The Disintegration of Marriage in Ryusuke Hamaguchi's *Happy Hour* (2015)

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The Disintegration of Marriage

in Ryusuke Hamaguchi’s Happy Hour (2015)

A Thesis by

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The Disintegration of Marriage

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ABSTRACT

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By using Happy Hour as a case study, this thesis argues Ryusuke Hamaguchi’s approach to the Japanese home drama genre presents a changing perspective on the institution of marriage in contemporary Japanese society, reflecting shifts in gender roles and the growing trend of singlehood amongst Japanese youth. This perspective contrasts with the values portrayed in Ozu's films, which emphasize the vitality of marriage and the necessity of forming a family for happiness. The thesis analyzes the thematic and narrative elements of Happy Hour, focusing on the portrayal of marriage as a source of alienation and loneliness. It also discusses the film’s aesthetic form – largely its cinematography and framing – which helps to convey Hamaguchi’s view of marriage as disintegrating, and his unconventional approach to portraying married life in contrast to the traditions of the Japanese home dramas. To contextualize this shift within the home drama genre, the thesis refers to Ozu's films Late Spring (1949) and An Autumn Afternoon (1962), as well as Kore-eda's films Still Walking (2008) and Our Little Sister (2015). By examining the connections between Happy Hour and the broader trends in Japanese society, this thesis aims to shed light on the ways in which Happy Hour represents the disintegration of marriage and the impact of social and cultural changes in 21st-century Japan on individual experiences and notions of marriage and family life, establishing the film as a latest addition to the Japanese home drama genre.
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1 Introduction

At about the halfway point of Ryusuke Hamaguchi’s *Happy Hour* (2015), a pivotal moment arises for one of the film’s main characters. This instance cements not only her journey in the film’s story but also embodies the essence of Hamaguchi’s cinema within the context of the long and rich history of Japanese ‘home dramas’ – a term coined by Japanese film critic Tadao Sato to refer to films which reflect the changing Japanese society through the changes in family relations in times of change.¹ In the scene in question, Jun (Rira Kawamura) arrives at a docking station for the ferry; to escape her unvarying life and marriage. Moreover, being pregnant, the idea of an unfulfilling traditional family life looms. Her absconding of what the future holds – being trapped in her marriage and soon a traditional family structure² – is narratively essential for the larger story being told in *Happy Hour*, as this moment marks a notable thematic and ideological break from how the institution of marriage has traditionally been depicted in Japanese home dramas.

This thesis examines the depiction of the disintegration of marriage in Ryusuke Hamaguchi’s film *Happy Hour* (2015). While the characteristics discussed in this thesis can be observed in the filmmaker’s other films too, this thesis focuses solely on an in-depth analysis of *Happy Hour* as an example of Hamaguchi’s unique approach to the portrayal of marriage within the Japanese home drama genre, as it is his most explicit presentation of marriage in any of his works thus far. *Happy Hour* represents a significant shift in the representation of marriage within

² I would call the phrase ‘family structure,’ or ‘family unit’ referring to the traditional notion of a family being constructed by a married couple who have one or more children together.
the Japanese home drama, traditionally characterized by its emphasis on the importance of marital stability and family life. The thesis focuses on the contrast between *Happy Hour* and the works of Yasujiro Ozu while ensuring to highlight how *Happy Hour’s* shift away from Ozu differentiates from Kore-eda’s, another renowned contemporary director within the genre.

*Happy Hour* tells the story of four women in their mid-thirties. It depicts their varied experiences with married life, ultimately tracing the various phases they find themselves in of realizing the collapse of the institution of marriage in their lives. It is a film about marriage, thus about an integral phase of family life, but the stories are told through the disintegration of these traditional structures. By using *Happy Hour* as a case study, this thesis argues, Ryusuke Hamaguchi’s approach to the Japanese home drama genre presents a changing perspective on the institution of marriage in contemporary Japanese society, reflecting shifts in gender roles and the growing trend of singlehood amongst Japanese youth.³ The protagonists in *Happy Hour* face the impermanence and instability of the institution of marriage; thus of the formation of a traditional family structure that often follows, yet they come to accept the possibility of a fulfilling life without the support of married life. This perspective contrasts with the values portrayed in Ozu's films, which emphasize the vitality of marriage and the necessity of forming a family for happiness.

This thesis analyzes the thematic and narrative elements of *Happy Hour*, focusing on the portrayal of marriage as a source of alienation and loneliness. It also discusses the film’s

³ James M. Raymo, Fumiya Uchikoshi, and Shohei Yoda, “Marriage Intentions, Desires, and Pathways to Later and Less Marriage in Japan,” *Demographic Research* 44 (January 2021): 67-98. In this article, the authors discuss the recent sociological trend in Japan that they characterize as the “drift into singlehood,” realized because of the current generation’s “rejection of marriage” and many of whom claimed in the study, that they had “not fulfilled their marriage desires.”
aesthetic form – largely its cinematography and framing – which helps to convey Hamaguchi’s view of marriage as disintegrating, and his unconventional approach to portraying married life in contrast to the traditions of the Japanese home dramas. To contextualize this shift within the home drama genre, the thesis refers to Ozu's films *Late Spring* (1949) and *An Autumn Afternoon* (1962), and to a lesser extent, Kore-eda’s films *Still Walking* (2008) and *Our Little Sister* (2015).

By examining the connections between *Happy Hour* and the broader trends in Japanese society, this thesis aims to shed light on how *Happy Hour* represents the disintegration of marriage and the impact of social and cultural changes in 21st-century Japan on individual experiences and notions of marriage and family life, establishing *Happy Hour* as the latest addition to the Japanese home drama genre. The significance of this research lies in the need for more existing scholarship on Hamaguchi’s films, especially concerning his approach to the home drama genre.

This thesis begins by looking at the history of the Japanese home drama, homing in on the representation of marriage observed in films of the prominent genre, from Ozu to Kore-eda and now to Hamaguchi. Adding to the contextualization needed to analyze *Happy Hour* in terms of the Japanese home drama, the section continues with a discussion of the sociological trends surrounding marriage and family life in contemporary Japan, as well as during the periods of Ozu and Kore-eda, establishing *Happy Hour* as a film of the home drama genre. By examining the progression in the representations of marriage within the Japanese home drama from Ozu to Kore-eda to Hamaguchi, the first section of this thesis highlights the changes in the idea of the nuclear family during the postwar years, the changes in gender roles in the decades since, the increase in divorce rates as a result, and the drift into singlehood in the 21st century. The thesis
then analyzes the various themes, narratives, and aesthetics of *Happy Hour*, highlighting how the film diverges from the traditional portrayals of marriage in the home drama genre.
2 Positioning Ryusuke Hamaguchi Within the History of Japanese Home Dramas

This section discusses the Japanese home drama, and by providing a reading of his films following a brief history of the genre, it positions Ryusuke Hamaguchi as a new director of the genre. This paves the way for the next section’s in-depth analysis of Happy Hour – the first of Hamaguchi’s readily accessible films – in which I discuss the film’s depiction of marriage and its presentation of the contemporary shift in gender role attitudes within the context of the film’s identity as a home drama.

According to Tadao Sato, the origins of the Japanese home drama can be traced to Yasujiro Ozu, whose films are primarily about marriage and family. His films portray life during the postwar years, during which Japanese society underwent rapid modernization. When considering the portrayal of marriage in Happy Hour, Ozu’s postwar films are particularly noteworthy for comparative analysis. Japanese film scholar Woojeong Joo states, “marriage only truly becomes a central subject of Ozu’s films [during this] period.” In the postwar years, Ozu demonstrated that marriage represents the contract to start a family, an essential detail to consider when viewing Happy Hour, and Hamaguchi’s other films, as being of the same genre. The topic of marriage, specifically in marrying off a young protagonist lent itself to the home drama narrative because it acted as a vessel to shed light on the nation’s broader circumstances during the postwar period and the stability that many wanted to preserve during this time. During this period, people faced obstacles in their daily lives often characterized by strenuous economic

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times, an era of cultural shifts towards modernization, or more implicitly, plagued by the loss of loved ones and the grief that followed – making the perseveration of the institution of marriage in the path towards forming a stable family structure more pertinent for Ozu. While their depictions of marriage are essentially different, Hamaguchi maintains and further permeates the concept of marriage as a contract through his portrayal of collapsing marriages – also observable in Drive My Car (2021), but primarily emphasized in Happy Hour, whereby highlighting the experiences of four protagonists, we are shown the various phases in the construction of the traditional family, but more explicitly in the disintegration of the institution of marriage. The phases characterized in Happy Hour derive from an understanding of topical descriptions of the lives of the film’s four protagonists: divorced, divorcing, married with a child, and a couple first realizing their incompatibility heightened by one partner’s infidelity. Each phase begins with marriage. Notably, all four protagonists experience the dissolution of the traditional family – of “the home as the source of respite, solace, and nurturance” – observed in the disintegration of their marriage, as will be analyzed later.5

In Japanese home dramas, marriage has consistently been represented in a way that mirrors Japan’s cultural traditions, values, and sociological trends. With time’s change, these traditions and values are presented differently. The gradual changes in Japanese society and culture, particularly in the context of modernization and characters’ approaches to marriage, can already be observed in the progression of Ozu’s films. From Late Spring to An Autumn Afternoon – two films released thirteen years apart, which tell very similar stories about marrying off a family’s daughter, a woman in her twenties who is hesitant to start her new life as

a married couple – Ozu shows how the characters have changed over this period of increased modernization⁶; yet the film’s father character gives essentially the same speech at the end of *An Autumn Afternoon* as he does in *Late Spring*, about the value of married life. This thesis will delve into this aspect in the subsequent section. Representatives of the Ozu generation in most home drama films about marriage attempt to preserve traditional perspectives on marriage and divorce, despite the rapid changes in their society. In all the Japanese home dramas referenced in this thesis – from *Late Spring* to *Happy Hour* – the various perspectives observed in different characters’ reactions to the notions of marriage, divorce, or remarriage across demographics are an essential aspect of analyzing the ‘changes’ realized over generations represented in the films, which permit the characterization of each film being a part of the home drama genre. Reflecting the shift in women’s perspectives regarding gender roles that is the most significant ‘change’ being depicted in *Happy Hour*, the varying reactions to the disintegration of marriage being portrayed is most notable in the perspectives of the husband-characters of the film who resist the shift away from married life and towards singlehood, as it is shown that the institution of marriage benefits men most. This contrast is shown clearly in the interactions between the women protagonists of *Happy Hour* and their husbands – most explicitly in the life of Sakurako (Hazuki Kikuchi), whose husband constantly requests her to run the home, prepare dinner, care for their son and her mother-in-law, rather than enjoy her life on her terms, such as spending time with her friends. Her husband’s patriarchal presence leads to her discontent with her marriage and lifestyle.

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⁶ The changes are most noticeable aesthetically, with the inclusion of certain clothing, objects, and even character mannerisms which signify the further “prolonged exposure to the West” over the period between *Late Spring* and *An Autumn Afternoon*. The worlds of the films had changed, yet Ozu notably relatively maintained his position on marriage in the two narratives.
In *Late Spring*, an aging father’s relinquishing of his daughter’s company by marrying her off is presented to us as something tragic for him but hopeful for her, even though he had insisted on her marriage. At the same time, she had spent the film’s entirety resisting the convention, wanting to stay with her father, keeping the ‘first family’ intact. This dichotomy highlights the postwar phenomenon of the “dissolution of the first family” while observing Ozu’s position on the matter – that presented the value of marriage as something to maintain in his home dramas – which depicts how such changes during this tumultuous period affected various characters’ approaches to the notion of marriage. Again, with intentional portrayals of specific characters’ reactions to marriage, divorce, or remarriage, the changes – which are the signifying element of a home drama – become most evidently clear.

For Ozu, his films further centered on the importance of marriage and forming a family unit during this time of change in postwar Japan – even when a common trope of these films was “the dissolution of family.” As alluded to above, film scholar Woojeong Joo acknowledges that the common Ozu-plot that is often correlated to defining Ozu’s cinema generally, of a daughter/son being married off causing the “dissolution” of the first family, as the lone parent is left to themselves, is a “postwar phenomenon” of Ozu’s.\(^7\) After the war years, the nuclear family was often broken apart by grief and loss. It was not until after the crippling war years and then the US occupation years, that Ozu began to contemplate themes of marriage as the center of his home dramas.\(^8\) While on the surface, Ozu’s plots disintegrate the structure of the first family seen throughout the film (the lone parent and their grown-up child), Ozu focuses on the future, and with a conclusive perspective on marriage, he aims to solidify and preserve the nuclear

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\(^8\) *Ibid.*
family unit – a married couple who have children together – into the lives and values of the next generation; this beginning with the presentation of a young couple’s marriage. Thus, although the ‘first’ family disintegrates in an Ozu film, it is to preserve the value of married life going forward; this is critical to understanding Ozu’s representation of marriage in terms of the home drama genre.

In *Late Spring*, the father and daughter at the film’s center are plagued by the personal outcomes of the war – the family’s wife/mother-figure has passed, and Noriko, the daughter, is still recovering both physically and emotionally from needing to work physical labor during the war years. Although such obstacles carried the potential to diminish the strength of the nuclear family in Japanese society, Ozu’s films push back against that potential outcome – one that at the time, may have been viewed as overly pessimistic about the future. In *Late Spring*, despite the film’s characters dealing with grief and a changing world around them, Ozu further confirms the necessity of participating in marriage – not only as the contract to enter family life but also as the first step towards a happy life, something that felt elusive during the postwar period. As Ozu’s stance on marriage in these films focused on preserving more traditional values for the next generation, it is how he approaches this preservation that makes his home dramas the most essential point of reference in any scholarship on the genre dealing with the Japanese home dramas which followed him because these films tethered the significance of marriage with how audiences can understand the family system in Japan.

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9 It is revealed in *Late Spring* that Noriko is “still recovering from a serious illness” caused by the strenuous time she spent working at a labor camp during the war years.
Japanese sociologist Yoshio Sugimoto describes the “family system,” as “an institution which penetrates into the life of every Japanese and controls it in a fundamental way.”\(^{10}\) Scholar Donald Richie writes that Ozu has often been considered “the most Japanese director” because of how he has been a “kind of spokesman” for Japanese tradition and culture. Richie argues that the “Japaneseness” in his films can be viewed thematically, culturally, narratively, and aesthetically.\(^{11}\) These are also the four areas of focus that my reading of Happy Hour as a modernized response to the films of Ozu, is built upon. Thematically, while Ozu’s films tell stories about family life which inform a position on married life, I argue Hamaguchi tells stories of individuals told through the absence of family and reflects on married life in Happy Hour rather than contemplating it as something to come. Culturally, Ozu’s films represent a period of modernization and the postwar shift towards the nuclear family as discussed above. In contrast, Hamaguchi’s films I argue portray the contemporary trend into singlehood amongst Japanese youth today – as observable in the stories of the four protagonists of Happy Hour and their increased dissatisfaction with married life. Narratively, while Ozu ushered in the beginnings of the Japanese home drama, I argue Hamaguchi’s Happy Hour depicts a modern perspective on the genre. Lastly, as I expand on much further in the next section of this thesis, Hamaguchi’s presentation of the cinematic form in Happy Hour, done primarily through his use of cinematography, responds just as vehemently to Ozu’s work as the previously mentioned elements of their films.


In Japanese cinema marriage (and family) tends to be depicted as representative of the nation and Japanese society’s social organization\(^\text{12}\), and as such, it is stability and strength that have historically been emphasized in these ‘times of change;’ particularly in the films of Ozu, whose cinema represented the transitional period in Japanese history following World War II, but also in the films of Hirokazu Kore-eda, when in the face of increased divorce rates, Kore-eda made films that revisited the taboo topic of remarriage, communicating that conventional understandings of marriage and family life are not the only way one may preserve traditional Japanese family values and stability.

It was during Ozu’s postwar stretch of films that Sato argues the ‘home drama’ rose to prominence. In the years following Ozu’s postwar stretch of films, Japan underwent a period of rapid modernization. Nevertheless, as scholar Noel Burch writes, “Bulwarks of tradition remain steadfastly in place even after significant prolonged exposure to the West.”\(^\text{13}\) The changes present in the films of Kore-eda and Hamaguchi can be observed through their altered presentations of marriage within the context of the idea of the “nuclear family.” Hirokazu Kore-eda’s depiction of marriage (and remarriage) in such films as Still Walking (2008), Our Little Sister (2015), and others present a modern outlook on the subject. Remarriage, a taboo topic in Ozu’s marriage films, is revisited in these Kore-eda films and presented as something becoming normalized amongst the younger generation. While Kore-eda’s films depart from Ozu’s home dramas in significant ways, they also uphold some of the same values and traditions – most

\(^{12}\) Merry Isaacs White, Ibid, 7. In the Introduction of this book, Isaacs White writes that the traditional family “has been seen as the perpetuating social organization at the base of Japanese society, one that also provides a model for other forms of social organization.”

prominently expressed in their style of cinematography and emphasis on familial bonds and versions\textsuperscript{14} of married life; albeit these institutions are defined differently.

In \textit{Still Walking}, a family gathers at the parent’s home on the anniversary of the family’s eldest son’s death. This year, the family’s other son, Ryo (Hiroshi Abe), brings his new, previously widowed wife and stepson. The topic of remarriage is the center of much of the film’s intergenerational family tensions and discussions. Notably, the older generation – represented by the family’s most senior members – is most resistant to the notion that their son has married a widow and is now stepfather to a son who is not his by blood. At one point early in the film, Ryo’s mother, Toshiko (Kirin Kiki) calls Ryo’s new wife, Yukari (Yui Natsukawa) a “used model,” even saying that it would have been better if Ryo had married a divorcee instead of a widow because “at least a divorcee chose to leave her husband.”\textsuperscript{15} It is understood in the film that the parents had always pushed their children to get married; thus for Kore-edaa, even though the rules around marriage are changing, the value of marriage is still preserved. \textit{Still Walking} illustrates that divorce and remarriage in the 2000s are generally no longer taboo topics – remarriage is acknowledged and accepted as a reality – but still treated as less-than, mainly by the older generation. Ryo’s mother calls his new family formed by remarriage “not normal,” but Ryo points out that “these days they are not abnormal.”

Thus, \textit{Still Walking} acknowledges the increased divorce rates that have led to the spike in remarriages during Kore-edaa’s period and the subsequent intergenerational tensions that arise from these changes. Ryo’s mother consistently worries about whether Ryo and Yukari will have

\textsuperscript{14} The term ‘versions’ is used here to reflect that in Kore-edaa’s films, we are often presented with alternate definitions of married couples or families.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Still Walking}, directed by Hirokazu Kore-edaa (2008; The Criterion Channel), Streaming Online: 8:10’.
children of their own. Yukari observes that Ryo’s mother seems unable to fully accept Ryo’s stepson as part of the family, but instead “like a guest.” One of the most prominent factors that can be traced to being a cause for the changes from Ozu to Kore-eda to Hamaguchi, is the shift in gender roles over the decades. In Still Walking, it is unveiled that Ryo’s mother had known of her husband’s infidelity in their younger years but chose to say nothing about it, likely due to the fear of becoming a divorced woman. In Happy Hour, as will be expanded upon in the next section, such situations are approached differently by married women in contemporary Japan. For example, early in Happy Hour, Akari (Sachie Tanaka), divorced, expresses that she wished she had not learned about her husband’s infidelity, but that once she did, she had to leave him. The relative levity that remarriage is spoken with amongst the younger generation in Still Walking and Happy Hour highlights the shift towards it no longer being a taboo topic in Japanese society.

In Our Little Sister, the topic of remarriage is also introduced from the beginning. Three sisters – Sachi (Haruka Ayase), Yoshino (Masami Nagasawa), and Chika (Kaho) sit around a table having dinner – a scene which mirrors many of the beginning sequences of Ozu’s marriage films – and they discuss their father’s remarriage and his second family with relative ease; as something that happened in their family’s history. After their first meeting with their new stepsister, Suzu Asano (Suzu Hirose), they invite her to live with them. From this early juncture in the film, the main characters accept the notion of an unconventional family born from the traditionally taboo topic of remarriage. The film is about the complex bonding of the three sisters with their newly met, younger stepsister. Throughout the film, characters attempt to sway the three sisters’ outlook on the situation: none more than their Great Aunt who describes the young

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16 Our Little Sister, directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda (2015, Amazon Prime Video), Streaming Online: 17’.
stepsister to Sachi as “the daughter of the woman who destroyed your family.” Once again, it is the older generation, and some of the men in the film such as Yoshino’s boyfriend at one point, who attempt to reframe remarriage as something destructive to the nuclear family. From the perspective of the three sisters, representative of the new generation for Kore-eda, remarriage is not something destructive; it is instead something that extended their family – they gained a sister.

By the time Hirokazu Kore-eda had begun his career decades after Ozu, in the 1990s, the nuclear family was beginning to be deconstructed in his new home dramas. Kore-eda’s depiction of marriage maintains Ozu’s emphasis on the nuclear family but defines family as being something more inclusive and of one’s own choices – the family unit being something that can be extended by either choice is itself a major step away from Ozu’s conservative presentation of the nuclear family, one which still finds its root in a traditional understanding of the value of marriage. Additionally, Kore-eda represents the increased divorce rates during his era – when ‘between 1988 and the end of the 1990s, divorce rates in Japan rose from 1.26 to 2.00 per 1000 person.’ In Kore-eda’s films the family is extended as his films re-approach the topic of remarriage – something that was consistently discussed as a taboo topic in many of Ozu’s films although, in Late Spring, a remarried couple is introduced. The conversations regarding remarriage in Late Spring are still framed as taboo, even if Noriko and most of the other main characters seem to accept it as a viable option by the end. It is noteworthy that Noriko’s father, Setsuko Somiya (Chishū Ryū) chooses to forgo his planned remarriage, after leveraging that

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17 Ibid. 24’.
18 Marriage is not approached traditionally in definition for Kore-eda, but the value of partnership and familial bonds are preserved.
opportunity in his attempt at convincing Noriko to get married. Even with the verbal acceptance of remarriage, the film still frames it as something to be hesitant about. For Kore-eda, increased divorce rates did not mean a collapse in the institution of marriage, or the end of traditional family values, but instead an opportunity to extend one’s definitions of these concepts by embracing remarriage as a viable and relatively accepted option in the romantic lives of his protagonists.

Hamaguchi takes a more radical step away from Ozu’s depiction of the nuclear family by entirely eliminating it, observed in *Happy Hour* through the disintegration of the institution of marriage. It is Hamaguchi’s films, and notably not Kore-eda’s more contemporary work, that most capture the “drift into singlehood” that is becoming the reality in Japan today. Additionally, in *Drive My Car* (2021), we are presented with various depictions of a collapsing family structure, most adamantly by the absence of family for the film’s two protagonists. Kafuku (Hidetoshi Nishijima) experiences the disillusion of marriage – as he discovers his wife’s infidelity before her untimely passing; while Watari (Toko Miura) experienced an unconventional relationship with the family structure growing up, as her mother suffered from dual-personalities and is described as having been more like a little sister than a mother. Watari is also notably a young adult woman who has seemingly no interest in pursuing marriage. Moreover, in terms of Hamaguchi’s depiction of the “drift into singlehood,” in *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy* (2021) we are shown three unrelated stories of people who experience various difficulties in their relationships, such as infidelity and unreciprocated feelings which result in loneliness for the characters, similar to how we view the emotional arcs in both *Happy Hour* and *Drive My Car*. In *Asako I & II* as well, romance is presented as being unavoidably impermanent. In both *Asako* and *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy*, characters are unable to move on after a
romance early in their lives falls apart. Each of Hamaguchi’s four films explores themes of marriage and family, featuring characters who have given up on marriage in one way or another; this classifies these films as being of the home drama genre, though this thesis – primarily in the next section – will focus only on the depiction of marriage in *Happy Hour*.

While Kore-eda’s films depict remarriages as a consequence of increased divorce rates, Hamaguchi’s films, especially *Happy Hour*, wholly embrace the reality of these increased divorce rates and the subsequent drift into singlehood. The institution of marriage disintegrates in *Happy Hour*, but rather than being presented to us as something tragic, it is something accepted, laying out a path to move forward despite the disintegration taking place.

One of the major shifting aspects of how the family system has been experienced in Japan since Ozu’s time is gender roles and women’s gradual resistance to a traditionally patriarchal society – which has been embodied by traditional approaches to marriage and the functions of the family system, as marriage and family in Japan are, as previously mentioned, indicative of the nation. The major contributing factor to the rising divorce rates that spiked during the early years of Kore-eda’s career, and more since, “has been attributed to changes in arrangement and expectation: what people want from marriage, especially what women want, is changing.”

Sociologist Merry Isaacs White acknowledges that even with the spikes in divorce rates amongst Japanese couples, the rates are still about only half of the United States, but it is significant in the context of Japanese society for all of the cultural reasons highlighted in this thesis; and the shift in gender roles is particularly notable because of how ingrained patriarchy has historically been, and still is, in Japanese society and laws. To be sure, ‘working women’ is not a contemporary

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20 Merry Isaacs White, Ibid, 85.
concept in Japan, but as scholar Merry Isaacs White explains; there is a “difference between working women and career women.”\textsuperscript{21} This difference is also observable in a comparison of Ozu’s films and \textit{Happy Hour}. Working women, like \textit{Late Spring}’s Noriko, who worked in a labor camp during the war years, work for the sake of their families; this particularly being pertinent in the midst of economic strife during and after World War II. In contrast, career women, like \textit{Happy Hour}’s Fumi (Maiko Mihara), work for their own sake of fulfillment and autonomy. Isaacs White adds that career women are also often characterized as having delayed marriage beyond the prescribed time. While this can be viewed as a characteristic of Noriko as well, it becomes more explicitly realized in \textit{Happy Hour}. Sociologist Yoshio Sugimoto cites the “rise of feminism outside and inside Japan” as having “sensitized observers to gender stratification in Japanese society.” It was not until the late 1990s that Japan began to implement “gender-equality ordinances,” the most notable moment being the introduction of a Gender Equal Society Act in 1999. Despite the nation’s attempt to move towards a more gender-equal society, women began to face “backlash” from conservative members of society who preferred to maintain the presence of a patriarchal society.\textsuperscript{22} The resistance and backlash against feminist movements in Japan have been correlated to marriage laws since the late 1990s when these issues became a topic of national discussion. One of the first points of emphasis that conservatives quickly resisted and “quickly moved to overturn” was the “revision of the civil code that allowed separate surnames for married couples.”\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 126.
\textsuperscript{22} Tomomi Yamaguchi, “‘Gender Free’ Feminism in Japan: A Story of Mainstreaming and Backlash,” \textit{Feminist Studies} 40, no. 3 (2014): 541.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 546.
Japan is still a noticeably patriarchal society today, as the persistent attempt to maintain patriarchal values remains an issue. Sugimoto highlights the “koseki,” or “household registration system” as one of the chief markers of the presence of patriarchy in the Japanese family structure today, and thus in Japanese society’s treatment of marriage. The suppressive effect of the “koseki” is relevant in Happy Hour by observing Jun’s struggle with the nation’s marriage and family laws, which inhibit her from being granted a divorce and threaten her rights over her unborn child; and also with the portrayal of Sakurako’s married life at home, as she becomes increasingly dissatisfied with her husband’s oppressive control over her decisions and daily life – such as her going on trips with her friends. The “koseki” maintains patriarchal values in the institution of marriage in Japan – in the home and in the public sphere – but as attitudes about gender roles are beginning to change, Happy Hour depicts these marriages as collapsing.

As briefly discussed over the course of this section, Ryusuke Hamaguchi’s oeuvre, including Happy Hour, Asako I & II, Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy, and Drive My Car, operates within the terms of the Japanese home drama, though they each explore various issues regarding marriage and/or family life in different ways that must be approached independently in analysis. In the following section, this thesis will discuss Happy Hour, as it is his first accessible film to deal with such concepts.

Key to reading Happy Hour as a home drama that responds to both Ozu’s presentation of marriage, and to contemporary cultural and sociological trends in Japanese society, is to consider the importance of the changes in women’s views of gender roles over the decades, as these changes are indicative to the changing approach to marriage, as observed in a comparative

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analysis of *Happy Hour* and previous films of the home drama genre; and how Hamaguchi’s step away from Ozu is different, and more explicit than Kore-eda’s. The analysis of the representation of marriage and changing gender roles in *Happy Hour* allows the film to be identified as a home drama, which Sato described as films that depict specific changes during times of change.
3 The Disintegration of Marriage and Shifting Gender Roles in *Happy Hour*

All Japanese home dramas that have been released post-Ozu, are to various degrees in conversation with, or a response to Ozu’s films. Similarly, *Happy Hour’s* depiction of married life – of four women’s experiences with the institution of marriage – is presented in the film with both a series of homages to Ozu’s postwar ‘marriage films’, and as an explicit, alternative response to Ozu’s consistent preservation of family values through his depiction of marriage and its vitality towards a happy life. This section analyzes *Happy Hour* from the perspective of this balance between homage and response; it discusses the film’s comment on the issue of marriage in contemporary Japan, and how it is communicated to the audience. Through an exploration of the film’s theme, contemporary culture, narrative, and aesthetic form, this analysis seeks to establish that Hamaguchi’s film is the latest, updated addition to the Japanese home drama genre because of the film’s commentary on marriage – that it is unstable, dynamically changing, and its institution disintegrating – specifically in the context of the 21st-century changes in Japanese society. The film highlights the shift into singlehood in Japanese society, which has largely resulted from changing attitudes regarding gender roles over the decades.

In the first minutes of *Happy Hour*, Hamaguchi tells us exactly what he intends on communicating to us in his new approach to the home drama. About two minutes into the film, following a train ride up into the cloud-covered mountains shot particularly shakily, one of the four women we meet says to her friends: “Cloudy, can’t see anything.” Her friend responds: “This resembles our future.” Two minutes in and we have two indicators of what will follow.
Firstly, it is notable that the shaky camera captures a train ride that is headed not only forwards, but upwards. Their future here is described as unclear and unstable. The shaky camera aesthetic is an intentional detail that constantly appears in the film. An imperative characteristic to consider when reading *Happy Hour* as a response to the postwar home dramas of Ozu – as essentially all Japanese home dramas post-Ozu are – is that the women protagonists of *Happy Hour* are in their mid-thirties, importantly about fifteen years older than the typical postwar Ozu-protagonist (i.e.: Noriko in *Late Spring*). This is a noteworthy detail to consider because while Ozu’s ‘marriage films’ portrayed characters like Noriko entering into married life with a hopeful position on how their lives would be in ‘five, ten, fifteen…’ years, *Happy Hour* shows us that future – one in which the married lives of these protagonists have failed to realize the optimism that films like *Late Spring* communicated about marriage.

With this opening sequence, Hamaguchi immediately places his film in conversation with Ozu – opening the door for five-plus hours of cinematic homages, but also countless instances of separation from Ozu, and others. In *Still Walking*, Kore-eda depicts an ended marriage – Ryo’s wife is widowed – also with characters in their mid-thirties; but the difference is Kore-eda’s film depicts the rekindling and reforming of what has ended. It is about building a new marriage in the wake of something thought to be lost. *Happy Hour* is about watching the collapse commence in the present time for the protagonists. Akari is portrayed as seeking a way to adjust to a new way of being after her marriage has already disintegrated. We observe as Jun and Sakurako attempt to break free from their emotionally damaging relationship with their husbands, and we watch as Fumi gradually realizes her husband’s unexpected infidelity.
Considering the depiction of failing marriages, *Happy Hour* inspires a recollection of the pseudo-promise spoken to us in Ozu’s films – perhaps most blatantly towards the end of *Late Spring*, as Shukichi Somiya (Chishū Ryū), the father character, says to his 23-year-old daughter Noriko (Setsuko Hara):

> Your life as a couple is just beginning. You’re starting a new life, one that you and Satake must build together… That’s the order of life and history. Marriage may not mean happiness from the start. To expect such immediate happiness is a mistake. Happiness isn’t something you wait around for. It’s something you create yourself. Getting married isn’t happiness. Happiness lies in the forging of a new life shared together. It may take a year or two, maybe even five or ten. Happiness comes only through effort. Only then can you claim to be man and wife.25

With this quote, Ozu expresses his perspective – one that he hopes to pass on to the generation that follows, represented by Noriko – that married life is a path toward a happy life. With this in mind, all four women in *Happy Hour* have given an effort; they have gotten married, yet that institution – that structure – has failed them, leaving them unfulfilled and unhappy. Notably, each of the four women is at different phases of realizing the failure or collapse of the confidence in marriage as being something permanent – and thus that the forming of a traditional family structure does not always equate fulfillment and happiness. Akari is already divorced due to her ex-husband’s infidelity. Sakurako has a husband, and a teenage son, and lives with her mother-in-law. Jun is married and seeking a divorce following the news that she is pregnant with what might not even be her husband’s child since she had an affair.26 Fumi is a career woman married to a younger man. Fumi’s marriage seems to be the most fulfilling at the beginning of the film as we observe how she and her husband can work together and support each other in their home life and their careers; but even her marriage ends with her husband’s infidelity, as he opts for a

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25 *Late Spring*, directed by Yasujiro Ozu (1949, The Criterion Channel), Streaming Online: 1:33:30’ – 1:35:45’.
26 Issues regarding family laws surrounding a husband’s right to claim a child, even if it is not his, if his wife is pregnant – a law which has only been changed after the release of this film – is described in the film.
woman who is notably younger than Fumi and more dependent on him. The preference for being with a younger woman who is more dependent on him is significant in how the film depicts shifting gender roles because it illustrates the hesitancy of men when faced with diminished power in the relationship. The sentiment that something unclear (i.e.: the cloudy sky) resembles their future presents the notion of a lack of faith in “the path” set forth by Ozu and the general conservative outlook of marriage and family being of paramount importance in forming the good life – something that has eluded the women in Happy Hour, despite their participation in married and/or family life.

These first few minutes of the film provide another crucial aspect to note. The interaction among the friends surrounding the aforementioned observation is significant. The scene ends with one of the female characters urging the others not to be ‘so dismal,’ as she remarks, “It’s not that bad.”27 Her remark embodies the position Hamaguchi takes towards the disintegration of marriage, within the home drama context: that the shift away from marriage and family life is not necessarily something to grieve, but simply something that must be accepted. This sentiment is at the heart of Happy Hour and how Hamaguchi approaches placing his film within the home drama genre, particularly in its specific counterpoints to Ozu. Perhaps married life does not always lead to a happy life despite one’s best effort; but that does not mean that we are unable to be happy on our own, finding peace and fulfillment from within – or that we are not capable of forming meaningful connections with others that inspire genuine human communication.

The issue that Hamaguchi sheds light on in his presentation of disintegrating marriages is that marriage does not always indicate a genuinely “shared life” as Ozu claims through Somiya’s

27 Happy Hour, directed by Ryusuke Hamaguchi (2015, Amazon Prime Video, Part I), Streaming Online: 2:13’- 4:00’.
speech in *Late Spring*, quoted above. Hamaguchi presents this by depicting an *emotional absence* between the women protagonists and their partners in *Happy Hour*. While these women entertained the tradition of attempting to build a married life as the speech given by Somiya at the end of *Late Spring* indicated one should, the lives they have built are not necessarily a shared one and thus did not equate to the fulfillment traditionally expected in the Japanese home dramas of Ozu. The sentiment of an emotional absence is most pertinent to the stories of the two women whose married lives, as depicted on screen, are farthest along in their representation of the traditional family structure: Jun and Sakurako. Their husbands are most representative of both the patriarchal structure of marriage and of the emotional absence referenced above characterized by their constant, cold indifference to the lives and emotions of their partners.

One of the characteristics that Hamaguchi utilizes to portray the distance between partners in *Happy Hour* is predicated on his casting of non-actors. While most of the main cast are untrained actors, the performances of the male characters in the film are particularly jarring in their inexpressiveness. In Sakurako’s case, her husband gives her “no warmth,” as his mother tells Sakurako. Similarly, Jun’s chief concern in her request for a divorce from her husband is what she, in her statement in divorce court calls his “psychological abuse” of her. Just as she says, “violence is not the only form of abuse,” so too is a physical absence not the only form of absence.\(^{28}\) While the question-and-answer sequences during the court scene are taking place, Jun and her husband are often both physically in the frame, but one of them is often blurred, indicating they do not share the same spaces, even if they are both there in the same place. She claims that he did nothing specific, but that she “was killed by [her] husband” because she constantly gave him the best parts of herself, and he would “trash all of that.” Although her

\(^{28}\) Ibid, 1:44’ – 6:30’.
husband did “nothing specific,” the sentiment of a lack of meaningful connection between romantic partners, and the effects of living in a patriarchal society are characterized in part by the structure of how marriage is experienced in such a society – as men benefit from the traditional institution of marriage significantly more than women do – is at the heart of Hamaguchi’s stance on the representation of marriage in his approach to the home drama, reflecting the shift in gender roles and the ‘changes in arrangement and expectation’ surrounding marriage in Japan.

The first major event scene of the film engages with the notion of experiencing unconventional forms of connection and communication that Hamaguchi presents in terms of how his films navigate this contemporary shift away from the nuclear family structure, represented by the marriage path Ozu champions, and into singlehood through an acceptance of this modern reality that marriage is not necessarily indicative of a happy life. The four women attend a seminar-workshop led by a man named Ukai (Shuhei Shibata), where they practice what he calls “unconventional communication.” Nevertheless, the activities and conversations that are had in relation to Ukai’s workshop paint a clear portrait of how Hamaguchi constructs his perspective on the previously mentioned shifts. While practicing exercises aimed at achieving one’s balance, Ukai expresses to his students that include the four women protagonists: “It’s important to rely on your partner. But rely too much, and it may not work… Don’t care too much about others by making yourself too small.”

29 In Ryusuke Hamaguchi’s later film Drive My Car (2021), the primary “connection” between characters is also unconventional. It is of two people in very different phases of their lives who bond over their tragic pasts, and their unconventional experiences with family (and marriage).
30 Certainly, there is more to unpack with the character of Ukai and his role as an almost shaman-like character – akin to traditions in Japanese film and literature, as it is left unclear whether he is something like a con-artist, or a genuine figure in the film; but such an analysis is not in the scope of this thesis.
31 Ibid, 28:30"
This line seems to especially pertain to Sakurako, as she has the most overwhelmingly traditional marriage and home life, often aching for relief. Throughout the film – and from the very first scene atop the mountain on a cloudy day – Sakurako must not only always consider her husband’s perspective on her plans and decisions but must ask for his permission in making them. Similarly, Jun essentially needs her husband’s permission to get her divorce. Reflecting on the workshop’s exercises, Sakurako vents that it was nice for others to listen to her and show care in everyday life – something she does not receive from her patriarchal and indifferent husband.

The shift in perspectives of gender roles is prominent in the lives of each of the women at the center of Happy Hour. Sociologist Mandy Boeknke notes that “gender role attitudes are shaped by personal experience; for women, their own engagement in the labour market leads to less traditional gender role attitudes.”32 To various extents, all four women protagonists in Happy Hour exhibit characteristics of non-traditional gender role attitudes; Fumi and Akari as career women, and Jun and Sakurako as they long for a sense of fulfillment from their oppressive experiences in married life. For each of the four women, any movement away from traditional gender roles is approached as a threat by their husbands or partners, as the traditional gender roles conventionally attached to experiences with marriage benefits men. For Sakurako who wishes to free herself from her traditional husband’s expectations, her husband insists she refrains from going on many trips with her friends, such as the one they had just planned to visit the Hot Springs, or making plans outside the home, so that she can assume her role as caretaker for their son and her mother-in-law. When he finds out she has plans to leave town, he asks Jun

to stop inviting Sakurako out as often. Fumi is married to a younger man who relies significantly on her in his professional work as an event coordinator. Fumi is strong, independent, and successful. Her younger husband notably has an affair with a woman younger than him, who is certainly more emotionally dependent on him than Fumi seems to be. Jun’s circumstances and their relation to traditional patriarchy within Japanese society are incredibly nuanced and complex, with a long, varying history deeply rooted in Japan’s marriage and family laws. Jun, pregnant with what is most likely not her husband’s child but the product of her affair with another man, at multiple points in the film expresses her fear of what is at stake due to the patriarchal laws surrounding marriage and family in Japan, which permit a man to claim the child of his wife, even if it is not his.\textsuperscript{33} Seeking a divorce, but knowing that her husband will not accept one if she cannot prove that he has been abusive, she resorts to running away; this returns us to the scene highlighted in the opening of this thesis’ introduction. This issue of Jun’s rights is commonly referred to in the film in various instances, such as in divorce court and the conversation between Jun’s husband and her three friends after she had gone missing.

In Akari’s case, because her experience with marriage is in the past – she begins the film already divorced – everything we learn of her experience, of being the victim of infidelity, is in reflection. Having already experienced the disintegration of marriage, and living through it, we see Hamaguchi’s conclusive perspective take precedence in Akari’s story. Akari expresses that she thinks “having a love interest is [\textit{still}] important,” yet of the four women, she feels the most at peace with the \textit{absence} “plaguing” her, and in fact, the slowly developed relationship she has with a single father and his young son, is perhaps the most balanced and unstressed relationship

\textsuperscript{33} This law has recently been changed, after the release of \textit{Happy Hour}; but patriarchy is still present in many forms, as the \textit{koseki} (which places men as the single leader of a household) is still present.
and portrayal of a family (adjacent) depicted in the film. Notably, Hamaguchi does not insert an older, traditional character’s perspective on the potential of Akari’s remarriage; as Kore-eda does in *Still Walking* with Ryo’s parents’ resistance to fully accept his new wife, or in *Our Little Sister* when the sisters’ Great Aunt expresses her reluctance to accept their stepsister as part of the family. Hamaguchi is strictly focused on depicting the phase in the disintegration of marriage that Akari represents, as one which accepts an unconventional path and embraces new forms of genuine connection. He leaves the perspective of Ozu’s home dramas behind, allowing Akari’s relationship to feel the most genuine.34 She once witnessed her marriage and her chances at forming a traditional family unit disintegrate – Ozu’s promise did not come true – and yet, she lives on.’ In other words, it is okay that things are changing, and that marriage is unstable and impermanent. Life carries with it more experiences than simply a ‘shared life together.’

Following Ukai’s workshop, the group sits to reflect on the experience. Here, Ukai takes the time to speak to his ‘students’ – to a room notably filled with mostly young to middle-aged women. Paraphrasing, he says the following:

You tried unusual ways of communicating. In finding balance, you lost your center mass; this goes far beyond communication. It’s connecting with others, to engage like a marriage. The feeling of becoming one… It was the time of happiness, feeling of ease and comfort. I’m sure you felt that. You may feel at ease, but you also feel a sense of uncertainty. Since you’ve lost the connection with your body, you have to listen to your body again. Or have others listen to your center. Then you can reconnect… it collapses again. I think it’s a repetition of that cycle… I think what you learned may be applied to your life.35

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34 In *Happy Hour*, it is in an earlier phase of the disintegration of marriage (told in Sakurako’s story), with conversations between Sakurako and her mother-in-law that maintain a traditional outlook on marriage and treats divorce and remarriage as taboo. This conversation is expanded on later in this thesis.

35 *Happy Hour*, Ibid, 55:00’-57:25’.
There are too many coincidences in Hamaguchi’s choice of vocabulary to ignore the relation this speech has with the larger narrative at hand – both in terms of Happy Hour’s story and Hamaguchi’s general stance in his separation from Ozu.\(^{36}\) The way this scene is shot is also noteworthy because although the class had both women and men attend, while Ukai is speaking we are primarily shown close-ups of only the women – and the camera wanders around the room. This latter observation not only contrasts with Ozu’s steady, unwavering camera; it also feels like Hamaguchi is no longer paying mind to time or space while Ukai is expressing his insight. Interpreting the above quote now in terms of this context; as Ukai says, the women can apply what he said to their lives, the sentiment that while married, one loses themselves in the relationship. One’s sense of self and control over their life are thwarted. ‘It was the time of happiness,’ he says; yet there is a feeling of ‘uncertainty.’ Hamaguchi introduces this idea of life being something cyclical; there are no certainties – nothing is permanent, and nothing is completely reliable. To refer back to the film’s narrative story arcs; within this context, it becomes clear that by running away while notably being pregnant, Jun is taking back ‘control of her body’ and her life. In the scene I describe in the opening of this thesis – at the moment of Jun’s official departure on the ferry – there is a very intentional use of a shaky camera. In this instance, Hamaguchi is making a statement; one now represented through both narrative and form. Ozu’s (and Kore-edo’s) camera is steady, but Hamaguchi’s is shaky. For Ozu, marriage and family are reliable; for Hamaguchi (and for Jun), it is disintegrating. Jun is physically breaking away and taking back control of her body and life – just as Hamaguchi is breaking the form of a traditional home drama, of which, as Sato claims, Ozu (and his steady camera) is the root.

\(^{36}\) Refer to italicized terms in above block-quote.
There are many exemplary scenes in *Happy Hour* where narrative and aesthetic forms come together to illustrate Hamaguchi’s balance of homage and deconstructive response to the traditional form of the genre. One very clear example is the calculated use of the red teapot, a consistent placeholder in Ozu’s cinema. The red teapot first appears in the film at a pivotal informative moment that depicts Akari at home, alone. The scene begins as a simple moment that makes us believe this is an innocent homage to Ozu. Akari prepares tea in the red kettle, on the stove. Then, the scene shifts into a subversive deconstruction. Akari receives a series of phone calls. The first is her ex-husband inviting her to his second wedding with his new bride. This instance recalls both the topic of remarriage and reminds us of Akari’s failed marriage, and the disintegration of Ozu’s promise for her. Importantly, it is the husband who remarries first – likely to a younger woman – because in a patriarchal society, Akari being in her mid-thirties, would be considered undesirable by many. She hangs up on her ex-husband and shortly after, Sakurako calls and asks her if she would attend Jun’s upcoming divorce court hearing. All these details which shift attention to the separation from the permanence of traditional married life are done with the intentional placement of Ozu’s famous red teapot boiling in the background. This is not a coincidence; it is Hamaguchi once again combining narrative with form to communicate his perspective on the home drama.

It feels intentional that the placement of such a subversive red teapot scene is tied to scenes with Akari, the film’s already-divorced character. Her life is the farthest from Ozu’s depiction of marriage (in terms of protagonist stories on screen), yet it is her scenes that feature

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37 Ozu’s consistent placement of a red tea kettle has been observed and established as a marker in his films by many scholars.
38 Traditionally, women unmarried after the age of 25 have been derogatorily labeled “Christmas Cake” in Japan, to signify that they are past the time of their value, just like a Christmas cake after December 25th is.
the most explicit visual homage to Ozu in the placing of the red teapot. As discussed previously, it is the intentionality of when these scenes occur that makes them more than simply homage, but an act of subversion.

A second ‘red teapot’ scene comes when Akari returns home with a man who attempts to force himself on her.\(^\text{39}\) As the violent act begins to ensue, we hear something boiling on a stove that is not at that instance on screen. As tension grows in this moment, so does the sound of the boiling kettle. There is a hard cut to a close-up shot of the boiling red teapot; this lingers for some time. Sound from the following scene – the sound of a ferry – enters the scene before the image on the screen changes. The next scene is the one that I highlight in the introduction of this thesis; Jun departing town by way of ferry. This subversive moment of homage to Ozu’s teapot then is accompanied by and leads into what is perhaps the most explicit shift away from married life shown on screen in the film. As Jun waves goodbye to Sakurako’s son at the ferry station, and to her life and marriage, a shaky camera captures constant movement in every corner of the screen. This is the instance of explicitly breaking away from Ozu, aesthetically and narratively. As this scene of Jun leaving by ferry fades out, the film cuts to a close-up of Sakurako. She is at home, her head down in her arms resting on a table, and her eyes closed. A tear makes its way down her face, falling in a stream across the ridge of her nose. The sound is completely cut out at this point. We are left in complete silence, asked to observe the image we are shown. Right as the image and its meaning set in, Sakurako’s eyes open and stare right back at us. The image disappears.

\(^\text{39}\) Happy Hour, Ibid, 1:29:45’.
The scene on the ferry is not the first signifying instance of a shaky camera accompanying a scene in which Jun isolates herself from the rest of the story. Earlier in the film, as the four friends are ending their trip to the Hot Springs, Sakurako, Fumi, and Akari drop Jun off at a bus station and commence to drive away. Similarly in this scene, we see Jun waving goodbye, and sound becomes suppressed. The camera takes the point-of-view of the departing car, as it rapidly drives away from Jun. In this instance as well, the camera shakes profusely.

What follows is one of the most curiously insightful sequences of Happy Hour. On the bus, Jun crosses paths with a stranger – a woman whom she had briefly met earlier on the trip – and they begin to talk, share, and get to know one another. The conversations between the two are strictly within the confines of their family lives. The stranger shares a relatively comprehensive history of her experiences with her family. After a lengthy, mostly one-sided conversation, Jun begins to open up about her own life. She mentions to the stranger that she is currently in the process of getting a divorce. This seems to make the stranger uncomfortable, as she awkwardly stops conversating, pulls the line to notify the bus driver she intends to get off at the next stop, and leaves. Notable here is that again this exchange is had on a moving bus, along with a shaky camera. The social ostracization that is a side-effect of this shift into singlehood and away from marriage is most clear in this instance. Divorce is still a taboo topic in many minds.

In a later moment of the film, in which Sakurako is walking and talking with her mother-in-law – who is dressed traditionally and represents the Ozu generation – her mother-in-law says about the notions of marriage and divorce: “Sustaining marriage is hard. And so is leaving it. If it’s hard either way, isn’t it better to sustain it?”40 It is the stark differences in how Ozu presented

40 Happy Hour, directed by Ryusuke Hamaguchi (2015, Amazon Prime Video, Part II), Streaming Online: 1:20:30’.
interactions around conversations of marriage between older and younger generations, and how Hamaguchi does so in *Happy Hour*, that are eye-opening. In *Late Spring*, Noriko’s father, the film’s elder spokesperson speaks about marriage to his daughter who is soon to be married, in terms of happiness; and in *Happy Hour*, Sakurako’s mother-in-law, this film’s elder spokesperson, speaks to Sakurako who is contemplating her marriage, in terms of unhappiness – of accepting that marriage does not lead to a happy life, but perhaps just an easier one. This scene ends with the two women of two different generations separating when they arrive at Sakurako’s son, representative of a new, third generation. After sharing her two cents on the topic, Sakurako’s mother-in-law leaves Sakurako to her son.

She now begins to walk and talk with her son, who had just experienced a pitfall in his relationship with a girl from school. He picks up his bike – notably not riding it like in the famous scene in *Late Spring* which had signified the happiness the film’s youth representative found in the onset of romantic life. They descend a staircase into the darkness of a tunnel, and Sakurako says to her son: “Maybe you can never be happy the rest of your life… You can’t depend on us as much anymore.”41 Hamaguchi is highlighting not only the deep disconnect between the three generations but also the reality and necessity of leaving old ways of thinking – the rules pertaining to marriage and family – behind in a world that is rapidly changing. It is for this same reason that Akari’s relationship with a single father is not bothered by the presence of an older, traditional figure to weigh in on their circumstances. Hamaguchi is presenting divorced life and potential remarriage as something that can also be *easy* and worthwhile going forward in the lives of *still young* individuals such as the film’s protagonists.

41 *Happy Hour*, Ibid, 1:24:30’.
It is outdated “rules” after all that the patriarchy relies on in staying relevant, thus inhibiting the happiness and freedom of the women at the center of the story. In a conversation with Jun’s three friends, about her disappearance from his life, Jun’s husband Kohei says that he cannot accept Jun’s request for a divorce because what she is doing is against the rules: “Marriage binds one to follow a set of rules in society. So, she must live by the rules. Of course, it’s not permanent. She can break it off. But it has to be done according to the rules.”

Marriage and family life in Japan have always been deeply rooted in this notion of rules – both in terms of Japan’s laws surrounding the topic and in terms of ways of being, hence the stranger on the bus’s discomfort around the taboo mention of divorce. Some of the laws which dictate how marriage and divorce are experienced differently for women and men in Japan are right at the heart of much of the story being divulged in Happy Hour. As previously alluded to, there are multiple mentions of the fact that women must have proof of their husband’s abuse to be granted a divorce, or the husband would need to accept it; otherwise, women are not permitted the allowance of a divorce. Additionally, as is prominent in Jun’s case, her husband Kohei can claim her unborn child to be his since she likely bore the child out of wedlock.

After Kohei leaves Sakurako, Akari, and Fumi, following the interaction described above, the three women discuss their differing perspectives on Jun’s situation. An important detail here is that they discuss the damage of dishonesty and its relation to the impossibility of expressing one’s true feelings to others – largely due to the taboos grounded in these deeply rooted “rules” that favor patriarchy. The women speak about the idea that when you are being true to yourself, it becomes hard to speak since you are afraid that others would not understand you. This is what

42 Happy Hour, Ibid, 56:20’.
Jun experiences on the bus with the stranger. While she was hesitant to share much of her situation’s details with some of her closest friends, she figured it could not hurt to divulge them to a stranger but was not understood.

Scenes, where form aligns itself with narrative in Happy Hour, are often characterized with how certain spaces are utilized. In almost every high-tension moment mentioned throughout this thesis, the spaces between friends, lovers, and ex-lovers feel boldly emphasized by Hamaguchi’s camera; those spaces tell the whole story about the disintegration of marriage in the lives of the film’s protagonists. In the teapot examples previously mentioned, Hamaguchi uses the depth of the space to place an aesthetic indicator of Ozu in the background of conversations regarding topics that represent the narrative shift away from Ozu, creating a stark dichotomy. In *Happy Hour*, to make the most of smaller spaces, Hamaguchi often expresses his frames with the use of reflections and windows. In one such scene, Sakurako’s husband arrives home and asks her to prepare him dinner. Additionally, she formally asks for permission to join her friends on a trip, even offering to prepare the week’s meals ahead of time. He responds that she should be home to take care of his aging mother who lives with them. Scholar Merry Isaacs White writes that the “contradictory understanding that women are the prime movers of family life, and their very importance to it may simultaneously disenfranchise or limit them, imbues family life in Japan.”43 In this one interaction outlined above, we are exposed to everything that paints Sakurako’s life as the most overwhelmingly traditional of the four women in the film, and how this most consumes her everyday freedoms.

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43 Merry Isaacs White, Ibid, 123.
After the suppressive response from her husband, she receives a phone call and steps outside to answer. The phone call is from Jun, who we come to learn notifies Sakurako of her pregnancy, which becomes the origin of Jun’s decision to run away. This scene is significantly placed immediately after we observe Sakurako’s interaction with her patriarchal husband. More than anybody, Sakurako seems to understand, empathize, and relate to Jun’s feelings. What is notable in terms of aesthetic form in this scene is that when Sakurako steps outside to answer the phone, the sound is diluted, and we continue to see her husband sitting at the dinner table – this through his reflection in the window Sakurako is standing behind. Slowly, while on the phone, she paces outdoors and stops in a particular spot that covers her husband’s reflection right as he looks up towards her, erasing him from the picture, consuming his presence as Jun expresses her marriage issues to her friend who can certainly relate to the feeling of being ‘psychologically abused’ by her husband’s indifference.44

Later in the film, Sakurako’s husband is giving Jun a ride in his car when some of the issues first presented in the scene above return to prominence. He explains to Jun the nature of his traditional married life at home. He admits that he is not the most romantic, not showing as much love as he should, but that ‘he works and she runs the home,’ and that works for them. By this point, as the audience, we are aware of Sakurako’s discontent with this lifestyle. Notably, the scene is shot while they are driving – formally indicating a transitionary moment in the thinking of married life, gender roles, and thus also the origins of the family structure.45 Additionally in

44 Happy Hour, Ibid, Part 1, 23:45’.
45 The implications of Happy Hour’s depiction of the disintegration of marriage and what that means in terms of how Hamaguchi views the current state of the family structure in Japan is not in the scope of this thesis, but as will be discussed in this thesis’ conclusion, future scholars must consider how these institutions are related in order to draw connections between Happy Hour and Hamaguchi’s other films (i.e.: Drive My Car) if reading his other films as home dramas as well.
terms of form, during this conversation in the moving car, reflections from trees outside rapidly appear and tread across the car windshield. While not in the tradition of Japanese home dramas, what we get a glimpse of in this scene – and are later exposed to further in Drive My Car is Hamaguchi’s engagement with the form of the road film genre. This particular instance of the trees’ reflections filling the windshield as they are driving recalls Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami’s road films; particularly Taste of Cherry (1997) where for Kiarostami too, the road film genre and use of reflection are used to bring form and narrative together, indicating the sentiment of moving forward – living on, as is also the message here in Hamaguchi’s new approach to the home drama, defined by an acceptance of the disintegration of marriage.

Similar to how space is used to bring narrative and form together in Happy Hour, so is location consistently used to underscore the objective of Hamaguchi’s new approach to the home drama. Happy Hour is notably not set in Tokyo, which is a relative rarity in Japanese film, particularly in terms of the home drama genre. Happy Hour takes place in Kobe, the site of a tragically destructive earthquake; the location here can be viewed as a city that has risen from the ashes to thrive, reviving itself, and finding new beauty and new life. Hamaguchi seems to argue that life is similarly cyclical. In Hamaguchi’s home drama, it is expressed that marriage may disintegrate, the family may become absent or unsupportive, and individuals may experience tragedy, but still, yet, they live on. Like the city’s space that the film fills, people too can rise from the ashes of tragedy or disappointment, to thrive.

While the first few minutes of Happy Hour – which began as the four women protagonists are on board a train – are indicative of the film’s main points to come, a scene closer to the end of the film provides a moment that is symbolic of the film’s theme. In the scene, Jun’s husband is
moderating a question-and-answer event with Ms. Nose – the young woman with whom Fumi’s husband has an affair – he says about her short story, “You open with visual descriptions. One of a train… I thought it symbolized the whole work.” This reflects the way Hamaguchi begins *Happy Hour* as well. The intention observed in Hamaguchi’s construction of his films, such as the analyses found in this section, of moments of cinematography and framing in *Happy Hour*, seem to reflect that the idea of Hamaguchi’s cinema blends form with narrative, visual cues with literary influence. In *Happy Hour*, the intertextual similarities between the film’s larger narrative and the conversation about a short story between these two specific characters, who are vital actors in the disintegration of two of the marriages portrayed in the film, is more than simply a coincidence; it is intended. Hamaguchi communicates to us how we may interpret his films.

The notion of moving forward, and accepting the gradual disintegration of marriage, is tethered to the shift in gender roles as discussed in this section. In the scene just before when Jun is left at the bus stop and is seen waving goodbye, shot with a shaky camera, the four women are sitting traditionally at the resort where they are residing. This scene aesthetically recalls many of Ozu’s films including the opening scene of *Late Spring*, but it is in the conversation that Hamaguchi separates himself once again. As a sort of exercise in a fresh start, the four friends pretend to introduce themselves to one another, as if for the first time. They are starting over; as new women, new people, they can break from the shackles of the lives they have lived and the rules those lives have been dictated by, and suppressed by. The key to reading *Happy Hour* as an installment in the rich history of the Japanese home drama is acknowledging its depiction of the

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46 *Happy Hour*, directed by Ryusuke Hamaguchi (2015, Amazon Prime Video, Part III), Streaming Online: 29:25’.  
47 This blend that includes literary influence is also featured explicitly in Hamaguchi’s *Drive My Car* (2021), based on a Haruki Murakami short story and imbedded with Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya*.  

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changes in gender roles, represented in the film with the presentation of the changes in marriage expectations amongst the film’s women protagonists. These changes reflect the perspective of married life in 21st-century Japanese society, as this change is the one Hamaguchi portrays most in his approach to the genre.
4 Conclusion: Hamaguchi’s ‘Home Drama’

With Happy Hour, Rysyuke Hamaguchi takes a significant step away from the traditions of the Japanese home drama genre and the representation of marriage within the prominent genre which found its roots in the films of Yasujiro Ozu and their maintained embrace of marriage and family life. By observing the subversions in Happy Hour, in terms of both form and narrative as this thesis does, we understand the film to be representative of contemporary trends in Japanese society and changes in approaches to marriage, just as the first home dramas of Ozu depicted the changes in Japanese society during the postwar and occupation years.

This thesis is an attempt to place Hamaguchi’s work in the tradition of the Japanese home drama. In the films that follow Happy Hour in his filmography – Asako I & II (2018), Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy (2021), and particularly Drive My Car (2021) – similar themes surrounding the disintegration of marriage and Hamaguchi’s general depiction of the absence and impermanence of family can be recognized. For the sake of this thesis, my analysis focused only on Happy Hour, as it is Hamaguchi’s most explicit response to the traditional representations of married life within the home drama genre, but as I have briefly referenced throughout this thesis, the trends observed in Happy Hour can be traced throughout the rest of his oeuvre as well, which positions Hamaguchi as a modern director of the Japanese home drama. That being said, the characteristics of his other films that could establish them as further examples of Hamaguchi’s approach to the home drama genre would have to be examined differently than I have Happy Hour.
Particularly an analysis of *Drive My Car* may present a further opportunity to examine Hamaguchi’s approach to the home drama genre by asking the following questions: What does the disintegration of marriage mean in our larger understanding of the family structure as it is experienced in Japan today? If emotional absence – the lack of a ‘shared life together’ – is at the root of the collapse of the institution of marriage in *Happy Hour*, how does this connect with the more explicit physical absence of family as depicted in *Drive My Car*?

In *Happy Hour*, marriage is *disintegrating*; but I would argue that in *Drive My Car*, the family structure all together has *disintegrated*. *Happy Hour*’s implications on the world portrayed in *Drive My Car* should be a paramount consideration in future scholarship on this topic.

With *Happy Hour*, Hamaguchi also separates himself from his predecessors of the ‘home drama’ – Ozu and Koreeda – from an aesthetic standpoint, mainly observable through cinematography and framing. The use of movement and a shaky camera, the use of spaces, and a trope of travel and location come together to oppose the visual makeup of the films of those before him and usher in a new representation of how marriage is experienced in 21st Century Japan, and why.

The Japanese ‘home drama,’ from Ozu to Hamaguchi, allows us to observe the changes in Japanese culture and society – as in Japan, marriage and family are indicative of the nation – from the postwar years on, as changes such as the shift in gender roles, became more prominent in the lives of people in Japan. All of Hamaguchi’s films are a significant step away from the traditional presentation of marriage and family as seen in Ozu, as he directly portrays the recent “drift into singlehood” occurring in Japan, presented in *Happy Hour* as being directly correlated
with the changes in attitudes regarding gender roles over the decades in Japan; and in his other works through their portrayal of the impermanence and absence of family. Hamaguchi’s depiction of the disintegrating marriage in *Happy Hour* mirrors trends in Japanese society today. *Happy Hour’s* representation of the changes in attitudes toward gender roles and marriage places Hamaguchi’s break-out film alongside the long history of Japanese home dramas and begins his output as the newest director of the prominent genre.
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