

Rostinsky, Joseph N.

Conceptual models and symbolic perception in Japanese gay text

Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty brněnské univerzity. Q, Řada teatrologická a filmologická. 2001, vol. 50, iss. Q4, pp. [143]-149

ISBN 80-210-2657-X

ISSN 1212-3358

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/114554>

Access Date: 03. 12. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

JOSEPH N. ROSTINSKY

CONCEPTUAL MODELS AND SYMBOLIC PERCEPTION IN JAPANESE GAY TEXT

The corpus of literature on gay and lesbian studies has recently amounted to a considerable quantity. That is why one might even assume that almost no stone of the dominant political construct has been left unturned in the process of inquiry. And yet, the very substance of a pragmatic role of gay and lesbian texts, as reflected in mass culture, and in particular outside the confines of the homoerotic societal context, has been insufficiently analyzed and evaluated. Even worse fares the assessment of the cross-gender cultural dependence, depicted for instance in the gay erotica, produced by female authors. The editors of the *Switch Hitters* (see bibliography), the collection of gay stories written by lesbians, and lesbian stories authored by gay men, have tried to some extent to redress the issue of a dyadic conflict of interests. With all the due respect to the initiative, undertaken by the editors, the publication has managed to elucidate only one aspect of the cross-gender dependence, especially as being proceeded along the lines of homoerotic cognition. The spectral otherness, defined as the normative constraints of heterosexual cross-gender dependence, has been by and large left out of the content focus.

The analysis presented here has been conceived as an alternative way of addressing the issue of gay textuality dependent on heterosexual authorship. In concrete terms it means that the gay literary production, as designed by straight/heterosexual women, is to be examined from the point of view of the reader's pragmatic perception. Conceptual models, as embedded in the structure of the text, as well as symbolic images, as perceived by the reader, are postulated so as to comprehend the aesthetic appeal of the gay male bonding for the professed straight/heterosexual female reader. This is then a case study of the uncommon Japanese cultural phenomenon: the pragmatic function of the homoerotic pornographic text in the service of the beatified normative sexuality.

The venerable topic of pornography has been subjected to all sorts of ideological twists, depending essentially on the person who happens to be in charge of a debate. More often than not, the ring of religious dogmatism resounds in the apocalyptic shrieks of those who condemn pornography (and especially its

homoerotic version), and wish, albeit in vain, to get rid of it once and for all. The intentions of zealots hardly ever come to lasting fruition, though. For all practical purposes, pornography has always played an important role in that widest possible spectrum of the aesthetic appreciation of the evanescent pleasure we refer to as beauty. To what degree, the corporeal eros and the intangible image of beauty correspond to each other; is indeed everybody's learned guess. However, the fact that these two components of human cognition do coexist in a symbiotic relationship, could hardly be denied. The arts of all the nations could provide an ample evidence.

In his seminal work on *Art and Pornography*, Morse Pekham purports that "the Japanese have created the greatest pornographic art, particularly in their prints (Pekham; 1969:276)." A mere look at the collection of *Shunga* (collection of Japanese traditional drawings) suffices in order for the reader to come to the conclusion that Japanese authors of pictorial pornography had rather indiscriminately portrayed both heterosexual and homoerotic coupling. The latter having been canonized in Japanese culture under the appellation of *nanshoku* (male color/sex).

Among the Japanese authors who have devoted a vast portion of their talent to the service and description of the homoerotic liaison, Ihara Saikaku (1642–1693) is considered to be the major figure. The idealized youth, the adolescent male beauty, referred to as *bishounen* (beautiful boy) surfaces in Japanese culture as a respectful model worthy of emulation not only by men, but also by women. He is not only "cute," physically attractive, but also well instructed in traditional arts, manners, and lofty feelings. He can thus win the heart and mind of many a man and a woman. Nonetheless, his customer would be as a rule another male, older, often socially respectable, and of sufficient means to be able to support his young and capricious lover. Indeed, beautiful boys as courtesans tended to be prohibitively expensive, and thus posed a serious threat of ruining financially many affluent merchants, as Ihara never fails to remind the reader in his stories.

The tradition of the Japanese homoerotic culture was abruptly terminated at the end of the nineteenth century by the Meiji government. The drastic political and economic reforms, pursued by the Japanese along the lines of the Western industrialization, were mostly accomplished under the auspices of the forbidding Christian dogma. Yet, to eradicate a tradition as old as *nanshoku* would have required a more drastic mode of repression than that the government edict could have exercised. As a result, the Japanese homoerotic culture has been able to survive in its pristine form and despite all the political and economic peripeteia until the present day. What used to be the exclusive love of boys (*nanshoku*) in Japan has been over the period of time amalgamated into a variety of homoerotic preferences which, as one might assume, could find their equivalent in other permissive societies. The only exception being the explicit cross-gender dependence, as practiced predominantly by heterosexual young women. That is to say that the contemporary Japanese gay text, produced by women, has undergone a pragmatic shift toward the reader who claims to be

a straight woman sympathetic to the gay course. Indeed, this cultural phenomenon appears to defy the inherent logic and purpose of the gay text. And yet, it is in this sphere of gay pornographic production where the Japanese woman seems to find an adequate imaginative space within which she can explore her own libidinous and romantic fancy.

The genre of the Japanese gay literature, written by women for female fans, falls essentially into three distinctive forms: girls' comics (*shoujou manga*), the aesthetic novel (*tanbishousetsu*), and the so-called "fanzines" (*doujinshi*), created by fans for other fans. Needless to say, the girls' (gay) comics seem to depict the most explicit type of iconic imagery. This is in principle based on *the syntax of montage* whose grammatical discourse system is common to the standardized lexicon of the Japanese *manga* (comics). Therefore, it is readily decipherable by the Japanese reader. (Foreigners attempting to read Japanese comics will frequently experience unsurmountable difficulties in interpreting the visual text.) Among the girls' magazines such titles as *June*, *Amour*, *Taboo*, *Egoist*, *Banish*, etc. seem to be especially popular with young Japanese women. In all these publications, serialized stories about handsome boys (*bishounen*) form the crux of the content. Adonic male characters, depicted as a rule as slim, long legged and androgynous, are usually in the process of establishing the bond of camaraderie which inadvertently leads to sexual relationship with other men. This process often resembles the hierarchy of heterosexual coupling. each partner is assigned either a passive or an active role to play. It is frequently the senior classmate in the high school (rarely a college student or a financially independent professional) who manages to ensnare his junior who, in turn, may have been already infatuated with his secret hero. In other words, the two sexually competitive partners profess to know each other rather superficially before their romance is allowed to develop. It is taken for granted that accidental encounters also happen, but only as exceptions to the general rule. The locale and the setting of the actualized sexual act progressively differ in order to sustain the reader's interest. However, the environment and circumstances of the gay romance are hardly ever exotic. Projected against the familiar, domesticated background, protagonists come out as more translucent models to be conceptualized by the female reader. Despite the romantic fabula, the girls' comics do not seem to employ the structural technique of "estrangement" so as to foreground the pivotal actor of the drama. That is why the participants in the homoerotic coupling appear to be placed on the equal metonymic level of *pars pro toto* where the part is equally representative of the whole semantic complex.

The only instance when the girls' comics may become dysfunctional in the sense of being linguistically incomprehensible, has to do with the verbal codification of the message. Occasionally, the *manga* text appears in a foreign language (especially in French, considered strangely enough as the most appropriate linguistic tool of amorous communication), which may pose some difficulties for the common Japanese reader whose knowledge of foreign tongues (other than English, that is to say) is very limited. The "foreign" text would then inevitably appear as "strange," incongruous for the given situation, and thus as the

incomprehensible "other" because the common linguistic code intermediating a sort of mutual understanding is virtually absent. The resultant semantic discrepancy seems to be important in that it provides enough blank space for generating a new meaning on the part of the imaginative, creative reader. Since the reader cannot employ the decoding linguistic mechanism, she may be forced to only extrapolate from the visual imagery (the symbolically familiar milieu), and thus generate yet "another" story, as it were.

The apparatus of symbolic perception operates only with familiar; imputed structural components of meaning. That is why the commonest type of sex, depicted in the girls' gay comics, happens to be the act of anal penetration. It often assumes the appearance of heterosexual rape. The difference, however, being that the gay rape, as presented in the homoerotic text, stands for a gradual intensification of love in the gay male bonding. The very prerequisite of this type of "benign" rape is the dreamlike atmosphere of cognitive fuzziness, induced sometimes by alcohol, or by opiates, unconsciously consumed. The attack of the rapist seems to occur at the moment of the victim's drowsiness, a momentary stupor when the conventional defenses of one's physical strength are at their lowest point. Yet, the raped male is never portrayed in the role of a victim. By the same token, the young rapist is never held responsible for his deed. Consequently, the very act of rape acquires in this way a rather positive connotation. Compared to the heterosexual concept of rape as crime, the gay rape, as romanticized in the Japanese girls' comics, denotes the inevitable act of sacrifice, self offering, as it were, for the sake of the desired happy ending.

The notion of sacrifice is frequently reinforced by the motif of "teaching," i.e., through the process of initiation. The one who instructs, initiates, becomes usually the active partner in the homoerotic coupling. The person instructed, initiated, as it were, assumes the submissive role, very much like in the pederastic relationship, practiced in the classical Greek society, as Bernard Sergent explains in his magisterial study on *Homosexuality in Greek Myth* (see bibliography). Yet, for the Japanese female reader, the closest parallel that might come to mind, appears to originate in the canon of the samurai's *bushidou* or in the proverbial male bonding in the Buddhist monastery. In each case, the senior not only instructs his junior, but also takes advantage of his inferior's sexual immaturity.

The motif of dominance occurs in a somewhat diluted form in the most extraordinary genre of the Japanese gay literature, that of the "fanzines." It is especially in this type of homoerotic text where the elements of parody and of the grotesque enter the world of girlish romance, and abrogate the seriousness of the girls' comics. The normative proportions of moral conventions are sometimes rather ironically inverted, and the popular straight/heterosexual (or sexually ambiguous) hem of mass culture undergoes the process of homoerotic metamorphosis. As a result, he no longer represents the normative world of heterosexuality, but --quite on the contrary-- the exemplary male figure becomes yet another prototype in the repertoire of gay characters. All these playful stories may appear to be utterly nonsensical, especially those published in the form

of *yaoi* which is an abbreviation of *yamanashi*, *ochinashi*, *iminashi* (translated as “no climax, no punch line, no meaning”). All the nonsense put aside, these texts do have a very specific function in the romanticized world of homoerotic relationships. For one thing, the carnivalesque parody introduces into the genre the down-to-earth disregard for the popular hero, deified by mass media. It lowers the pedestal of socially expedient “conventional sanctity,” and lets everybody see that the emperor has indeed no clothes. Yet, not all the female readers of this kind of gay text may be ready to interpret the *yaoi* comic through the lenses of the grotesque inversion of semantic values.

The utmost seriousness among the gay literary genres produced by women for women, commands the so-called aesthetic novel (*tanbishousetsu*). The very fact that this text claims to belong to the category of the novel, places on the author's shoulders far more responsibility as to the functional construct of the text. The Japanese aesthetic novel is in essence based on the model of the Harlequin romance, popularized in the form of pulp literature and TV soap opera series. In this respect, the gay aesthetic novel, as produced by Japanese female authors, conforms to the prescriptive norms of the Japanese mass culture. The major protagonists are as a rule pretty high school boys, or handsome young men, engaged in an unflinching process of romancing. The world of mundane events is transposed onto the level of sacred appearances where the process of love confirmation and consummation also takes place.

Unlike the dramatic personae of the girls' comics, the heroes of the aesthetic novel are less prone to get engaged in an instantaneous homoerotic performance. One reason being that they are more pensive, hence heavily doped with romantic fancy. They tend to muse about life complexities, leaving the physical action prudently for the very climax of the narrative. In spite of the emphasis on the beautiful and gentle, the content of the aesthetic novel could get at times rather violent as when the less benign rape is featured, or the sadomasochistic proclivity of some characters is pictured in colorful terms. The inventory of motifs also includes incestual relationships (*kinshin soukan*) and the ubiquitous androgynous allusions. The typical book cover of the aesthetic novel is often desired in the form of a simple drawing in pastel colors. Symbolic flowers such as tulips and carnations as well as symbolic musical instruments (e.g., the Japanese *shamisen*) and other paraphernalia are all encompassed in the single aesthetic frame.

The fictitious hero, too, is designated by compositional symbolic elements. For example, both in girls' comics and in the aesthetic novel, the incidence of the hair color symbol happens to be indicative of the role each sexual partner is to play in the text. Out of 34 homoerotic stories, analyzed for the purpose of this study, fifteen texts portray passive men as blond whereas the active male is characterized by black hair. In five stories, the proportion is reversed: the black hair male is passive and the blond type is active. Eleven stories do not give any explicit description of hair color. Two stories refer only to a “light color” hair common to both the passive and active partner. Only in one story, the active and passive gay males have black hair. The distribution ratio of the hair color sym-

bol seems to indicate that it is predominantly the traditionally black-hair Japanese male who plays the active part in the homoerotic liaison. This only goes to show that the motif, composed of familiar symbolic items, can be more readily cognized as a reassuring and identifiable possibility. Whether the Japanese straight female reader could actually become aware of this possibility, is altogether another problem.

At this point, one may want to know why the Japanese heterosexual woman should like to read gay stories at all. Should her interest in the gay romance indicate that she might be willing to undergo the ordeal of being raped, albeit in a "benign" way, for the sake of enjoying the resultant happy ending? Or is it just a sort of romantic fantasy of being tantalized by the arcane sexual practices violating the prescribed norms of decency? Or is it, lastly, a pragmatic sign of a growing sexual independence of the Japanese woman, which is to undermine the traditional male dominance in Japanese society? The ultimate answer may be a combination of various factors, some of which might be rather unpredictable. However, one indisputable fact remains, namely that the Japanese female author of the gay text, designed for the non-homosexual female reader, has at long last crossed the prohibitive boundary which have been prejudicially dividing the heterosexual and homosexual hemispheres of the uniquely globalized human sexuality.

I would like to thank Miss Yumiko Mukai, my former assistant at Tokai University, Tokyo, and the present instructor of the Japanese language at Masaryk University, Brno, for her assistance and cooperation especially in collecting all the necessary research materials pertaining to the topic of this study.

This paper was presented at the XV Congress of the International Association of Empirical Aesthetics (IAEA) at the University of Rome ("La Sapienza"), Italy, in 1998.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Abraham, Julie. *Are Girls Necessary? Lesbian Writing and Modern Histories*. New York, London: Routledge, 1996.
- Bornoff, Nicholas. *Pink Samurai. Love, Marriage, and Sex in Contemporary Japan*. New York, London: Pocket Books (Simon and Schuster), 1991.
- Blakey Andrew. *The Body Language*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1996.
- Collcutt, Martin. *Five Mountains: The Rinzaï Zen monastic Institution in Medieval Japan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Cooper, Emmanuel. *The Sexual Perspective. Homosexuality and Art in the Last 100 Years in the West*. London, New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Ihara, Saikaku. *Comrade Loves of the Samurai*. Traps. Edward Powys Mathers. Boston: Charles E. Tuttle, 1972.
- Ihara, Saikaku. *The Great Mirror of Male Love*. Traps. Paul Cordon Schalow. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990.
- Ihara, Saikaku. *The Life of an Amorous Man*. Traps. Kengi Mamada. Rutland, VT: C.E.Tuttle; 1964.

- Kristof, Nicholas D. "In Japan, Brutal Comics for Women." In *The New York Times. Weekly Review*. Nov.5, 1995. Pp.1-4.
- Leupp, Gary. *Nanshoku: Homosexuality, Gender, and the Social Order in Tokugawa Japan*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992.
- Levy, Howard S. *Sex, Love, and the Japanese*. Washington: Warm-Soft Village Press, 1971.
- Pekham, Morse. *Art and Pornography. An Experiment in Explanation*. New York, London: Basic Books, 1969.
- Queen, Carol and Lawrence Schimel, eds. *Switch Hitters: Lesbians Write Gay Male Erotica and Gay Men Write Lesbian Erotica*. San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1996.
- Robertson, Jennifer. *Takarazuka: Sexual politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- Schodt, Frederik L. *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics*. Tokyo, New York, San Francisco: Kodansha, 1983.
- Schodt, Frederik L. *Dreamland Japan. Writings on Modern Manga*. Berkeley, CA.: Stone Bridge Press, 1996.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990.
- Sullivan, Gerard and Lawrence Wai-Teng Leong, eds. *Gays and Lesbians in Asia and The Pacific: Social and Human Services*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 1995.
- Watanabe, Tsuneo and Iwata Junichi. *Love of the Samurai: A Thousand Years of Japanese Homosexuality*. Trans. D.R.Roberts. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1989.
- Wilton, Tamsin. *Lesbian Studies. Setting An Agenda*. London, New York: Routledge, 1995.

