

Family Picture: The Contemporary Dysfunctional Japanese Family in Sono Shion's Films

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ABSTRACT

This article concerns the image of Japanese family, that emerges from director Sono Shion's films. Such works as e.g. *Noriko's Dinner Table* or *Strange Circus* show family embroiled in chaos, violent and crippled, broadly speaking: a dysfunctional one. Films' characters tend to replace handicapped family with some other communities, yet they cannot succeed in finding love nor devotion, nor other affirmative values. According to tendency ascendant in contemporary Japanese Cinema, parents are mostly to blame for family crisis, and mothers show the most reprehensible behaviours. The author sees this pessimistic view as a result of various changes that Japanese society underwent during the post-war period, concerning gender, cohabitation patterns, ageing of society, shifting boundaries of term 'family' and many others.

KEYWORDS: Japanese cinema, Sono Shion, Japanese family, crisis, Japanese society in film.

The second half of the 20th century brought years of an economic bubble for Japan (which burst at the end of the century) as well as a galloping urbanisation and westernisation of the country. Japanese society underwent a number of significant changes that became a burning issue not only for sociologists and politicians but also for film-makers. They influenced the shape of the typical Japanese family, the image of this institution and its role in the life of society as well as individuals. The changes concern marriages, models of cohabitation, demography, typical gender roles and shifting the boundaries of what is understood as a family. A more detailed look into a "large dysfunctional family", portrayed by Sono Shion in his artistic work, enables us to see that it is the symbol of the contemporary Japanese family in crisis. The main reasons for this crisis are sudden modernisation, turning away from tradition and a conflict between an individual and the community.

Statistics presented by sociologists give an idea of the scale of the problem. In 1997 in Japan people aged 65 and older made up 15% of society, which was more than the amount of children below the age of 15 (Rebick, Takenaka 2006: 5). Moreover, the Japanese are characterised by having the greatest longevity in the world. In 2003 the average life expectancy for

men was 78 years, and 85 years for women (Ogawa et.al. 2006: 21). The ageing population is a menace from the demographic and economic point of view. Older people requiring care can count less and less on the help of their children and other family members, as they choose to live in major urban centres, creating nuclear families. In this case the duty falls on the state. The traditional multigenerational family model starts disappearing. In 1975 about 18% of all Japanese households were three-generational; however, by 2002 it had decreased to 10%, while the percentage of single-person households increased from 18% to 23% in the same period of time. The percentage of homesteads inhabited exclusively by elderly people (65 years and more) increased to 15.8%, whereas the average number of family members decreased by half between 1950 and 2004 – from 5 to 2.5 (Rebick, Takenaka 2006: 6). The above data indicates the tendency of breaking multigenerational families into smaller social units, consisting usually of three to four people.

The ageing of society is of course not the only problem influencing the institution of the family. In the last half-century a number of issues concerning the functioning of nuclear families appeared in public and scientific debates and almost each of them finds a gloomy reflection in Sono's creative output. Observations and findings of sociologists can often seem soulless, paradoxically detached from the reality which they are supposed to describe. In this context the director in some way helps the social researchers by reflecting the image of the dysfunctional family in his films. This reflection is in fact exaggerated because Sono emphasises and points out the defects and also presents inconvenient truths in his own, ruthless and direct way, which enables him to create the grotesque, symbolic film representation of the Japanese family of the 21st century engrossed in crisis.

Timothy Iles, who tries to explore the complicated identity of the Japanese, both in an individual, as well as in a cultural or national sense, clearly emphasises the key part of the family in its formation process:

“Beyond the issue of gender, one of the first places a person will receive an idea of his or her identity is of course the home—the family is the first exposure to social life and values and the first formative influence on the development of an individual in every country. As such, the central importance of the family in creating the individuated selfhood of its members cannot be overstated. This is true when the family structure and

situation are stable, supportive and nurturing (...) but it is also true when the family is in chaos.” (Iles 2008: 79)

In his films Sono Shion describes a family embroiled in chaos. This subject is probably most common and thoroughly reflected in his creative output. It provides us with various examples of dysfunctional families characterised by loss or lack of parental care, bond, love and support, and instead the presence of violence, deviation, incomprehension and hate. The dysfunction of these families is often a result of the irresponsible attitude of parents or their absence in their children’s lives. This motif, pushed to the extreme in the *Strange Circus* (*Kimyō na sākasu*, 2005)¹, is present in almost every film by the Japanese director. The characters of the mothers deserve a special critique. Although the characters of the fathers, such as Gōzō from the film mentioned above, disgust the audience, in other works of the director these are men who are active and are trying in different ways – and with the different effects – to repair their mistakes. The incompetence of characters in performing parental duties has its explanation also in the rules of functioning of the Japanese society, where mothers are being taught how to perform their role by taking part in special classes. The aim of the classes is adapting to a so-called “one on one” contact with their own children and forcing them to take an active part in their school life. All this is to encourage Japanese women to give birth and raise children. In Sono’s films marriages also fail and any attempts to replace “broken” families with a substitute such as a sect are unsuccessful. The film *Noriko’s Dinner Table* (*Noriko no shokutaku*, 2005) provides us with the richest amount of sociological statements on the Japanese family and it is also the central element of the image of the family in crisis created by Sono.

The action of *Noriko’s Dinner Table* takes place before, during and after the events of the *Suicide Club* (*Jisatsu Sākuru*, 2002). This film is an explanation and a lengthy comment of the plot of the *Suicide Club* but simultaneously functions as an independent story about the family Shimabara from Toyokawa. It consists of a father, Tetsuzō (Mitsuishi Ken), a busy worker at a local newspaper, an apathetic and distant mother Taeko (Miyata Sanae) and two teenage daughters: the elder, Noriko (Fukishi Kazue), and the younger, Yuka (Yoshitaka Yuriko). The narrative voice in

¹ In my article I’m focusing on *Strange Circus* the best example of my thesis, although it’s not the only film I refer to. I’d like to point out, that I intentionally avoid analysing the *Suicide Club*, as it is best-known of Sono Shion’s films, therefore has largest representation in literature. I’m also not interested in Japanese suicide problem, and issues I concentrate on are better shown in some other Sono’s works.

the film informs us about the fact that Noriko is dissatisfied with her life. In her opinion her father is a boring and unambitious man, her biggest dream is to study in Tokyo but Tetsuzō will not allow it. The girl is trying to convince the headteacher to grant her permission for unlimited access to the Internet for students. Her favourite website is *haikyo.com* (*haikyo* means “ruin” or “uninhabited building”), well-known from the *Suicide Club*. Here, as Mitsuko, “she is meeting” with her soulmates. Ueno eki 54 is a founder of the website and her nickname means “Station Ueno 54”. This pseudonym refers to the earlier film by Sono, in which fifty-four secondary-school female students commit suicide in the subway station Shinjuku. The full meaning of this pseudonym is, however, explained in the later chapters of the film. Noriko, who is in a conflict with her father, uses the first occasion to escape. She meets a girl called Kumiko whom she earlier met online as Ueno eki 54, by the post office box number 54 at the Ueno subway station in Tokyo. After the disappearance of the older sister, Yuki logs onto the website *haikyo.com* as Yōko and just like Noriko, also leaves her parents. The father starts a private investigation to find his daughters.

Kumiko introduces Noriko to her family. Both of them visit the girl’s grandmothers and they spend all day in an idyllic, family atmosphere. Thanks to another visit, this time to the allegedly dying grandfather, it turns out that Kumiko runs a so-called “family to hire” organisation which provides services on family life. Kumiko and Noriko become friends and the main character learns how to control emotions necessary in her new occupation. After a few months Tetsu finds Kumiko with the help of his friend and he is arranging a “family to hire” session. They meet at a house arranged precisely like Shimabaras’ flat in Toyokawa, and he is hoping that he can get his daughters back.

Noriko’s family story seems incredible, however, it experiences conflicts well known to contemporary Japanese, and among them also a problem with which Japan has already been struggling for more than a century. It is a conflict of values represented by the tradition of the strongly collectivised society with individuals counting on self-realisation. Shimabara family members are presenting attitudes illustrating social transformations, which took place within the last few decades in Japan, as well as their influence on the life of a typical family in *The Land of the Rising Sun*.

The main reason for Noriko to blame the father is his insensibility to his daughter’s individual needs. Only as a result of dramatic events does the man realise that the smiling faces of his daughters in the family portrait by

Taeko do not reflect the image of the girls in a photo which was used to accomplish the painting. A seventeen-year-old Noriko already thinks of herself as a woman and wants to go to the capital city to experience city life and see the world². She considers her house in Toyokawa to be a prison from which she wants to break free at the first possible opportunity. The reason why Tetsuzō does not let his daughter leave is also very significant. According to her father, boys in Tokyo are aggressive and worthless. As Noriko says, “my father thought that the main reason for girls to go to Tokyo is to get pregnant” and this was because of two of her cousins, who did exactly what Tetsuzō was afraid of. His attitude is a result of lack of trust towards his daughter (which is rather groundless) but also reflects an attitude of contemporary Japanese society towards their offspring and starting a family. In the nineties of the last century the average age of getting married in Japan reached the highest anywhere in the world – 29.6 for men, 27.8 for women (Rebick, Takenaka 2006: 8). Simultaneously the number of births drastically fell – in 2006 the birth rate was a negative number (ibid.: 3) – as the percentage of births in non-marital relationships is extremely low in the Land of the Rising Sun and it is only 1.9% of all births on the islands (as comparison, in Sweden it is 56%) (ibid.: 8). The negativity towards parenthood and the lack of skills in performing the roles of parents are extremely popular subjects in contemporary Japanese cinema. Irresponsible and sometimes even degenerate parents are often the main characters in Sono’s films. Tetsuzō from *Noriko's Dinner Table* is undergoing a transformation, giving up his work in the editorial office and devoting all the time to investigating his daughters’ disappearance, finding them and turning to violence or even homicide (in self-defence) in order to get them back. A character in *Cold Fish (Tsumetai nettaigyō, 2010)* undergoes a different but finally also destructive transformation, given the surroundings. He is being brutally woken up from the sluggishness and boredom of daily existence. The violence becomes a means to his healing. Shamoto (Fukikoshi Mitsuru) is running a small shop selling aquarium fish. There is no intimacy between him and his wife Taeko (Kagurazaka Megumi), his daughter Mitsuko (Kajiwara Hikari) despises him, family meals consist of ready-made or instant dishes only. The main character seems to be a loser, particularly after contrasting him with Yukio Murata (Denden), the owner of a huge, modern pet shop with rare specimens of tropical fish, whose sense of humour and red Ferrari helps him to win the warm attention of Shamoto’s daughter and wife. The father, who is losing

² It is worth noting that Sono Shion, just as Noriko did, left his hometown Toyokawa and headed for Tokyo at the age of 17.

control over his own life, gets to know a new business partner and at the same time a serial killer³, who helps him discover his tendency towards brutal violence. In the dynamic ending of the film the main character beats his daughter to unconsciousness, rapes his wife, murders Murata and his wife, in the end he also kills Taeko and commits suicide, leaving Mitsuko alive. Shamoto saves the daughter in a very twisted and sophisticated way: from Murata's corrupting influence, as she used to work for him, and also frees her from the misfortune of living in an unloving family.

Shamoto's violence towards the daughter was a one-time act caused by an outburst of rage but Yuichi Sumida's father (Sometani Shōta), played by Mitsuishi Ken, in the film *Himizu* (2011) uses violence towards his son on a regular basis. He is a compulsive gambler and this exposes his son to dangerous meetings with the Yakuza's debt collectors. He leaves the boy and his mother, and when he occasionally appears at home, it is only to get some money and vent his anger on the son. The truly degenerate parent is however the rapist and sadist Gōzō from the *Strange Circus*. He embodies the nightmare of the Mitsuko's childhood. His presence poses an even greater threat than the permanent absence of parents that Yuichi is struggling with in *Himizu*.

A serious discussion about the problem of violence in families began relatively recently in Japan as late as the 1990s. Roger Goodman reminds us what Ann Buchanan said about a sinusoidal model in touching on ("discovering") and forgetting about such issues in political and public debates. He states that as in the case of many other countries, it is possible to notice this model also in Japan, however the country is in a way exceptional, since "(...) in the Japanese case there developed in the 1980s a literature which sought to explain why it was that Japan was immune to child abuse and why it was a problem in western societies" (Goodman 2006: 149). When the economic crisis started in the nineties the search for the guilty of the economic downturn began. In the end the criticism fell on the strongest and the highest of the Japanese values – the family. As Iles writes, this almost desperate search for a scapegoat became the obsession of a disappointed and frustrated nation. Parents started being perceived as careless and excessively forgiving, fathers too devoted to their work and disengaged from family life, the educational system did not fulfil its role in vaccinating socially appropriate values. At the same time children and teenagers remained strongly influenced by fashion, television and video

³ The real-life killer, who served as an inspiration for the film character, bred dogs, which he fed with his victims' remains. Sono chose fish instead of dogs, because he "kind of liked the fact that those tropical fish can be surprisingly dangerous in spite of their visual beauty" (Sono 2011).

games as well as the stress associated with entrance exams to schools (Iles 2008: 80). Society also started paying attention to violence in families. This problem became important and widely commented upon. Few authorities that raised these issues earlier in the eighties, gained the attention of the media and society, some non-profit organisations supporting victims were founded together with special helplines, and what is more a special terminology was created on the subject and statistics were being published (Goodman 2006: 150-151).

When the heavy swell of fear of the violence in families slowly passed, the problem of child abuse returned to the political agenda and to the front pages of newspapers in 2004 because of the so-called Kishiwada Child Abuse Incident (*Kishiwada Jidō Gyakutai Jiken*). Throughout February and March the story of a fifteen-year-old boy was the main subject in the Japanese media. He was almost starved to death by his father and his cohabitee. The boy, weighing only 24 kilograms, fell into a coma after eighteen months of exhausting, compulsory fasting. The details of the incident and socio-legal circumstances shocked public opinion. Based on the existing regulations as well as customs – at that time alleged – abuse of the boy could not have been prevented by teachers nor social welfare, nor by the biological mother, not even by the police. At the same time the family, the neighbours and the local community lacked the determination to prevent the violence they knew about (ibid.: 147-148). Roger Goodman highlights that the reason why the Kishiwada Child Abuse Incident remained a hot topic for so long and did not become just short-term hype, was its convergence at the time in enforcing two laws: The Child Abuse Prevention Law (*Jidō Gyakutai Bōshihō*) and the Child Welfare Law (*Jidō Fukushihō*) (ibid.: 149). And so the debate on the problem of child abuse that began in the 1990s was moved to the next century. In a economically difficult period of budget cuts between 2000 and 2004 the budget for the fight against violence towards children was increased over thirty-five times, from about 470 million yen up to 16.6 billion yen (ibid.: 151).

In 2005 Sono Shion produced two films touching on the subject of the crisis of family values and child abuse – the *Strange Circus* and *Noriko's Dinner Table*. Although the main character of the first one, Mitsuko, is lacking nothing at first glance, her family house is hiding a dark secret, which leaves marks on her psyche. The impressive villa, in which Gōzō is subjecting his wife and daughter to psychological and physical torture, is a place from which the girl either cannot or does not want to escape, which was probably also the case for the teenager from Kishiwada. In his social-critical flair Sono seems to say that the problem of violence in families also

concerns Japan in its entirety and can take the shape of real horror, which can only be grasped and accepted when represented in a grotesque way in a fictional world.

Noriko and Yoko from *Noriko's Dinner Table* were not battered by parents. The director is describing subtler problems such as trouble with communication between family members or the lack of intergenerational dialogue. These topics appeared in classic works of the Japanese cinema, often becoming the main focus of the films. In *Tokyo Story* (*Tōkyō monogatari*, 1953) Ozu Yasujirō pictures an elderly married couple that cannot count on the interest of their children, who are busy with careers and with accumulating wealth. Also Kurosawa Akira brings up the problem of lack of understanding between parents and the offspring in *Ikiru* (1952), in which a lonely father (Shimura Takashi) is struggling with workaholicism, a fatal illness and disrespect of his son and wife. Although the main character could be accused of insensibility, absence and not being a good father in general, Kurosawa allows his redemption after all by his taking up an impressive fight against bureaucracy in the community and also highlights the dedication he shows for his son. The negligence of the main character should be perceived as the result of the industrialisation and urbanisation of the country that are at least partly guilty for the lack of social cohesion, as well as for creating certain tensions in the family sphere. The father, working all the time for his son, is not devoting due attention to him because of work. “Urbanisation here, as in Ozu’s *Tokyo monogatari*, is a detriment to the family and a source of decay in the social fabric” (Iles 2008: 84). The main characters in Kurosawa's film are admittedly not as one-dimensional as they in Ozu's work, however, even from *Ikiru* it is possible to read quite a clear message that the traditional values – understood here as community, family bonds, rural life – are being driven out by the egoism of the younger generation and the rush towards economic gains. The father, even if a little bit lost, is an anchor of these values, and the son is their opponent. Timothy Iles writes:

“And yet despite the acknowledgement in *Ikiru* of Watanabe’s distance from his son as a (partial) result of his having buried himself in his work, ultimately the discourse of social decline in *Ikiru* and *Tokyo Monogatari* places responsibility clearly at the feet of the younger generation, the children who (...) neglect or (willfully) misunderstand their parents. For both Ozu and Kurosawa, the parents represent a warmth of personal relations,

dedication, drive, and an obligation to their fellow countrymen which their children either do not or can not feel.” (ibid.)

Iles further notices that contemporary cinema in the Land of the Rising Sun has the opposite tendency, where parents are carrying the prevailing responsibility for the disappearance of healthy relations and family bonds, “they are no longer a paragon or source of moral education but are instead absent, incompetent, over-indulgent or completely unknown” (ibid.: 86). It is also true for the characters from Sono Shion's films, particularly mothers who are traditionally required to be caring and protective. In the works of the director they are demonstrating indolence or are absolutely passive. Sayuri from the *Strange Circus* demonstrates a fatal passivity towards her daughter. Although emotions displayed towards Mitsuko are visible, the lack of firmness and her egoism do not let her intervene on the harassment of the girl by Gōzō. Mitsuko is not able to take revenge on her father, so she decides to change sex. As soon as she becomes a man and has got a chance of active opposition, it is already too late. Eventually the main characters of the *Strange Circus* make attempts to deal with the cruel reality surrounding them, as Sayuri's escape from her own identity and acceptance of her daughter's personality should be treated as signs of those efforts.

Noriko's and Yoko's mother from *Noriko's Dinner Table* does not have the courage to escape. Although in the portrait she has painted her husband resembles Chairman Mao, the woman has nothing to say at home, not because of the husband's domineering personality but due to her own mediocrity and incompetence. The director admittedly does not devote too much attention to this character, however, when Taeko is on-screen she is silent and she not capable of expressing her own opinion, no reaction at all true for her relation with the husband, as well as with her daughters. When Noriko introduces her family, she does not devote more than a few words to her mother. The only statement about the mother is the girl mentioning that she has one. Except for Taeko each of the members of Shimbara family had one chapter of the movie devoted just to them – entitled “Noriko”, “Yōko” and “Tetsuzō”. After Yōko's escape it seems that the mother of the teenagers will play a certain role in the family drama as the father, consumed with the mission of finding his daughters, is deciding to take advantage of her help. However, the main character of this part of the film is a man – according to the title of chapter, Tetsuzō is the only one who takes an active participation in the private investigation. He also gets information, which with time he stops sharing with his wife and keeps only

for himself. The first and last and finally pointless activity of the woman was to commit suicide.

The helplessness of mothers in Sono Shion's films turns many times into aggression directed towards children. The initial astonishment of Sayuri in *Strange Circus*, evolves into jealousy and then the next form of violence towards Mitsuko, who is pushed down the stairs by her mother and this incident is somehow erased from her memory. The increase in the number of cases of child abuse in the 1990s is being justified by the lack of commitment to parenthood and as already mentioned – mainly mothers are responsible for child care. Women constituted 60% of the parents guilty of violence and abuse towards children and 90% were the biological mothers of victims (Goodman 2006: 150). This phenomenon also finds a certain reflection in Sono's work. The director puts the degenerate Gōzō against the row of mothers neglecting or even hating their children. One of them is the main character of the horror film *Exte: Hair Extensions* (*Ekusute*, 2007) – Kiyomi Mizushima (Tsugumi), who frankly just cannot stand her daughter, Mami. The aunt, Yūko Mizushima (Kuriyama Chiaki), is acting as the girl's mother. The girl finds shelter at the protective woman and her roommate's place, however she is scared of the aggressive Kiyomi who is coming to her sister's place in search for money, vandalising the flat and intimidating the daughter. Although she is still threatened by the biological mother, she is given protection and shelter by the aunt.

Mothers in Sono's films are unimportant or completely absent in the life of their children. This is the case in particular regarding the three young main characters of *Love Exposure* (*Ai no mukidashi*, 2008). The mother of Yū, an ardent practicing Catholic, dies when her boy is still a child. She manages, however, to equip him with certain values, and even manages to send him on a specific mission to find a wife resembling the Mother of God. In this way the director grants Yū's mother the strongest influence on the child's psychology among all of the characters of mothers in the film. As we know absolutely nothing about Aya's mothers (a high-level sect member, who wants to recruit Yū to Church Zero) and Yōko (stepsister of the main character, in whom he then finds an incarnation of the Mother of God). The degenerate fathers of the girls that recall their terrible childhood stay in the centre of their and the camera's attention.

The most literal and horrifying example of the lack of a mother concerns Kumiko from *Noriko's Dinner Table*. The girl was found as a baby in locker 54 in the train station. Kumiko, who was left by her parents, considers herself to be a child born to a metal box which becomes a mother to her and at the same time, a family house and her name – Ueno Station

54. The main character invents and collects her “memories” in the same locker and creates stories of objects left and found in the train station. The organisation established by Kumiko replaces the real family not only to the customers paying for her services, but also to herself. Forgetting blood ties as the single condition and guarantee of understanding, help and care is visible even in *Tokyo Story*, produced more than sixty years ago. After all, it is the daughter-in-law, a widow of a soldier killed during the war, who turns out to be the only representative of the younger generation that understands the needs of in-laws, respects them and devotes enough time and attention to them. Commenting on this element of Ozu’s work, Timothy Iles writes:

“Human compassion and social obligation therefore, while still possible, no longer rest upon the undeniable foundations of kinship and the family but now assume the individual as their basis in a construction which the viewer cannot help but feel is remarkably weaker than that which it is poised to replace.” (Iles 2008: 82)

Sono Shion is observing his main characters attempting to replace dysfunctional families with other institutions and communities, many times more destructive for their identity as the environments from which they were escaping. He develops this motif successfully in his movie *Love Exposure*, where a sect called Church Zero, funded with money from drug trafficking and fake artwork, uses the crisis of faith and other weaknesses of the main characters in order to recruit them into their community. The director also criticises Catholicism which he does not see as opposition of the sect. Sono emphasises the value of interpersonal relations and mutual understanding in creating a happy family and society, diminishing the value of spirituality and showing the danger carried by religious fanaticism. In *Himizu*, the atmosphere of catastrophe associated with natural disaster changes thanks to a flicker of hope, which the community turns out to be. Yuichi, left by both parents, is not completely lonely. The boy lets earthquake victims, whose houses and belongings were destroyed, settle in the area of the boats rental company run by himself. They are populating a patch of land filled with tents. They are grateful and kind to him and he knows that he can count on them any time. However, he does not want any help.

In contrast to Yuichi Sumida, the main characters of *Guilty of Romance* (*Koi no tsumi*, 2011) and *Noriko’s Dinner Table* desperately want and seek

help. Both Mitsuko (Togashi Makoto), the university academic teacher harassed in childhood by her father, as well as Izumi (Kagurazaka Megumi), a housewife frightened by her husband and discovering her attractiveness, searching for understanding and the closeness of another person, are reaching the very bottom of human existence. Search for happiness, unattainable for them, like Kafka's castle, led the main characters to corruption because they betrayed not only their bodies but also their souls. Particularly naive is Izumi, suffering a defeat in the film, falling into a trap of a grotesque *femme fatale* and finding out the truth about the pitiful substitute of her family – marriage, which so far was devoid of emotion and intimacy.

Noriko and Yuka (or Mitsuko and Yōko) have a desire to create a new family, one that is sensitive to the needs of a unit and free from the arbitrary decisions of parents. However, they end up in a “family”, in which the hierarchy plays a much greater role than before and individualism is being sacrificed for the “greater good”, which is illustrated by the easiness with which fifty-four girls take their own lives at the underground station at Kumiko's order. The organisation created by her is something in the shape of a sect, in which members have the illusion of being able to create a new family. When Tetsuzō is fighting for his life with members of the circle attacking him, Noriko is going back to her childhood (“I drooled and I felt like I wanted to pee”) to the moment, in which she was defenceless and completely dependent on her parents and the entire life and all difficult choices were yet to come. Mistakes made by her and her parents led the family to destruction but Noriko's rebirth gave her hope for a new beginning. Indeed, Tetsuzō, Kumiko (playing his dead wife), Noriko and Yuka make an attempt to form a new family, however, it is already crippled and doomed to die from the wounds, which is symbolised by the youngest family member, Yuka, escaping.

The films, *Be sure to share* (*Chanto tsutaeru*, 2009) and *The Land of hope* (*Kibō no kuni*, 2012) are exceptions in Sono's work, as he usually depicts malfunctioning families. The first of them tells the story of a relationship between a son and his father, living in a quiet Japanese province. Kita Tetsuji (Okuda Eiji), a PE teacher at a local school, is at the same time a father, a teacher and a football coach for Shiro (Akira). The boy finds out about his parent's fatal illness, which causes a change in the relationship between them. In a series of flashbacks we see the difficult co-existence of the characters, lost in attempts to adapt to various roles: son and pupil, father and coach. The mutual agreement, as is usually the case in Sono's movies, comes a bit too late but quickly enough for the character to

understand the importance of confiding in the individual in life and families. Soon after Tetsuji's diagnosis, Shiro finds out that he is suffering from an illness similar to his father's. The main character has just got engaged and struggles with a huge dilemma. Using the metaphor of the carapace of a cicada and the transitoriness of this insect's life, the director conveys that the expression and sharing of problems and emotions with family and friends are crucial in life.

The Land of Hope is a story about a happy family of four. The Onos run the dairy farm and produce organic food far away from the city tumult. The son Yoichi (Murakami Jun) helps them with the household along with his wife Izumi (Kagurazaka Megumi). In spite of the mother's illness (suffering from Alzheimer or something similar) the entire family is filled with happiness, mutual respect and warm feelings. Their life resembles an idyllic country life, which is suddenly shattered by a disaster. The family becomes divided due to reasons beyond their power – the force of the explosion in the area of a nuclear power station. Despite certain elements known from the director's previous works, like the mother being incapable of fulfilling her role, there is a belief in humanity and a particularly strong bond between the four characters pictured in *The Land of Hope*. This is actually without precedence in Sono's filmography – the family constitutes the maximum value, giving meaning to the human life and the characters of the film know it very well. It seems, as Izumi says in the end, that “thanks to love everything becomes possible”. However, at the end of the film Sono's pessimism comes to the fore. In spite of sincere willingness and their devotion, the family cannot be together – the oldest members die, and the youngest and still unborn members of the family are in danger of living in fear and suffer due to the spreading radiation.

Although Sono Shion's works are full of images of families damaged, destroyed, replaced by other institutions and communities, full of rape and cruelty, lacking warmth and support, the Japanese director does not negate the idea of the family. On the contrary, he laments on its current position and according to his artistic *credo*, using the grotesque and hyperbole, he has taken on the mission of repairing the notion of family through his art.

It is necessary, however, to confront the traditional idea of family with the new reality and Sono Shion seems to be doing just this. In *Noriko's Dinner Table* Tetsuzō says that Toyokawa was supposed to be a safe place for his family and was meant to cut them off from the problems of this world. It is worthwhile pointing out that the main characters are frustrated because of this division into safe province and city jungle. They gather courage to protest against putting them into this opposition thanks to technology – the

Internet. Sono left Toyokawa for the first time in the age of seventeen – similarly to Noriko. The father of the director, just like Shiro’s father, was a teacher at a provincial school in Toyokawa. It would be interesting to know just how many images of the family presented in the filmography of this Japanese director have their origin in his real experiences.

Translated by Natalia Przybyło.

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