



Japanese Film

by Andrew Grossman

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While alternative sexualities have long played a role in Japan's literary history, from bisexuality in Lady Murasaki's eleventh-century *Tale of Genji* to Saikaku's seventeenth-century *Great Mirror of Male Love*, homosexuality in Japanese cinema, except for rare feudal-era gay films such as Oshima Nagisa's *Gohatto* (1999), has been mostly informed by twentieth-century modernity.

Also, an odd experimental film such as Ichikawa Kon's *An Actor's Revenge* (1963) notwithstanding, post-MacArthur Japanese cinema never really created film genres derived from native traditions of theatrical transvestism in the way that Hong Kong films did.

Rather, queer themes in Japanese cinema have drawn upon a cross-section of leftist political filmmaking, pornography, and popular trends in *manga* (comics) and *anime* (animated films), a complex of factors that continues to complicate attempts to read contemporary queer Japanese films in terms of Western, post-Stonewall politics.

Indeed, only in the 1990s did Westernized gay liberation movements gain momentum in Japan, in part because Buddhistic Japan has only recently adopted the Western notion of gayness and never had to deal directly with the homophobia underlying Christian sexual attitudes.

The 1960s New Wave Films

Although the *samurai* and *yakuza* (gangster) genres have always been open to homoerotic interpretation, the first authentic queer films in Japan were products of the 1960s new wave, a leftist movement concurrent with new wave cinemas in the West. Films such as Imamura Shohei's *The Profound Desire of the Gods* (1968), Hani Susumu's *Nanami: First Love* (1967), and Terayama Shuji's *Emperor of Tomato Ketchup* (1970) dealt with incest, child sexuality, and other taboos.

In this radical atmosphere, a few queer films such as Masumura Yasuzo's lesbian-themed marital satire *Passion* (1964, based on an early story by Tanizaki Jun'ichiro) and Matsumoto Toshio's transvestite black comedy *Funeral Procession of Roses* (1969) caused quite a stir.

But like many portrayals of deviant sexuality in the Japanese new wave, homosexuality in these films arguably amounted only to another means of shocking the bourgeoisie, rather than an attempt to establish a transgressive queer cinema.

One exception, perhaps, is Fukasaku Kinji's brilliant *Black Lizard* (1968), a baroque transvestite burlesque whose main concerns are the gender ambiguities of romantic attraction, unalloyed by sexual exploitation or politics.

Pink Films

Around 1963, Nikkatsu studios fostered a new film genre, the "pink film" (*pinku eiga*). At first an artsy kind of softcore sadomasochistic pornography, by the late 1960s the pink film had accrued radical political themes.

The best-known practitioner of pink films was Wakamatsu Koji, who, like Oshima Nagisa and other Japanese new-wavers, was heavily influenced by the radical student movements of late 1960s Japan, and whose depictions of anarchic sexuality became metaphors for the era's revolutionary politics.

Pink films--and there are literally thousands of them--are low budget, quickly produced, usually about one hour in length, and frequently feature lesbian images aimed, unsurprisingly, at heterosexual male audiences.

There are, however, also some pink films of legitimate homosexual interest: Nakamura Genji's *Beautiful Mystery* (1983), a satire of Mishima Yukio's "Shield Society"; Shimada Koshi's gay romance *More Love* (1984); Sato Hisayasu's surreal, Pasolini-obsessed *Muscle* (1988); and Oki Hiroyuki's *Melody for Buddy Matsumae* (1992) and *I Like You, I Like You Very Much* (1994).

It should be noted, however, that some of these directors are not necessarily gay themselves--Nakamura Genji was a prolific director of heterosexual erotica and Sato Hisayasu is best known for his sado-erotic horror films (such as *Naked Blood* [1995]).

Indeed, with the exception of directors such as Oki Hiroyuki or Hashiguchi Ryosuke, most Japanese directors of gay films are not gay-identified. We should remember that even seventeenth-century writer Saikaku wrote both hetero- and homosexual stories to please different audiences.

Manga and Anime

It is impossible to discuss queer Japanese cinema without emphasizing the importance of *manga* and *anime*. Since the late 1980s, animated erotica such as *LA Blue Girl* (1992), *Demon Beast Invasion* (1993), *Twin Angels* (1995), and hundreds of others have flooded video shops in both Japan and the West. Falling under the subgenre of *hentai* ("pervert"), these cartoons usually feature young lesbians with mystical powers and a penchant for blushing onanism.

While such lesbian-themed erotica for heterosexual male audiences is common wherever there is pornography, Japan is unique in that it also produces a prolific amount of young male homoerotic stories (*shonen ai*, literally "boys' love"), usually written by women for the voyeuristic consumption of young, heterosexual women.

Shonen ai themes in *anime* can include anything from coy homoeroticism and transvestism in *Here is Greenwood* (1991), to "taboo" gay romances such as *Wind and Trees Song* (1987, based on Takemiya Keiko's *manga*), Kigurashi Teruo's *Homosexual White Paper: Man's Decision* (1992), and Michihari Katsumi's *Love's Wedge* (1992), to the more aggressive gay erotica of Kodaka Kazuma's *Kizuna* (1995).

Japan has been most comfortable with queerness in *manga* and *anime*, perhaps because male and female characters are drawn similarly anyway, often with only hairstyles distinguishing genders. Furthermore, because Japanese censorship laws prohibit the "threat" of frontal nudity, the genital region is rendered as a blank slate, and what the artists draw is effectively a "neutered" or "third" gender.

This gender ambiguity has allowed for queer or gender-ambiguous characters to become a regular part of animated series popular with adolescents: an incidentally gay cop in the *Bubblegum Crisis* series (1987-1988), an ambisexual assassin in the *Cyber City Oedo* series (1990-1991), the transsexual farce of Takahashi Rumiko's *Ranma ½*, and even same-sex desire in the children's cartoon *Sailor Moon*.

Live action versions of *manga* and *anime* are also common, such as Kaneko Shusuke's *Summer Vacation 1999* (1988, based on the 1974 manga *Heart of Toma*), in which the first-love yearnings of four teenage boys alone on summer break are enacted by four cross-dressed female actresses; and Hosoyama Tomoaki's outrageous satires *Weatherwoman* (1995) and *Weatherwoman Returns* (1996), which play like absurdist lesbian porn versions of Paddy Chayefsky's *Network*.

The "Gay Boom"

In the early 1990s, Japan experienced a so-called "gay boom," with homosexuality becoming a standard topic on television talk shows and in tabloid magazines, just as it was in the West, and Japan witnessing its first gay pride marches.

Gay novels such as Hiruma Hisao's sensationalistic *Yes, Yes, Yes*, Nishino Koji's coming-out narrative *When I Met You in Shinjuku Ni-chome*, and Fushimi Noriaki's *Private Gay Life* were popular with both curious straight women and gay men, and the television serial *Dosokai* (1993) marked a kind of watershed in gay visibility.

During this period, a number of generically gay (male) films were released: Kojima Yasushi's *Rough Sketch of a Spiral* (1990), a landmark documentary about the lives of urban gay men; Matsuoka Joji's fake marriage drama *Twinkle* (1992); Nakajima Takehiro's *Okoge* (1992); Hiroki Ryuichi's *800 2 Lap Runners* (1994); and Hashiguchi Ryosuke's *Slight Fever of a Twenty Year Old* (1990) and *Like Grains of Sand* (1995), the latter promoted as the first commercial feature-length Japanese film about teenage male homosexuality.

While these films often do consider Western notions of gay rights, many are also framed in the *shonen-ai* terms of the female spectator; for example, *Okoge*, the only one of these films to have been widely distributed in North America (to date), is told from the point of view of a young woman fascinated by her gay male friends. Some gay rights activists in Japan, in fact, have criticized this trend for objectifying and trivializing the lives of gay men.

Furthermore, as the male homoeroticisms of the gay boom catered to the curious gaze of heterosexual audiences, lesbianism received short shrift, and one must look back to Yazaki Hitoshi's wistful romance *Afternoon Breezes* (1980) or ahead to Shindo Kaze's *Love Juice* (2000) and Shu Lea Cheang's experimental sci-fi porn *I.K.U.* (2000) for sincere representations of lesbian desire.

The Future of Japanese Queer Cinema

It remains to be seen what course Japanese queer cinema will take after the gay boom, whose films--with the exception of the upbeat *Okoge*--often seem more interested in creating a minimalist aesthetic of melancholy rather than expressing overt political points of view.

Furthermore, even allegedly outré Japanese cult films, rather than challenging bourgeois sensibilities in the style of the 1960s new wave, tend to appease heterosexual bourgeois audiences by presenting homosexuality as a curious, "taboo" spectacle.

For example, the gay kiss between two criminals in Ishii Takashi's *Gonin* (1995) is not really as shocking as it is meant to be, and Miike Takashi's *Fudoh* (1996) presents a nihilistic, *manga*-inspired world where queer characters exist mainly to add another sensationalistic "color" to the film's spectrum of wild sex and violence.

The Uniqueness of Japanese Queer Cinema

Queer themes in Japanese films, then, cannot be framed solely in terms of Western gay liberation politics, which is still a new phenomenon in Japan. Yet it is precisely because of these differences that queer

Japanese cinema is unique, offering visions of sexual transgression divorced from Western political correctness and assimilationist civil rights ideals.

While the idea of the female consumer of gay male images may seem grounded in a cultural misogyny--the female spectator perhaps imagines herself to be a man loving another man because loving as a woman is insufficient--it also fundamentally challenges the usual construction of same-sex desire.

Perhaps most significantly, Japan's is the only world cinema that mass-produces sexually transgressive films, in the form of gender-bending *anime*, for children and adolescents. So while we should first appreciate such cultural differences on their own terms, we should also realize that Japanese cinema can offer queer alternatives more imaginative, more playful, and possibly more transgressive than those that conventional Western identity politics frequently allows.

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About the Author

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