. Kiyoko had suffered from anxiety and loneliness until then, however, and one day she quarrels with Shiro. After that, they temporarily live separately. In the end, they end up living in the same house again; however, their son has died. Finally, they decide to get over their loss and to raise their daughter properly. In this film, the quarrel between the husband and wife had happened because he had

criticized the smell of the rice prepared for him by her. He described it as the “smell of nuka”: that is, the smell of salted rice bran. In this case, the smell was too distasteful for him to stop eating (Figure 5). This interpretation was only his interpretation. When the husband angered his wife, their daughter continued to eat and their son continued to play in silence (Figure 6).



Figure 5: Keisuke Kinoshita's *Times of Joy and Sorrow* (1957)



Figure 6

After their quarrel was settled, the wife decided to temporarily live apart from him with her daughter and son. It was only the husband who had found the smell to be distasteful, so it was only him who had to live separately. Furthermore, we can find other examples in which smell implied something in Japanese films.

Yasujiro Ozu's *Early Spring* (1956) used smell as a symbol of the husband's affair. In this film, Syoji Sugiyama is unfaithful to his wife Masako because of an adulterous relationship he has with his co-worker Chiyo Kaneko. The closer the relationship between Syoji and Chiyo, the more serious the relationship becomes between him and his wife. Words such as “smell” and “odor” appear in the dialogue between his fellow workers. In the drinking parties and Udon-no-kai held among his fellow workers, the use of these expressions was part of the process of exposing his affair. First, the men say “Recently, you looked fishy with Sugi” to Chiyo as a joke while they play mahjong and eat ramen noodles (Figure 7), thereby expressing their uncertainty about the relationship between Syoji and Chiyo. Later, Syoji has a secret dinner with Chiyo and sleeps with her (Figure 8).



Figure 7: Yasujiro Ozu's *Early Spring* (1956)



Figure 8

In short, the men's remark turns out to be true. Later, a woman and a man are talking while having lunch. The woman remarks to him that the relationship between Syoji and Chiyo smells fishy to her (Figure 9).



Figure 9

She says, "something is strange, something smells." This topic of conversation has also spread to other fellow workers' drinking parties and they share the recognition that Syoji is having an adulterous relationship with Chiyo. The word "smell" also appears in their conversations. After that, they accuse Chiyo of these acts at Udon-no-kai, where the smell of the suspicion was transferred to the assurance (Figure 10).





Figure 10

All people who took part in Udon-no-kai, noticed the relationship between Syoji and Chiyo. In *Repast*, Michiyo is the only person who smelt something. In contrast, Syoji's wife and fellow workers found the relationship between him and Chiyo to be smell bad. These two films have in common the fact that women are more sensitive than men. As mentioned earlier, a wife had seen through her husband's duplicity in *Repast* and a woman was the first person who "smelt" the affair between Syoji and Chiyo. Naturally, Masako eventually finds out the truth in *Early Spring*. Therefore, smell is sometimes symbolic of presentiment, thereby revealing an issue that is at the heart of the relationship between wife and husband. In addition, smell is able to reveal secrets. This means that the more the smell spreads, the more the secret of the affair spreads among Syoji's fellow workers.

### Smell as Intimacy

A further link between smell and intimacy was found in these films. For example, there are scenes wherein characters smell the same smell, thereby implying the intimacy of their relationship. As Jaquet notes, a smell that is simultaneously experienced among people means sharing something subjective (Jaquet, 2017, p.29). This chapter will examine the representation of proximity by characters' experience of the same smell.

In Ozu's *The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice* (1952), the smell of nukazuke is a symbol of intimacy between those who smell it together. In this film, Mokichi Satake and his wife Taeko share an experience of the smell and he then smells his wife's hand (Figure 11).



Figure 11: Yasujiro Ozu's *The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice* (1952)



This sequence occupies a privileged position in Ozu's filmography. First, Taeko often goes to stay with her friends by telling her husband a lie; she does not notice that her husband sees through her lies. She remains convinced of her husband's ignorance, of course, and so blames him for being insensitive. Between Mokichi and Taeko, there is a further issue of Taeko disliking her husband's habit of eating ochazuke. In the middle of the story, Taeko refuses to share food with Mokichi because she is uncomfortable with the sounds that he was making while eating ochazuke.

However, in the last sequence, she accepts his habit and prepares ochazuke for him, and they, therefore, share in the smell of nukazuke. They ascertain that they share the same smell together. Then, the act to smell others must be appeared between people whose relationship is closer than a certain distance. Moreover, in this film, the smell of nukazuke was not uncomfortable for Taeko. Laura U. Marks has written about smell in cinema as follows:

[T]he cinema can draw on the power of smell while preserving its particularity. Smell is already a movie, in the sense that it is a perception that generates a mental narrative for the perceiver. (Marks, 2002, p.114)

This means that the impression that a smell makes relies on individual feelings and, as she mentions, it "provokes individual stories" (Marks 119). Taeko could finally accept the smell of nukazuke, which meant that her feelings for her husband had changed.

However, there are other more important aspects present in this film. In the following passage, we will focus on smell as a physical type of contact. When one is able to smell someone else's smell, it implies that there is a physical proximity to that person. For example, Jaquet argues as follows:

In metonymy smelling other's odor, or not being able to smelling it, means having a close relationship, or contrarily having a distant relationship. It entails having a sense of value toward the whole existence of the other. Generally speaking, the expression used toward a person, "I smell him/her well (je le sens bien)," indicates tacit understanding and a trusting relationship. (Jaquet, 2015, p. 57)

The act of smelling another's smell in *The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice* is exceptional for Japanese films of those days due to the limited degree of physical contact in them. Ozu's films generally contain very little physical contact. Masato Hase, who studies Japanese cinema, indicates that Ozu's filmography hardly contains any kissing scenes, which goes against contemporary movie trends (Hase, 2017). He therefore called Ozu's films "anti-kissing movies." This phenomenon has also been observed in other Japanese films. Thus, it is clear that the husband's act of smelling his wife's hand is exceptional because of the hitherto frigid nature of their marriage. Furthermore, experiencing the same smell together proves that they share the same food and live in the same space, thereby emphasizing their intimacy.

Jaquet writes about smelling others as follows:

Odor and the sense of smell sometimes play a deciding role in the definition of sociality. They administer interaction with others, greetings, and rituals of reception in all various cultures. To rub another nose, smell other odor is the action which is forms to contact and interact with others, and these actions are seen as the highest sophisticated way to express respect. (Jaquet, 2017, p. 29)

Therefore, smell as a symbol of physical contact can represent feelings of intimacy between the wife and husband. In many cases, including the one in *The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice*, the relationship between the wife and husband was not very good at first; finally, however, physical proximity made it better.<sup>1</sup>

In Mikio Naruse's *A Woman's Place* (1962), smell is a trigger that causes a man to fall in love with a woman. This film shows us that the representation of the smell of hands is important. In this film, Yoshiko Ishikawa, a widow, lives alone at home after her husband had died. Therefore, some of her sisters-in-law regard her as a nuisance and she feels uncomfortable. One day, Musumiya visits the house and falls in love with Yoshiko. He fell in love with her because she pickled nukazuke with her family, which reminded him of his deceased mother who had also pickled nukazuke.

Although this film does not mention the smell of her hands directly, it is obvious that Yoshiko's hands have the same nukazuke smell as his mother's had. The effect of this smell was to evoke an individual memory for Musumiya. Marks writes, "the associations we have with odor are strongly individualized and context-dependent, and will be as long as humans have different life experiences" (Marks, 2002, p.121). An example of this is Musumiya's association with the smell based on his own personal context and experience.

It is true that in the film, Musumiya only states that Yoshiko pickling nukazuke was similar to what his mother had done; however, nukazuke sometimes works as a symbol of the smell. It is certainly true that it recalls the memory of his mother, and Musumiya develops amorous feelings for Yoshiko because of it. On the other hand, Yoshiko's younger sister-in-law, Umeko, had also fallen in love with him; however, her love was not requited. It is notable that Umeko had not pickled nukazuke with Yoshiko. This means that Umeko's hand does not have the same smell as the man's deceased mother and this fact is important for him to love someone. In this film, the smell of nukazuke is desirable and is the catalyst in his relations with a woman.

Therefore, it is clear that the perception of smell—for instance, whether or not one smell is desirable—is related to the character's feelings toward other characters. In addition, an experience of the same smell together indicates psychological proximity.

## Conclusion

As mentioned previously, there are two predominant effects of smell in post-war Japanese films. First, smell is used as a symbol of presentiment. In Mikio Naruse's *Repast*, Keisuke Kinoshita's *Times of Joy and Sorrow*, and Yasujiro Ozu's *Early*

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<sup>1</sup> In *Repast*, there is a scene of indirect kissing wherein a man drank his wife's leftover sake. Other films have some scenes wherein a husband and wife are walking side by side or are in the same space together.

*Spring*, smell had the ability to portend future events. Whether the smell is comfortable or not involves whether future is comfortable or not. Second, smell was also shown to be a symbol of intimacy. In Yasujiro Ozu's *The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice* and Mikio Naruse's *A Woman's Place*, smell represents psychological intimacy. In these films, an experience of the same smell together implies physical proximity.

The sense of smell is indeed less objective than the visual and auditory senses but it also represents psychological and temporal proximity beyond time and space. As previously mentioned, a future event that hasn't occurred yet cannot be perceived by vision and sound but by smell. That is, even if the future has not come there, we can find the smell of this future as far as the smell is coming soon. Therefore, smell plays a very important role in the representation of family in Japanese films and it occupies a privileged position in its ability to represent proximity beyond the confines of time and space.

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