

2015

Suburbia, The West and Modernity: Social Commentary Achieved Through Representations of the Child in *I Was Born, But* and *Good Morning (Ohayo)*

Samuel McGuinness

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/kino>

 Part of the [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McGuinness, Samuel (2015) "Suburbia, The West and Modernity: Social Commentary Achieved Through Representations of the Child in *I Was Born, But* and *Good Morning (Ohayo)*," *Kino: The Western Undergraduate Journal of Film Studies*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.
Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/kino/vol6/iss1/6>

Suburbia, The West and Modernity: Social Commentary Achieved Through Representations of the Child in *I Was Born, But* and *Good Morning* (Ohayo)

Abstract

Samuel McGuinness offers a comparison between two of Yasujiro Ozu's films, *I was Born But* (1932) and *Good Morning* (1959), films connected by similar imagery and themes of parent-child relationships and the interrogation of patriarchal authority. At the same time, the films are thirty years apart and inevitably reflect shifting context. McGuinness explores these contexts of increased militarism in the early 1930s versus the encroaching Westernized modernism of the 1950s. McGuinness elaborates the ways in which Ozu tackles societal conflict by blending humor and stark reality, looking at these issues through the eyes of children growing up in two tumultuous histories of Japan.

Keywords

Ozu, *Good Morning*, Shochiku Kamata, *I Was Born*, David Bordwell, *Tokyo Story*

**Suburbia, The West and Modernity:
Social Commentary Achieved Through Representations of the Child in *I Was Born, But* and
*Good Morning (Ohayo)***

By Samuel McGuinness

In 1931, Japan was undergoing a period of increased militarization. This emerging militaristic influence was exemplified in the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and subsequent occupation. The following year, the ruling Prime Minister was assassinated by eleven young members of the Japanese navy. The subsequent outpouring of public support for the assailants and the lenient sentence given to the perpetrators contributed to an already growing rise in Japanese militarism. Furthermore, 1932 was also the year that Yasujiro Ozu's critical, eloquent and noteworthy silent film, *I was Born, But* was released. Ozu's film is noteworthy because of its stark social criticisms that would have been seen as politically dangerous at the time. Japanese film scholar Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano explains that at the time, aspects of modernization such as urbanization, capitalism and centralized political power had reached their limits and the subsequent class conflict and alienation signaled the "end of the modernization project...the films of the *Shochiku Kamata* studios belong to this period and parallel the vicissitudes of Japanese modernity in crisis" (Wada-Marciano 73). I find the strongest correlation between the *I was Born, But* and his 1959 film *Good Morning* is the thematic tendency to comment on the direction of Japan's evolving social structure, achieved through a combination of comedic and dramatic representations of working class children and their families. In *I was Born, But*, Ozu is questioning the 'salaryman' structure of Japanese culture through the defiance of the Yoshii brothers. Alternatively, in *Good Morning*, Ozu investigates the rejection of traditional patriarchy, an emerging Western influence, and an evolving Japanese modernity combined with the subsequent social resistance to these gradual shifts in mass culture.

In 1959, at the time of *Good Morning's* release, the social context in which the film was made and subsequently exhibited had undoubtedly evolved since 1932. Japan's increasing militarism came to an abrupt end following the culmination of the Second World War. The U.S occupation of Japan had ended in 1952, seven years before the release of the film, and the remaining resistance to the influence of the West is displayed throughout the film's narrative. Additionally, Simon Partner outlines the creation of the 'bright life' He poses that during the 1950's "consumption is one of the nation's defining post-war features." He goes on to state that although the popularity of electric goods rose drastically during the decade, "throughout the 1950's, a lasting note of skepticism accompanied outpourings of celebrations over televisions, washing machines and refrigerators" (Partner 139-141).

In *Good Morning*, Ozu masterfully utilizes child characters juxtaposed against the ideals, motivations and personal tendencies of their parents. Ozu is able to effectively represent the emerging modernity of Japan through the sentiments expressed, both implicitly and explicitly, by the children in the film. In *Good Morning*, this is best exemplified by the Hayashi brothers, Minoru and Isamu. The film's narrative takes place mostly within a small, colorful suburban community

housed under the looming gaze of industrial power lines. The primary conflict in the film arises when the brothers excitedly ask for a television set, only to be met with stern disapproval from their parents, citing that television is a waste of one's time. Metaphorically speaking, the parents' hostility towards the acquisition of a television set can be read as an aversion to the encroaching grip of modernization in Japan at the time of the film's production. Ozu's representation of the Hayashi family recalls a familiar dichotomy within his filmic catalogue, the struggle between one's social, familial or cultural obligations and one's own desire or prerogative. Meanwhile, the women in the community gossip, debate, and worry over banal social difficulties. The brothers rebel against this seemingly *wasteful* social norm, opting to refrain from vocalizing themselves at all. The strike against speaking implemented by the brothers works as a thematic adhesive within the structure of the narrative, effectively bringing together the film's various subplots. The densely populated working class community allows the narrative to span across several families, taking the brothers on an immersive ride through modern suburbia. The brothers' performances are very effective, endearing themselves to a potential audience within moments of their first appearance onscreen. Through the juxtaposition of ideals between father and sons, Ozu is able to highlight emerging social tensions regarding modernization, rapidly emerging consumer culture and shifts in the construction of traditional Japanese patriarchy.

Clearly, *Good Morning* investigates both the generational divide between parent and child as well as within an evolving, modernizing Japan with a far lighter, comedy-driven approach. The film's opening sequence subtly identifies the film's thematic motivations and focus through the calculated use of *mise-en-scene*. Ozu opens with a long shot of a towering power line, followed by a medium long shot of a white picket fence, followed by a sequence of shots depicting a group of young schoolchildren, presumably returning from school. Within five short shots, Ozu has established notions of modernization and an increasing Western influence while simultaneously introducing the point-of view of the child. Interestingly, Ozu replicates the costume design seen in *I was Born, But*, creating a visual identification between the schoolchildren in each respective film. This is further exemplified in the sequence in which two of the local schoolchildren and Mr. Okubo (one of the children's fathers) are practicing military style drills on the train tracks. Here, Ozu is visually quoting a corresponding sequence from the 1933 silent film, *I was Born, But*. In addition to this, *Good Morning* repeatedly represents a resistance to Westernization, concurrent with the notion that Japan was superficially Westernized but underneath the surface still identified with traditional Japanese ideals. This is best exemplified in the Hayashi brothers' relationship with the pajama-wearing, television owning modern young neighbors, specifically their parents disapproval of the young couple's lifestyle. Following the film's introduction of the brothers, Ozu captures a gossip-laden conversation between two of the older women in the community. Both women express the sentiment that they have no problem with their children watching sumo on television. In fact, their problem is that their young female neighbor had (allegedly) worked in a cabaret. This could be seen as a citation of the growing social anxiety regarding youth and exaltations of sex.. Contextually speaking, the Hayashi brothers' tendency to avoid their English lessons in order to watch sumo wrestling on television can be read as a metaphor for the resistance to westernization prevalent in

Japan at the time of the film's production. Their strike against speaking cites a similar plot device seen in the 1932 film, *I was Born, But*. Furthermore, in the sequence in which the Hayashi family reconciles with the presentation of a new television set, Ozu manipulates the interactions between Minoru, Osamu, and their father to investigate the decline of traditional patriarchal authority as well as a modernizing Japan and its subsequent effects on the traditional family. It is important to note that the Hayashi family buys the TV from a struggling working class salaryman, Mr. Tomizawa. As argued by David Bordwell, "the parents buy the TV set from him partly to ease the plight which could, in a few years, become their own" (Bordwell 350). Even after being awarded the television, the brothers continue to defy the wishes of their father, refusing to remain quiet. In this particular sequence, Ozu expressively utilizes deep space to illustrate the generational divide between father and his sons. Minoru and Isamu sit together at the end of the hallway, their father stands, back facing the camera and out of frame. The familiar low camera position places the brothers in the center of the image. Ozu masterfully separates the space between them with the newly purchased television. Even after a stern warning, Isamu is still defiant, and his father admits defeat and exits the frame. This is a cogent representation of the decline of traditional patriarchal authority, using the television as a symbol of the generational divide between father and sons. The repeated resistance to patriarchal authority exemplified by Minoru and Isamu resonates with a growing social issue following the war. The large-scale loss of Japanese life, mostly young and middle-aged soldiers, left a resounding hole in the social structure of the country. This sentiment is expressly tied to a movement known as the 'sun tribe', a catalogue of films and thematic ideologies characterized by a rejection of patriarchal authority, the exaltation of sex as well as notions of resistance towards Western influence. This can be undoubtedly tied to the resounding defeat of World War Two and its subsequent effect on the construction of Japanese masculinity in the post-war. Furthermore, the resistance to patriarchy exemplified by the Hayashi brothers is juxtaposed against the eventual acceptance shown in *I was Born, But* by the Yoshii brothers regarding the necessary social sacrifices needed to survive within the modern capitalist system.

In the 1932 film, *I was Born, But*, Ozu focuses on the personal relationship between parent and child, specifically investigating disagreements regarding duty, the cultural shift to suburban living and the young boys' general naiveté regarding the inner-workings of Japanese social and economic hierarchy. The film's narrative chronicles two brothers, Keiji and Ryoichi, as they adjust to life in a new community. The general themes explored are ones that have remained ubiquitous throughout the history of cinema. A working class father attempts to climb the corporate ladder by relocating, subsequently creating problems for his family as they attempt to assimilate to the new community. The boys and their parents have recently moved from Tokyo to a neighboring suburb in order for the boys' father to take a job as an office clerk. Specifically, Ozu cogently investigates the shift in the brothers' perception regarding their fathers place in the Japanese social hierarchy. By manipulating the naïve innocence of the young boys, Ozu is able to effectively critique the 'salary man' economic system and its effect on constructions of patriarchy and fatherhood. Ozu masterfully employs the child characters to provide performative, comedic relief while simultaneously investigating the abrasive generational conflict taking place between the boys and

their parents.

In regards to the film's production, it is interesting to note that production was delayed for several weeks following one of the children being injured on set. During this break from production, Ozu purportedly re-wrote the ending of the film, re-working the film's conclusion to resonate with more thematic ambiguity. In an interview with reputed Japanese magazine *Kinema Junpo*, Ozu states, "...I started to make a film about children and ended up with a film about grown-ups" (Turner Classic Movies). This excerpt speaks to the notion that the film utilizes the questioning nature of the child to highlight and accentuate social criticisms regarding the modernizing nature of Japan's social and economic realms.

Formally speaking, the lack of available sound technology at the time of the film's production undoubtedly shapes the performance of the brothers. Emotive expressions of frustration, anger and shame are hyperbolized through bodily performance as well as the synchronization of the brothers' actions. The performative, hyperbolized and emphatic nature of the boy's synchronized frustration create strong comedic undertones. The comedy is juxtaposed against the solemn, melancholic and serious thematic concerns of the film, characterized by the personal sacrifices a working class man must make in order to climb the corporate ladder and the subsequent effects this has on his family. The comedic nature of the brothers' performance is effective in allowing the film to investigate a widespread social issue without making audiences uncomfortable.

Following the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing global financial crisis, the structure of Japan's economy shifted drastically. The white-collar worker was especially affected in regards to job security. As Woojeong Joo writes, "...overproduced and devalued like other commodities in capitalist society, Japan's urban white-collar middle class had to deal with the contradiction between expectation and frustration, their perseverance often rewarded with the threat of disposal" (Joo 106). Simultaneously, the encroachment of right wing, militaristic driven ideologies threatened the liberal attitudes of the former Taisho democracy. In Brian Darr's short exposition on the film for the San Francisco Silent Film Festival, he writes that at the time of the film's production, military personnel rather than politicians ruled the country. Specifically, the military's tendency to refuse political cooperation with the ruling government posed the greatest risk to the civilian population. This is best exemplified within the film's narrative in the sequence in which the boys complete military style drills in the schoolyard (Darr 1). While the brothers' performance is packed with light, cheeky, performative driven comedic moments, the most compelling aspects of the film resonate in the sequences in which the brothers lose their social innocence. This is most explicitly illustrated in the screening sequence at the company staff party.

In this particular sequence, Ozu uses expressive blocking, costume, lighting and performance to accentuate and solidify the distaste the brothers have for the representation of their father in the company's private films. Ozu subtly distinguishes between Taro (the boy whose father, Iwasaki, is the director of the company) and the two brothers through the expressive use of costume design. While the rest of the boys sport dark jackets with buttons and matching baseball caps, Taro is dressed without a hat or buttons, effectively highlighting his elevated socio-economic status. Ozu simultaneously employs expressive blocking to maintain the narrative focus of the sequence on the

two brothers' reaction to the company film. Repeatedly, the cutaway shots of the children position the brothers in focus and in the centre of the frame. As the sequence progresses, Ozu uses expressive cinematography, specifically in the placement of the camera. As the first of the company films finishes, Iwasaki reaches for a cigarette and knowingly glances in the direction of Yoshii in search of a match, and after a brief moment of hesitation, Yoshii sheepishly obliges him. The compelling nature of this subtle interaction is Ozu's placement of the camera directly in the position in which Keiji, Ryoichi and their friends are seated. You can almost feel the shock, disappointment and embarrassment undoubtedly racing through the veins of the young boys as they are forced to re-evaluate their perceptions regarding their father's social status. Ozu effectively captures this change in perception visually in the second screening of the company films. Just as the films begin to depict Yoshii's affinity for comedic contortions of his face, Ozu sharply cuts to a reactionary shot of Keiji and Ryoichi, sharply changing from amusement to shame. It is interesting to note the content being displayed within Iwasaki's films, shot in settings ranging from a public zoo, a modern office space as well as a busy shopping street, effectively exalting the luxuries of modern life (Phillips 33). However, the brothers are not swayed by these superficialities, instead focusing on the vulnerable and submissive nature of their father's social position. Here, Ozu is reflexively utilizing the medium of film as a signifier of modernity, modernity that the brothers are resistant to if it means the humiliation of their father. Furthermore, through calculated casting, Yoshii's tall athletic frame is juxtaposed against the shorter, stout physicality of Iwasaki. This discrepancy correlates to the brothers' understanding of social hierarchy, one that is dominated by characterizations of physical strength or appearance. Contextually speaking, the brother's focus on physicality or strength as a measure of one's importance could be tied to an increase in militarization within Japan, specifically within the education system. This sequence culminates in an exceedingly melancholic scene in which the brothers solemnly walk home discussing how their father is perceived outside the private realm of the home. Keiji and Ryoichi defiantly remove their matching jackets, diverging from the 'uniform' worn by the other boys (with the exception of Taro).

In the sequence in which the boys confront their father for his actions, Ozu employs expressive blocking to represent the inescapable nature of the current economic system. Specifically, Ozu manipulates the synchronicity of the brothers' actions to match that of their father as all three men of the family simultaneously gorge on rice balls. Here, Ozu is visually synthesizing the cyclical nature of the 'salaryman' system through performative mimesis, effectively solidifying the notion that the boys will likely grow up and inherit the same social standing as their father.

Throughout both films, Ozu uses the representation of children and their subsequent inter-generational interactions with their parents to expressively synthesize emerging social concerns prevalent at the time of each film's production. In *I was Born, But*, Ozu questions the validity and sustainability of the 'white-collar' or 'salaryman' economic system, one that promotes the submission or servitude of the worker. The superficial, physically determined understanding of social hierarchy associated with the Yoshii brothers is juxtaposed against the painful, adult realities of the white-collar economic system, exemplified by their father's submissive tendencies in regards

to his employer. Furthermore, Ozu uses the narrative to subtly comment on the rising militarism prevalent throughout the Japanese government and society. In *Good Morning*, Ozu manipulates thematic elements of comedy with family drama, effectively capturing a cultural resistance to an ever-encroaching Western influence while simultaneously highlighting the inter-generational differences between father and sons. The thematic notion of highlighting social change through inter-generational divide exemplified by conflict between parent and child is a familiar scenario in Ozu's filmography, illustrated in various films including *Tokyo Story*, *Autumn Afternoon* and *Equinox Flower*. In the two selected films, Ozu manipulates the use of comedic, satirical elements in combination with a questioning, curious child's perspective, effectively citing and investigating the social concerns at the time of each film's respective production.

Works Cited

- Axmaker, Sean. "I Was Born, But." Turner Classic Movies. Web. 20 Nov. 2014.
<<http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article.html?id=650688|355251&name=I-Was-Born-But->>
- Bordwell, David. "Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema". London: BFI., 1988. Print. Pg. 350
- Darr, Brian. "I Was Born, But. 1932." Silent Film. San Francisco Silent Film Festival. Web. 20 Nov. 2014. <http://www.silentfilm.org/archive/i-was-born-but>
- Partner, Simon. "Creating the Bright Life." *Assembled in Japan*. Los Angeles.: U of California., 2000. Print. Pg. 139-141.
- Phillips, Alistair. "The Salaryman's Panic Time: Ozu Yasujiro's I Was Born, But." *Japanese Cinema: Texts and Contexts*. Routledge, 2007. Print. Pg. 27-33.
- Wada-Marciano, Mitsuyo. "Nippon Modern: Japanese Cinema of the 1920's and 1930's." Honolulu: U of Hawaii, 2008. Print. Pg. 73
- Joo, Woojeong. "I Was Born Middle Class But...: Ozu Yasujiro's Shoshimin Eiga in the Early 1930's." *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema*. 4.2 (2012): 104-110. Print.