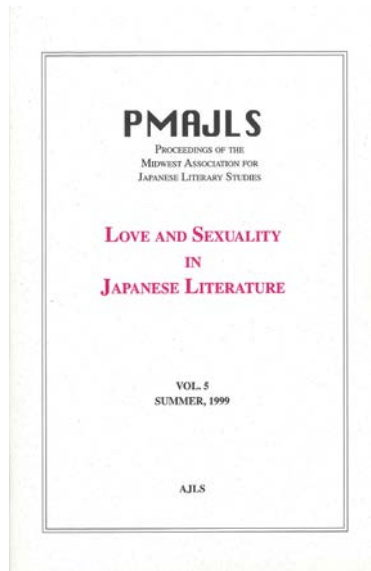


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THE IDEOLOGY OF REBELLION AND “ANTI-SOCIAL SEX” IN ŌE AND ŌSHIMA

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In light of current domestic events, we know, only too well, that when the written word or the visual image addresses the subject of sex, it sells. Yet the nefarious roles of capital, kitsch, and market segmentation were, no doubt, less transparent during the early sixties in Tokyo than now, during the doldrums that ensued in the wake of the violent *Anpo* protests, political assassinations, and general cultural ennui. When it comes to theorizing the significance of the sixties in Japan, or even in America, there is a common yet banal ideology that the corporate sphere—or, the forces that built Japan Inc.—mysteriously co-opted the critical space of resistance embodied by the counterculture that sought to break any and every social taboo. Yet consumption and youth culture, as we now know, are intimately related. Further, it is all too easy to conflate counterculture and youth culture, the latter being foundational to the birth and growth of the postwar culture industry.

We must not forget a few fundamentals about the sixties in Japan. The number of television sets in Japan, in September, 1958, was 1.2 million. By 1970, 95% of all homes had a cathode ray tube. In turn, Anderson and Richie tell us that by 1970 no less than eighty percent of all film production costs were devoted to the *pinku eiga*, that is soft-core porn.¹ The Golden Age of Japanese cinema, was, in their view, essentially finished. Meanwhile a year later, the realm of serious literature was substantially undermined by the kitschy suicide of Mishima Yukio. Recently, Dennis Washburn has written an article on Mishima and kitsch where he convincingly argues for a reassessment of Mishima's productions in light of their complicity with the Culture Industry, and their capacity to sell as exoticised kitsch in international markets.² Washburn's article has provided me with the seed of inspiration for this paper. I wish to address such questions as: how did it impulse towards kitsch and pornography infiltrate the realms of serious literature and film? What are the

¹ Anderson, Joseph L. and Richie, Donald. (1982) *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

² Washburn, Dennis. (1998) "Structures of Emptiness: Kitsch, Nihilism, and the Inauthentic in Mishima's Aesthetics". University of Michigan, Center for Japanese Studies: Monograph Series. *Studies in Japanese Literature: Festschrift for Edwin McClellan*.

origins of that prototypical icon of the sixties, the hip rebel youth who is utterly at odds with the social and political order of Japan Inc.? What are the relationships between the birth of hip counterculture within youth culture and the construction of the culture industry? In short, was the powerful desire for a democratic revolution in the fifties, as Koschmann has detailed in his book on postwar intellectuals, liquidated by the cathode rays emanating from that idiot box?³

In this paper I will present a comparative analysis of the representations of “anti-social sex” in a film by Ōshima Nagisa and a text by Ōe Kenzaburō. I apologize for the awkward title of this paper for the term “anti-social sex/hanshakaiteki na sei” is not in my vocabulary. It is Ōe’s neologism. By 1959, Ōe, ever the theorist, introduced the opposing subject positions of the political human and the sexual human. Many of Ōe’s initial essays focus on the theme of sexuality in the contemporary world: from the 1959 “Warera no sei no sekai” to the 1963 “Gendai bungaku to sei.” For Ōe, the political human has a healthy erotic unconscious due to the fact that a stable relationship with the state is established through voting and actively participating in the shaping of the political order, that is, how things are supposed to work in an ideal democracy. In contrast, the sexual human has a deranged erotic unconscious due to her incapacity to participate in a healthy relationship with the political order. In other words, vestigial fascism and Cold War nuclear terrorism breed multiple forms of erotic perversion, that is, anti-social sex. By July of 1959, Ōe published the highly controversial novel *Warera no jidai* (*Our Age*); this represented his initial attempt to flesh out this particular binary opposition. Five months later in December of 1959, in one of his more uncannily intuitive essays entitled “Warera no sei no sekai” (*Our World of Sex*), Ōe framed this binary:

Political humans stand in opposition to and in competition with “others.” They will either defeat the “others” or they will force them to assimilate into the institutions of political humans and renounce their identities as “others.” In accomplishing this, political humans repeat this process with those who continue to confront them. Once they are eliminated from this pursuit, they are no longer political humans.

On the other hand, sexual humans neither confront nor compete with “others.” They not only refuse to relate to “others,”

³ Koschmann, J. Victor. (1996) *Revolution and Subjectivity in Postwar Japan*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

but regard them as essentially non-existent. Hence sexual beings are never “others” to anyone.⁴

Despite my reluctance to engage this much abused term—“other”—I find this curious binary to be especially significant in investigating the milieu of the early sixties. This is so in part due to the interesting valences between Ōe’s “sexual human” and the nature of commodified dissidence and hip youth counterculture movements in the early sixties. After the Anpo protests of 1960, Ōe was convinced that all Japanese, but especially the youth, were made into sexual beings. Needless to say, fascist and sado-masochistic impulses (anti-social sex) come naturally to the sexual human.

Both Ōshima’s film *Seishun zankoku monogatari* (1960) and Ōe’s text *Seiteki ningen* (1963) focus on a singularly distinct public archetype: the hip rebel youth, who stands at odds with society at large, requiring incessant distraction and taboo-breaking pleasures. I intend to investigate the degenerate yet primal forms of eroticism that provided a foundation, albeit a shaky one, for the subjectivity of the hip youth. A relationship between these two figures was established since Ōe’s Akutagawa prize-winning story “Shiiku” was made into a film by Ōshima in 1961, after leaving the Shōchiku company. Before leaving Shōchiku, however, Ōshima made the film that is translated as “Cruel Story of Youth.”

The film commences with the heroine, Makoto, and her girlfriend hitching a ride in a car with an older salaryman, because automobiles are more fun than trains. After dropping off her girlfriend the man then drives Makoto to a dark alley where he attempts to rape her. Enter stage left Kiyoshi, a skinny Japanese James Dean, who beats up the salaryman and demands money for not going to the police. They take his money and spend the night on the town. Next we are shown documentary footage of the student protests in Seoul and Tokyo, establishing that the protagonist is associated with, but disillusioned by, the activism. The couple watch the parade, and then take off. The next scene, at 7:45 minutes into the film, establishes the real subject of this story—sex. It is a scene that for me is nauseating and horrifying in its misogyny, inviting the question: “does this fit under the category of anti-social sex?” (View clip at this point).

This scene, in my view, certainly matches anything Beat Takashi or Quentin Tarantino have created. It is what today we call “date-rape.” Fur-

⁴ Ōe, Kenzaburō. (1965) *Genshuku na tsunawatari: zen-esseishū dai-ichi*. vol. 1, Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū-sha, pp. 227–229.

ther, I have a strong hunch, but no direct evidence, that Ōe's category had an important role in shaping the contours of this script. Afterwards, Makoto asks Kiyoshi why he did this to her. His reply: "Because at first I was angry." She asks "angry at what?" His reply: "everything." He is a rebel without a cause or a clue.

Subsequently, it is made clear that he is a second or third-year college student while she is still in high school. He lives in a grungy apartment while she lives at home. It doesn't take long for her dysfunctional nuclear family to discern the affair. It is her older sister who attempts to intervene, and it is this relationship between the sisters that proves to be the most interesting wellspring of irony in the movie.

Not that the relationship between Kiyoshi and Makoto is uninteresting, but rather is simply typical hip sixties decadence. Unable to voice any political dissidence, they turn to escapist nihilism. The viewer's sympathy is transferred to the young woman who is torn between her desire to experience "first love" and her shame for willingly assisting her boyfriend in criminal misdeeds. They continue to extort salaryman, and then party afterwards at the Kuro Neko bar. The soundtrack alternates between bebop jazz and American rock-a-billy. They drive his motorcycle into the ocean and make love on a beach. She discovers that she is pregnant. He demands an abortion.

It is at the abortion doctor's office where Makoto discovers that her older sister had an illicit affair with none other than this abortion doctor when she was a young girl. This invites the perennial question: Is youth wasted on the young? (as Keats put it). The doctor declares: "Young people indulge every desire to express their rage against the world, and in so doing, destroy the relations and solidarity amongst themselves." Kiyoshi of course bristles at this suggestion, retorting that they have already submitted to the establishment. Shortly after the abortion is completed, Kiyoshi and Makoto are arrested. In the interrogation room, the police officer declares: "In spite of your theory of right and wrong you like money, money, money. You're no different than the salaryman that you rob. You use it for pleasure, food, drink, play." In other words, the hip rebel is nothing more than first rate consumer, a pawn to capital.

This is no doubt the central irony of the film. Once they are bailed out, there is little plot left. The only option is to drive home the nihilistic import of their lifestyle. Ōshima completes the film with a split screen, Makoto jumps out of a car she is traveling in, and Kiyoshi wrecks his motorcycle. It is perhaps, since they are utterly alienated from each other, a kind of anti-love suicide. Nonetheless, the film is a classic

in terms of representing the birth of hip, rebel youth culture in Japan and its implicit collusion with consumption and “kane, kane, kane.”

Several years later Ōe wrote an essay about the state of Japanese youth in the late fifties and early sixties:

There is a general preoccupation amongst young Japanese to attempt to escape from their country. Some have already been living as exiles within Japan. For example, they have rejected Japanese films and accepted foreign films as though they were their own. They come out of the theater with the gait and facial expressions of foreigners; they indulge in these moments to escape from their identity as Japanese. Further, they make every effort to prolong such moments: on the Ginza, as well as at summer resorts such as Kamakura and Karuizawa, the fad is to find ways not to be Japanese. This “summer-resort lifestyle” is brought back to the cities by the young people, who maintain this year round and refuse to return to their real lives. . .

Film directors have come up with a shameful invention in the hope of winning back their audiences: they capture and present this “summer resort lifestyle” as if it were real life. They have done this by appropriating the techniques of the latest French films. By choosing not to adopt the realism that the directors such as Imai Tadashi have refined, these other directors have also become exiles.⁵

Although we will shortly remove Ōe from his moral high horse, it is interesting that one of the original portrayers of hip, rebel youth lifestyles, has suddenly turned around and disparage this so-called summer resort lifestyle. One wonders how Ōshima or Ōe’s late, great brother-in-law, Itami Jūzō would have responded to such criticism, or what they would have said upon reading Ōe’s short novel called *Seiteki ningen*, which has been translated by Luk Van Haute as *J*.⁶

J is the name of the protagonist who, irony of ironies, is a film director who may well have been modeled after Ōe’s brother-in-law. I refuse to speculate on this biographical reference out of respect for the recently deceased.

The text has two halves which are awkwardly connected. The first part commences with a group of seven people—*J*, his wife Mitsuko, *J*’s

⁵ *Sengo seinen no Nihon fūki*, OZE, vol. 1, p. 103.

⁶ Ōe, Kenzaburō. (1996) *Seventeen and J*. New York, NY: Blue Moon Books.

sister, a middle-aged cameraman, a young poet, a twenty year old actor, and an eighteen year old jazz singer—who are riding in a big ivory Jaguar (a cool car indeed). Most of them are drunk, some are naked. They are going to J's summer resort house to make a radical film entitled "Inferno." The film never gets made, in part because they spend too much time having an orgy. Their illicit activities are discovered by the local villagers who then gather in a mob to denounce these Tokyo celebrities as evil sprits who must get out of town. The writing is, frankly, of poor quality, and it reads almost like a television script for a soft porn movie on Showtime. The dialogue is forced and the depictions of sexuality are basically inflected with a transparent pornographic gaze. There are plenty of salacious terms like *penisu*, written in katakana, to assault the reader's eyes. The central problem for J is his continuing guilt over the suicide of his first wife, who found out he was sleeping with "that filthy foreign faggot," her sister's English teacher. J, it would seem, is a confused bisexual.

But in part two, his purported fondness for men is displaced for a fondness for what is called his *chikan kurabu* (subway perverts club). Before elaborating on this, let me provide some context. In early 1963 Ōe wrote an essay on his interest in sex criminals. He had been reading *The Encyclopedia of Murders* by Colin Wilson and Pat Pitman, and writes the following:

In the criminology of today is a crime defined as something committed by a psychopath, or is it seen as some abnormal incident perpetrated by a normal person. . . I am interested in sex criminals, especially in rapist-murderers and pathetic molesters. I am trying to decide whether to treat them as saints who bear crosses, or as ordinary people who live as sexual beings at certain moments.

I remember the strange inspiration I felt while reading a newspaper report of a molester who was arrested on a Tokyo subway at the time of the *Anpo* struggle. Here was a middle-aged employee of some company who could care less whether his country would sign a military treaty, or whether President Eisenhower would be coming to Tokyo, or about the fact that a student had actually been murdered in the struggle. He was simple concentrating on risking his life in the act of touching the

buttocks of a young woman on the subway. We may just find the Marquis de Sade of the sixties on the Tokyo subways.⁷

Ergo, the *chikan*, that infamous icon of the perversion within urban life. Part two commences in the subway station of the Diet building, where J rescues an old man who has been caught assaulting a young woman. He turns out to be a retired politician, and the two strike up a friendship with a young poet who also shares with them this perverse interest. Their joint efforts at achieving public orgasm, their dogmatic faith in the primacy of action over thought, their philosophic rationalizations about what drives a *chikan* to do what he does: all of these things constitute most of the plot. There is no need to go into detailed reportage here, you can read it yourself if you so desire. It has after all, been listed as a Quality Paperback Club book-of-the-month. In the final scene, J has promised his wealthy corporate father that he will finally join his company, but at the last moment has a change of heart and, at last, is finally caught. To quote:

At once he saw himself as someone who was taking a step forward with no possibility of retreat. A new life, a new life with no deception. With low moans sounding in his blazing head he climaxed. All outside clamor sprang to life again. Sure and ineradicably staining the woman's coat, his semen was real, a piece of evidence. The ten million strangers of Tokyo glared at J with hostile eyes. "J!" they seemed to call. Fear struggled against bliss in a wave that rose up interminably and engulfed him. Countless arms had seized him. Overcome with fear, J began to cry. He considered his tears to be his compensation for those his wife had cried the night she killed herself.⁸

I find the fatal flaw of the text to be that the reader's trust in the narrator is radically broken, yet according to Susan J. Napier, Mishima was quite impressed with this final scene, noting the resemblance to the Marquis de Sade who remained happily unrepentant throughout his imprisonment. We can recall that in 1965 Mishima wrote a play about Madame de Sade. It would seem that both writers found a good deal of sado-masochism in the contemporary cultural milieu.

⁷ *Sei hanzaisha e no aisatsu*, OZE, vol. 1, p. 254.

⁸ J; p. 194.

Nonetheless, *Seiteki ningen*, is nothing more than extravagant kitsch. This is perhaps why Mishima liked it. At the time it was written, the trial over Lawrence's *Lady Chatterly's Lover* was capturing plenty of headlines, and Ōe himself has described his interest in the radical depictions in Baldwin, Mailer, Miller, and Wright. We can grant him this youthful indulgence in the course of Ōe's development of the theory of grotesque realism for which he will always be remembered.

Even so, the implied narrator of *Seiteki ningen* is unambiguously pandering to the lowest common denominator of literary value, as does, *Seishun zankoku monogatari*, in the insincere replication of that which is supposed to be authentic, in other words, kitsch. In short, here we have two of the leading cultural talents of the sixties appropriating the same set of strategies that are deployed within an advertising agency, or a pink film studio.

This brings us back to the myth of co-optation. It is all too obvious that the corporate sphere anticipated and structured the hip rebel consumer, and assisted in creating a space for this subject position within the culture industry. Far less salient, however, is the role played by major figures from "high culture" who sought to produce films and texts that were equally as collusive with the construction of the "summer-resort lifestyle" that endures to this day amongst a large number of adolescents and young adults, that is, the discourse of the cool.

Finally, what is the best antidote to the pathology of the *chikan*? In interviews with some victims, I have been told that the best solution is a very sharp sewing needle dug into the palm of the assailant, hopefully severing a tendon.