

Trans Maternal Bodies as Biopolitical Sites: Medicalized Embodiment in *Close-Knit* (2017) and *Midnight Swan* (2020)

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Abstract: Motherhood in Japan has been grounded in biologically female bodies, rendering trans parenting socially ambiguous and institutionally fragile. While existing studies on transgender representation in cinema often focus on identity and visibility, limited attention has been paid to how trans maternal bodies are regulated through biomedical regimes. This study examines trans maternal bodies as biopolitical sites in *Close-Knit* and *Midnight Swan*. Drawing on Foucauldian biopolitics and theories of medicalized embodiment, the analysis employs Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach to situate cinematic representations within Japan's socio-historical norms of gender and caregiving. Methodologically, this study contributes by applying DHA to trans embodiment in Japanese cinema, focusing on hormone therapy, surgical transition, and social surveillance. The findings highlight how discursive strategies of nomination, predication, and argumentation contribute to the differential recognition of trans maternal subjects. The findings also reveal a contrast between biopolitical becoming and conditional maternal embodiment. Nagisa is constructed through bodily suffering produced by medical compliance, where femininity is achieved at the cost of corporeal vulnerability. In contrast, Rinko embodies trans motherhood only after undergoing bodily normalization, yet remains subject to social scrutiny. This study demonstrates that contemporary Japanese cinema frames trans motherhood not as an autonomous caregiving identity, but as an embodied negotiation shaped by biomedical authority, economic precarity, and affective governance.

Keywords: Trans Motherhood, Biopolitics, Medicalized Embodiment, Japanese Cinema, Discourse-Historical Approach

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1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Japanese cinema has increasingly engaged with transgender characters, reflecting broader cultural negotiations of gender diversity [1], [2], and [3]. However, motherhood in Japan remains deeply anchored in biologically female bodies. This construction is historically rooted in gendered expectations of family and care in Japan, where motherhood has been closely associated with domestic responsibility and reproductive roles [4], [5]. Therefore, trans parenting becomes ambiguous and institutionally fragile. While films such as *Close-Knit* [6] and *Midnight Swan* [7] foreground transgender experiences, maternal legitimacy continues to be shaped by heteronormative and biomedical frameworks. Within this context, trans maternal bodies emerge not merely as identities on screen but as embodied sites where medical authority, social norms, and caregiving practices intersect [1].

Existing scholars on Japanese cinema have largely examined transgender representation in terms of identity, visibility, and social marginalization. Studies addressing LGBTQ characters frequently emphasize stigma, affective vulnerability, or processes of social acceptance ([3], [8]). Studies on sexuality in Japan have also shown that non-normative gender identities are often positioned at the margins of social legitimacy, particularly within family

452

structures [9]. Yet, they rarely attend to how trans bodies are materially governed through biomedical practices. At the same time, research on motherhood in Japan continues to center cisgender women within heteronormative family structures, reinforcing the assumption that caregiving is grounded in biologically female embodiment [10], [11], [12], [13]. These parallel strands of scholarship remain largely disconnected, leaving trans motherhood insufficiently theorized.

From a theoretical perspective, the regulation of bodies has been extensively conceptualized through Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics [14]. Foucault foregrounds how power operates through medical, institutional, and social mechanisms to discipline and optimize bodies. Contemporary scholars further extend this framework by examining how life itself becomes the object of governance through biomedical and regulatory practices [15]. Building on this framework, Paul B. Preciado [16] argues that contemporary gender is materially produced through pharmacological technologies, particularly hormone therapy, positioning trans bodies within regimes of biomedical governance. Feminist and queer scholarship, notably Judith Butler's work on gender performativity [17] further demonstrates that gender is sustained through repeated bodily practices rather than by biological essence. This regulation is not only discursive but also administrative, as legal and institutional systems play a crucial role in shaping the conditions under which trans lives become recognizable [18]. While these theoretical contributions illuminate trans embodiment and bodily regulation, they are seldom applied to parenting contexts, particularly in East Asian cinema. This study addresses this gap by analyzing trans maternal bodies as biopolitical sites in *Close-Knit* and *Midnight Swan*. Rather than approaching trans motherhood solely as a matter of identity or representation, the article foregrounds embodiment as a process shaped through hormone therapy, surgical transition, and social surveillance. It asks how trans maternal bodies are discursively constructed as biopolitical sites through medicalization and affective regulation in two contemporary Japanese cinemas.

To answer this question, the analysis combines Foucauldian biopolitics, Paul B. Preciado's theories of medicalized embodiment, and Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA). DHA [19] enables a contextualised reading of filmic discourse by linking textual and visual representations to broader socio-historical processes. This approach is particularly suited to examining how cinematic narratives are embedded within Japan's historically sedimented norms of gender, family, and bodily legitimacy. By situating specific scenes within these wider contexts, DHA enables analysis of how trans maternal bodies are produced through intersecting regimes of medicine, the economy, and social morality.

Methodologically, this article contributes by applying DHA to the study of trans motherhood in Japanese cinema, an approach rarely adopted in existing film scholarship. Substantively, it advances debates on gender and caregiving by demonstrating that trans motherhood is not represented as an autonomous maternal identity but as an embodied negotiation conditioned by biomedical authority and social regulation. Through a close analysis of scenes depicting hormone treatment, surgical intervention, bodily vulnerability, and institutional scrutiny, the study reveals contrasting forms of embodiment: Nagisa's biopolitical becoming through corporeal suffering in *Midnight Swan*, and Rinko's conditional maternal embodiment in *Close-Knit*, where parenting becomes possible only after bodily normalization.

By focusing on trans maternal bodies rather than identity alone, this article reframes trans motherhood as a biopolitical process shaped by medical compliance, economic precarity, and affective governance. In doing so, it extends existing scholarship on Japanese cinema and transgender representation, offering new insights into how contemporary film constructs caregiving through regulated bodies.

2. METHOD

This study employs the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) developed by Ruth Wodak to analyze the trans maternal bodies as a biopolitical site in two Japanese films, *Close-Knit* (2017) and *Midnight Swan* (2020). The DHA was selected to examine the dialectical relationship between discursive strategies within the filmic texts and the socio-historical contexts that shape and constrain such representations. This approach emphasizes that discourse is not an isolated entity but is inherently linked to history, power relations, and broader social structures. In this study, trans-motherhood is represented not as an autonomous maternal identity, but as a negotiation embodied within the physical self, shaped by biomedical authority and social regulation.

The research corpus consists of two Japanese films: Naoko Oigami's *Close-Knit* (2017) and Eiji Uchida's *Midnight Swan* (2020). These films were selected for their portrayal of transexual female protagonists who assume maternal roles and engage in caregiving. Furthermore, both films were produced within a similar

timeframe (2017 and 2020) and have received positive critical acclaim at various national and international film festivals.

2.1. Data Collection Technique

The primary data analyzed in this article consist of visual scenes and dialogues relevant to the trans maternal bodily experience and the power dynamics surrounding trans motherhood. The units of analysis were selected purposively based on their relevance to the research question: how the trans-maternal bodies are discursively constructed as a biopolitical site through medicalization and affective regulation in contemporary Japanese cinema.

Data were collected through the following steps:

1. Repetitive and intensive viewing to comprehend the narrative structure and situational context;
2. Transcribing dialogues related to trans-maternal embodiment and power relations;
3. Documenting visual data through screenshots of significant scenes;
4. Logging recurrent visual and narrative motifs concerning the body and the power structures surrounding trans mothers.

Secondary data were sourced from academic literature relevant to trans-bodily experiences, biopolitics, gender, family, and film studies. This literature provides the conceptual framework and socio-historical context necessary to analyze the trans maternal bodies as a site of biopolitics.

To ensure methodological transparency, the selection of scenes was guided by three primary criteria. First, scenes that explicitly depict caregiving practices, including emotional support, domestic labor, and interactions between the trans maternal figure and the child. Second, scenes that illustrate processes of medicalization, such as hormone therapy, surgical intervention, or bodily transformation. Third, scenes that reflect social regulation and surveillance, including interactions with institutions, neighbors, or broader societal responses.

In addition, the analytical procedure followed a systematic sequence. After identifying relevant scenes, dialogues were transcribed, and visual elements were documented. These data were then categorized according to discursive strategies within the Discourse-Historical Approach, namely nomination, predication, and argumentation. Each category was subsequently interpreted in relation to biopolitical frameworks to examine how trans maternal bodies are constructed through medical, social, and affective regulation.

2.2. Data Analysis Technique

The data analysis in this study is conducted through several systematic stages:

Stage 1: Identification of Themes and Patterns of Representation

The initial stage involves identifying primary themes and recurring patterns of representation within the selected scenes. The researcher traces patterns related to the trans maternal bodies and the realization of power dynamics encompassing the trans-maternal figure.

Stage 2: Analysis of Discursive Strategies (DHA)

The selected scenes are analyzed using the discursive strategies of Wodak's DHA, focusing on three primary strategies: nomination, predication, and argumentation (topoi). Nomination strategies examine how the maternal figure is named or categorized; in the context of both films, terms such as '*okaasan*' (おかあさん) and '*mama*' (ママ) serve as markers of motherhood. Predication strategies identify the attributes or qualities attached to these figures, such as being "nurturing," "responsible," "neglectful," or "deviant." Argumentation strategies are analyzed through topoi—conclusion rules or argumentative schemes used to justify or challenge maternal legitimacy. Identified topoi include the biological topos (emphasizing birth mothers as "true" mothers), the domestic sacrifice topos (valuing motherhood through labor and self-sacrifice), and the family stability topos (emphasizing the biological family unit as essential to a child's stability). These strategies are identified through dialogue analysis, visual expressions, the arrangement of domestic space, and narrative resolution.

Stage 3: Socio-Historical Contextualization

The third stage involves socio-historical contextualization. In this stage, the identified discursive strategies are linked to broader social and historical contexts. Representations of trans maternal bodies as biopolitical sites in these two films are situated within historical discourses. In addition, this study follows established approaches in critical discourse analysis that emphasize the relationship between discourse, power, and socio-historical context [20].

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section analyzes the selected scenes through three discursive strategies: nomination, predication, and argumentation (topoi).

3.1. Medicalized Becoming: Nagisa’s Biopolitical Body in *Midnight Swan*



Figure 1. Nagisa receiving a hormone injection at a clinic (*Midnight Swan*, 00:07:58)



Figure 2. Nagisa is crying as she expresses feeling trapped in the wrong body (*Midnight Swan*, 00:36:40)



Figure 3. Nagisa is undergoing gender affirmation surgery in Thailand (*Midnight Swan*, 1:30:34)



Figure 4. Nagisa experienced postoperative bleeding after undergoing gender affirmation surgery (*Midnight Swan*, 1:42:05)

Nagisa’s body is constructed not merely as a site of gender identity but as a field of biopolitical regulation. Through a predication strategy, the film repeatedly attributes vulnerability, instability, and corporeal suffering to her body, framing femininity not as an inherent essence but as something achieved through medical compliance and endurance.

This construction aligns with Michel Foucault’s argument of biopolitics, in which bodies are disciplined and optimized through institutional and medical mechanisms, thereby demonstrating that Nagisa’s femininity is produced through regulatory power rather than an inherent identity.

A significant scene depicts Nagisa preparing for hormone treatment (Figure 1), followed by moments of physical pain and emotional distress (Figure 2). Emotional experiences such as attachment, suffering, and desire are not merely personal but circulate within broader affective economies that shape how bodies are valued and recognized [21]. These scenes not only represent bodily transformation but also construct her subjectivity through suffering. Through predication, Nagisa is discursively positioned as fragile and incomplete, reinforcing the idea that her femininity remains in a process of becoming rather than being. This resonates with Paul B. Preciado’s argument [16], who argues that hormones function as pharmacopolitical technologies that materially

produce gender, suggesting that Nagisa's body is not only transformed but also governed through biomedical regimes.

In addition, the film mobilizes a topos of biology, in which legitimate womanhood—and by extension motherhood—is implicitly tied to bodily transformation and reproductive conformity. This becomes evident when Nagisa decides to undergo gender affirmation surgery (Figure 3). In this sense, bodily transformation can be understood as a form of self-regulation within normative frameworks that privilege coherence and stability of gendered embodiment [22]. Her statement that she can now become a mother after surgery reflects a discursive logic that equates maternal legitimacy with medically sanctioned bodily normalization. Here, the narrative constructs a causal argument: if the body is surgically aligned with normative femininity, then maternal recognition becomes possible. This reasoning exemplifies a topos of biological legitimacy, which excludes trans bodies that do not conform to such criteria.

At the same time, the film also invokes a topos of suffering, when endurance of pain becomes a moral condition for recognition. The postoperative bleeding depicted in Figure 4 reinforces this logic, framing bodily sacrifice as the cost of gender legitimacy. Through this lens, Nagisa's transition is not represented as liberation, but as a disciplinary process that demands compliance with biomedical norms.

From a nomination strategy, however, Nagisa is not consistently positioned as a mother within the narrative. Despite her caregiving relationship with Ichika, she is not fully addressed or recognized through maternal terms. This absence of stable nomination reflects her precarious maternal status. The lack of linguistic anchoring (e.g., *okaasan* or *mama*) signals that her maternal identity remains discursively unstable and socially unrecognized.

These discursive strategies must be understood within a broader socio-historical context. From a Discourse-Historical Approach perspective developed by Ruth Wodak, Nagisa's body is situated within Japan's regulatory framework that links womanhood to biological and legal criteria.

This suggests that Nagisa is required to undergo a sex reassignment surgery to stabilize her body as a woman. Regarding sex reassignment surgery, individuals in Japan may legally undergo the procedure as long as they meet specific criteria. First, the individual must receive a formal diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) from a psychiatrist. Second, additional legal requirements stipulate that the applicant must be at least 20 years old, unmarried, and have no children under the age of 20. Furthermore, they must lack functional gonads (reproductive glands, namely ovaries in females and testes in males) or possess permanently dysfunctional gonads, and their physical genital appearance must closely resemble that of the preferred gender [23]. Nevertheless, these regulations concerning sex reassignment surgery or mandatory sterilization for transgender individuals have faced significant criticism from human rights and LGBTQ activists in Japan, as they fail to provide alternatives for individuals who do not wish to undergo surgical intervention. Previous studies have also highlighted how Japan's legal framework imposes strict conditions on gender recognition, reinforcing the alignment between bodily conformity and legal identity [24].

The requirement of surgical intervention for legal gender recognition reinforces the topos of biological legitimacy, where bodily conformity becomes a prerequisite for social recognition. Thus, Nagisa's decision to undergo surgery abroad reflects not only personal desire but also structural constraints shaped by law, medicine, and economic precarity. Ultimately, Nagisa's embodiment exemplifies what can be understood as biopolitical becoming. Through the interplay of predication (vulnerability and incompleteness), nomination (absence of stable maternal labeling), and topoi (biology and suffering), the film constructs her body as a site of negotiation between selfhood and regulation. Her maternal potential is deferred, conditioned by the requirement that her body must first be disciplined, normalized, and legitimized within biomedical and socio-legal frameworks. This also indicates that trans motherhood is not simply denied, but deferred through a regulatory logic that prioritizes bodily conformity over caregiving capacity.

3.2. Conditional Care: Normalized Trans Parenting in *Close-Knit*

While Nagisa represents biopolitical regulation through medicalization, Rinko illustrates a different configuration through normalization and affective integration.



Figure 5. Rinko is asking Tomo's favourite food (Close-Knit, 33:40)



Figure 6. Rinko is comforting Tomo, who had a bad dream (Close-Knit, 35:46)



Figure 7. Rinko explains to Tomo about her breast (Close-Knit, 17:22)



Figure 8. Naomi and Kai are observing Rinko from a distance (Close-Knit, 51:54)

If Nagisa represents biopolitical becoming through medical vulnerability, Rinko embodies a different configuration of trans maternal subjectivity—one that becomes socially legible through normalization. In *Close-Knit*, Rinko is introduced primarily through everyday caregiving practices rather than medical struggle. Through a nomination strategy, however, Rinko is not consistently addressed using explicit maternal terms such as *mama* or *okaasan*. This absence of stable maternal labeling is significant, as it reflects the precarious status of her maternal identity. These attachments may also reflect what Berlant [25] conceptualizes as “cruel optimism,” where individuals remain invested in forms of belonging that are structurally difficult to sustain.

Rather than being fully recognized through language, her position as a mother remains implicit and contingent. In this sense, the lack of nomination functions as a discursive marker of partial inclusion: while Rinko performs caregiving roles associated with motherhood, she is not fully anchored within the linguistic category of “mother.” This instability suggests that maternal legitimacy is not automatically granted, but must be negotiated through other discursive means, particularly through affective labor and normative femininity.

Even though Rinko is not addressed as a mother, the film shows a predication strategy that attributes traditional motherhood qualities such as care, patience, emotional warmth, and domestic competence. Scenes depict her preparing meals, knitting, and comforting Tomo (Figures 5 and 6). The film constructs her as a nurturing and morally responsible figure. These attributes align closely with culturally dominant ideals of motherhood in Japan, where caregiving and emotional labor are central to maternal legitimacy. Through this discursive construction, Rinko is not merely accepted as a mother; she is framed as a *good* mother.

However, this acceptance is not unconditional. The film mobilizes a topos of domestic sacrifice, in which caregiving labor and selflessness function as the primary criteria for maternal recognition. Rinko's legitimacy is thus grounded not in biological reproduction, but in her ability to embody normative maternal practices. At the same time, a topos of family stability operates implicitly, suggesting that the child's well-being depends on a stable and morally ordered family environment. Rinko's presence is tolerated insofar as she contributes to this stability, rather than disrupting it.

A key scene in which Rinko explains her body to Tomo further illustrates this dynamic (see Figure 7). While the interaction is framed as intimate and pedagogical, it also reveals the necessity of justification. Rinko must narrate and rationalize her embodiment to sustain recognition. This reflects a broader discursive logic in

which trans motherhood requires continuous validation. Through this process, her identity is rendered intelligible only within the boundaries of normative femininity.

From a theoretical perspective, this configuration can be understood through the notion of biopolitics proposed by Michel Foucault [14], where power operates not only through discipline but also through normalization, thereby explaining how Rinko's maternal legitimacy is produced through conformity rather than resistance. Unlike Nagisa, whose body is visibly subjected to medical regulation, Rinko represents a subject who has already passed through institutional thresholds and now embodies a regulated form of femininity. Her body appears stable, yet this stability is the product of prior compliance with biomedical and social norms.

Nevertheless, surveillance remains present. In scenes where neighbors observe Rinko from a distance (Figure 8), the film subtly invokes a topos of social conformity, in which deviation from normative gender roles invites scrutiny. These moments suggest that her acceptance is fragile and contingent upon her continued performance of idealized motherhood. Through predication, she must consistently appear gentle, patient, and morally upright; any deviation risks destabilizing her recognition.

From the perspective of the Discourse-Historical Approach developed by Ruth Wodak, these representations are embedded within broader socio-historical constructions of Japanese motherhood, where femininity is closely tied to domesticity and moral responsibility. Rinko's legitimacy is therefore not achieved by challenging these norms, but by aligning herself with them. This reveals a paradox: while the film appears to offer a progressive depiction of trans parenting, it simultaneously reproduces heteronormative standards of maternal legitimacy.

Ultimately, Rinko's embodiment illustrates a form of conditional inclusion. This suggests that inclusion does not dismantle normative structures, but rather rearticulates them through conditional acceptance. Through the interplay of nomination (maternal labeling), predication (care and moral virtue), and topoi (domestic sacrifice, family stability, and social conformity), the film constructs her as a normalized trans maternal subject. However, this normalization does not dismantle regulatory power; rather, it rearticulates it in more subtle and affective forms. Trans motherhood, in this case, is made possible—but only through disciplined alignment with existing socio-cultural expectations.

3.3. Trans Maternal Bodies as Biopolitical Sites

A comparative reading of *Midnight Swan* and *Close-Knit* reveals two distinct yet interconnected configurations of trans maternal embodiment. Together, they demonstrate that trans motherhood in contemporary Japanese cinema is structured by biopolitical negotiation rather than autonomous self-definition.

In *Midnight Swan*, Nagisa's body is positioned in a state of ongoing becoming. Hormone therapy, surgical aspiration, and economic precarity construct femininity as a costly and painful achievement. Maternal possibility is deferred by medical vulnerability; caregiving cannot stabilise identity because bodily legitimacy remains unsettled. The narrative foregrounds corporeal suffering as the price of gender recognition.

By contrast, *Close-Knit* presents Rinko as already normalized. Her body has passed through institutional certification and now functions within domestic space as a maternal figure. However, this apparent stability is conditional. Rinko's acceptance depends on sustained compliance with cultural expectations of femininity and caregiving. Her maternal legitimacy is effectively earned rather than structurally guaranteed.

The contrast between the two films illustrates different phases of biopolitical regulation. Nagisa represents the disciplinary phase, where the body is actively reshaped through biomedical intervention. Rinko represents the assimilative phase, where normalized embodiment enables conditional inclusion within family structures. In both cases, the trans maternal body remains governed by external regimes—medical, legal, economic, and affective.

Through a Discourse-Historical lens, these cinematic representations reflect Japan's enduring linkage between womanhood, biological classification, and moral caregiving. Trans motherhood is not portrayed as dismantling this linkage; rather, it must negotiate within it. The films thus reveal that maternal recognition is contingent upon bodily conformity and emotional labour.

Ultimately, trans maternal bodies in these films function as biopolitical sites where gender, care, and governance intersect. Whether through painful medical compliance or disciplined domestic normalization, motherhood emerges not as an inherent identity but as an embodied negotiation shaped by regulatory power. Contemporary Japanese cinema, therefore, frames trans parenting as possible—but only within the boundaries set by biomedical authority and socio-cultural surveillance. Taken together, these findings demonstrate how trans

maternal bodies are discursively constructed as biopolitical sites through both medicalization and affective regulation.

Taken together, these findings reinforce how biopolitical power operates not only through exclusion but also through differentiated modes of inclusion that regulate which forms of trans motherhood become intelligible and legitimate.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that trans maternal bodies in *Midnight Swan* and *Close-Knit* are constructed as biopolitical sites shaped by medical regulation, legal norms, and affective expectations. Rather than presenting trans motherhood as a purely emancipatory identity, both films situate it within regimes of governance that condition bodily legitimacy and caregiving recognition.

Nagisa embodies biopolitical becoming, where femininity is achieved through hormonal intervention, surgical aspiration, and corporeal vulnerability. Maternal possibility remains precarious because bodily recognition is mediated by biomedical compliance. In contrast, Rinko represents normalized trans parenting where her maternal legitimacy emerges through alignment with conventional feminine and domestic norms, yet remains subject to social surveillance and conditional acceptance.

Taken together, these representations suggest that trans motherhood in contemporary Japanese cinema is not outside normative structures but negotiated within them. The trans maternal body becomes intelligible only through processes of medicalization and disciplined care. Motherhood, therefore, is framed not as an inherent identity but as an embodied negotiation shaped by institutional power and socio-cultural regulation. Through the lens of the Discourse-Historical Approach, this study demonstrates how trans maternal bodies are constructed through distinct yet interconnected discursive strategies. While Nagisa's body is shaped through medicalization and institutional regulation, Rinko's maternal identity is stabilized through affective labor and normative femininity. These findings reveal that trans motherhood is not simply represented, but differentially legitimized through nomination, predication, and argumentation within broader biopolitical frameworks.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the intersection of biopolitics, gender studies, and film analysis by demonstrating that trans motherhood must be understood not merely as representation, but as a systematically regulated process of embodied negotiation. By extending the Discourse-Historical Approach into the analysis of trans parenting in cinema, this study also highlights how discursive strategies operate across textual, visual, and socio-historical dimensions in shaping maternal legitimacy.

Future research may further explore dimensions of trans motherhood that remain underexamined in this study. In particular, deeper analysis could be conducted on the affective contradictions and ambivalences experienced by trans maternal figures, especially in relation to recognition, belonging, and emotional labor. Additionally, further studies may investigate how different genres of media or cultural contexts represent trans parenting, to examine whether similar discursive patterns of biopolitical regulation persist across texts.

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