
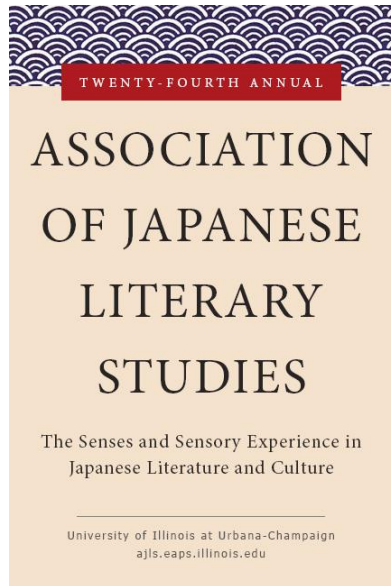


“A Woman’s Gaze”

Luciana Sanga 

*Proceedings of the Association for Japanese
Literary Studies* 17 (2016): 60–67.



PAJLS 17:

*The Senses and Sensory Experience in Japanese Literature
and Culture.*

Ed. Robert Tierney and Elizabeth Oyler

A WOMAN'S GAZE

Luciana Sanga
Stanford University

Tanabe Seiko wanted to write highbrow literature. In 1964, she won the Akutagawa prize, Japan's most prestigious literary award for emerging highbrow fiction writers. However, Tanabe found it difficult to publish in the established literary magazines (*bungei zasshi*) and eventually expanded her activity to include middle- and lowbrow magazines. Her career benefitted from the boom in the publishing industry that occurred in the late 1950s. Gradually, Tanabe made a name for herself as a writer of popular fiction. Tanabe's essays and fiction have appeared in a variety of venues, from newspapers (*Osaka hibi shinbun*) and middlebrow literary magazines (*Ōru yomimono*, *Shōsetsu gendai*, *Shōsetsu hōseki*), to women's magazines (*Josei seibun*) and lowbrow weeklies for men (*Shūkan heibon*, *Shūkan yomiuri*, *Asahi geinō*).

The culminating point of her career that established her as a reputable writer came around her 80th birthday, in 2008. Seniority endows one with respectability, which in the case of Tanabe Seiko was also well deserved. To celebrate Tanabe's 80th birthday, Shūeisha Publishing Company issued a 25-volume collection of Tanabe Seiko's works, and from 2006 to 2007, NHK aired a morning TV-drama based on Tanabe's life. In 2006, the prestigious literary journal National Literature and Interpretation (*Kokubungaku to kaishaku*) devoted a special issue to Tanabe Seiko's work.

Tanabe is recognized for her employment of the Osaka dialect and for her humor. But commentators have noted that underneath the light-hearted, humorous conversations there is "a sharp critical mind"¹ that readers are forced to confront. Nowadays Tanabe Seiko is best known as a writer of love novels. In fact, six of the twenty-four volumes of her recently published *Complete Works* are advertised on the *obi* as "love novels."

Among her most popular titles are *Iiyoru* (*Approach*, 1973) and its two sequels,² consumed by young women as love novels and hailed by critics as feminist texts. She herself considers *Iiyoru* and its sequels to be "love novels,"³ and has termed these works her literary "kernel."⁴ But *Iiyoru*'s message of love and feminism has humble, if not paradoxical, origins: It first appeared alongside photographs of scantily clad women, serialized in *Shūkan taishū*, a lowbrow weekly magazine for men. How do we explain this shift in readership and reception? How are we to

¹ Kan Satoko describes it as *surudoji hihiyō seishin*. See Kan Satoko, "Sakka gaido," in *Satō Aiko, Tanabe Seiko*, ed. Taeko Kōno (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten 1997), 444.

² *Shiteki seikatsu* ("Personal Life," 1976) and *Ichigo wo tsubushinagara* ("Crushing Strawberries," 1981).

³ See Tanabe Seiko and Kawakami Hiromi, "Ren'ai shōsetsu somosomo banashi," *Subaru*, May 2002, 76-85. The first part of this *taidan*, which has as its topic love novels, revolves around *Iiyoru* and its sequels.

⁴ Tanabe Seiko and Kawakami Hiromi, "Ren'ai shōsetsu ni komeru otona no hōsoku," *Fujin kōron*, June 2006, 136.

understand the novel's message of feminism and love? In order to answer these questions, we must first turn to the visual medium of weekly magazines.

The most important change in the publishing landscape of postwar Japan was the proliferation of weekly magazines. By 1956 the "postwar era" had officially ended, the economy was improving at a quick pace, and the trains were packed with men commuting to and from work. Perhaps even more than the work itself, the commute was *the* defining experience for men in postwar Japan. Nearly every working man was crammed next to his fellow man for the same trip, an hour or more, twice a day, six days a week. It's what made a man a salaryman.

For all those commuting hours, how was a man to pass the time? No doubt this is what the editors at the publishing house of Shinchōsha were asking when they issued their first men's weekly magazine, *Shūkan shinchō*, on February 6, 1956.

Before this publication appeared, a man might have found recourse to a novel, a daily newspaper or a monthly. But here was a new publication catering specifically to the sensibilities and needs of the salaryman, epitomized in the expression "money and women," the motto of the first editor of *Shūkan shinchō*.⁵ While monthly magazines were usually delivered by the postman and read in the comfort of one's own home, weekly magazines were bought at a kiosk located on the train platform, read on the go, and never brought home.

The idea caught on quickly. By 1959, *Shūkan shinchō*'s circulation had reached one million. Scores of other publishers were following suit with competitor magazines---*Asahi geinō*, *Shūkan taishū* and *Shūkan gendai* ---all squarely aimed at the everyday commuting salaryman. The "Weekly" was born.⁶ The Weekly was and remains a tabloid. Its pages are filled with incendiary news⁷, lowbrow fiction, and, of course, sexy women. Most weekly magazines include in every issue dozens of color pictures of beautiful women in various and sundry states of dress and undress, striking provocative poses. Such pictures are complemented by articles and interviews detailing the amorous life of actresses, singers, or TV personalities.

Alongside incendiary articles and raunchy pictures, Weeklies also contain fiction. The themes of the Weekly novels echo the big three themes of the Weekly articles: "sex, scandal and money."⁸ The novels could not be easily ascribed to a genre; they include detective fiction, historical fiction, gangster (*yakuza*) fiction, and erotic fiction (*kannō shōsetsu*). But in all of the novels, money, and violence intersect with sex at some point. Sex has been the one element absolutely necessary in any work of fiction published in a weekly magazine.

⁵ Takahashi Gorō, *Shūkanshi fūunroku* (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 2006), 122.

⁶ *Shūkan Asahi* and *Sandē Mainichi* had existed since the Taishō period, but they did not become an important presence within the Japanese publishing landscape until the postwar era.

⁷ Oftentimes controversial, news articles in weekly magazines claim to expose the hidden, illegal, or immoral circumstances behind the surface of any scandal. Usually such magazines do not substantiate their claims with solid evidence, and they are not expected to do so. Their appeal has consisted in boldly stating outlandish ideas that many people harbor, but that no mainstream news outlet would ever dare to say.

⁸ Nagao Saburō, *Shūkanshi keppūroku* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2004), 15.

Why this emphasis on sex? The proliferation of weekly magazines coincides with Japan's nationwide ban on prostitution in 1956.⁹ The Weekly capitalized on this vacuum. Through stories and pictures, the Weekly fulfilled the desires of men who now had limited opportunities to satisfy their sexual urges.¹⁰

In the late 50s and 60s, weekly magazines became guidebooks on how to find "local women" (*tōchi no onna*), a euphemism for illegal prostitutes. But the complete elimination of red-light districts meant that gradually the boundary between "ordinary," good, proper women (*shirōto no onna*) and "professional" women (*kurōto no onna*), who sold their bodies for a living, became extremely murky. Starting in the 1970s, weekly magazines reflected a new interest in the intimate lives of "ordinary" women, including OLS, students and even married women, who became the target of men's sexual fantasies.¹¹

This trend was also illustrated in the fiction published in weekly magazines, such as Uno Kōichirō's novel *Asobi zakari*, serialized in 1973 in the pages of the weekly magazine *Shūkan taishū*. Uno Kōichirō was a notable author of erotic fiction.

Many of Uno's pornographic novels were turned into *roman poruno* films, a new genre of high-quality soft-pornographic films, produced by the film studio Nikkatsu beginning in the early 70s.¹²

Uno is recognized for his unique employment of a feminine point of view. For instance, the narrator of Uno's *Asobi zakari* is a lonely housewife, who presents in detail her sexual yearnings and adventures while her husband is away. Thus an ordinary wife becomes the object of men's curiosity and sexual desire. What does a stay-at-home wife do when her husband is not around? "I have nothing to do. After my husband left for work, I am just idling away on the second floor of this apartment building."¹³ Finally, the wife decides to exercise a little: "It would be a bit too much to change into a sports outfit, so I am standing in front of the mirror, wearing just my bra and panties."¹⁴ From here things deviate a bit: "Will I just have to spend my time like this, without showing my beautiful body to anybody?"¹⁵ The reader can imagine how this continues: the wife goes out, meets a man in a crowded elevator, and then accompanies him to a hotel.

Uno's novel is an endless succession of sexual encounters, with graphic details of the sexual act, described in the present tense, as if it were happening in front of the readers. Following the conventions of pornography, it is the sexual pleasure of the woman, not of the man, that is emphasized. Uno offers detailed descriptions of

⁹ To be sure, prostitution has continued to flourish, even to this day, in underground as well as not-so-underground markets.

¹⁰ Kageyama Kayoko. *Sei, media, fūzoku: shūkanshi "Asahi geinō" kara miru fūzoku to shite no sei* (Tōkyō: Hābesutosha, 2010), 54.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 128-129.

¹² Both Uno's novels and many of the Nikkatsu films reflect this new interest in the private lives of ordinary women, even married ones. Of course, the boundaries are sometimes ambiguous, and sometimes the housewife characters in the Nikkatsu films end up working in a brothel.

¹³ Uno Kōichirō, "Asobi zakari 8," *Shūkan taishū*, Sept. 27, 1973, 66.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

the woman's physical reactions: her body relaxes or gets tense, she pants heavily, moans, and screams.

Uno's narrator herself defends the structure of pornography, or the reason for its focus on the female body: "I'm sorry to say this, but the male nude is comical. Compared to a woman's body, it is not very beautiful. After all, the one who is admired, loved, and possessed is the woman."¹⁶ This is the philosophy behind weekly magazines targeted at men. The Weekly offered lonely men on their commute a woman to admire, love, and possess.

Tanabe Seiko turned this formulaic, lowbrow soft-pornographic magazine into the arena for her feminist message. In *Iiyoru*, Tanabe closely follows and at the same time subverts the conventions of pornography.

Tanabe's heroine Noriko narrates in the first person her life and complicated romantic experiences, including her involvement in two love triangles.

An artist and designer, Noriko is a single woman in her early thirties. The novel offers a glimpse into her daily life. From the very first pages, we learn that Noriko keeps her hair short and usually wears jeans and a T-shirt, a bold look for someone thirty-one years old. Sometimes, she dons a casual summer dress or an alluring evening gown and, on rare occasions, she even puts on a wig.

It is not just Noriko's looks that make her attractive to male readers, but also her attitude towards romantic relationships. Despite her age, Noriko is by no means looking for a husband, though she would be more than willing to marry Gorō, the man she is in love with. In her relationships with other men, she is carefree, not interested in anything stable or serious, a dream woman for any male reader fantasizing about sex and relationships in the 70s. Noriko embodies the contradictory aspects of angel and whore; she is willing to give anything to the man she loves, but meanwhile, she also makes herself available to other men, younger or older, single or married. This is the essence of love in the 70s - romantic love still exists as an ideal, but even for women, sex is no longer confined to marriage or to a relationship based on love. The "first night" (*shoya*), a concept usually associated with purity and marriage, becomes the name of a simple erotic game, which Noriko plays with one of her lovers.

Like any novel serialized in a weekly for men, *Iiyoru* contains numerous sex scenes. Indeed, *Iiyoru*, too, fits the new trend of soft-pornography centered on the private, erotic life of an "ordinary" woman. However, Tanabe's treatment of sex scenes is different from that of the average writer of pornography. The sexual act itself is treated in a non-lascivious manner. In Tanabe's novel, readers never hear Noriko pant or scream in pain or delight. Tanabe titillates readers with conversations between lovers sprinkled with sexual innuendoes, and she pays attention to the facial expressions of both lovers:

He was staring at me with his eyes that resembled two gun barrels. His mouth appeared to be smiling, but his eyes weren't. I wanted to smile at him, but my face was stiff. I was so frightened

¹⁶ Uno Kōichirō, "Asobi zakari 1," *Shūkan taishū*, Aug. 9, 1973, 71.

by the man's strength that for a second I froze. The man noticed that with keen sensibility and said to me gently:

"You have such a beautiful body. You're so young. No matter how many times I look at you, it's like I am seeing you for the first time."

"I am sure you have seen lots of women for the first time."¹⁷

Tanabe balances the erotic moment with a light joke. Noriko might be captivated by the man's strength, but she is not fooled by his sweet talk.

At other times, the sex act is described retrospectively. For example: "The breeze was crisp, and I very much enjoyed having my skin slowly caressed by a man's hand, while lying down in the cold sheets."¹⁸ In the sex scenes, Tanabe is not repetitive, and she does not simply use formulaic expressions. Each partner is different, each sexual act is different, and offers a different pleasure.

Despite the lack of explicit language, thus far Tanabe Seiko's novel seems to offer male readers yet another woman "to admire, love, and possess." How can one break away from the paradigm of woman as a consumable object, and turn the woman into an autonomous, liberated force?

An artist and designer, Noriko, the heroine of the novel, seems aware of this question, and she responds to it through art that is both sexual and visual – as if to fit the medium in which her story lives. Her art confronts the stereotypical feminine poses that appear everywhere from men's magazines to fine art museums. Noriko's painting titled *Crotch-frame* is a bold reinterpretation of the famous *mikaeri bijin* pose. This is how Noriko describes her painting:

In the painting I am working on now, a girl is standing firm, with her legs wide apart. She is looking at the world upside-down, from between her legs. (...)

The girl is wearing white panties, pink shoes, and a wristwatch. Her hair is arranged in two braids, but she is past the age of childhood. She is completely absorbed and fascinated by the new dimension of the world she sees from between her legs.¹⁹

The painting has the marks of soft-pornography, as the girl is presented alone, adorned with fetishistic objects such as virginal white underwear and pink shoes that codify desire. But in soft-pornography, the look of the girl "directly addresses either the reader or parts of her own body."²⁰ In pornography, the girl's gaze is supposed to be imbued with latent desire, or it should reflect the ecstatic joy of (auto)eroticism. However, in this respect, Noriko's painting deviates from pornographic conventions, as the girl's gaze is directed at the world at large, and is not seeking the eyes of the

¹⁷ Tanabe Seiko, *Iiyoru; Shiteki seikatsu* (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 1982), 73.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

²⁰ Kaite Berkeley, *Pornography and Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 70.

male viewer. While the painting invites the male viewer's "scopophilia,"²¹ his pleasure at looking at erotic images, the content of the painting expresses the girl's "epistemophilia,"²² curiosity to know herself and the world.

The "crotch-framed" world presented in the painting has clear sexual connotations, but the girl's world-view is framed by her own sex, sexuality, and sexual experience. The expression "crotch-frame" is key for understanding the entire novel. Indeed, at the end of the chapter titled "Crotch-frame," Noriko compares herself to the girl in the painting. Noriko has just had sex with a man she barely knew, and the world seems to her exciting and new, as if she were seeing it now from a whole, new, different angle, just like the girl in her painting.

So what does the girl see? Noriko is always gazing at her men, evaluating and comparing their looks. For instance, she comments on their walking style:

"[Mizuno] had a confident way of walking. It was different from Gō's swift and strong gait, and from Gorō's melancholic bearing. His movements were saying: This is the best way to do it and there is no other way. This made him irresistibly charming."²³ But Noriko's gaze does not stop there. In fact, Noriko enjoys spying on her men while they shower: "Gorō was taking a shower, and he was not looking in my direction. My first impression was that compared to Gō, his body was slim and had a delicate texture."²⁴

The male body is not shown overpowering Noriko in a sex-scene, but alone, naked, and vulnerable. As Noriko's gaze dwells on Gorō's body from afar, it is clear that Noriko does not find the male nude comical, but beautiful and worthy of admiration.

Noriko offers an explanation for the pleasure she takes in watching men bathe: "This mundane activity of 'a man washing his hair' is as important as 'the fun activity' he was doing with me before. That's because in both cases one can feel the man's toughness, his bold attitude towards life."²⁵ Although Noriko takes delight in a man bathing, she invests this "mundane activity" with meaning. To her, it is more than a mechanical and necessary activity, or an erotic act. It is a reflection of the man's personality. Thus, even male readers would have felt comfortable with the manner in which the male body is described in the novel.

However, the focus on the male body that Tanabe Seiko brings into her novel was unusual for male readers of weekly magazines, who were more accustomed with looking, rather than being looked at. Ultimately, Tanabe successfully offers in her novel a "crotch-framed" worldview. Men's world of sex and pleasure is turned upside-down, as they become the focus of the female gaze.

The feminist message of the text resides in the way Tanabe plays with the gaze.

²¹ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (England: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 14–27.

²² Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 75–76.

²³ Tanabe, *Iiyoru: Shiteki seikatsu*, 60.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

Not only does Tanabe successfully challenge the conventional power structure of the gaze, but she does so in the highly visual medium of a weekly magazine for men, sprinkled with pictures of women on display on every other page.

The historian Roger Chartier claims: "The space between text and object, which is precisely the space in which meaning is constructed, has too often been forgotten (...)." ²⁶ Indeed, the text is distorted by the material form of the text, by the object readers hold in their hands and look at while reading the text. When the first readers encountered *Iiyoru* in the pages of weekly magazines, their interpretation of the novel and of the particular passages quoted above was framed by other written and visual texts in the same magazine. The image of the girl that Noriko painted gained clear colors and contours as readers were stimulated by actual pictures of beautiful semi-nude girls that appeared at the beginning of each issue of *Shūkan taishū*. At the same time, Tanabe Seiko's resistance to this soft-pornographic medium becomes more clear and potent when the novel is considered in the context of its initial publication venue.

When a reader buys the same book in *bunkobon*, the dust jacket that resembles a handkerchief is a subtle invitation to shed a tear, because, after all, Noriko never gets the man she loves most. The sexual imagination of the readership is not stimulated by any additional visual aid, except for the cover. Most importantly, the flowery cover of the 2010 Kōdansha edition repels men. Tanabe's message about sex and relationships is now directed at women.

It is not only the particular dust jacket that influences a reader's reading even before having encountered the text, it is also the *bunkobon* format itself that is invested with meaning. Thus, when readers see a *bunkobon*, particularly a Kōdansha *bunkobon*, they associate the format with a work that has the value of a classic, and has an elevated content. In fact the "Address on the Occasion of Publication" ²⁷ that appears at the end of all Kōdansha *bunkobon* states that the aim of the collection is to offer Japanese readers "famous works (*meicho*) of the East and West." ²⁸ While recently, even light novels and manga appear as *bunkobon*, and this format is no longer synonymous with "classic," the *bunkobon* format still invests a work with "new legitimacy." ²⁹ Thus, this format discourages the reading of *Iiyoru* as soft-pornography, or as light-hearted humorous fiction, and encourages the reader to engage with the work in a serious manner. To quote Chartier again, "one must state that forms produce meaning and that a text, stable in its letter, is invested with a new meaning and status when the mechanisms that make it available to interpretation change." ³⁰

The change in the reception of a work does not happen exclusively through the repackaging and relabeling of a novel. The author, too, needs to be rebranded through articles, interviews, and *taidan* (conversations between authors, academics and editors) that appear in literary magazines. Tanabe Seiko started as a pure-literature writer, rose to fame as a writer of popular fiction, and achieved recognition

²⁶ Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe Between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth centuries* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 10.

²⁷ Noma Shōichi, "Kōdansha bunko kankō no ji," 1971.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Chartier, *The Order of Books*, 11.

³⁰ Chartier, *The Order of Books*, 3.

due to her re-evaluation by a couple of notable feminists and academics, such as Ueno Chizuko. Tanabe Seiko's works were not just consumed and forgotten, but they are slowly becoming part of the literary canon. Younger authors such as Kawakami Hiromi and Wataya Risa often mention Tanabe Seiko as one of their influences, and point to *Iiyoru* or its sequel *Shiteki seikatsu* as favorite love novels and sources of inspiration.

The case of *Iiyoru* shows that the parameters of love novels are not fixed, but fluid, and they are a result of the constant negotiation amongst the publishing industry, readers, and author. At the center of this negotiation is not just the text, but also its material form, as *Iiyoru* in its serialized version elicits a different reading from its *bunkobon* version.