

***Hideo, it's me Mama!* (1983) by Mako Idemitsu: A Chronicle of a Chronic Outcome of the Housewife**

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Beginning in the 1980s, Tokyo-based Japanese artist Mako Idemitsu produced a series of video art dissecting apart the intricate issues inlaid in the Japanese household. Growing up in the 1940s, Idemitsu witnessed and lived through traditional patriarchal dominance within her family of origin.¹ Such personal experience formed the major source of inspiration for her video works. As the director behind the scenes, Idemitsu gathered her crew of cast and cameraman for the 27-minute video art *Hideo, it's me Mama!* in 1983. It tells the peculiar yet imaginable story of a mother's growing obsession with caring for her adult son, Hideo Marayama, who had found work and left home. Distracting herself from the bleak relationship with her husband, the mother spends the majority of her time-consuming media content showing her son's activities. The failed mediation between the mother's friend and the husband eventually led to her abandoning of her husband to live near Hideo.

Mako Idemitsu's *Hideo, it's me Mama!* provides a poignant critique towards the unfulfilling role of the traditional Japanese housewife through its portrayal of a mother's unhealthy fixation on her adult son, which serves as a metaphor for the housewife's loss of identity and purpose once her domestic labor is no longer valued. By employing techniques such as the uncanny use of the television screen, haptic aesthetics inviting visceral viewer engagement, and depictions of mundane homemaking tasks, Idemitsu's work highlights the psychological toll of patriarchal societal norms while prompting reflection on improving conditions for housewives.

This essay will first briefly cover the historical backdrop of the development of the role of the housewife

in Japanese society and how Idemitsu constructed a narrative that suitably captured this social phenomenon which was descriptive of real life and relatable to viewers like folklore. In the following, this essay will investigate the unique choice of TV as subject matter, which further assists Idemitsu in fostering the universality in her storytelling. Additionally, this essay shall draw upon Sigmund Freud's concept of the *Unheimliche* and haptic aesthetics in discussing the creation of a sense of "unfamiliar familiarity" and the potential for a corporeal reading of the video art piece.

As a staple in her video art, Idemitsu continues the usage of the TV monitor in *Hideo, it's me Mama!* The blocky TV occupies the center of the frame, alternating between daily scenes of the mother's son, Hideo, such as his morning routine, exercise, and meal consumption in his own apartment. The jarring and nonnegligible presence of the TV prevents the audience from fully immersing in the drama, reminding them that they are spectators watching a story unfold from a third person's view.

The footage of Hideo shown on the TV monitor could have the following two metaphorical meanings. The first type of scene, shown on the TV screen most of the time, is her son complying with her requests and orders. For instance, the son coincidentally eats the same food served by the mother, who moves around the table in front of the TV and smiles towards the TV screen. The grateful reactions from the son match the mother's expectations, and they appear when the mother deliberately turns on the TV or inserts her chosen DVD tape. I hypothesize that such scenes are of the mother's

¹ Kara Kelley Hallmark, *Encyclopedia of Asian American Artists* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007), 81.

imagination, idealizing how Hideo should still behave accordingly like the obedient and dependent child he once was. The second type of scene is the pixelated TV, which rarely appears in this video artwork. In a particular scene, the mother self-decidedly serves Hideo's former favorite pork shabu shabu dish with chopsticks in front of the TV without any active request. She then encounters trouble turning on the TV to meet her son initially as the screen flickers severely. It later resumes normal, but Hideo is shown eating a Western fried port cutlet with a knife and fork instead. Here, the TV noise possibly indicates the son's updated preferences as an adult, while the difference in food consumed shows how the mother remains entrenched in the past and her idealized monodrama without actually knowing her son now.

Concerning Idemitsu's choice of using the TV as the central prop, it further suggests the story's pervasiveness in society. A 1984 survey conducted by the Economic Planning Agency of Japan found that color television sets are owned by 99.2% of Japanese households.² This finding confirms that the television was an easily found household electronic in domestic environments at the time of creation.³ In terms of the narrative, Idemitsu does not create the housewife as a main character rebelling and breaking free from the oppression of domestic labor and an unhappy marriage. Instead, she constructs the housewife as someone who remains trapped in the household and encounters psychological suffering.

Making use of the complete storyline and the TV monitor to exhibit the mother's inner world, Mako Idemitsu's *Hideo, it's me Mama!* addresses the housewife midlife crisis in the 1980s from a sociological perspective.⁴ Japanese sociologist Ueno Chizuko's examination of

Japanese households reveals that when housewives remain in the same stifling situation of demanding domestic labor, their relationship with their husbands becomes increasingly estranged.⁵ Meanwhile, their children, on whom these housewives' identities are based, begin to grow up and become independent. With the children gone from the household one day, the housewives are stuck with their barren relationships with their husbands.⁶

The increasing fragility and instability of the union partnership also reflects the concept of liquid modernity raised by the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, referring to the constant shifting and evolving of social structures like family, work, and relationships.⁷ Detangled from the notion of permanent love and subsequently disrupting its equilibrium, modern marriage can easily transpire from a bonding of love to imprisonment of discontent.⁸ In the video art, Hideo's mother is in a comparable predicament. There is not one word or gesture of acknowledgment and affirmation from the husband but deafening silence during breakfast, the atmosphere only to be lightened by the DVD tape with Hideo in. The diffusion of disappointment in the husband's minimum reaction is epitomized in the mother's line "Mama lives for you only Hideo dear, only for you" (Fig. 1). It discloses the mother's anxiety about losing her child. She intently focuses on her son for substitute gratification as an escape from her disappointment and misery surrounding her communicatively unresponsive husband, with her eventual decision to opt out of her commitment as the virtuous, caring model housewife by exiting her home.⁹

On the one hand, the mother's desire and over-intervention towards Hideo serves as an avoidant coping mechanism for her to escape dissatisfaction in her

2 "TV Ownership in Japan," *The New York Times Archived Print*, May 24, 1984, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/05/24/business/tv-ownership-in-japan.html>.

3 "TV Ownership in Japan."

4 Ueno Chizuko, "Wives at 'Midlife Crisis' Stage," in *The Modern Family in Japan: Its Rise and Fall* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2009), 191.

5 Chizuko, "Wives at 'Midlife Crisis' Stage," 191.

6 Chizuko, 191.

7 Aleksandra Jasińska-Kania and Katarzyna Bartoszyńska, "The Fluidity of Love and Hate: Zygmunt Bauman on Death, Love, and Hatred," *Revue internationale de philosophie* n° 277, no. 3 (2016): 329.

8 Jasińska-Kania and Bartoszyńska, "The Fluidity of Love and Hate," 334.

9 Annabell Halfmann and Leonard Reinecke, "Binge-Watching as Case of Escapist Entertainment Use," in *The Oxford Handbook of Entertainment Theory*, ed. Peter Vorderer and Christoph Klimmt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 192–194.

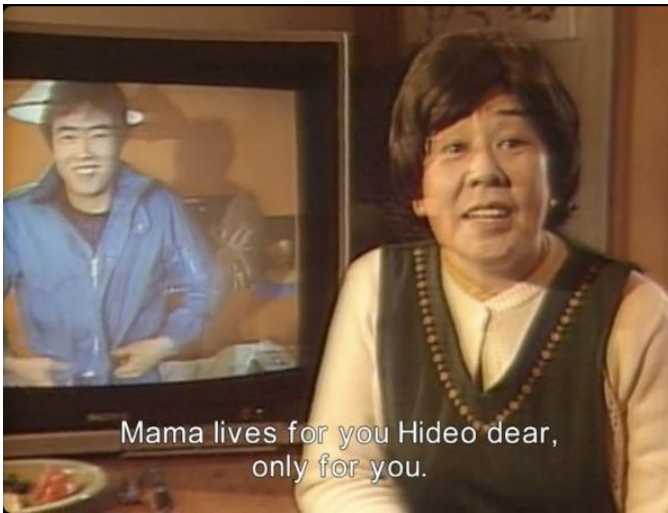


Figure 1

Mako Idemitsu, *Hideo, it's me Mama!*, 1983. Single-channel digital video (colour, sound), 26:49. M+, Hong Kong. © Mako Idemitsu/EAI.

marriage. On the other hand, the blockage of mental separation between herself and her son could also be problematic.¹⁰ Following psychoanalysis, Julia Kristeva argues, “for man and woman, the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous.”¹¹ For a person to become a subject with sustainable physiological and psychological operations, it requires matricidal separation, which refers to separating oneself from the closest relationship with his/her mother and her body. Matricide is essential as the mother-child dyad needs to be broken up and to introduce the child into language and social life. The mother’s overt affection towards Hideo and the continual insistence on him still being a child could be a sign of her refusal to come to terms with her emotionally unfulfilling marriage, as the matricide would force her to contemplate her value and existence outside the role as a housewife. Moreover, her active prevention of independence is detrimental to Hideo’s character development and socialization as a grown man. Once again, Idemitsu’s plot can be critical of the side effects of the child-attached housewife trickling down as hindrances to children’s development and independence.

Just like the vast number of colored television

owners, there could be numerous housewives stuck at home with a colored television, enduring a similar tragedy just like Hideo’s mother. As distinguished by folklorist Andrew Dundes, folklores are “autobiographical ethnographies as people’s own description of themselves,” used to bring the repressed areas of special concern into the open for discussion.¹² Utilizing her acute observation and conclusions from growing up in a traditional family as a Japanese woman, Idemitsu joins the shared prevalence of televisions, housewives in strained marital relationships, and their self-worth mainly originating from children in her video art. Her approach declares the capability of *Hideo, it's me Mama!* as modern folklore that could appear in households, warning viewers both didactically and viscerally of the unaware destruction, and the failure in tragedy prevention of current normative practices and evaluations of the role of housewife.

Idemitsu’s *Hideo, it's me Mama!* reflects the real-life experience of instability and uncertainty relating to home and domesticity, originating from the concept of *das Unheimliche* (the unhomely). Referring to Sigmund Freud, *Heimlich* indicates something belonging to the house, which is intimate and friendly, falling in line with the conventional understanding and expectation of home and family.¹³ The added prefix extends it to *Unheimlich*, indicating what is typically concealed and kept from sight of the home is unwrapped and showing the potentially strange and disturbing dimensions of the home. In *Hideo, it's me Mama!*, what place in front of the viewers are the interiors of an apartment, the furniture for the kitchen and dining room, and the family members of husband and wife. These elements combine to signify a standard, homely household supposedly recognizable in daily life. Yet, throughout the video, the fixated position and consistent use of the TV screen for monitoring, alongside the contrast between the silent background, and the husband’s ignorance with the mother’s exasperated monologue expressing her missing her son, exude a sense of eeriness and discomfort. Hélène Cixous reads *das Unheimliche* as “in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only

12 Simon J. Bronner, “Folklore as a Mirror of Culture,” in *Meaning of Folklore: The Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (University Press of Colorado, 2007), 53.

13 Hélène Cixous, “Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud’s *Das Unheimliche* (The ‘Uncanny’),” *New Literary History* 7, no. 3 (1976): 621.

through the process of repression.”¹⁴ Idemitsu’s portrayal of the household relates to the double-sidedness of the unhomey, as the depicted home is never purely familiar. The comfortable lid of the ordinary home, covering the family’s internal psychological turbulence bubbling underneath is lifted and brought forth as the video progresses. As observed in her behavior, the mother gradually becomes more obsessive when she frantically dials and grabs the phone with a wide-eyed expression to get a grasp of her son’s latest news (Fig. 2). Viewers are left witnessing the normally concealed scene of the turmoil’s boiling point with the mother eerily determined, ditching her husband and leaving the home to live with and take care of her grown-up son.

Although *Hideo, it’s me Mama!* is indeed a video art displayed through screening, the artwork’s meaning is not confined to its mere visual components. Instead, it is plausible to move beyond formal analysis and take the embodied dimension of the viewing experience, known as haptic aesthetics, into consideration. According to art historian Jennifer Fisher, haptic perception can explain the aspects involved in sensing a space, such as temperature, presence, pressures, and resonances.¹⁵ In particular, distal haptics can perceive objects and the surrounding environment distant from the body and the skin’s surfaces, without the requirement for actual touch from viewers.¹⁶ Although viewers are unable to access the original film set and it is impossible to touch the TV monitor during the display of this piece, they are still able to partake in the co-production of the interpretation of this artwork by utilizing their distal haptic senses in the following ways. Framed and seen only within the TV monitor, the son is never physically present with the mother. Viewers see the mother’s hand pressed onto the slippery glass TV screen, grasping for her beloved yet absent son (Fig. 3), with the TV screen radiating heat due to long-term use. The audience may have visceral engagement through observation, corporeally feeling the mother’s eagerness to rekindle the experience of spending time with her son by absorbing the warmth from the TV. Moreover, hearing alone the mother’s increasingly loud, fast-paced, and high-pitched side phone calls, viewers may step into the shoes of the son listening on the other end



Figure 2

Mako Idemitsu, *Hideo, it’s me Mama!*, 1983. Single-channel digital video (colour, sound), 26:49. M+, Hong Kong. © Mako Idemitsu/EAI.



Figure 3

Mako Idemitsu, *Hideo, it’s me Mama!*, 1983. Single-channel digital video (colour, sound), 26:49. M+, Hong Kong. © Mako Idemitsu/EAI.

and feeling anxious and overwhelmed due to the enthusiasm. Such dynamic engagement based on the circulation of corporeal sensations and effects, therefore, adds another profound visceral layer to the manifestation of the depicted story in real life.

Made forty years ago, Mako Idemitsu’s *Hideo it’s me Mama!* is not a story of one mother or one family. Its universality is comparable to a contemporary folktale to

¹⁴ Cixous, “Fiction and Its Phantoms,” 634.

¹⁵ Jennifer Fisher, “Relational Sense: Towards a Haptic Aesthetics,” *Parachute*, 87 (1997): 5.

¹⁶ Fisher, “Relational Sense,” 6.

this day. Narrative-wise, it serves as a bold critique of the melancholic tragedy of the aged good girl who abided by the altruistic housewife archetype in Japanese society. Living an estranged relationship with her husband and suffering from the underappreciation for her domestic efforts, the mother and housewife under Idemitsu's lens continue to fill in the void with a fixation on the children despite their gradual maturation. This leads to the housewife with an undeveloped sense of self due to the lack of respect of interpersonal boundaries, resulting in a lose-lose situation for both.

Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of the *Unheimliche*, the seemingly familiar fused with the increasing frenzy of the mother's obsessive behavior effectively garners empathetic but unsettling sentiments among the viewers. The employment of distal haptic sense in reviewing the displayed scenes of actions encourages intuitive and visceral perspective change among viewers without the need to engage with the art piece or cast members in close proximity. Nonetheless, the fragmented footage of homemaking has revealed the underappreciation of the housewife's physical, laborious contribution to maintaining the household and their significance in guarding and reconstructing the definition of home. Now lies the big question: what can one do to prevent this from happening, and how can the conditions of the housewife be improved?

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