“The Play of the Ear in the Novels of Uno Kōji”

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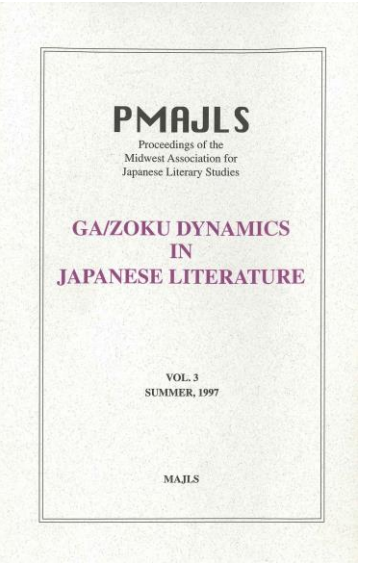

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The Play of the Ear in the Novels of Uno Kōji

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This paper will examine the acoustic play in Uno Kōji's unconventional *shishōsetsu,* a genre which has been closely associated with **"pure"** ***(jun),*** as opposed to **"popular"** ***(tsūzokuteki)*** prose literature in modern Japan. It will look at ways in which this writer departed from the quiescent tone of many Taishō *shishōsetsu* by weaving into his narratives voices that were overtly performative in consciously disruptive, transgressive ways. It will consider how the polyphonic texture of his narratives, which included the incorporation of vocal sounds associated with the *rakugo* monologuist, lent his stories a histrionic dimension that challenged serious *shishōsetsu.* In short, the paper will propose that this writer's exploitation of obstreperous sound patternings constituted one way in which ***zoku*** broached ***ga*** in the modern novel.

Whether one considers sight as a cultural universal which varies little between cultures, or as a culturally produced and historically conditioned artifact, the near universality of visual metaphors would appear to be difficult to gainsay. Martin Jay, in the introduction to his well-documented exposition on visuality in twentieth-century thought, cites studies supporting the physiological and developmental pre-eminence of sight over the other senses. The eye, for example, possesses "some eighteen times more nerve endings than the cochlear nerve of the ear," is endowed with a superior capacity to transfer data from without to the brain, and "at a rate of assimilation far greater than that of

any other sense organ."[1] Vision has been closely linked with mental development, particularly, linguistic development. Researchers, for example, have offered strong evidence showing the development of the sense of sight to be closely related to language acquisition. Sight and language capability seem to "come into their own at approximately the same moment of maturation."[2] "The ability to visualize something internally is said to be closely linked with the ability to describe it verbally. Verbal and written descriptions create highly specific mental images. . . . The link between vision, visual memory, and verbalization can be quite startling," conclude the authors of a recent work on human perception.[3]

Vision played a prominent role as an important metaphor in the history of western philosophical thought from the time of Plato. It became a particularly dominant theme in the second half of the seventeenth century with the writings of Locke and Descartes, and remained so throughout the Enlightenment. The growth of science, and the use of the eye as an organ of empirical investigation, confirmed vision as "the primary means of obtaining knowledge of the world."[4] As Jay proposes, the magnitude of that role can be appreciated when we consider the many ways in which twentieth century critiques of the dominance of rationalism and instrumental reason since the time

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[1] Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes, The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 6.

[2] Ibid., 8.

[3] Robert Rivlin and Karen Gravelle, *Deciphering the Senses: the Expanding World of Human Perception* (New York: 1984), 53, quoted in Jay, 8.

[4] Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense. Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 27.

of the Enlightenment have been couched in an "antiocularcentric discourse."

If we turn our attention to Japan do we not find a similar privileging of the sense of sight and metaphors of vision in refined cultural activities which we may characterize as **ga**, and this, from earliest historical times onward? The classical culture of ancient Japan was continental, Chinese in origin, and tied to Chinese script. It has been often asserted that a visual, as opposed to an aural, emphasis normally occurs with a shift from an oral culture to one based on writing, as the written word comes to supplant the spoken word as the source of knowledge and authority.[5] In the case of a literary culture based on Chinese characters, such an emphasis upon visuality was arguably especially pronounced because of the iconographic nature of the Chinese character, and the concise, disassociative word units of Chinese syntax, which promote the foregrounding of distinct visual images, particularly in poetry.

Within the high culture imported from the continent, visual practices employing the two eyes of the body and visual metaphors alluding to the eye of the mind were found, among other places, in Buddhist rituals practiced by members of the aristocracy. Shingon Buddhism, brought to Japan in the early ninth century by Kūkai, introduced the practice of gazing and meditating upon mandala images and Sanskrit syllables in complex visualization exercises. The centrality of vision in these higher cultural practices becomes apparent when one considers the essential role that visuality played in disciplines of spiritual improvement. Seeing, for example, was of primary importance

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5 Two well known works on the subject are Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1967) and Marshal McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: the Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

in the large-scale Shingon rituals performed for public benefit in which attention was focused upon the display of a new mandala or the viewing of a secret Buddhist image. So significant was the act of visual observation that "simply to watch the ritual from a distance [was] considered to bring merit,"[6] and served in itself as a form of initiation into the religious mysteries. Nor was the importance accorded to seeing limited to the elaborate rituals of esoteric Shingon. Tendai Buddhism, introduced in the tenth century by Saichō, came to be known as *shikan-shū*, the *shikan* sect that accorded primacy of place to the practice of "tranquillity and insight." The characters of *shikan* mean, literally, stop *(shi)* and look *(kan). Kan,* glossed as "seeing, spectacle, appearance, view, and contemplation," signified the purpose of 'stopping the mind' (attaining tranquillity), which was, namely, to 'see within.' The *shikan* practitioner meditated by focusing his/her gaze upon the tip of the nose. Physical sight led to spiritual sight as the adept was led to a sequence of contemplations: the contemplation of kindness in order to do away with hatred and resentment; the contemplation of the limitations of the realms of existence in order to overcome belief in an ego; and lastly, the contemplation of the emptiness of all dharmas. Vision continued to occupy primacy of place as a central metaphor in Zen Buddhist thought of the thirteenth century, when expressions such as "eye of the dharma" and "awakening of the dharma eye" were evoked to allude to the inexpressible experience of enlightenment.

The emphasis on vision metaphors in meditation later also appeared in Neo-Confucian teachings, wherein the practice of

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6 Taiko Yamasaki, *Shingon. Japanese Esoteric Buddhism.* Translated and adapted by Richard and Cynthia Peterson. Edited by Yasuyoshi Morimoto and David Kidd (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1988), 154.

observation *(kakubutsu* or inspection) of the external world led to the apprehension of universal, transcendent principles *(ri).* In the modern era this tradition of gaining insight into an existential reality within by closely and thoughtfully observing the phenomenal reality without resurfaced among men of letters in a cultural practice associated with a higher order of mentality: namely, the production of the purest of pure literature *(junbungaku),* the *shinkyō shōsetsu.* Here we should note that the *kyō* of *shinkyō* is written with the first character of the compound *kyōgai,* an important term in Buddhist meditation traditions which referred to one's sphere (world) of perception: i.e. that which lies within one's capacity to perceive, and to the object of consciousness. The graph *kyō,* meaning border or frontier, points to the area of the mind to be explored in meditation and disclosed through the practice of composing *shinkyō shōsetsu,* namely, the hitherto undiscovered, undisclosed part of the interior self lying beyond the boundary of habitual consciousness.[7]

Might not the extraordinarily positive reception given to the work that is arguably Japan's most famous *shinkyō shōsetsu,* written by *"(jun)bungaku no kamisama,"* Shiga Naoya himself,

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[7] Irmela Hijiya-Kirschnereit and Janet Walker address the influence of Buddhist intellectual traditions in *shishōsetsu* writing in Hijiya-Kirschnereit, *Rituals of Self-Revelation: Shishōsetsu as Literary Genre and Socio-Cultural Phenomenon* (Cambridge and London: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University Press, 1996) and in Walker, *The Japanese Novel of the Meiji Period and the Ideal of Individualism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). Hijiya-Kirschnereit finds a parallel between Buddhism's focus upon the mental attitude of the individual and its teaching of the acceptance of things "as they really are" *(akirame)* and the aesthetic of the *shishōsetsu,* which strives to achieve "harmony between the self and the world." (Hijiya-Kirschnereit, 311, 318). Walker links the "Buddhist mode of seeing the individual" with the focus on the inner life of the individual in *shishōsetsu* writing (116-117).

be due in part to this long tradition of valorizing vision as a means leading to the acquisition of higher insight? In "Kinosaki nite" the protagonist, identified with the author, is situated in a series of visual fields. Through a series of discrete acts of observation and contemplation of phenomenal reality he proceeds by stages to the border region lying between life and death and thus to a higher state of insight.

Borrowing Konishi Jin'ichi's definition of **ga** as the attainment of a consummate form,[8] we might say that "Kinosaki nite" embodies the essence of **ga** in *junbungaku* prose. In its purity of form it has become a classic in twentieth-century Japanese literature. The short, lucidly crafted piece is characterized by scenes constructed of vivid eidetic images that lead to the direct intuitive apprehension of insights lying beyond the instrumental use of language. The clarity of its visual focus conveyed through a sculpted language has made it a model for later *shinkyō shōsetsu,* many of which appear to have been significantly influenced by the role of the eye in "Kinosaki nite," and this in spite of occasional tendencies to counter the compelling authority of the "Shiga gaze" by inserting elements of irony and humor. In Ozaki Kazuo's "Mushi no iro iro" ("This and That about Bugs" 1948), for instance, a recumbent invalid, confined to his futon on the floor of his sickroom, invests the passage of time with significance by engaging in (playful) ocular practices as he focuses day after day upon the spiders on the ceiling above him (reversing the direction of the gaze in "Kinosaki nite," where the convalescing protagonist looks down upon the bees below him).

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8 Jin'ichi Konishi, *A History of Japanese Literature, Volume One. The Archaic and Ancient Ages.* trans. Aileen Gatten and Nicholas Teele, ed. Earl Miner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 58.

Do other *shinkyō shōsetsu* foreground the visual through the primacy accorded the act of seeing and/or the predominance of their visual images? Does the tendency to reify a remembered past contribute to the development of a genre in which the visual sense is paramount? It would appear that memory in many *shinkyō shōsetsu* is encoded in primarily visual imagery. Memory is spatialized. Through recalled mental pictures of the scenes of childhood, adolescence and early adulthood a world is brought into being. The past comes alive through visualizations of persons and events in physical settings.

We are not distracted from these visual images, and the truths revealed through their surfaces, by a distinctive, colloquial voice that calls attention to itself. Nor do these texts foreground competing voices. They are self-centered and monological, and divested of "overtly colloquial features that might unduly personalize [them] and thus undermine [their] omniscient authority." [9]

As a contrast to the visual imagery, the monologic voice, and the quiescent tone of *shinkyō shōsetsu* (and many other modern Japanese novels) one might cite the oral, polyphonic texture of Uno Kōji's *parodic shishōsetsu.* Unlike the composed, balanced stability of a "Kinosaki nite," which foregrounds objects visually perceived in space, the text of ""Kura no naka"" is shifting and unstable as it moves to the rhythm of spontaneous speech unfolding in time.

> Soshite, watakushi wa, shichiya ni ikō to omoitachimashita. Watakushi ga shichiya ni ikō to iu no

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[9] The neutralizing or concealment of the speaking subject as a strategy for asserting the omniscient, impersonal authority of the written word in modern fiction is discussed by James Fujii in *Complicit Fictions. The Subject in the Modern Japanese Prose Narrative* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 110-111.

wa, shichimotsu o dashi ni ikō to iu no de wa arimasen. Watakushi ni wa sukoshi mo sonna yoyū no kane wa nai no desu. To itte, shichimotsu o ire ni iku no de mo arimasen. Watakushi wa ima shichi ni ireru ichimai no kimono mo hitotsu no shinamono mo motanai no desu. Sore bakari ka, gen ni ima watakushi ga mi ni tsuketeiru kimono made shichimotsu ni natte iru no desu. [10]

And so I made up my mind--I was going to the pawnshop. When I say I was going to the pawnshop I don't mean that I was going to redeem something I had pawned. I don't have that kind of money. And I didn't want to go there to pawn something. I don't have anything to pawn anymore, not even a single kimono. Not only that, but the kimono I'm wearing is already in hock.

Again and again, the narrative breaks down and the first person speaker steps to the fore and calls attention to the act of narration as he disparages his own efforts to narrate a story.

And so I thought about going to the pawnshop. As I said earlier, I thought of it after this year's summer airing. . . At last my story has come back to its beginning. "Isn't that a way to lend it importance, though? To make it seem as if what will come next will really be interesting? Don't be misled. It's little else but the woman in me, whining, complaining, and bumbling on from behind a manly mask. Anyway, please continue to listen. And so I went to the pawnshop . . . .[11]

Stimulated by the sound of his own voice, the speaker goes on, digressing on this topic and that, loading his speech with *soshite, sore kara, to itte, sore bakari ka,* and other such markers signifying that more words will follow. Multiple voices enter

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10 *Uno Kōji zenshū,* ed. Shibukawa Gyō et al. vol. 1 (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha. 1972), 61.
11 Ibid., 74.

the space of the text as *watakushi*'s monologue gives way to conversations with the clerks of the pawnshop in which his kimono are stored, the divorced sister of the pawnshop owner, and other women. These multi-voiced interactions foreground the performative quality of the narration, a quality further underscored as direct authorial addresses to *'shokun'* (gentlemen) inscribe not just a reader but readers into the text as members of a listening audience. In such a manner the text continues to be born. It ends, unexpectedly, only when of a sudden the speaker notices that his presumed audience has gotten up and walked out.

If "Kinosaki nite" is the standard bearer of **ga** in *shishōsetsu* literature, we may choose to think of ""Kura no naka"" as lying at the opposite end of the **ga-zoku** spectrum. Uno's garrulous narratives with their stops and starts, exclamations and outbursts, and unformed, open-ended quality bring to the text the language of the common people as they speak it; in short, a quality which we may call ***zoku*** (as Konishi describes it: [*zoku* belongs] to a world without precedents; a world without fixed form.")[12] The feeling of warmth and intimacy projected into the text through the colloquial expressions and the rambling quality of the long, winding sentences filled with trains of qualifying clauses evoke the life of language itself, the spoken language that carries the voice and vitality of the people as life goes on, generation after generation.

To narrate ""Kura no naka"" Uno borrowed from a vehicle closely associated with the living voice of the common Japanese,

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12 Konishi continues: "[*Zoku* writings] may come with a strange roughness. . . with unsettling darkness; with frivolous originality; or with raw urgency. . . . The negative does not characterize the whole of that *[zoku]* world, however. Exuberant health, youth and fresh purity, freedom of expression, and more are its positive qualities." (Ibid., 59).

namely *rakugo,* and more particularly, Ōsaka-style *rakugo.*[13] The familiar *rakugo* world of *nagaya* tenements, shopkeepers, concubines, alluring female musicians, and wastrels surfaces in ""Kura no naka"," whose settings are the enclosures of Yamaji's lodging house, the pawnshop that holds the rights to his clothes, and the pawnshop *kura* (storehouse) in which his kimono are stored.

Structural components of "Kura no naka" parallel the composition of *rakugo.* There is an introductory section (the *makura* or pillow in *rakugo*), in which the first person narrator steps to the fore and introduces himself to the audience and captures its attention with light comic chat. *Watakushi,* like the *hanashika* in the *makura,* introduces the general theme of his story, his love of clothes. His speech is a mixture of polite honorific formulae, in deference to his listeners, and self-deprecation *(watakushi wa myō na kibun de, ima ni dandan owakari ni naru deshō ga).*[14] Some *hanashika* engage in discourse about *rakugo* itself in the introductory *makura.* [15] *Watakushi* talks about being a novelist, both in the introductory chat section, and later in the body of the presentation *(hondai).* As in *rakugo,* there are disclaimers in the introductory section as

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[13] While the better known *rakugo* style associated with Edo/Tokyo is fast-paced and rhythmic, the Ōsaka style of *rakugo,* with which Uno's narrative has more in common, is characterized by a slower, more meandering pace. This quality, and the tendency toward involved episodes in which the characters become caught up in a tangle of complicated emotions, is characteristic of the Ōsaka narrative, according to Yamamoto Kenkichi, *Shishōsetsu sakka ron* (Tokyo: Shinbisha, 1966), 85.

[14] UKZ: 1: 63.

[15] One famous *hanashika* who does this is Katsura Bunchō, according to Lorna Brau in her study, "Kimono Comics: The Performance Culture of Rakugo Storytelling," Vol. II (New York University Dissertation, 1994), 582.

watakushi warns his reader not to expect too much in the way of a story.

Although the persona of the narrator of the *makura* and the *hondai* may change in *rakugo*, in ""Kura no naka"" it remains the same. Nonetheless "Kura no naka" is, like *rakugo*, multivocal, with reproductions of conversations between *watakushi* and the pawnshop clerks, maids, the divorcee, and various other women in his life.

Like *rakugo* and other Japanese performative arts, "Kura no naka" follows a *jo ha kyū* pattern of development, proceeding from leisurely chat in the introduction, to more involved narration as *watakushi* describes the various women associated with the kimonos he has pawned, and climaxing in an accelerated tempo toward the end as he recounts the manner in which his relationship with the divorcee which he has so carefully cultivated falls apart. "Kura no naka"'s sudden ending might be likened to the "falling off a mountain" action favored by some *hanashika.* [16] Like the *rakugo* "falling off a mountain" *sage,* its final words: *"Oya, mō kikite ga hitori mo inaku narimashita ne.* "Hey, the listeners have all gone!"[17] brings about a strong closure introduced by a brief statement deftly inserted at the end (the words are enclosed in parenthesis in the text). One may also liken "Kura no naka"'s ending, which punctures the illusion that *watakushi* has been addressing an audience, to the *totan ochi* ("just at that moment"), in which a trick is revealed in an unexpected way at the last moment, or to the *sakasa ochi,* in which a statement introduced at the beginning is turned upside down in a strange manner, or to a combination

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16 Blau, 153.
17 UKZ: 1: 91.

of the two.[18] The *sage* of "Kura no naka" demolishes the enabling construct of the performative situation. It is, as the *rakugo* artist Katsura Beishō once described the *sage*, "an act of demolition."[19]

Rakugo-like too are the narrator's exaggerated disclaimers of performance, which become parodies of humility ("What am I trying to say anyway? This doesn't even make sense to me"), and the formulaic repetition, *soshite shichiya ni ikō to omoimashita,* which makes the speech seem more 'life-like' (mirroring the repetitiveness of actual conversation), while breaking the flow of narration and framing the new topic to follow.

As in *rakugo* there are shifts in mood and tempo for the sake of variety. One *hanashika* described in a study of contemporary *rakugo* is known to recite in increasingly longer sentences as he comes to the end of the *makura* and nears the beginning of the *hondai;*[20] Uno's narrator does something similar at the end of his introductory section. He describes in long involuted sentences the kimono hanging on a neighbor's clothesline, before he launches into the story proper with the conclusion, "I ran straightaway to the pawnshop."

Rakugo recitation incorporates the kabuki *kōjō* --a long flowery declamatory speech in which a character steps to the fore and advertises himself or tries to persuade the listener to adopt a given perspective on a matter. In "Kura no naka" the *kōjō* take the form of a series of parodic, self-presentations; *watakushi*, a novelist by profession, stops the action of the narrative to

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18 A descriptive listing of types of *ochi* or *sage* can be found in Heinz Morioka and Miyoko Sasaki, *Rakugo The Popular Narrative Art of Japan* (Cambridge and London: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University Press, 1970), 70-81.

19 Blau, 150.

20 Kokontei Shinshō, described in Blau, 139.

display different sides of his character for inspection by the audience, as he talks about his love of clothes, his weakness for smells, and his love of women.

"Kura no naka", like *rakugo*, is a narrative about talking, in which various oral performances in the text mirror and highlight the verbal performance of the structure as a whole. *Watakushi* tells how he cajoled the pawnshop clerks into granting him permission to enter the storehouse to air his pawned clothes. He describes how he used verbal persuasion to get his landlady to give him a more desirable room in the rooming house. There is even a section in which he tells a story about a *yose* performance which he attended as a youngster when he was infatuated with a female *gidayū*.

As in *rakugo*, humor and dramatic interest are generated by a display of linguistic competence run amuck. Carried away by the sound of his own voice, Yamaji oversteps the bounds of caution and carries on about a hysterical woman he used to know as he performs for the benefit of the divorcee whom he is attempting to seduce. His eloquence backfires when the divorcee, who has been sent home on account of her hysteria, takes affront at mention of the word *hysterī and* terminates their relationship. The spoken language, a means of engendering narrative in conventional *shishōsetsu*, is highlighted as subject in Uno's performance, in which language takes over as an irresistible force that carries the narrator away.

Kanji are not foregrounded in Uno's texts. His heavily clause-laden sentences look like long strings of *hiragana* on the page. In contrast to the narrative in Kinosaki nite, which proceeds from clear cut visual images to a state of transcendent insight, "Kura no naka" moves according to a vaguer, more perturbing, more vital introduction of colloquial sounds. Its movement is circular, and its protagonist, and its readers

(listeners) are no wiser at the end of the narrative than they were at the beginning.

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Heian aristocrats, pursuing standards of elegance and refinement **(ga)**, immersed themselves in a world of play. As Konishi reminds us, ". . . these poets were never to forget an attitude of play *(asobi)* in every aspect of their life, including poetry. There was in this an inclination to scorn as rustic those who knew no better than to be dead serious, taking in everything with an open mouth."[21]

Uno's play was of the *zoku* variety, an *asobi* arising from the life of the common people--the vulgar--rooted in the earth. Like wildflowers in the fields his linguistic play, uncultivated, runs rampant. There is an earthy recognition of the things that make plants grow in those fields. His allusions to bodily emissions include references to nightsoil, urine, menses, and mucous. The senses evoked are frequently the 'lower order' senses, such as smell and tactility.[22]

Sounds are foregrounded not only through the garrulousness of the narrator, but by the noises described: the sensuous whispering sound of a drawer filled with kimonos as it is opened and closed; the slapping sound of slippers; the clattering of dishes; the voices of kitchen maids chattering and singing country songs. Other stories that Uno wrote are notable for the sounds of their crowds: villagers rehearsing for a festival;

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21 Konishi, 414.

22 For an interesting study on the role of olfactory symbolism, and the decline of the sense of smell with the rise of industrial capitalism and the emergence of sight as the primary sense in Western civilization, see Classen, *Worlds of Sense.* See also Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* translated by Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The M.I.T. Press, 1968), especially Chapter Six, "Images of the Material Bodily Lower Stratum," for a discussion of the role of images associated with the 'lower body" in carnivalesque literature.

matsuri processions; a claque calling out the name of a kabuki actor in a Dōtombori theater; a throng of fans cheering a popular movie actor in a public park.

And when the sense of sight is foregrounded, it is often compromised. Vision is distorted. Visual illusions are produced by atmospheric conditions, a hazy state of mind, or by simple visual technology such as dioramas. Often the desire to see is parodied. Obstacles of a humorous nature intrude between the would-be seer and the landscapes, people, and objects he strains to see. On yet other occasions Uno plays with scopophilia, making his protagonists pathologically shy of being seen.[23]

Uno's parodic voice-centered *shishōsetsu* were written at a time when many novelists had retreated from social concerns and retired into a private interior space of self-reflection. The spoken voices positioned centerplace in his writing, and the laughter they invited, were highly social in nature, with the potential to break through the self-imposed isolation of *shishōsetsu* writing. We may regard his work was as important to the vitality of the *shishōsetsu* genre as *zoku* is to the healthy diversification and development of culture in general. His stories, in which a patently clownish author donned a mask of bogus sincerity, gave back to his literary colleagues a comic image of themselves, reminding them, and us, of that which Antonin Artaud and Victor Turner knew well: that without laughter and play a people will perish--and this is as true of a complex society emerging into the modern world as it is of the most obscure aboriginal band."[24]

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[23] See my translation, *Love of Mountains* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

[24] Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986) 128.