

***“Three Little Maids” in Occupied Japan:
Domestic Things, The Mikado, and Navy Wife***

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Abstract

This study explores the embedded subplot in a forgotten Hollywood film titled *Navy Wife* (1956), a comedy about three maids in Japan under American occupation. Starring Joan Bennett, *Navy Wife* depicts American domesticity in Occupied Japan, which the three maids undermine. By adopting Robin Bernstein’s theory of “scriptive things,” this paper examines how a comic subplot emerges from the complex interactions between people and things, characters, and props. The Blain household, the film’s main setting, is equipped with the latest electric home appliances imported from the United States, such as vacuum cleaners and refrigerators; however, these domestic machines are completely unfamiliar to the Japanese maids and servants in the household. These streamlined home appliances serve as “scriptive things,” and the agency of things shapes or directs human characters’ actions, namely those of the Japanese servants and maids, to evoke laughter. I suggest that the comic subplot of *Navy Wife* is loosely based on and significantly rewrites Gilbert and Sullivan’s Japanese-themed operetta *The Mikado*, which was performed for the first time in the Ernie Pyle Theater (formerly the Tokyo Takarazuka Theater) in Occupied Japan. *Navy Wife* reinterprets some of *The Mikado*’s female characters, specifically the three little maids. This paper argues that with the introduction of the three maids, the story of *Navy Wife* becomes a topsy-turvy topical satire.

Keywords: Film Studies, Occupied Japan, The Mikado, Three Little Maids

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Introduction

This paper examines the embedded subplot of the movie *Navy Wife* (Edward Bernds, 1956), a forgotten Hollywood comedy starring Joan Bennett, which is set during the American occupation period in Japan and tells the story of three maids who undermine American domesticity in Occupied Japan. This study adopts Robin Bernstein's "scriptive things" theory to examine the development of a comic subplot through the complex interactions between people and things, characters, and props in *Navy Wife*. The Blain household, the film's primary milieu, possesses the latest electric appliances imported from the United States, such as vacuum cleaners and refrigerators; however, the Japanese maids and servants are unfamiliar with such gadgets. These streamlined home appliances function as "scriptive things" whose agency shapes or directs the actions of the human characters, namely the Japanese servants and maids, inducing laughter.

I suggest that the comic subplot of *Navy Wife* is a loose adaptation and retelling of Gilbert and Sullivan's Japanese-themed operetta *The Mikado*, which was never performed in prewar Imperial Japan but was shown for the first time in the Ernie Pyle Theater (formerly the Tokyo Takarazuka Theater) in Occupied Japan. *Navy Wife* rewrites some of *The Mikado*'s female characters, specifically the three little maids, who use vacuum cleaners in the film instead of paper fans in the operetta. I argue that the three maids transform *Navy Wife* into a chaotic topical satire on the Americanization of the postwar Japanese domestic sphere.

Navy Wife and *The Mikado*

Depicting the adventure of an American citizen in Japan, *Navy Wife* features a postwar rewrite of *The Mikado*. After World War II, navy wife Peg Blain receives a telegram from her husband, Comdr. Jack Blain, asking her and their daughter Debby to join him in Sasebo, Japan, where he has been stationed as a member of the occupation forces. In Japan, Peg arrives at a U.S. House (upper-class residences requisitioned from Japanese owners for Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers [SCAP] officials) called "Dragon Heights," and there she meets the three little maids. Although there appear to be four maids—Akiko, Kimiko, Tomiko, and Reiko—the film emphasizes the existence of only three, excluding Akiko.

The reason for this is linked to Tats Blain's book *Mother-Sir!* (1954), the movie's source literature. Blain was the first American woman to live in the postwar Sasebo village, where her husband worked as part of the occupation forces. In the book, Blain—addressed by her Japanese servants as "mother-sir"—writes her expectations of Japan as follows: "I expected Japan to extend dainty almond fingers to pull me to her breast. I expected a Gilbert & Sullivan operetta on a Willowware plate with a garden, bamboo tree and a couple of maidens-fair in bright kimonos singing me a song of welcome" (Blain, 1954, p. 24). Instead, Blain arrives at a gray harbor with "[n]o gardens, bridges or girls." Upon arriving at Dragon Heights, she *does* encounter some maidens, but they are maids hired through the Japanese government for the residences of SCAP officials.

As Blain frequently mentions the maids in her stories, the maids take on a central role throughout the book. Blain even includes them on the illustrated cover of her book along with her husband and daughter, but it shows only three of the maids instead of the original four. An article in *The West Australian*, titled "Unlike 'The Mikado'" ("Reviews of books in brief," 1954) described how Blain used her disillusionment with Occupied Japan to write a

humorous narrative in *Mother-Sir!* However, Blain's writing suggests otherwise. Despite her disenchantment, she continued reporting her experiences by referring to *The Mikado*.

This is seen in her description of the maids, whom she calls the "Three Fates," a common motif in European polytheism. The name is reminiscent of the "Three Little Maids" from *The Mikado*. The operetta portrays the girls as a playful trio, like the Three Fates, who finds "everything [to be] a source of fun." In describing the house girls, Blain frequently uses words such as "giggly" (as opposed to "chuckle" in the operetta) and "unquenchable amusement." The Three Fates are the products of Blain's initial images of Imperial Japan in *The Mikado* and inform the novel's retelling of the operetta.

Similarly, in *Navy Wife*, Peg's expectation of adventure in Japan (based on representations of prewar Imperial Japan) is displaced onto Occupied Japan. After receiving Jack's telegram, Peg undergoes a battery of preventative vaccines and, in the process, hallucinates herself, Jack, and Debby at a small Japanese garden with a bridge and a river, clothed in traditional Japanese kimono, and accepting a drink from a young Japanese maid in celebration of their arrival to Japan.

The film also uses the images of *The Mikado*'s Japan to portray Occupied Japan. Instead of a maid, the housing authority provides Peg with multiple housemaids at Dragon Heights. She had initially planned to hire two, Akiko and Tomiko, but when another maid, Kimiko, insists that Peg recruit three of them (Reiko, Tomiko, and Kimiko) because they always "work together," Peg reluctantly agrees. Through this event, the film features a *trio* of maids instead of a duo, which would have invalidated the movie's reference to the operetta, and Kimiko's comment explains the movie's unusual emphasis on the three maids.

Both the film and the novel's reference to *The Mikado* is not surprising; "for countless people who had never been to Japan, never met anyone of Japanese descent, or never seen or heard anything of Japanese culture (as well as for many who had done all of those things), *The Mikado* served as the basis of knowledge of what 'Japanese' meant" (Lee, 2010, p. viii). Before becoming a Hollywood producer, Walter Wanger, who produced the film, had worked in theater, also as a producer. Hence, it is not an exaggeration to say that *The Mikado*'s readaptation in *Navy Wife* comes naturally.

Nevertheless, *Navy Wife* does not authentically represent Japan or its inhabitants. According to Ken Provencher, the goal of 1950s productions in Japan was not to capture the genuineness of Japanese locations but rather to "frame locations as authentically—that is to say, exotically—Japanese" (Provencher, 2014, p. 44). Although *Navy Wife* includes some footage of Tokyo streets shot on location, the entire movie was shot in a Hollywood studio. It does not seek to truly represent Occupied Japan not necessarily because of a lack of desire but perhaps out of a lack of resources. *Navy Wife* was made outside the big studios with a small budget and a timeline but with increased creative freedom. The film rewrites *The Mikado* by infusing the familiar characters (to Western audiences) of the three little maids with the theme of "Occupied Japan" to form a humorous subplot within its narrative.

"Scriptive Things" and Subversive Laughter

The three little maids and their mistress generate laughter within the movie with the help of various Western domestic appliances functioning as "scriptive things." Examining the difference between things and objects, Robin Bernstein (2009, p. 70) writes, "At the deepest

ontological level (. . .) performance is what distinguishes an object from a thing.” Bernstein argues that things, not objects, script actions. The nonconventional background of *Navy Wife*, the requisitioned house, and its servants’ everyday physical encounters with the modern Western home appliances script the film’s comical, dramatic exchange, an *interracial female farce*, between the American mistress and Japanese subjects.

The material *things* of the Blain household must be analyzed in conjunction with the Japanese characters, as they inform each other’s existence within the narrative. Professions such as maids were a new type of employment created in the wake of the occupation. The livelihood of Japanese maids depended not only on their relationships with their mistresses but also on their ability to command and operate the various machines that constitute the domestic (and hence gendered) spaces of U.S. Houses. In *Navy Wife*, the Japanese female characters and their interactions with *things* necessarily form a female-to-female relationship that reshapes their connection with their mistress, Peg.

Early reviews and subsequent writers viewed the comicality of *Navy Wife* from the perspective of cultural misunderstandings. Newspaper reviews saw the film as a humorous take on life in postwar Japan. The *Frontier* described it as “the most hilarious scramble a woman got into since ‘The Egg and I’” (“Navy Wife,” 1956), while the *St. Louis Register* stated that “[t]he customs are amusing, backgrounds are colorful and the acting of both principals and supporting Japanese cast is quite good” (Mooring, 1956). Meanwhile, film historian Matthew Bernstein used the word “mediocre” to describe the film, writing, “[T]he film was a talky situation comedy that exploited misunderstandings between Americans and Japanese” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 314).

Be that as it may, cultural misunderstandings between Americans and the Japanese are not the only factor that helps deliver the film’s humorous plot. One important comical element in the film is the relation between people and things, characters, and props in the *mise-en-scène*. Despite being described in the film as handy, the American home appliances are ultimately characterized by their insubordination to humans. In a scene where all the servants gather in the kitchen to inspect the newly arrived gadgets, one maid takes the initiative to open a cooker and says, “*Sugoiwane*,” which in Japanese means “amazing.” The younger cook notes, “What a beautiful kitchen!” and another maid says, “Everything new, cost much money,” all applauding the generosity of Uncle Sam. Things take an unexpected turn, however, when the servants try to use the appliances.

Because of the servants’ unfamiliarity with the Western lifestyle, catastrophic events occur unless Peg individually supervises their every action. The servants of the Blain household wreak havoc, for instance, by putting a block of ice inside a refrigerator and burning a shirt. Sometimes the structure of the house itself just does not seem to cooperate; for instance, because the house runs on faulty current, when Sato, the young male cook, forgets the correct order of turning on the appliances, the electric outlet in the kitchen explodes. In another instance, also because of unstable electricity, when Peg tries to plug the vacuum cord to teach the maids how to use it, the outlet blows up yet again. Peg and the maids jump almost theatrically in response to this spectacle-like event. Worth noting is that more often than not, these scripts of *interracial female farce*—seemingly meaningless actions that have little to do with the main narrative—cause the American mistress to be ridiculed by the Japanese maids. After the vacuum cleaner episode, the laughing maids mock Peg, who made the same mistake as Sato, by saying, “mother-sir forget, should unplug refrigerator before inplug Hoover.”

The movie portrays Japanese servants as harmless and clueless characters who speak pidgin-like English and are fundamentally incompatible with the Western lifestyle because of their inability to command simple electric home appliances. Nevertheless, despite the ridiculous depiction of these Japanese characters, the subject of laughter is ultimately the American occupiers.

Conclusion

The comical elements of *Navy Wife* are characterized not only by the misunderstandings between American and Japanese cultures caused by a displacement not only of *people* but also of *things* and by a reimagination of the enduring tale of *The Mikado* in the context of “Occupied Japan.”

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