
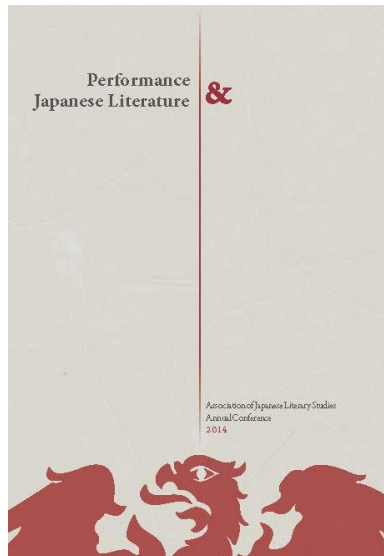


“Celebrity, Media, and Shame: *A Linked Heart Comedy, Life of an Artist (Or, an Operetta, Life and Heart of an Artist)* by Murayama Tomoyoshi (1923)”

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Celebrity, Media, and Shame:
***A Linked Heart Comedy, Life of an Artist (Or, An Operetta, Life and Heart of an Artist)* by Murayama Tomoyoshi (1923)**

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I.

Murayama Tomoyoshi (1901-1977) was the quintessential artist of Japan's "media age." Painter, performer, playwright, and critic, he rose to fame as the leader of the avant-garde group Mavo (1923-1925) and became a central figure in the *shinkō geijutsu* (new arts) movement. As Omuka Toshiharu observes, the new art movements were characterized above all by their dynamism.¹ This dynamism can be understood not only in terms of reaction and forward movement, but also in terms of these artists' concerted attempts to create lateral connections between different forms of media. *Shinkō geijutsu* collapsed the boundaries between different genres and forms, promoting multimedia experimentation and paving the way for new theories of "synthetic art" or *sōgō geijutsu*. From the very beginning of his career, Murayama worked in a wide variety of media and at the intersection of different forms: in the 1920s alone, his works included paintings, sculptures, collages, set designs, commercial illustrations, scripts and screenplays, performances and actions, criticism and translations, and mixed-media constructions. Like other *shinkō geijutsu* artists who were influenced by post-impressionist movements from abroad—expressionism, futurism, cubism, constructivism, symbolism—Murayama's earliest works do not always necessarily recognize, or respect, differences between distinct schools of modernism. His works and writings juxtapose different aesthetic styles, sometimes in anachronistic ways: one of his most celebrated works is the Soviet constructivist-style set that he designed for the Tsukiji Shōgekijō staging of Karlheinz Martin's expressionist play *From Morning to Midnight*. The three-tiered construction included seven "sets" for use in different scenes, and transitions between different areas of the set were effected by the use of lighting. Murayama's output in this period suggests that lateral movement, boundary play, and new forms of "construction" were as important to his aesthetic as the idea of a "cutting edge" (*sentan*).

It has been argued that Japan's interwar modernisms were not true avant-gardes, as the entrenched academic tradition against which European artists rebelled was still very new to Japan. It is true that in Japan, ideas regarding the autonomy of art were imported at nearly the same time as practices that revolted against the separation of art from everyday life. However, as Gennifer Weisenfeld has argued, to deny the existence of an avant-garde in Japan surely

¹ Omuka, *Nihon no avangyarudo geijutsu: "Mavo" to sono jidai* (Tokyo: Seidosha, 2001), 7.

ignores the extent to which artists' radical formal experiments expressed criticisms of art, power, the state, society, and the individual, just as it ignores how European "avant-garde" artists also created commercial works and engaged with mass culture.² The ambivalent relationship of avant-garde artists to popular culture must be examined more closely, in Japan and in other national contexts.

In this paper, I will discuss the libretto for *A Linked Heart Comedy, Life of an Artist (Or, An Operetta, Life and Heart of an Artist)* (1923) as an important early example of Murayama's interest in the aesthetic possibilities of admixture and combination.³ The libretto also provides insight into the influence of mass media and celebrity culture on Murayama's career. The operetta was never staged, and the magazine issue that originally featured the libretto was pulled for censorship reasons, so it is only recently that scholars have begun to situate this work in relation to Murayama's larger oeuvre. Murayama planned to include film sequences in *Life of an Artist*, making it a key work for tracing his long-held fascination with cinema and, in particular, forms like *rensa geki* (chain drama) and Total Theater that combined theater and film. It is one of many works that Murayama built around episodes from his own life, and numerous songs in the operetta, which are only tenuously related to the main narrative, convey Murayama's fascination with actresses and the commodification of sexuality and persona in modern forms of entertainment. Many facets of contemporary media culture are reflected in the themes and construction of the libretto, making it a useful work for examining Murayama's interest in the changing media landscape.

2.

The libretto for *The Life of an Artist* was completed during the year following Murayama's return from a one-year sojourn in Berlin. It is dated November 25, 1923. It was published in the February 1924 debut issue of the journal *Shinkō*, but the issue was pulled for censorship reasons and never circulated, and *Shinkō* folded without putting out a second issue. In the operetta, two young artists compete for the affections of a café cello player's niece, a girl named Hertha. One suitor is known as the Small Youth, a painter who thinks of himself as a budding Kandinsky and describes his works as "new art" (*iwayuru "atarashii geijutsu"*). His rival is the Big Youth, a sullen and brutish musician whose career prospects look far more favorable than his friend's. Considering the family's future, Hertha's aunt and uncle encourage a match with the Big Youth, imagining that this will be best for everyone involved. They attempt to remove the Small Youth from the picture by plying him with their own

² For example, see Gennifer Weisenfeld, *Mavo: Japanese Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1905-1931* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), and "From Baby's First Bath: Kaō Soap and Modern Japanese Commercial Design," *The Art Bulletin* 86:3 (2004), 573-598.

³ Murayama Tomoyoshi, "Rensa shinzō kigeki, geijutsuka no seikatsu (arui wa, operetta, geijutsuka no seikatsu to shinzō)," *Shinkō* 1 (Tokyo: Shinkōsha, 1924), reprinted in *Fukkokuban kindai bungei zasshi kishō jissai* (Tokyo: Yūshōdō Shuppan, 2007), 2-54.

daughter, a sexually precocious thirteen-year-old named Michiko. The Big Youth and Hertha live together for one year, but when he suddenly breaks their engagement, Hertha's family sues for damages for the loss of her virginity. The Big Youth perjures himself in court, lying that Hertha was actually not a virgin when he took up with her. He also gets the Small Youth, who has since broken up with Michiko, to corroborate his lies. Taking advantage of the disconsolate painter's disillusionment, the Big Youth persuades him testify that he too had a sexual relationship with Hertha and she wasn't a virgin then, either. The Big Youth convinces the Small Youth that this lie that they both slept with her (and that the Small Youth had her first) will make the rivals even and equally avenged. Within this overarching plot structure, Murayama inserts songs, film sequences, and fantastic occurrences that create absurdist digressions from the main plot. For example, when the Big Youth and the Small Youth argue over Hertha shortly after meeting her, the Big Youth is shocked by the Small Youth's hysterical tributes in this "Song of Love":

An insect is running over a photograph of my lover
 Well my lover is also like an insect
 Her cheeks are rouged and her lips are also red
 When I grasp the thick bundle of her tied-back hair in both
 hands and pull
 Those cunning fruits shake back and forth
 Part your lips, let our tongues touch
 She tastes like an insect
 An insect! An insect! My lover is an insect!⁴

In the following scene, the Big Youth dons a mask that makes him look old, frail, and shriveled. As he bemoans his wasted state, a cupid comes down from a single white rope dangling above the stage and shoots arrows in every direction. The play alternates between straightforward narrative exposition and surreal intrusions of symbolic imagery conveyed in song and anti-realist performances.

Life of an Artist is based on real-life experiences that Murayama described as humiliating (and yet which he wrote about again and again). In his autobiography, Murayama describes "the most shameful" event in his travels abroad as an incident in which his friend H (who had come to Europe to study piano) became involved with a German girl, which resulted in a civil trial somehow related to their love affair. H intimidated Murayama into becoming involved in the trial. This incident becomes the basis for *Life of an Artist* as well as the novella *The Girl and the Trial*.

The libretto for *Life of an Artist* shows Murayama attempting to create new, transversal relationships between different forms of media. It is one of his early aesthetic projects that depends on borrowing, repurposing, superimposing,

⁴ Murayama (1924), 22.

or linking together heterogeneous materials and forms. The influence of Wassily Kandinsky, a very important aesthetic model for Murayama's early career, is especially evident in Murayama's attempt to create a rich synesthetic experience in which diverse elements, appealing to different senses, resonate with one another and produce cumulative effects. The operetta was to include projected film sequences, musical interludes, and expressive use of color, and it was probably influenced by color-tone dramas by Kandinsky such as *The Yellow Sound* (1909). The "linked hearts" referred to in the full title of *Life of an Artist* were displayed on the outside of each character's costume. Throughout the course of the play, these change color with the characters' emotional and mental states. At the opening of the play, a tenor sings directly to the audience, asking their hearts to rise up and drift in the theater, link together, embrace one another, and commune in experience.

Life of an Artist can be understood as an attempt to resuscitate the *rensa geki* (chain drama). These popular stage plays reached the apex of their popularity in the 1910s. *Rensa geki* invigorated well-tread melodramatic formulas with the incorporation of short, filmed scenes, but this combination of theatrical and cinematic elements was harshly criticized by the Pure Film Movement. Highly conscious of developments in foreign film art and industry that had not yet taken root in Japan, most film critics treated *rensa geki* as one of many irregular, transitional forms (such as film with live narration and musical accompaniment) that would naturally disappear as cinema developed standard practices based on medium-specific properties.⁵ Yet in the later 1926 article "Rensa geki," Murayama shows little regard for medium specific arguments, instead emphasizing how combinations of film and theater could overcome the limitations of each respective medium:

It goes without saying that however advanced films may become, films are films, and they do not feature actual people or seem real. Moreover, at least at present, color is impossible (today's tinted films are hideous, so these aren't to be taken under consideration); words and natural sound are impossible; the atmosphere produced by the existence of real space and use of artificial lighting is impossible. ...film lacks the *merit* of theater's "limited perspective," the *visceral* exchange between what happens on stage and in the audience, and the *ephemerality* of theater, in which it is absolutely impossible for the same thing to come into existence twice.⁶

⁵ See Ōya Atsuko, "Rensa geki ni okeru eiga bamen no hyōka o megutte," *Art Research* 10 (2010), 51-60.

⁶ Murayama, "Rensa geki," *Engeki/eiga* (1926), 46.

In the article, Murayama goes on to discuss what film is able to do that theater is incapable of, concluding that in order to obtain the most powerful effects and greatest range of expressivity, one should combine film and theater. He asserts that *rensa geki* is the most promising form of agitprop theater (*senden geki*) and wraps up the essay by promoting an experimental staging of *William Tell* at the Kokoro-za, where he would later direct a version of Vsevolod Meyerhold's *Trust D. E.* featuring film projection as part of the scenography. Murayama's article implies a genealogical connection between 1910s *rensa geki* and 1920s politically-engaged experimental theater. He claims that *rensa geki* is the "highest form of theater art" and may be the art of the future.⁷

Murayama's plans to use film projection in *Life of an Artist* several years before the *rensa geki* article indicate his early interest in using modern technology and media, such as cinema, to create links between different aesthetic forms. At several points in the libretto for *Life of an Artist*, stage directions describe the projection of brief film montage sequences that give poetic expression to characters' desires and emotions, as well as foreshadow later developments in the play. Murayama's enthusiasm for multimedial theater is developed further in the book *Constructivist Research*, published in 1926, in which Murayama enthusiastically describes experiments by Walter Gropius, Erwin Piscator, and Vsevolod Meyerhold that incorporated film projection within fully-mechanized, multimedial theaters. Japanese experiments with film projection in modernist stage plays received mixed reviews in Japan. Reflecting on the use of cinema in the plays *R. U. R.* and *Nebeneinander* at Tsukiji Shōgekijō, a 1928 article "A Consideration of Films for Stage" by Itō Kōichi distinguished between two possible uses of cinema on stage: either as "conjunctions" between scenes or "inserts" in a stage set. Itō opined that early forms such as *rensa geki* had failed to discover the full potential of cinema—*rensa geki* was a "total failure," because it merely exploited the novelty of cinema and used cinematic sequences for narrative continuity. Itō suggests Tsukiji Shōgekijō try staging Alfons Paquet's *Flags*, noting that the use of film for narrative continuity would be more interesting if projection were integrated into the stage design rather than used just for its own sake. However, his article seems ambivalent about these continuing experiments.⁸ Murayama seems less concerned with what is actually possible on the Japanese stage. He was inspired by El Lissitzky and Walter Gropius's visionary plans for machine-like modern theaters that incorporated multiple media and movable architecture, integrating performance space and audience space within a carefully designed machine—even though neither Lissitzky nor Gropius's designs could be practically executed. This visionary (impossible) theater may have been an inspiration for ambitious Murayama works like *Life of an Artist* and *Actress* that were too technically advanced to be staged at the time their scripts were published. At the same time, it seems

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸ Itō Kōichi, "Gekijō eiga kō," *Tsukiji Shōgekijō* 5:3 (1928), 50-52.

Murayama felt the need to defend *rensa geki* in order to justify much cruder experiments with film, or in other words, the experiments that were practical given the state of contemporary Japanese stagecraft.

3.

With the rise of mass-circulated lifestyle magazines, star culture, and movie fandom, the domestic and private became part of popular entertainment and public discourse. Murayama encouraged the public's fascination with his private life by appearing with his wife in the lifestyle pages, writing confessional accounts of past sexual experiences, and playing with how his gender and sexuality were perceived: wearing his hair long, cross-dressing, baring his body for the camera, and performing sensual dances. *Life of an Artist* similarly appeals to the reader's voyeurism by fictionalizing intimate details from Murayama's life, such as his use of prostitutes and his involvement with a "shameful" court case involving the relationship between a Japanese friend and the friend's German lover at the time Murayama was living in Berlin.

Murayama wrote for commercial magazines as well as coterie journals, and he also did commercial illustration and design. He contributed to magazines sponsored by the cultural establishment, like *Atelier* and *Eiga jidai*, but was also a participant in many short-lived publications that were put out as experiments and created temporary alignments of writers and artists who sought to depose a more firmly entrenched elite. These included *Bungei shijō* and *Mavo*, the magazine of the avant-garde group.

In the 1920s, literary careers were increasingly launched in small university literary journals and self-financed coterie magazines that proliferated after the college journals' model, while the high-powered editors who headed general-interest publications had star-making power. Mass-marketed magazines and peer organizations became more influential than the older, master-disciple model of vetting young talent.⁹ In addition to promoting young novelists, magazine editors promoted the idea of modern cultural celebrity. The owner of *Kaizō*, Yamamoto Sanehiko, was responsible in bringing Bertrand Russell to Japan in 1921, and Margaret Sanger and Albert Einstein in 1922. Big publishing houses sent their writers on national speaking tours, and *Kaizō* even filmed its writers' lectures and had these films sent with the writers it put on tour.¹⁰

At this time, many literary critics raised concerns about the most highly regarded genre of Japanese fiction, the *shishōsetsu*. They contended that in the contemporary marketplace, *shishōsetsu*, with their introspective focus on protagonists modeled after their authors, were becoming no different than gossip columns. Novelists were being viewed like entertainers rather than public figures, forced to produce work about themselves constantly in order to maintain

⁹ William Tyler, ed., *Modanizumu: Modernist Fiction from Japan, 1913-1938* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 51-52.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

their place in the public eye, which had become a new source of livelihood and esteem. As Edward Mack points out, many modern writers and critics viewed the self-concern of the *shishōsetsu* as an immature but necessary stage in the development of modern Japanese literature; at the same time, they worried that the demands of the marketplace would trap the most promising authors in an arrested state of development. The production of such self-concerned media stars, it was argued, was to the disadvantage of national modern culture as a whole.¹¹

New forms of celebrity are on display in *Life of an Artist*, in which Murayama places fictional accounts of sensational events in his own life alongside songs and commentary on female performers and sex workers who live firsthand the commodification of bodies, desire, and intimacy. This interleaving of autobiographical confession with songs about the commercialization of female sexuality creates a complex commentary on modern celebrity culture, for while Murayama is sensitive to the exploitation that performers face, his imagery also makes apparent the strong allure of commercial sex and sex appeal—and even the excitement of the shame associated with these transactions.

Masaki Yoshikatsu has noted that Murayama's play thematizes linkage, connection, mutual recognition, and mutual embrace.¹² This is generally true: the “*rensa*” or “link” of the play's title is the same “chain” in *rensa geki*, so named because of the alternation filmed scenes with live action on stage. Linkage is also a theme in the operetta's dialogue, song lyrics, and imagery. However, I would argue that it is usually figured negatively: in descriptions of the agony of romantic yearning, depictions of frustrated or self-destructive sexual desire, confessions of sexual shame, and scenes of bitter betrayals. If *Life of an Artist* foregrounds linkage, it does so by dwelling on moments of rupture and disjunction. Masaki fails to mention that when the tenor sings about souls embracing in the prologue to the operetta, he sings about souls who have left their homes, set loose to wander. The tenor exhorts these souls to embrace in mutual “shame” (*haji*). The prologue is performed in total darkness, with the house lights off and no light on stage. However, shame does not simply break connection; if it is the cause or the result of uncomfortable, unwanted, or regretted intimacies, it also has a contagious and confessional quality. Shame in *Life of an Artist* is intersubjective, or wants to be intersubjective, and is never fully separated from erotic pleasure. This is evidenced by the repetitive confession or performance of shame again and again in the operetta, typically in conjunction with sexual longing, for example when a male singer relates his experience seeing a prostitute or Hertha sings about her sexual awakening and self-consciousness. In “Prostitute Song,”

¹¹ See Mack, *Manufacturing Modern Japanese Literature: Publishing, Prizes, and the Ascription of Literary Value* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 163-4.

¹² See Masaki Yoshikatsu, “Tamashii no hōyō: *Geijutsuka no seikatsu* (1923) ni miru Murayama Tomoyoshi no engeki kan,” *Murayama Tomoyoshi: Geki teki sentan*, ed. Iwamoto Kenji (Tokyo: Shinwasha, 2012), 53-74.

the singer describes how, in the yellow light of morning, he feels shame for the first time, as he looks around a prostitute's rented room and senses that she is genuinely proud of her dwelling. In his description of this awkward and painful interaction the morning after, the singer expresses surprise that it is not the prostitute but he who feels dirty and ashamed. A moment of potential connection is blocked as the singer realizes they do not feel the same and could not explain themselves to each other. However, by fictionalizing the experience, dramatizing the incident for an audience, this song (which seems to be based on Murayama's own formative sexual experiences) seems designed to prompt the "mutual embrace in shame" described as occurring in the theater in the prologue of the operetta.

Murayama lost his virginity to a prostitute in Europe and visited prostitutes several more times while abroad. After returning to Japan, he wrote about these experiences in *Bungei jidai*, and they also appear later in his autobiography, and references to sex workers and female sexuality can be found throughout his works. It has been noted that the prostitute usually appears in Murayama works about Berlin and is often conflated with other kinds of female performers, such as dancers, that he encountered during that time. Takizawa Kyōji and Nomoto Satoshi have argued that Murayama felt a strong identification with these women. Nomoto has even suggested that Murayama allowed himself to be photographed dancing nude in his studio as a way of inhabiting the position of the sexualized female bodies that he incorporated into his work. Takizawa writes that the prostitute was emblematic of Murayama's own feelings of estrangement from his body and argues that he used depictions of prostitutes to confront his own painful, personal experiences.¹³

Throughout the operetta, sex is compared to intoxication, alternately exhilarating and sickening. According to the Small Youth, all that remains of pleasure afterwards is an unreliable memory, and everything seems dirty and shameful in the next morning's light. Repeatedly throughout the play, pleasure at its apex becomes its opposite as sensual excess gives way to a sense of revulsion or shame. In the prologue, the chorus of voices representing shamed individuals who congregate in the theater cry out in a frenzy, over and over, that they are "crazed with pleasure." When he is most enraptured, the painter compares himself and Hertha to insects. In her song of sexual awakening, Hertha sings of spying a dead body in the sewers. She hides in the sewer to avoid the other townspeople, overcome by shame because of the way her sexually maturing body is used to attract customers at the tobacconist's where she works. Drunk with desire for her, the Small Youth sings a song about stumbling out of a bar:

A bar at night.

A bar on a night where, as soon as I stumble outside, I threw

¹³ See Takizawa Kyōji, "Avangyarudo no 'seikatsu' to 'sakuhiin'—Murayama Tomoyoshi, 1922-1927" in *Iwamoto* (2012), 75-118.

up.
 The clinking beer mugs had the mark of your house.
 That bar.
 Tilting, tumbling down the slope, forgive me for soiling the
 door of your house.
 There's a fountain drawn on the bottom of the bottle, for what
 purpose I wonder,
 As I'm thinking I'll ask, I'll ask
 My pleasure reaches its summit,
 Heaven and earth become the most intimate and most
 disgusted with one another
 The dyes of the striped signboard become a symbol of my
 pleasure
 Moon and sun and stars clasp each other's hands and slip
 under your door,
 Exchange intimate greetings with me, as well as sideways
 glances.¹⁴

In this song, too, antipodes of heaven/earth, intimacy/disgust, pleasure/sickness are presented as linked to one another like a striped pattern, a symbol for the Small Youth's euphoria and the stark oppositions it contains.

The theme of alienating pleasure, and pleasure in alienation, contributes to a critical commentary on how sex and sensuality are priced, advertised, and circulated like commodities in modern culture. Yet, despite its scathing portrayal of male hypocrisy and the exploitation of female sexuality, *Life of an Artist* also suggests that there is something particularly powerful about pleasure that is mixed with disgust or shame. Weaving portraits of female performers, sex workers, and exploited lovers into an autobiographical tale of past humiliations, Murayama's *Life of an Artist* is an act of identification with female performers and a powerful commentary on modern celebrity that links different media forms. *Life of an Artist* suggests that shame can be powerful and transformative. It can be the ground for some form of mutual recognition, even if fleeting, where no understanding seems possible.

¹⁴ Murayama (1924), 17-18.