

# ***Ka* as *shomin-geki*: Problematizing videogame studies**

**William Huber**

34 Rausch Street 401  
San Francisco, CA 94103  
USA  
+1 415 861 5863  
whh@zang.org

## **ABSTRACT**

The paper addresses limitations of strictly interactive theories of videogame genre, proposes a supplementary, historicist inter-media alternative, and interprets the videogame *Ka* as a ludic worked based in the *shomin-geki* tradition of Japanese cinema.

## **Keywords**

Japanese cultural history, videogame genre theory, *shomin-geki*, domesticity, intertextuality

Rather than looking at videogames in general, this paper examines one game in particular as a cultural artifact: *Ka*, produced in Japan in 2001, and later released in the US and Europe as *Mister Mosquito*. By bringing a historicist sensibility to the study of individual games in the aftermath of the initial *ludology/narratology* formalist discussions, the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate a way to access videogames as texts in ways that recognize their inherent, media-specific structure as videogames, yet also explore their inevitable intertextualities.

To begin with, I look at some general aspects of genre theory as they affect the study of games. I then turn to the game itself, breaking out the structure in a table of interactive and narrative events. An explanation of the *shomin-geki* comedy drama follows, with attention to how the texts of that genre react to historical changes in the discursive field it tracks, ultimately to include *Ka* in its concern with the ongoing construction of domesticity in Japan. By tracking genre-formation to historical anxieties within cultural practice, and seeing game-texts as participants in intertextual, thematic genres, we can better understand how they generate discursive positions within gameplay.

## **Videogames, genre, and intertextuality**

Most discussions of game-texts begin with only minimal skepticism of the categories of genre that have evolved from popular literature. Wolf [16], making a good attempt to catalog the extant interactive logics of genre, suggests:

While the ideas of iconography and theme may be appropriate tools for analyzing Hollywood films as well as many videogames, another area, interactivity, is an essential part of every game's

structure and a more appropriate way of examining and defining video game genres.<sup>1</sup>

I contend that much a game's power, both a cultural artifact and as a medium for pleasure, is incomprehensible unless understood thematically. The purpose of looking at genre in this context is not part of a project of taxonomy, but rather to discuss how the game as a text generates meaning in reception/interaction, to find a lineage in its tropes and so ground it in the broader field of cultural practice from which it emerges.

The semantic/syntactic approach used by Altman[1] is meant to account for an unfolding, historicized account of film genre development, and make some sense of the failures of both purely thematic or structural approaches to account for intuitive senses of genre membership (specifically, questions such as the "Pennsylvania western," as well as the relationship between Elvis Presley films and the musical.) A purely syntactic approach to genre would categorize Star Wars as a western (and Altman notes that some critics have done just that.) In fact, he posits a dual-origin theory of genre, in which either element may be a stable or dynamic element of genre-construction.

A more thematic approach towards genre may be more productive to the interpretive study of videogames. Interactive (syntactic) genres are less stable over time than thematic genres: the epoch when a videogame title could effectively be constrained to a single mode of interaction has passed. Partially a product of market expectations and partially due to technological and industrial development, interactive game syntax in terms of task-structure changes more dynamically than the cinematographic conventions of film. (At a finer level of analysis, perhaps some elements of game syntax are more stable – the mapping of the cursor or avatar onto the input, for example. However, genre formation does not operate at this level of analysis.)

Many recent games remediate other game-styles within them, as "minigames" (as in the *Final Fantasy* series) or as component tasks (as within *Grand Theft Auto 3*, where players can essentially play driving simulations within the context of a larger adventure game.) In comparison, thematic genres are *more stable* over time, to the extent that they can constitute a history that may last over generations. Often, a single game title is experienced as a suite of interactive mini-games, challenges, simulators, and narrative sequences. As games themselves are constituted by other games, the specific interactive structure diminishes as a determinate element of genre.

The popular game press betrays a certain reluctance to constrain itself to the interactive aspect of game genre, at times appealing to aesthetic or semantic criteria. For example, a widespread distinction exists between 2-dimensional or cel-shaded games, and 3-dimensional games, even within the same interactive

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<sup>1</sup>Interestingly enough, Wolf draws a comparison with dance genres, noting that the fox-trot, the waltz and so on "are defined by how the dancers move rather than by how they look." However, as observed by Savigliano[14], that claim is questionable – the reception of dance forms and their taxonomy has always included elements of class position, racial and national identity, and other thematic and contextual information, and the consolidation of a dance tradition into a structured dance form is an historical process by no means isolated from other issues; nor are those forms stable.

genre: in fighting games, a distinction made between games such as *Guilty Gear X* on one hand, and *Tekken 4* or *Bushido Blade 2* on the other. Though the interactive regimen is almost identical in 2D and 3D fighters, the aesthetic element alone is considered a basis for genre distinction. In practice, the game audience builds genre from interactive/syntactical, thematic/semantic, visual aesthetic, and technological/platform considerations.

Thematic genres are inter-textual, and it is my claim that they are meaningful by their origins in the historical anxieties and cultural discourses which background the practice of their production. For example, games such as *Silent Hill*, *Resident Evil* and *Clock Tower 3* participate in a survival horror genre by which they both remediate and extend the cinematic tradition. In interactive terms they vary somewhat, with *Clock Tower 3* having elements of an adventure/stealth game and *Resident Evil* those of a first-person shooter. Inter-textual junctions exist between the martial arts film genre and fighting games, between televised sports and sport simulations, between first-person war-games and war movies.

#### **The Structure of Ka**

The game *Ka* – released in the US under the name *Mister Mosquito* – was developed for the Sony Playstation 2 by Zoom Games, a relatively independent game production house in Japan, and distributed in Japan by SCEI. It was then (un)localized for the US and European markets by Fresh Games, a division of Eidos Interactive that specializes in “quirky Japanese games,” in marketing Japanese eccentricity and turning the unsaleability of the products into a premise for marketing.<sup>2</sup> The title enjoyed a certain amount of critical acclaim in the US for its novel approach, (and some criticisms for a certain awkwardness with the interface) but was generally treated as a niche title. In Japan, the title was considerably more successful. A sequel, *Ka 2*, was released in Japan in the summer of 2003 and is also being distributed by SCEI – it was marketed in pharmacies with a free can of mosquito repellent.

The game is about a mosquito's summer as an intruder in the home of the lower-middle class Yamada family. The mosquito must drink enough blood to survive the summer, without being swatted or poisoned. He<sup>3</sup> eavesdrops on the conversations of the family. Though predatory, he shows a genuine affection for his hosts. He (and, of course, the player) is a voyeur as well as a parasite, gazing at and tracking the moving bodies of the family members with a playful *eros*. His only sounds are groans of pleasure and grunts of surprise.

The game is structured into 12 stages, each preceded by a stylized cinematic scene depicting a family conference: only the top halves of their heads are shown in these round-table discussions<sup>4</sup>, a ground-eye view. The conversations track the family's increasing stress and annoyance, first with each other and then with the intruder. After the conference, the game cuts to

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<sup>2</sup>Exportability and “Japaneseness” with regards to videogames have not been addressed in videogame culture literature. See Iwabuchi [8] on *mukokuseki* (without-nationality) and cultural exports.

<sup>3</sup>The game's mosquito is depicted as male, though in actuality it is only the female mosquito that drinks blood.

<sup>4</sup>The conferences are *danran*, a “tradition” of Japanese families described below.

another interior scene, with the stage target in one of the rooms of the Yamada household. After this stage-establishing shot, the game play begins.

The player navigates the flight of the mosquito using the Playstation 2's analog joystick controllers, and identifies targets on the bodies of the different Yamada family members. The "shoulder buttons, L1 and L2, control reverse and forward flight speed. The O button will land the mosquito at the penetration site. The R3 button binds to the penetration of the host's skin; the right joystick then needs to be rotated at a variable pace to ensure that the host doesn't notice the mosquito. The player must attend to a blood-pressure/heart-beat monitor: if the gauge enters red level, the host will swat the mosquito, ending the stage (and forcing a reload, at the beginning of the family conference.)

At times, careless navigation into the field of vision of the host will trigger a battle-event. The unlikely scenario of a mosquito battling a human is explained by acupuncture. In order to survive the battle, the mosquito must attack vital *ki* points on the body of its opponent/host, using the O button. When the requisite points are struck – from 2 to 4, depending on the stage and the opponent – the (English) word "RELAX" flashes across the screen, and the human host smiles and abandons the conflict<sup>5</sup>. The mosquito is then free to return to the task of drawing blood<sup>6</sup>.

This is the essential structure of the game. There are, additionally, side-quests and bonus-tasks (collecting items, etc.) but what follows is the critical path for completion, and the narrative and thematic content which is traversed by gameplay:

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<sup>5</sup>*Ka* is not the only game that models human stress levels as game-play information. The game *Tondemo Crisis (Incredible Crisis)* demands the player negotiate ridiculous situations in order to keep the characters from suffering a sort of cartoon aneurysm. *Tondemo Crisis* has much common with the *nansensu* (nonsense, screwball) genre of film, which is historically closely linked with *shomin-geki*: Nolletti [11] notes "*shomin-geki* comedy evolved out of nonsense comedy and *shomin-geki* drama."

<sup>6</sup>The mosquito survives on the blood of the family. Anxieties of contagion have a double meaning – the mosquito is historically associated with malaria, and malaria is associated with the Japanese occupation of Indonesia in the Pacific War: Japan controlled the world's primary source of quinine during the conflict. The mosquito's function as a disease vector accompanies sexual anxiety: the act of penetration accompanies an oddly pleasurable groan from the hosts, and the mosquito moans contentedly while feeding. The anesthetizing saliva of the mosquito causes itching later – the game makes constant reference to itching, including a cautionary screen at the beginning of the game warning of impending itchiness – and at the same time is the transmission media for mosquito-borne diseases.

<b>Stage / Room</b>	<b>Conference</b>	<b>Stage establishing sequence</b>	<b>Game objective</b>
Prelude: Exterior	Narrator voice-over. "You must realize that you are a mosquito." The player is told that he is not a welcome visitor, because he "makes people feel itchy."	Medium distance outdoors shot, (sometimes day, night, raining); the camera circles the Yamada house; finally, the mosquito enters frame and then flies into the house.	Game loads; shot ends at games/options/file operations menu.
Stage 1: Rena's bedroom	Kenichi, Kaneyo and Rena quarrel about the family photo: Kaneyo storms out when she meets resistance; Rena takes refuge in her room.	Rena walks into her room, lounges on her bed.	Draw 2 tanks of Rena's blood.
Stage 2: Store room	Rena complains of insect bite; Kaneyo remembers that she needs to find something in the store room. Kaneyo advises Rena to apply aloe; Rena resists.	Kaneyo enters the darkened storeroom; the scene evokes visual conventions of suspense films.	Draw 2 tanks of Kaneyo's blood as she searches for a stored photo album, waxing nostalgic; avoid toxic clouds.  At the end of the level, Kaneyo has found the photo album she was looking for.
Stage 3: Living room	Kenichi is off-screen, Kaneyo informs Rena she's found the old photo albums; Rena notices Kaneyo's bite, advises her to place aloe. Kaneyo resists, promises not to disclose Rena's curfew violations.	Medium interior shot: Kenichi is laying (in his underwear) watching television.	Force Kenichi to move around the room by triggering appliances, turning off TV, turning on fax machine; draw 2 tanks of blood.

Stage 4: Bath room	Almost all dialogue is off screen (we only see Kenichi) – Kaneyo tells Rena her bath is ready; when Rena balks (she is watching something “really neat” on TV), Kaneyo asks if it’s alright if Kenichi goes first. Rena rushes to the bath. <sup>7</sup>	Close shot of Rena’s eyes veiled by bath steam, cut to high medium shot over Rena, who is soaking in the tub.	There is a 3.5 minute time limit. Suck 3 tanks of Rena’s blood, avoid being sprayed by hand-shower. (This stage is the most explicitly voyeuristic.)
Stage 5: Kitchen	The fabric of the family frays: Kaneyo betrays Rena’s confidence about her curfew violations. Kenichi orders Kaneyo to pick up some mosquito repellent; Kaneyo tells Kenichi that he can pick them up. Rena criticizes her mother’s cooking.	Samurai-film satire: Kaneyo prepares dinner using martial-arts-styled acrobatics.	Suck 4 tanks of Kaneyo’s blood from her feet. Avoid the fumes of the burning mosquito coils.  At end of the level, Kaneyo drops the food she was preparing.
Stage 6: Rena’s room	Rena is off-screen, practicing martial-arts moves. Kaneyo apologizes for ruining the dinner – Kenichi tells her that she’s glad she’s alright. The rapprochement is broken when Kenichi notes that Rena’s rambunctious nature resembles her mother’s.	Above shot. Rena is practicing her martial-arts maneuvers. View of her bedroom, including a cell phone on her bed.	Activate the cell phone to get Rena to speak; suck 4 tanks of Rena’s blood. During battle, avoid bug spray.

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<sup>7</sup>Bath water is usually shared between family members in Japan – the bath is larger, somewhere between a typical family tub in the West and a jacuzzi/hot tub. Traditionally, the “right” of first bath goes to guests, and then is accorded by seniority. Rena’s rush to take the first bath ahead of her father is an act of comic disrespect (and consistent with her social anxiety about the class position of her family.)

Stage 7: Japanese room	Rena complains of her injury while practicing. Kenichi advises her to stop all hazardous hobbies, and suggest she join him in <i>ikebana</i> , announcing that “flower arranging is the spirit of Japan.” Rena demurs.	Short cut sequence: Kenichi is dressed in gym clothes, sitting with ceremonial somberness, surrounded by a ring of mosquito coils. He is holding a flower, considering the best way to set it.	Suck 6 tanks of Kenichi's blood. At the end of the stage, an enraged Kenichi upsets the spiked <i>ikebana</i> holder, sending it flying and injuring himself; leaving a disk-shaped injury on the top of his bald head. <sup>8</sup>
Stage 8: Rena's room	Before the conference, the voice-over announces that Rena's friend Ayaka is visiting. Ayaka is described as upper-class and privileged, and as never having been bit by a mosquito. “She is defenseless. And delicious.” Rena mockingly advises her father not to go around “dressed like that.” She clearly is anxious about the difference in class status between Ayaka and herself.	An off-screen Rena tells Ayaka that she's going to get some drinks. Ayaka starts walking around the room, looking at Rena's belongings. She is repeating the movements of the mosquito.	Suck 6 tanks of Ayaka's blood. The last 2 tanks are drawn from her left eyelid after her glasses have fallen off. She is the least dangerous combatant, but a difficult target in her mobility <sup>9</sup> . At the end of the stage, a voice-over warns that standing too close to a TV is bad for one's eyesight, as a fumbling Ayaka hits a drawer and passes out.

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<sup>8</sup>The irony, of course, is that Kenichi sustained a far worse injury while flower arranging than Rena did while practicing *jujitsu*. The injury resembles the red disk of the Japanese national flag, as if marking him by his own attempts to perform his national identity.

<sup>9</sup>Implied in the game is Ayaka's virginity, associated with her higher social status.

Stage 9: Kenichi and Kaneyo's room	All three family members are growing angrier about the mosquito. They mobilize an attack strategy.  Kaneyo compliments Kenichi's masculine resolve.	The stage begins in battle mode. Kaneyo proclaims that it is for the love of her family that she fights. The tone is militant. <sup>10</sup>	Cause Kaneyo to faint by hitting 3 <b>relax</b> spots and then 1 <b>faint</b> spot. While she is conscious, avoid her blasts of insecticide.  While she is unconscious, draw 2 tanks of blood.
Stage 10: Rena's room	High drama: Kenichi and Rena discuss their battle plans. Kaneyo is missing in action.  Rena vows to defeat her fallen mother's enemy.	A long close scene of Rena streaming insecticide on (a different) bug. The stage then begins in battle mode.	Cause Rena to faint by hitting 3 <b>relax</b> spots and then 1 <b>faint</b> spot. She is also using cans of insecticide to attack.  While she is unconscious, draw 2 tanks of blood.
Stage 11: Living room	The setting is a darker, bluish hue. Kenichi sits and makes a long, growling, groaning sigh of anger.	A sequence of shots – back, front, front left – that are immediately recognizable as characteristic of Ozu. <sup>11</sup>	Cause Kenichi to faint by hitting 2 <b>relax</b> spots and then 1 <b>faint</b> spot. When he is unconscious, draw 3 tanks of blood.  Kenichi is a formidable opponent, throwing lightning bolts and fireballs.
Stage 12: Entire house (loading screen displays common areas.)	Not a conference, but same camera angle. Akaya rings the doorbell to visit, but no one answers (the family is unconscious.) Mistaking the clouds of insecticide and mosquito-coil fumes for a fire, she flees in panic.	Ground-level shot: Akaya's feet as she flees. The mosquito starts the level in the foyer.	There is a 5 minute time limit, until the house is filled with insecticide. The mosquito must go from room to room, sucking a total of 5 tanks of blood from all Yamada family members, and then leave the last room.

<sup>10</sup>Note the rhetoric of the mother as military leader, associated with Meiji rhetoric of domestic reform, discussed below.

<sup>11</sup>Mild-mannered Kenichi becomes a contemporary caricature of an angry demon, with a mosquito coil on his head, clutching cans of insecticide. He, a man who will never be a boss, is a Final Boss, a figure from a fantasy *anime*.

The epilogue begins with the mosquito performing a victory somersault as the house behind him fills with smoke, and one hears the sound of a fire engine's siren. An inter title - "the next day" - and then another conference, this time outside. The family is covered in mosquito bites, and Kenichi's *ikebana* injury is as prominent as ever. Rena pleads with her parents to reschedule the photo shoot for another day, but Kenichi insists that the photo shoot must occur that day, as it is their wedding anniversary. Kaneyo expresses her appreciation of Kenichi's thoughtfulness, and Rena capitulates. Cut to a tripod-mounted camera's view, from behind the camera, with cross-hairs on the family: they are composed for the shot, but as the shutter closes, their composition crumbles as the mosquito insists on inclusion in the family photo. The credits begin to roll while as the family continues its photo shoot, the unity of the nuclear family affirmed; Akaya joins them to help them take more photos.

After the cinematic sequence is completed, a report card of the player's performance is shown, listing the cc's of blood drawn from each family member, the time and battle statistics from the game, and a final letter rating. We learn that the mosquito was born on May 25, 2001, and has blood type X.<sup>12</sup>

Over the course of the first portion of the game, with each stage, the family's cohesion erodes in a series of subtle games of emotional sabotage, criticism and betrayal. By the ninth stage, however, there is a transformation in family relations: the mosquito has been identified as an invader, and the characters make proclamations of devotion and care of the family. At the same time, another outsider – Rena's upper-class friend, Akaya, is loosely associating with the family (her complaints that she's afraid she might die from the mosquito bite are met with mocking derision by the till-then class-anxious Rena.)

#### ***Shomin-geki* in cinema and television**

The *shomin-geki* genre (this is a redundancy - "*geki*" means, more or less genre) was named as such and consolidated in Japanese film practice during the 1930's, and continues to be a point of reference for film and television production. Ozu and Naruse are traditionally the auteurs most associated with genre, but it has an ongoing life in less auteurist works (such as the long-running *Tora-san* series of movies of the 60's through the 80's) as well as in family comedies like Morita Yoshimitsu's 1983 *Kazoku geimu* (*Family Games*). *Shomin* can be translated as *the little people*, *the common people*, or *the masses*. In practice, it refers to stories about the life of the lower middle class. Anderson and Richie [2] mark the beginning of the genre in film with Yasujiro Shimazu's *Chichi* (*Father*), at the beginning of the 1920's. While numerous auteurs and studios created a large body of *shomin-geki* works, today it is still the works of Ozu (and, to a lesser extent, the *Tora-san* series) which continues to resonate on the cultural landscape.

The most fundamental genre distinction in Japanese cinema is between *jidai-geki*, or period drama, and *gendai-geki*, films in contemporary settings. Largely drawn from the dramatic tradition, the distinction is more essential than that, say, between the comic and the dramatic. *Shomin-geki* is a genre within the *gendai-geki* meta-genre (along with *haha-mono* – mother-pictures – *sarariman-mono* – dramas of the workplace).

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<sup>12</sup>Blood type is considered the basis of personality in Japanese popular psychology.

Burch [4] locates the emergence of the *keiko-eiga*, or social “tendency” film as an escape from a myth of Japanese unanimity. This stance does a disservice to the entire history of social and political discourse in Japan and, even within cinema, he overlooks the break with the dramatic tradition that the domestic *shomin-geki* reveal, with the representation of private space as a contested space and object of political knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

Yasujiro Ozu did not invent *shomin-geki*, but he did make it his own – only one film, his very first, was a period piece. Two surviving films in particular stand out as exemplary of his work in *shomin-geki* comedy: the 1932 *Umarete wa Mita Keredo* (*I Was Born, But ...*) and its partial-remake, the 1959 *Ohayo* (*Good Morning*.) Both of these works are lighter in tone than, for example, the 1933 melodrama *Tokya no Onna* (*Woman of Tokyo*) or *Tokyo Monogatari* (*Tokyo Story*). Ozu made a number of *shomin-geki* comedies in the twenties and early thirties, while a more tragic, melancholic tone dominated his latter movies, until the making of *Ohayo*.

There are specific tropes that recur in *shomin-geki* productions, both comic and tragic. Almost universal, although taking different forms in pre-war, post-war, and contemporary productions, are center/periphery in-group/out-group structures. In pre-war *shomin-geki*, such as *Umarete wa Mita Keredo*, the protagonist family was the outsider; in *Ohayo*, the outsiders were strangers, either predatory salesmen or eccentric bohemians.

Nolletti [11] writes how both *shomin-geki* dramas and comedies involve the same general concerns. *Shomin-geki* narratives are structured around the response of the group to trauma, whether it be outside influence, such as the economic demands of Tokyo life in *Tokyo Monogatari*), the expectations of the community, such as the pressures to marry *Banshun* (*Late Spring*) and *Bakushu* (*Early Summer*), or even the arrival of a domestic technology, like the television in *Ohayo*.

One notable recurrent effect, particularly in comedy, is that of the arrival of a new media technology in private space. The cataclysm which triggers the silent protest of the children in *Umarete wa Mita Keredo* is a home-movie of their sycophantic father taken by his boss, viewed in the boss' home. In *Ohayo*, the invasive technology motivating an intergenerational crisis is the television. In all these cases, there is clear metonymy between family and nation, domestic media technology and economic/technological transformation. At play is the logic of David Morley's “politics of the living room.” [10]

The resolution of the social body in response to the trauma marks a film as comic or tragic: in *shomin-geki* comedy, the family (or, occasionally, other in-group) seems to fracture, but ultimately unity is restored; in tragedy, the family unit dissolves, individuals are left isolated, and the unity is broken. The sign of the fate of the family is often in the character of the mother, and this links many *shomin-geki* films to the *haha-mono* (mother-film) genre. The comic *shomin-geki* mother has authority, often over the father; the tragic mother is resigned and patient.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Yoshimoto [17] discusses the critical uses and misuses of Ozu by Burch, Bordwell and others.

<sup>14</sup>See Geist [7] for more depth on Ozu's narrative structure and its integration with his central themes.

These elements, and importantly the positions of the characters which require them, persist in *Ka* and link it strongly with the *shomin-geki* body of work, particularly Ozu's. The mosquito – the player – occupies the role of the outsider affirming the unity of the social/host body. The player adopts the position of the camera in the cinematic form: the invader who documents, and in fact catalyzes, the restoration of the group. During the fifth and ninth play stages, Kaneyo assures us of the preservation of the family through displays of domestic mastery and command, as she does in the third and fifth conferences. These events resolve the anxieties generated by the original disruption of the family fabric, and are consistent with the narrative resolutions in Ozu's *shomin-geki* comedies<sup>15</sup>.

The intrusion of media technology in the home also figure in the game; Kenichi is watching TV in one of the first stages, and the mosquito-player can toy with the remote to annoy him and thus get him to remove his layer of insect repellent. Ultimately, the entire narrative is motivated by (and, again, remediates) the desire of the Kaneyo to get the family to participate in the annual photo shoot.

#### **Domesticity and the Origins of *Shomin-geki***

Before *shomin-geki* became popular, there were virtually no depictions of the domestic social space in Japanese popular forms. Even its pre-filmic precursors in Kabuki, the *sewamono* plays which date back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century works of Chikamatsu Monzaemon and depict the lives of commoners [6], focused on public-sphere activity, such as affairs (often leading to suicide.) A non-aristocratic, domestic social body figured as the circumference of dramatic activity was only first represented in cinema.

Domesticity in Japanese society has a history as a field of knowledge for the production of power, as per Foucault, during the years of the Meiji reformation. One of the initiatives of the Meiji government, to the end of adapting Japanese society to global economic and political structures, was a campaign to reconstruct Japanese domestic practice along western terms.

Jordan Sand described the invention of the modern domestic ideal in Japan as a product of the Meiji-era accommodation to the demands of the West and emerging global imperialism. As he puts it:

“much of the tradition of the Japanese home is a creation of late nineteenth-century intellectuals. . . (b)efore the end of the century, no one in government, religion or the world of letters identified the site of family life as a locus of moral meaning.”[13]

The domestic ideal promulgated for Meiji Japan, designed to facilitate the transition into a world-class capitalist, industrial power, was inseparable from the consolidation of the lower- and middle-classes into an appropriate workforce. Iwamoto Yoshiharu, editor of *Jogaku zasshi* – Japan's first mass-market magazine for women – was inspired by the Protestant American agrarian domestic ideal, with its admixture of democratic familiarity and patriarchal moral authority. The harmonious, stable and economic Western nuclear family was compared favorably to extant Japanese family practices.

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<sup>15</sup>Also with the prewar works of Goshu, described by Noletti [11] and Naruse, described by Richie [12].

These practices included adoption (children were frequently raised by aunts, uncles, grandparents, or even wealthier friends), as well as the presence of in-laws and their relatives, concubines and mistresses, and lodgers, all of which were considered a corrosive moral influence on children by Japanese moral and intellectual authorities. The prominent figures advancing the rhetoric of domestic reform included Yoshiharu Iwamoto, principal of the Meiji School for Women and editor of *Jogaku zasshi*, the first women's magazine in Japan; political theorist and politician Emori Ueki, and American-educated Protestant evangelist and theologian Kan'ichi Uchimara. Uchimara described the American Christian home as "characterized most of all by efficient management." [13]

The re-engineering of the family included "invented traditions" meant to promote the integration of the new family model with the construction of the new nation-state. Among them was the *ikka danran* or *kazoku danran*, a "family group circle," or formal conference among family members in which issues of family management would be discussed. Both democratic and industrialist/managerial ideals were actively and explicitly promoted – all members of the family were encouraged to discuss issues of concern. The *danran* was established by the Meiji era domestic reformers as an essential component of the harmonious family life – it is a mechanism by which the nature of the family is determined.

In the aftermath of another social paroxysm, the defeat of Japan and the American occupation, once again the domestic sphere became a site of political discourse. The efforts to construct a US-friendly, anti-communist liberal democracy included public information campaigns by the occupation administration, mandating the "democratization" of the home.[5] Obviously, the domain of the domestic continued its process of historical change since the last work of Ozu, and the genre of work that concerned itself with it evolves accordingly. Among the emergent issues in post-war Japanese domesticity are the anxiety over declining birthrates which transforms the relationship between generations, and the lingering malaise and sense of disappointment in the wake of the collapse of the "economic bubble." This latter development has become associated with the fall of the salaryman and a subsequent crisis in Japanese fatherhood.[9] All of these issues are actively portrayed in Japanese media, and are the material of social and political discourse and public concern. It will be no surprise to find them integrated into the production of new texts in new media working in the same domain.

#### **Ka as *Shomin-geki*: negotiating anxieties**

In *Ka*, a *danran* precedes every stage. In one conference, Kenichi advises Rena to abandon all hobbies which cause harm after she notes she may have been bitten while outdoors. He then announces authoritatively that "flower arranging (*ikebana*) is the spirit of Japan," and invites Rena to join him in this both safer and more culturally affirmative activity. The effect is comic, as Kenichi wears his jogging suit in the *wa-shitsu*, or "Japanese room," a tatami-mat covered, paper-walled side-room which is a feature of many otherwise western-style, carpeted, plaster-walled lower-middle class and middle-class Japanese homes. The anxiety about the "invented authentic" persists through a century of discourse, negotiated as comedy.

The mosquito manipulates the family by manipulating the media technology that permeates the house: turning on cell phones, fax machines, televisions,

and stereos. A collusion between the mosquito and the technology recalls the crises of the arrival of such technologies that recur in the homes of Ozu's families. The Meiji intervention in the construction of domestic space was paired with the shock of the arrival of the new media technologies, and this pairing has become part of the *shomin-geki* tradition.

Two different outsiders bear a role in restoring the unity of the family – the invasive outsider, the mosquito, and the invited outsider, the guest, who is both a member of the community, and yet outside it. The mosquito ultimately witnesses the restoration of the unity of Yamadas, in a final scene in which a pock-marked and battle-weary family poses for a traditional annual family photo session. Kaneyo, the mother, had been pressuring her family into participating in the photo session – her position in the family is strongly characteristic of the *shomin-geki*. In the final sequence, the mosquito – the outsider who affirmed the circumference of the family by compromising it – intrudes on the photo shoot, but the final sequence is an affirmation of the restoration of domestic harmony. For a player evaluating his position regarding the family, this is a kind of absolution, a gesture of forgiveness for his complicity in the erosion of the family.

It should be emphasized that *Ka* and other games that could be placed in the continuum of *shomin-geki* are not received as members of the cinematic genre by their audiences, nor is there any indication that fidelity to or membership in such a genre was a design goal *per se*. In the US, the game was widely received as “another quirky Japanese import game.” In Japan, the game was marketed as an action game, a novelty game, or as simulation.<sup>16</sup> The inclusion of the game in the sequence of works in different media is meant to locate it historically as a cultural production, not as a claim about the self-perception of the industry. At the same time, reference is made within the text of the game<sup>17</sup> to modes of perception of the domestic space that are clearly in lineage with previous visual depictions of that space; in short, it is part of a visual culture of the representation of domestic space, and also of the light-comic stance towards that space that addresses the anxieties associated with it.

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<sup>16</sup>Based on perusal of game retail stores in Japan, as well as Japanese on-line sales websites.

<sup>17</sup>There are strong cinematographic affinities between the signature style of Ozu and both the cinematic and interactive camera in *Ka*, but they are not the basis for my linkage between *Ka* and the *shomin-geki* films. Bordwell's close readings of Ozu's camera work [3] are useful here.

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