

## Representing a Woman's Story

Explicit Film and the Efficacy of Censorship in Japan

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In February 1936, young military officers in Tokyo attempted a *coup d'état*, which left the city under martial law. The Sino-Japanese War began the following year; this led to the Asia-Pacific War and the attack on Pearl Harbour. It was eventually concluded in 1945. The case of Abe Sada, who killed her lover and cut off his penis, took place in the early summer of 1936, the middle of this dark phase of modern Japanese history. It caused an outburst of media reaction; the whole phenomenon was later described one historian as “the last and biggest pre-war pornography” (Kano, 1992:166).<sup>1</sup>

The newspapers ran Abe Sada stories one after another, depicting the case as a grotesque crime committed by a good-looking, nymphomaniac woman. When she was arrested three days after the murder of her lover, a rumour even spread that parliamentary proceedings were interrupted because the representatives wanted to read hot-off-the-press newspaper extras about the arrest. The papers were overflowing with news about her, though not a small number of articles were suspended due to censorship. Her trial proceedings in the winter of the same year were also covered in detail by the newspapers. Since 1936, Abe Sada's story has been the basis of more than 20 theatrical dramas, novels and movies, even after she disappeared from public view in 1969. Boom periods of renewed attention to her story repeatedly broke out, especially in the late 1940s, the 1970s and the late 1990s. Considering that the central focus of this case was an act of castration, it is interesting that Abe Sada has been written about by predominantly male authors, who refer to her act as a realisation of true love.

Representations of this woman's story deserve investigation, as over the past 60 years it has repeatedly been revived in various forms in Japanese popular cultural contexts. This essay focuses on films with the theme of Abe Sada. As her story always implicates expressions of desire, sexual practices and explicit representation, all of which belong to the sphere that often invites censorship, examination of Abe Sada films not only reveals what censorship does or does not do to the representation of sexuality, but also uncovers various problems relating to the narrativisation of women's sexual desire.

I will begin by providing a sketch of the Abe Sada case, followed by a discussion of a 1976 Abe Sada film directed by the art film director Oshima Nagisa (b. 1932), which best illustrates the issues of film censorship. Finally, I will examine the subversive re-framing of

the story by female pornographer Hamano Sachi (b. 1948). My primary concern in this essay is to point out that, censored or not, the Abe Sada myth is constructed by the dominant discourse of romanticised love, and that women's 'excessive' sexual desire was both recognised within and excused by the context of romantic love (in other words, romanticised sex), which I believe needs to be problematised.

### **The Abe Sada Myth, 1936-2000**

On 18 May 1936, Abe Sada, a 31-year-old waitress, strangled her lover to death, cut off his penis, and took it with her when she fled. Having previously working as a prostitute, mistress, and domestic servant, Abe had run away to a hotel in Tokyo with this lover, Ishida Kichizo, her employer at an inn where she worked. Kichizo was a 42-year-old married man with two children. Spending money Ishida had taken from his inn and Abe had received from another wealthy lover, they stayed in the hotel for about one month, absorbed in having sex. As one of their sexual practices, Abe tied a string tightly around Ishida's neck because the spasms this caused enhanced her pleasure. Abe eventually strangled him to death not during intercourse, but later while he was sleeping. She then cut off his penis because she did not want anyone else to touch it. With his blood, she wrote "Sada and Kichi Together" on his thigh and on the bed linen, carved her name into his arm, and then fled the hotel. By her account, she was going to kill herself. After being found and arrested, she was interrogated by a pre-trial judge (a method employed in the pre-war process of criminal trial preparation).<sup>2</sup> The judge's *Record of the Abe Sada Investigation* (generally known as *Abe Sada Chosho* or *Yoshin Jinmon Chosho*) collected her confessions about her life, explicit details of her sexual practices and the motives of the crime. The record was leaked and illegally published in high-priced editions that circulated among a limited number of people in the pre-war era, but were reprinted and widely enjoyed in the post-war era.

The repeated reprinting of this pre-trial record greatly inspired later texts about the Abe Sada case. The document comprised questions and answers from the sessions of eight meetings (or six, in a different version of the leaked booklet) between the interrogator (pre-trial judge) and the accused. The record provided a set of very brief questions by the judge and her detailed, long answers. The interrogator's questions included such queries as: "Is your period regular?"; "Any mentally diseased family members or relatives?"; "Describe your life during the time period that you were a licenced prostitute"; and "Why is that you fell so deeply in love with Ishida?" Abe was represented as narrating a comprehensive account in response to these questions. The narrative style and structure of the record presented to the court were largely shaped by the police. Many post-war writers praised the record for being an amazing and compelling text, but in my view, it is the anonymous editor, associated with the police, who should be given the credit.

Loosened codes of sexual expression during the immediate post-war period of the late 1940s fostered the emergence of numerous magazines and novels with erotic content, including several Abe Sada books that portrayed her as evil, as a nymphomaniac and as a *femme fatale*. One of these was the 1947 *Sada's Erotic Confession (Osada Iro Zange)*, a fictionalised account of her sex life. It redirected public attention to her case as well as to Abe herself, who had been released from prison in 1941 and was happily living with a man

who, however, left her amid the furore created by this publication. Abe sued the publisher for slander, and published her own autobiography. But her public image did not shift from that of *femme fatale* to lovely and loving woman till December 1947, following the publication of an interview with her, along with an accompanying essay about her, both by the prominent novelist Sakaguchi Ango.

Sakaguchi insisted that it was Abe's true love and excessive feminine sensibility that provoked her to castrate Kichizo. Although it is true that Abe was not reviled for cruelty nor seen as a disgusting person even before the interview and essay, Sakaguchi fervently emphasised that Abe should be viewed as an icon of truly romantic love, and that her act of violence be seen as the outcome of her excessive love and womanly obsession. In the 1950s and 1960s Abe worked as a barmaid, an inn service maid and as the owner-operator of a small bar, and made her presence felt through interviews in magazines and on television. In 1969, she disappeared from public view.

At least five films about her case have been produced: the 1969 *History of Women's Grotesque Crimes (Meiji, Taisho, Showa: Ryoki Onna Hanzaishi)* by Ishii Teruo, in which Abe herself made a special appearance; the 1975 *A Woman Called Abe Sada (Jitsuroku Abe Sada)* by Tanaka Noboru; the 1976 *In the Realm of the Senses (Ai No Korida)* by Oshima Nagisa; the 1998 *SADA* by Obayashi Nobuhiko; and the 1999 *Abe Sada in the Heisei Era: I Want You (Heiseiban Abe Sada: Anta Ga Hoshi!)* by Hamano Sachi. The 1970s Abe Sada boom may have been accelerated by the influx of western pornographic movies such as *Deep Throat* (USA, 1972, directed by Gerard Damiano and starring Linda Lovelace), and *Emmanuelle* (France, 1974, directed by Just Jaeckin and starring Sylvia Kristel) with its multiple sequels.<sup>3</sup>

These imported films were heavily trimmed and edited according to censors' rules for public screenings, which provoked filmmakers to pay attention to free speech issues in Japan. On the other hand, the more recent Abe Sada boom in the late 1990s was mainly triggered by an extremely popular 1995-96 novel titled *Lost Paradise (Shitsurakuen)*, portraying the adulterous love affair and sexual practices of a middle-aged married man and a thirty-something married woman who were inspired by the Abe Sada story and ended up committing suicide together. This novel ran in serial form in the morning edition of a major financial newspaper, gained enormous popularity, and sold over two-and-a-half million copies when it was republished as a book in 1997 and 1998. The triple appeal of an extramarital love affair, romantic true love and the pleasure of heterosexual intimacy was widely celebrated and consumed in this popular cultural context.

#### **From *In the Realm of the Senses* to *Ai No Korida***

Among the five films dealing with Abe Sada, Oshima Nagisa's<sup>4</sup> 1976 film is especially interesting, as it exists in three versions released and screened in different countries and at different times. The first version, *In the Realm of the Senses* (original French title *L'Empire des Sens*), was exhibited at Cannes in the summer of 1976; this is a hardcore 'art' film that fully depicts genitalia and copulation. Previous film reviews and articles published by English-language authors on *In the Realm of the Senses* (hereafter in this essay, *Realm*) are based on this version (Burch, 1979; Desser, 1988; Heath, 1981; Lehman, 1980, 1987, 1988; Turim 1987, 1998; Mellen, 2004). The second version is a heavily edited, cut, trimmed and blurred-

out version of *Realm*, released in Japan in late 1976 under the Japanese title *Ai No Korida*, literally translating as *Bullfight of Love*. The third version is *Ai No Korida 2000*, which was re-released in Japan in 2000 as an uncut version of *Realm* but with minimal masking of genitalia. Perhaps the film's sexual explicitness was no longer such an issue in the era of international mail order pornographic videos and the Internet, where national level censorship was quite ineffectual and also meaningless. However, the original hardcore version, fully depicting genitalia, penetration and fellatio, has not been publicly screened in Japan, even today.<sup>5</sup>

According to an essay Oshima wrote about *Realm*, he had decided in 1975 that he would make a "pornographic film" (Oshima, 1992:260). In this context, by "pornographic" he meant hardcore; this was immediately after he learnt that France had completely legalised pornography and that the movies screened at the Cannes International Film Festival were overflowing with hardcore scenes. The French producer Anatole Dauman had already suggested to him that the theme should be Abe Sada (Oshima, 1976:39). Dauman thought the woman's name was reminiscent of the utterance 'sado', which seemingly accorded with the sado-masochistic sexual practices involved in her case; and also evoked the French title of *L'Empire des Sens*, which would echo Roland Barthes' collection of essays on Japan, *L'Empire des Signes*. Because hardcore as a genre was taboo in the Japanese film industry, Oshima's making a hardcore film served as a challenge to Japanese obscenity law as well as the rules of the Committee for Codes of Ethics in Film. As even the laboratory personnel could have been arrested for developing hardcore negatives, Oshima decided to produce the movie as a French film: the print stock was imported from France, the film was shot in Japan with Japanese crews and Japanese actors, then developed, edited and premiered in France (as *Realm*), and finally re-edited and imported back to Japan (as *Ai No Korida*).

Let me briefly point out three Japanese laws concerning censorship of sexually explicit materials (books, magazines, films and, recently, comics) before discussing the film in detail. The first is Title 175 of the Criminal Code, known as the Obscenity Law, which prohibits the "distribution, sale, or public exhibition of obscene documents, images and other forms of expression". Though modified in the post-war period, the Criminal Code has been in effect since 1908, when it was drafted (based on the French and Prussian Criminal Codes) in the process of Japan's modernisation. The specific definition of obscenity in post-war obscenity trials was based on that used in the 1950-57 trial of a translation of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, in which both the publisher and the translator were ordered by the Supreme Court to pay penalties. According to this Supreme Court decision, "obscenity is an expression that unnecessarily stimulates one's sexual desire". Secondly, Article 21 of the Constitution of Japan, which guarantees Freedom of Speech, has been a basis of defence for those indicted based on Title 175. The third law related to censorship is Section 21 of the Fixed Tariffs Law, which is applied to import products at customs control of international ports. Obscenity trials in Japan have often condemned paper media – including a 2003 verdict on pornographic comics – and adult videos as well, but no film intended for public screening has been indicted since those charged in two major cases of obscenity were found not guilty in 1969 and 1980.<sup>6</sup>

Another important element specifically relating to film censorship is the Committee for Codes of Ethics in Film (hereafter, the Committee). This non-governmental Committee,

established in 1949, rates films and advises producers to edit, remove, or blur out violent and sexually explicit scenes both in screenplays and in completed films. Members are chosen from the film industry, and include journalists as well as retired personnel of major commercial studios. Though the Committee is not authorised to exercise legal enforcement, its approval is required for a film to be distributed to commercial theatres. Some filmmakers see the Committee as a censorial body, but others argue that one of the functions that the Committee has fulfilled is to serve the industry as a shield against direct police intervention, and that its decisions are complicit with film productions.

When *Realm* was 'imported' back to Japan, customs officers insisted that one third of the footage be edited (Oshima, 1992:266). In addition, the film underwent tremendous modification in accordance with the Committee's rules. Thus, the version shown in Japan, very different from the French version, could be called a co-production of Oshima, the Committee and the state, whereas the director might have wanted it to be seen as a contestation between an individual and the state. In any case, comparison of these films illustrates the efficacy of censorship. Even the opening scenes of the two versions were different. Scenes of pubic hair, genitalia, copulation and fellatio were trimmed and blurred in the Japanese version.

Despite the significant visual differences, the narrative remains the same in *Realm* and *Ai No Korida*. Both versions start with Abe's life; she works in an inn that rents rooms for eating and drinking parties, as well as for sexual liaisons. She falls in love with the owner Ishida; the two of them shut themselves up in another inn and become absorbed in sexual practices; she strangles her lover to death while he is asleep, and mutilates his genitalia; the last scene shows her lying down next to him. The film contains many scenes of sexual intercourse, including Ishida and his wife, Ishida and Abe Sada, Ishida and an old woman, with Abe watching, Abe and another lover, and so on. The film repeatedly presents Abe's obsessive sexual pursuit of Ishida, and Oshima claimed several times that the central theme was her love for him (Uchida, 1980).

Oshima created a sequence that emphasises the historical setting of the late 1930s: Ishida, on a short outing to the barber, walks in the opposite direction, passes a column of soldiers in uniform marching down the street near the hotel where he and Abe are staying. He then returns to their room, where she is waiting for him. Here, a notion of romantic love/sex is articulated as a site of liberation that contests and transcends social restraints, and this notion is visually politicised through oppositions between public/private, totalitarian/individual, and militaristic/libertine. The military presence in the film indicates the beginning of Japan's total war against China, a kind of dark age when seen in terms of today's anti-nationalist views.

The effect of censorship on the representation of sexuality is quite interesting. I would argue that the most noteworthy outcome is the manner in which the viewer is denied access to sexualised male bodies in the Japanese version; these bodies are erased/rendered invisible. Lehman observes that in *Realm*, neither Ishida's sexual activities nor his body are primarily presented to impress the viewer, and that a number of shots show men's flaccid penises, which decentralises a convention of hardcore pornography (Lehman, 1987:21-22, 1988:94). It is significant that the French version visually provided the potential to question

male dominance, virility, and hegemonic masculinity through full sexualisation of male body. This scrutiny of male sexuality was not available to the viewers of the Japanese version due to censorship, though it could have been an interesting addition to the Abe Sada myth in which female sexuality had been always exclusively foregrounded, to accord with Japanese popular cultural context. In the heavily modified Japanese version, it is even unclear that the castration is taking place. The images simply show a serious expression on Abe's face when she is supposedly mutilating the dead Ishida's genitalia. Thus, the apparatus of censorship generated a different conduit for the representation of the sexual story, and specifically highlighted female and not male physicality.

### **Counter-Narrative to Romanticised Sex**

Mellen (2004:74-76) sees Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses* as "a fully realised work of art" as compared to the vulgar softcore 1975 porn film *A Woman Called Abe Sada*, which also had a male director. She argues that Oshima's film is "feminist" as it raises Abe to "an allegorical level" so that "she represents all women released from repression, and stands for the idea that sexual satisfaction is best pursued free of all social norms", whereas the 1975 film "descends quickly into vulgarity", showing Abe's and Ishida's sexual play as "unpleasant, more animal than transcendent". Mellen raises three interesting issues concerning Oshima's *Realm*: a dichotomy of art versus 'vulgar' porn; transcendental romantic love versus social norms; and 'feminist' versus non-'feminist' sexual expression.

It is ironic that Oshima's film has been screened in art theatres, praised by critics and shelved in the art section of video rental shops, regardless of the director's initial identification of this film as hardcore porn. Despite its sexual explicitness, the film was appreciated within the modern notion of avant-garde art, which constantly breaks existing social taboos (at the same time providing an excuse for provoking sexual curiosity among the spectators). Such an avant-garde notion girded Oshima's challenge to the conventional visual language of sex in Japan, and a narrative framework of "sex with romantic love" was mobilised to contend with norms of sexual expression in Japanese filmmaking. In turn, the director's strategy of foregrounding and praising a story of woman's love and her compulsive sexual desire is recognized as 'feminist' by critics like Mellen or Japanese women's lib activist Ozawa Ryoko (Uchida, 1980:287, 294). Exalting a woman's initiative in sexual relationship could be in fact defined as feminist if it is seen as a form of women's sexual revolution. However, does the narrative of women's sexual pleasure have to always be fuelled by hetero-normative conventions of romantic love? Is a non-'art', "vulgar" form of porn an inadequate tool for the portrayal of women's sexual pleasure?

There were at least two Abe Sada films produced in the Japanese porn industry.<sup>7</sup> In this context, by 'porn' I mean those films rated as adult by the Committee; in other words, sexually explicit 35 mm feature length films produced in accordance with the Committee's rules – usually shown in adult film theatres in sordid areas, and shelved in the 'adult' section of video rental shops when the film is made into a rental VHS. One such depiction is the 1975 *A Woman Called Abe Sada* discussed above. This is a very faithful reproduction of the *Record of the Abe Sada Investigation* released one year prior to Oshima's film. The other rendering is the 1999 *Abe Sada in the Heisei Era (Heiseiban Abe Sada)*, directed by the

female professional porn director Hamano Sachi. This film is subversive in its rewriting and parody of the existing Abe Sada myth, including Oshima's canonical depiction.

Hamano's<sup>8</sup> Abe Sada film is set in contemporary Japan, and the names of main characters are changed to "Saki" and "Yoshio", though these are still derived from original "Sada" and "Kichi". The film begins by showing a woman knitting in a living room at night. Her name is not revealed in the first half of the film, and she is just referred as the "wife" of an accountant. One day her husband takes her to a gay bar that he frequents, intending to arouse her sexually. There she meets a bisexual male prostitute named Yoshio. Later she decides to buy his services and comes to the bar. She leaves her husband and shuts herself up with this younger man in a hotel, whereupon she tells him her name. Unlike Ishida Kichizo, a gentle but passive lover in *Realm*, Yoshio is very assertive and eager to please her. He assures her that he wants her to enjoy herself, and says, "Let's enjoy the best sex together". Saki strangles him to death during intercourse.

Reversing the previous narratives of both the prosecutor's record and the other Abe films, it is Yoshio/Kichi who first asks Saki/Sada to tie his neck to feel more (Ishida suggested that Abe Sada tie his neck during intercourse as his spasm was supposed to give her greater pleasure); she is a client, not a prostitute; she strangles the man in the midst of her pursuit of sexual pleasure. The death is accidental, as she is so immersed in her own intense sexual experience. These departures from previous narratives are accompanied by several 'revisionist' elements vis-à-vis the genre of pornography: literate scripts and scenes of extended foreplay for the purpose of sexually stimulating women. Woman's pursuit of sexual pleasure and desire *per se* are a clearly visible, dominant strand in Hamano's narrative of Abe Sada. Abe's subjectivity had been shown in *Realm* and other popular narratives as recovering its autonomy by means of 'true love,' which meant sleeping with her lover without getting paid. In contrast, in Hamano's film the main protagonists' sexual activity is not a matter of love; rather, it is one of consensual pleasure. Saki killed Yoshio not because she loved him but because she was too preoccupied with fulfilling her own needs. These departures from generic conventions subvert the existing narrativisation of Abe Sada's relationship to Ishida; they serve as an ironic comment on the ideology of heteronormative romantic love, and in particular, parody Oshima's film.

When feminists want to avoid regulations like those advocated by Catherine MacKinnon (1993), one way to express their frustration and opposition toward dominant visual languages of treating women's sexuality is, as Cornell discusses, to present alternative modes of representing women's sexual practices (Cornell, 1995:137). Hamano's version of the Abe Sada story is a counter-narrative, one that achieves a radical transgression without violating censorial codes. It is ironic that the film is not widely accessible to women, as it is primarily produced for male consumers. Hamano's narrative is created within the censorial rules; nevertheless, it is subversive, as it questions the notion of romantic love which has been always supposed to fuel sex in previous narratives. In this regard, explicitness is not the only means to contest social norms.

The editors suggested the removal of Oshima Nagisa's film stills of *In the Realm of the Senses* from this essay due to their explicit content, and the author agreed.

## NOTES

1. In keeping with standard practice, names of Japanese individuals appear with the family name preceding the given name.
2. In the pre-war Japanese legal system, the accused was expected to reveal all details of the case by answering the questions of the pre-trial judge. This interrogation was performed without the defence lawyer's presence.
3. In addition to *Emmanuelle*, its sequels *Emmanuelle 2* (1975) and *Goodbye, Emmanuelle* (1977) were great successes in Japan. They were screened in non-adult film theaters and drew a large number of female viewers of a variety of age groups, which made film critics frown.
4. Oshima Nagisa is a well-known art film director. Born in 1932, he was a leftist student activist in the early 1950s, and then joined the Shochiku Studio in 1954, producing several films that became controversial for their political or sexual expression in the 1960s and the early 1970s. His early works were often regarded as Japanese counterparts of the French "Nouvelle Vogue". He also made numerous TV documentaries, often treating sensitive political themes such as ethnic discrimination and Japan's war crimes. His later works include *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (1983) and *Taboo* (1999). He is very often seen as a controversial director who challenges social norms and authority.
5. Although pubic hair was allowed to be shown starting in 1993, unmasked images of genitals are still prohibited in all film and video.
6. I have discussed elsewhere the details of these two obscene film trials and their relation to the obscenity trial that resulted from a book based on Oshima's Abe Sada film (Hori, 2004). Oshima's book, which contains essays, the film screenplay, and still photographs, was indicted for violation of obscenity law in 1977. He was found not guilty in 1982.
7. It is hard to trace all the titles of this genre, which rapidly increased and reached about 200 titles a year in the mid-1960s, then continued to decline after the advent of adult video in the 1980s, as these products are usually junked when the prints wear out. However, the feature length 35 mm porn film production still survives in Japan.
8. Hamano Sachi (b. 1948) made her directorial debut in 1970 after training as assistant director with several porn film directors. She is a very rare example of a female porn filmmaker, and the only one who has survived in the industry for more than 30 years. Producing on average one film per month at the height of her productivity, by 1998, when she made her first non-adult film, an account of a forgotten woman writer entitled *Midori*, she had produced more than 300 porn films. It is not rare in Japan for film directors trained in porn industry to move to non-adult, mainstream filmmaking. Though the targeted audience of her porn films is male and they are commercially successful, her works, especially from the late 1980s on, offer many woman-oriented plots that attract a female viewership when the films are re-released in the video rental market. Also, although Hamano has always followed the Committee rules, nevertheless she is known among fans for her bold depiction of sex scenes, including the frequent use of close-ups, in the genre of porn. She is also known as one of the founders of an annual meeting of women directors and producers in both film and TV, and is an outspoken feminist.

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