

Kissing Scenes in the Representation of Family in Post-war Japanese Films

Yui Hayakawa, University of Tsukuba, Japan

The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2021
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Yasujiro Ozu and Mikio Naruse are well-known Japanese filmmakers who depict the “everyday life” (nichijo in Japanese) of families in the post-war period. Their ways of presenting “everyday life” are characterized by the exclusion of violent and sexual expressions. However, exceptionally, emotions are expressed through kissing scenes in their films. Focusing on kissing scenes in Ozu’s *The Munekata Sisters* (1950), *Early Spring* (1956), Naruse’s *Floating Clouds* (1955), and *Scattered Clouds* (1967), this paper examines how “everyday life” is depicted through these scenes. By analyzing the kissing scenes in relation to plots and visual shots, I attempt to show that these scenes function as disruptions of the stability of “everyday life,” that is to say, as the representation of “the extraordinary” (hinichijo). Here “the extraordinary” involves disquieting events that disturb the continuous rhythm of “everyday life” and has negative images associated with adultery, prostitution, or sexual violence. Many previous studies on kissing scenes in post-war Japanese films have examined their reception by contemporaries from a sociohistorical perspective. For example, Kyoko Hirano’s *Kiss and the Emperor* (1998) observes that the kissing scenes introduced into Japanese films by GHQ and their reception reflect the idea of romantic love and sexual freedom in the context of post-war democracy. But this paper will explore the meaning of kissing scenes by looking at the relation between “everyday life” (“the ordinary”) and “the extraordinary” on which the films of Ozu and Naruse are based.

Keywords: Japanese Film, Family, Yasujiro Ozu, Mikio Naruse, Kissing, Everyday Life, The Extraordinary

iafor

The International Academic Forum

www.iafor.org

Introduction

This study aims to examine the role of kissing scenes in the depiction of “everyday life” (*nichijo* in Japanese) of Japanese families in the post-war period. In this paper, we consider the post-war period to be from the 1950s until the 1960s. By analyzing films directed by Yasujiro Ozu and Mikio Naruse, this study explores how kissing scenes in these films function as “extraordinary” (*hi-nichijo* in Japanese), in contrast to “ordinary” family life. Ozu and Naruse’s ways of presenting “everyday life” are characterized by the exclusion of violent and sexual expressions. However, exceptionally, there are kissing scenes in their films, and they form unusual expressions.

Here, I would like to summarize what the kissing scene was like for the Japanese. In his book, *The Culture of Gesture*, Michitaro Tada describes how Westerners are averse to shoulder-to-shoulder contact due to the need to maintain personal space and the fact that touching is associated with special proximity reminiscent of sex (Tada, 1972, pp.62-63). Meanwhile, the Japanese are not as sensitive to this contact (pp.62-63). As Tada points out, this is not so much a factor of love or coincidence, but rather a result of the fact that he Japanese people usually do not acknowledge sexuality itself. Therefore, it was not prevalent enough to forbid making shoulder-to-shoulder contact. Although the culture of kissing was not completely absent in Japan, it was not recognized as an act to be performed in public. Thus, kissing scenes in Japanese movies were not considered “every day,” instead fell into the category of “the extraordinary.”

Previous studies that discuss kissing scenes in post-war Japanese films examine the reception of the scenes by contemporaries from a sociohistorical perspective. In *Kiss and the Emperor*, Kyoko Hirano noted that, “The reason why the U.S. requested the inclusion of kissing scenes in Japanese films, even though it was not a common practice among Japanese people” was because “the occupation prosecutor believed that it was essential for the Japanese people to express their desires and emotions in the presence of others without being coy about their love and affection” (Hirano, 1998, p.252). She observed that kissing scenes had both pros and cons, as the act of kissing on screen was unusual and therefore most likely uncomfortable for some viewers (p.248). On the other hand, Hirano described it as a welcome sign of sexual freedom (p.253). She found that there was a conflict regarding the acceptance of kissing scenes in movies in post-war Japanese films, because while kissing was an “extraordinary,” unusual act for the contemporaries, these scenes aided in reflecting the sexual freedom and free love of post-war democracy.

As mentioned above, previous studies, including those of Hirano, have examined the relationship of kissing scenes in post-war Japanese films in the context of history and contemporary acceptance. However, how kissing scenes affected post-war Japanese films is still being debated. This paper discusses kissing scenes of these films as unusual expressions that disturb the continuous rhythm of the “everyday life.” The continuous rhythm of “everyday life” consisted of monotonous plots and repeated shots. Yoko Ima-Izumi’s *Kiss Scenes in Japanese Film* (2003) analyzed women’s kissing scenes in the post-war Japanese films. Ima-Izumi acknowledges that people during the wartime considered these kissing scenes to be a symbol of separation. Contrarily, this paper aims to explore how kissing scenes represented “the extraordinary” in post-war Japanese films. “The extraordinary” refers to the symbol of unpeaceful affairs, especially ones that disturb the continuous rhythm of every day family life, and include negative images, such as adultery, prostitution, and sexual violence.

Although kissing is indeed an act of intimacy in the real world, the kissing scenes of post-war Japanese films, by directors such as Ozu and Naruse, whose subject is typically everyday life, represent the extraordinary. The extraordinary differs from intimacy. In these post-war Japanese films, “intimacy” is expressed by indirect contact. In these films, intimate activities include eating together and walking together, rather than maintaining intimate physical contact, such as kissing. There are some scenes in contemporary films wherein two people walk side by side or are in the same space together, intimately positioned. Therefore, physical or sexual contact such as kissing is regarded as an extraordinary affair in these films. To reveal the effect of kissing scenes as the symbol of the extraordinary which disturb the rhythm of everyday life, this study analyzes post-war Japanese films whose kissing scenes effectively represent “the extraordinary,” such as those in Yasujiro Ozu’s *The Munekata Sisters* (1950) and *Early Spring* (1956), Mikio Naruse’s *Floating Clouds* (1955) and *Scattered Clouds* (1967).

1. Kissing scenes in Ozu’s films

As already mentioned, the intimacy depicted in Yasujiro Ozu's representations of daily life was mainly through indirect contact. Particularly, films such as *Early Summer* (1951) and *The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice* (1952), the act of eating together represents the intimacy of everyday family life (Figure 1, 2). Therefore, it is only natural that the kissing scene gives an extraordinary impression within Ozu's films. In contrast to other Japanese films of the same period, such as *Hatachi no Seishun* (1946) which is regarded as Japan's first kissing film, Ozu's films continued to depict arranged marriages even when the GHQ's film democratization policy required "free love" to be depicted in films (Hase, 2017, pp.127-128). Hase argued that Ozu's films, especially *Late Spring* (1949), which depicted arranged marriages and restricted sexual depictions, were positioned as “anti-kissing films,” in contrast to films that tended to insert kissing scenes to enlighten people about “romantic love” as a post-war democracy (Hase, 2017, pp.128-130). It is not clear to what extent Ozu was skeptical of this policy, but kissing itself was something extraordinary in Ozu's films, which depicted the everyday lives of families in his time. In this section, I will discuss the role of the kissing scene, a symbol of the unusual in Ozu's films, as it affects the family and the representation of the family.



Figure 1: Yasujiro Ozu’s *The Flavor of Green Tea Over Rice* (1952)



Figure 2

In *The Munakata Sisters*, there is a scene in which Setsuko Munakata attempts to kiss Hiroshi Tashiro, her former love. This occurs after her relationship with her husband, Ryosuke, has gone cold. Subsequently, the two notice Ryosuke's appearance and hurriedly pull apart from each other. The marital problems of Setsuko and Ryosuke are depicted in this film. When Tashiro, her former lover, appears on the screen, his relationship with Setsuko is in contrast to her relationship with her husband, and the lack of intimacy in her marriage to Ryosuke is emphasized. Setsuko tries to behave as a virtuous wife, but after an incident wherein she is slapped by Ryosuke and then receives advice from her sister, she finally leaves Ryosuke and tries to be with Tashiro. The scene where Setsuko and Tashiro are about to kiss is when they call Ryosuke to discuss it. Ryosuke's catching his wife red-handed with Tashiro makes him realize that Setsuko is about to leave him and marry Tashiro. As fate would have it, Ryosuke dies suddenly, before they can officially divorce. Setsuko is overcome by guilt and never marries Tashiro. In this film, Tashiro and Setsuko attempt to kiss (Figure 3) and get close to each other (Figure 4). However, this kiss is prevented when they realize that Setsuko's husband Ryosuke has arrived (Figure 5) and leaves (Figure 6). Ozu's films have demonstrated "the fact that sexuality can be perceived as unclean for human beings" (Hase, 2017, p.129). As Hase points out, a married woman attempting to kiss a man other than her husband is never depicted in a positive light, even when she loves him more than she loves her husband. When Ryosuke suddenly dies, Setsuko immediately snaps out of her relationship with Tashiro and acts as a virtuous wife-turned-widow. In other words, in this film, kissing depicted immorality, as the only witnessed kiss was an adulterous one. Not only did the kissing scene express the extraordinary nature of the family, but it depicted a disturbance in the rhythm of daily life in post-war Ozu's films.



Figure 3: Yasujiro Ozu's *The Munakata Sisters* (1950)



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

In *Early Spring*, there is a kissing scene between Syoji Sugiyama, who has a wife, and his co-worker, Chiyo Kaneko, in the Okonomiyaki restaurant (Figure 7). After this scene, they spend the night together. Their kissing scene is perceived by the audience as the symbol of their disquieting adultery. Adultery is an unpeaceful and extraordinary occurrence in Ozu's films, which typically describe the peaceful everyday life of a family. Furthermore, after Syoji spent the night with Chiyo he attempted to kiss his wife, Masako. Masako, however, refused his kiss (Figure 8). This scene reveals that kissing scenes were not a symbol of affirmative intimacy.



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



Figure 8

The contrasts between Chiyo willingly kissing Syoji and Masako refusing to kiss Syoji is stark and meaningful. Shoji and Chiyo's affair is later discovered by other colleagues and is severely criticized. Not only is his strict and fastidious wife, Masako, upset but his friends also severely criticize his relationship with Chiyo. This shows that the characters in Ozu's films were naturally moral, and that kissing people, especially people that one was not married to was not in the scope of morality. It is also important to note why Masako refused to kiss Shoji. This was partly because she sensed Shoji's guilt, but mostly because the act of kissing between a husband and wife is an unusual act in Ozu's films. As mentioned previously, the everyday intimacy of family in Ozu's films is represented by the act of eating the same food and being in the same space. A kissing scene between Shoji and Masako here is not a guarantee of intimacy. Thus, these kissing scenes represented extraordinary affairs and disturb the peaceful relationship of a family rather than symbolize affirmative intimacy. In Ozu's films, kissing scenes disturb visual and continuous rhythms by consisting of a shot-reverse-shot of bust shot.

Therefore, in Ozu's films, the kissing scene is a symbol of the extraordinary, and what the kissing scene suggests is a family crisis. In these two works, the object of the kiss is someone other than the spouse, which falls under the category of cheating or adultery. In *The Munakata Sisters*, the husband dies suddenly and in *Early Spring*, the couple's relationship deteriorates decisively. In Ozu's films, everyday family intimacy is expressed through indirect contact, such as the act of sharing the same foods. The kissing scene is a symbol of unwelcome intimacy, or more specifically, a sense of guilt. This guilt is not simply based on the social context of losing the war, but it is a guilt that disrupts the family routine in Ozu's film and is connected to the extraordinary nature of the kissing scene.

2. Kissing scenes in Naruse's Films

Mikio Naruse's post-war films have the same tendency. Many of Mikio Naruse's post-war works focus on women's lives during the post-war period. Catherine Russell noted that, "Naruse's marriage films dramatize the emotional and economic difficulties of couples attempting to make it on their own in the harsh conditions of the post-war era" (Russell, 2011, p.104). As Russell pointed out, "[Naruse's] female characters" tend to work as *geishas* or bar hostesses (pp.103-104). However, "they are neither eroticized or exoticized, which was a new way of depicting the *mizu shobai* or 'water trade' in Japanese culture" (pp.105). Thus, Naruse's films tended to depict everyday life with a greater focus on the hardships of life, than Ozu's. However, this was mainly due to the difference in the social classes of characters in the films. Also, Naruse did not emphasize sexuality when depicting the "water trade." In addition, the symbol of everyday intimacy in Naruse's films was walking together, which is an act of indirect contact (Figure 9, 10). This is similar to Ozu's representations of intimacy, as physical contact was not regarded as a symbol of intimacy in Ozu's movies either. Therefore, the kissing scenes in Naruse's films, similar to those in Ozu's films, were depicted as something extraordinary, as well as an act that threatened the family.



Figure 9: Mikio Naruse's *Repast* (1951)



Figure 10: Mikio Naruse's *Yearning* (1964)

This is exemplified in Naruse's *Floating Clouds* (1955), where two kissing scenes, one of the past in the form of a flashback, and one of the present, are shown. This film depicted the relationship between Yukiko and Tomioka which became adulterous when Yukiko went to Vietnam and met with Tomioka clandestinely. The flashback of their kiss exchange there was shown in connection to the current kissing scene when they meet again in Japan (Figure 11), charting the path of their love affair. Although they kissed when they were reunited in Japan, Tomioka reneged on his promise to Yukiko and finally chose to remain with his wife. The kissing scene here suggests an empty relationship between Tomioka and Yukiko in an adulterous relationship, which is the opposite of positive intimacy. This does, however, differ

from the way in which Imaizumi uses kissing scenes, which, for him, symbolizes eternal separation. It is also important to note that Imaizumi used a flashback to inform the audience of a past kissing scene. Another flashback that appears in the film is the scene where Yukiko was raped by her brother-in-law, Iba (Figure 12). After returning to Japan and working as a prostitute, Yukiko recalls the assault as a piece of her past that is irreversible when she sees Iba again.



Figure 11: Mikio Naruse's *Floating Clouds* (1955)



Figure 12

This pattern suggests that the depiction of physical contact through flashbacks is associated with negative imagery, such as adultery and rape. In addition, Tomioka's wife has noticed that his feelings for her lack warmth since his return to Japan, and their relationship has deteriorated. However, Tomioka does choose to stay with his wife while continuing his relationship with Yukiko. Yukiko continues to pursue him, while Tomioka also becomes involved with other women. In the film, he is asked by another woman, "Why did you kiss me while you were drinking?" This suggests that kissing is not an act of devotion for him. These scenes make the audience notice that his action has disturbed the everyday lives of women. The act of kissing, which is insignificant for Tomioka, threatens his relationship with his wife and the families of each of the women involved. By the time he finally began to consider a serious relationship with Yukiko after his wife's death, Yukiko was already ill, and it was too late to forge a permanent relationship with her.

Russell (2011) noted that *Floating Clouds*, "lacks stability, but an unusual sense of instability is created" (p.118). This characters in this film consisted of Tomioka, a "womanizer", and the women who fell prey to Tomioka, and had their stable, everyday lives disturbed by him. The "instability" that Russell referred to was caused by Tomioka. Therefore, these kissing scenes

are also a symbol of the immoral act of adultery rather than as symbols of intimacy and devotion. Since Tomioka had the potential ability to ruin the everyday life of these women and their families, including his wife, we can say that his promiscuous behavior was an act that endangered Yukiko's everyday life and that of his wife and family.

There is another example of kissing scenes that represents the extraordinary in Naruse's post-war films. In *Scattered Clouds* (1967), there are kissing scenes between Yumiko, a widow, and Shiro, who had run over Yumiko's husband with his car. At the beginning of this film, their relationship was that of victim and perpetrator. This caused Shiro to be an object of hatred for Yumiko. However, as they kept encountering each other, Shiro falls in love with Yumiko and begins to pursue her. At first, Yumiko strongly rejects him, but eventually she is attracted to him. Then the kissing scene between the two takes place as Shiro asks Yumiko to go to Lahore with him. It is during this kissing scene, that the flashback appears in which her husband, who died in an accident caused by Shiro, flood Yumiko's mind as cuts of the car and ambulance are contained in it. This flashback evokes guilt in her kiss exchange with Shiro makes her feel like a traitor. It also suggests a threat to Yumiko's living of a chaste life. At the same time, Yumiko bears a grudge against Shiro for her husband's death. This means that Shiro is Yumiko's metaphorical assailant, so their kissing is a symbol of an unwelcome and immoral affair. Furthering the immorality, their affair did not culminate in marriage. Additionally, in Naruse's films, shots of close-ups are used to evoke a sense of touch. Both these shots and previous flashbacks disturbed the visual rhythm of everyday life.

Conclusion

Both *Floating Clouds* and *Scattered Clouds* use flashbacks, which are not common in Naruse's films. They both contain kissing scenes that are connected to images of adultery, infidelity, sexual violence, and feelings of guilt. Since one of the men or women has a family, this type of kissing is an act that could destroy the family. In *Floating Clouds*, the relationship between the man and his wife deteriorates and, in the end, the wife dies. In *Scattered Clouds*, the kissing was an act that had the ability to destroy the everyday life of the widow by evoking feelings of guilt in her. Furthermore, the effects of these kissing scenes are common in Ozu's films, as mentioned earlier. In Ozu's films, the couples depicted in the kissing scenes do not end up getting married. Rather, in those films, the kissing scene is a symbol of an unwelcome and unusual relationship, regardless of the guilt the couple feels.

As mentioned previously, these post-war films of Ozu and Naruse describe ordinary, everyday family life. However, kissing scenes represent the extraordinary rather than the ordinary. They contain moments that disrupt the rhythm of peaceful, everyday life, such as adultery, sexual violence, and prostitution, scenes which are intended to disquiet the audience. Thus, kissing scenes symbolized the extraordinary rather than idyllic, romantic love, in the context of post-war democracy. In post-war Japanese films directed by Ozu and Naruse, the audience can see this as an original approach to kissing scenes. Ozu and Naruse typically described everyday family life, and they were able to effectively use kissing scenes to represent disturbing paradoxes within everyday life. The idea that kissing scenes in post-war Japanese films could represent the "extraordinary" in everyday family life is new and exciting.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Editage (www.editage.com) for English language editing.

References

- Imaizumi, Y. (2003). Kiss Scenes in Japanese Film. *Studies in language and literature. Literature, 44*, 74-35.
- Fujimoto, M. (Producer), & Mikio, N. (Director). (1951). 『めし』 [*Repast*] [Motion picture]. Japan: Toho.
- Fujimoto, S. (Producer), & Naruse, M. (Director). (1955). 『浮雲』 [*Floating Clouds*] [Motion picture]. Japan: Toho.
- Hase, M. (2017). 『ヴァナキュラー・モダニズムとしての映像文化』 [*Vernacular Modernism in Visual Cultures*]. Tokyo: University of Tokyo.
- Hirano, K. (1998). 『天皇と接吻』 [*Kiss and The Emperor*]. Tokyo: Soshisha.
- Kaneko, M., Fujimoto, S. (Producers), & Naruse, M. (Director). (1967). 『乱れ雲』 [*Scattered clouds*] [Motion picture]. Japan: Toho.
- Koi, E. (Producer), & Ozu, Y. (Director). (1950). 『宗方姉妹』 [*The Munekata sisters*] [Motion picture]. Japan: Toho.
- Naruse, M. and Fujimoto, M. (Producer) , & Naruse, M. (Director). (1964). 『乱れる』 [*Yearning*] [Motion picture]. Japan: Toho.
- Russell, C. (2011). *Classical Japanese cinema revisited*. New York: Continuum.
- Tada, M. (1972). しぐさの日本文化 [*Japanese culture in gesture*]. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo.
- Yamamoto, T. (Producer), & Ozu, Y. (Director). (1952). 『お茶漬の味』 [*The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice*] [Motion picture]. Japan: Shochiku.
- Yamanouchi, S. (Producer), & Ozu, Y. (Director). (1956). 『早春』 [*Early spring*] [Motion picture]. Japan: Shochiku.

Contact email: yuihayakawa.ozu@gmail.com