

ARE KISSING FILMS DEMOCRATIC? THE US OCCUPATION POLICY ON JAPANESE CINEMA

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Abstract: The US occupation censorship on Japanese cinema from 1945 to 1952 presents a unique case of the American effort trying to democratize Japan from a totalitarian nation. Americans liberated the Japanese film industry from the yoke of the prewar and wartime Imperialist restrictions, however, at the same time implemented their own censorship. They recommended democratic themes including promotion of civil rights, equal rights for women, and the agrarian reform, and prohibited undemocratic themes such as nationalistic and feudalistic ideas, anti-social behavior and any criticism of the occupation authorities. Kissing was recommended to be included in film as a symbol of democracy and the Japanese filmmakers had to face this new challenge. The audiences were excited by kissing scenes as a novelty and the film studios grabbed this opportunity to enhance their commercial outcome. However, the inexperienced acting and under-developed stories including kissing for the sake of kissing frustrated some viewers and critics, and old-fashioned moralists were annoyed. Although these kissing films were awkward, they were part of the postwar Japanese cultural liberation welcomed by filmmakers wanting to expand their horizon and the public who wanted no restriction on what they would see.

Key Words: The United States occupation in Japan; the Allied Forces; the prewar and wartime Japanese militarist government; the Japanese Emperor; the new Constitution of Japan; SCAP; GHQ; CIE; CCD; democratic subject matter; prohibited film treatment; responsibility for the war; seppun eiga[kissing film]; Shochiku Studio; *Hatachi no seishun* [Twenty-Year-Old Youth]; Daiei Studio; *Aruyo no seppun* [A Certain Night Kiss]; kasutori zasshi [pulp magazines]; gakubuchi [frame]show; Nikutai-ha [Flesh School].

THE U.S. OCCUPATION CENSORSHIP ON JAPANESE CINEMA

The United States occupation in Japan from 1945 to 1952, following Japan's defeat to the Allied Forces in World War II, presents a unique period in the censorship history of Japanese cinema. For the first time in its history, Japanese film industry was under the direct influence of other foreign cultures, mostly of the Americans who conducted the film censorship almost solely among the Allied Forces countries which occupied Japan^[1].

The Japanese film industry, along with other fields of mass media such as newspapers, magazines, book publishing and radio broadcasting, was under the strict censorship implemented by the prewar and wartime Japanese militarist government. The purpose of their censorship was to indoctrinate Japanese and prepare them to dedicate themselves to the national effort of preserving the Imperial Japan and the Emperor's sacred wars. The films were required to portray the heroic and noble characters living in the divine land of Japan and her colonies in Asia who are not only unquestionably but also happily ready to

sacrifice their lives for the Japanese Emperor Hirohito, his ancestors if the film portrays a historic subject, and to fight the war waged against the Empire. No criticism of the Emperor, imperial family and system was allowed. In cinema, this measure was carried out to an extreme degree. For example, shots of chrysanthemums or of patterns similar to the flower were severely cut out by the order of the censors, simply because the chrysanthemum is the emblem of the royal family. Censors would count the number of petals of chrysanthemum-like flowers on costumes and background decors in order to make sure that it was not the same as that of the royal family's emblem, sixteen. The common people must not use this flower anywhere in their lives. (Hirano 1992: 13-24)

The occupation authorities, in their attempt to democratize Japan, liberated the Japanese film industry from the repressive prewar and wartime restrictions imposed by the Japanese government censorship and helped legalizing freedom of assembly and speech in the new Constitution of Japan put into effect in 1947. However, at the same time, the Americans established their own censorship system. The occupation government (SCAP or Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, also called GHQ or General Headquarters) practiced its censorship through the civil censorship section (CIE or Civil Information and Education); and the military censorship section (CCD or Civil Censorship Detachment) for the pre-production and post-production censorship. Their policies were carried out in the forms of both recommendation and prohibition.

The American censors recommended that Japanese filmmakers select “democratic” subject matter including biographies of the fighters against the prewar and wartime Japanese fascism and advocates of civil rights and equal rights for women; promotion of freedom of expression; the agrarian reform distributing huge properties belonging to landowners to tenants; and successful repatriation of the Japanese soldiers to the postwar lives. They gave close guidance to the Japanese filmmakers in order to accomplish this task. For example, Akira Kurosawa's 1946 film, *Waga seishun ni kui nashi* [*No Regrets for Our Youth*], is an example of this kind of democratic film praised by American censors and supported by Japanese film critics and audiences alike. The film's themes of a strong-willed and independent-thinking woman, the agrarian reform, and fascist fighters are all suitable to the new age under the occupation¹²¹.

The Americans, on the other hand, prohibited film treatment of themes including militarism, feudalistic ideas such as blind obedience to the boss figures, low status of women, suicide, xenophobia, anti-social behavior such as black-marketeering and prostitution, and above all, any criticism of the occupation itself, the United States of America and other Allied countries.

Film producers were required first to submit the film's synopsis in Japanese and English translation to the censors at CIE, then, at CCD. After the synopsis was approved, the film's script was submitted for their examination, again both at CIE and at CCD. The American censors discussed what should be emphasized or changed with the producers, directors and writers, symbolizing the important American democratic cultural value of open discussion. This process makes a striking contrast to the arrogant attitude of the prewar and wartime Japanese censors who allowed filmmakers no discussion or refutation but conveyed their decisions and enforced the directives on them to observe. Some Japanese directors such as Akira Kurosawa praised the American censor's open-

minded spirit. (Kurosawa 1982:144) Others such as Kaneto Shindo remembered the American censors applying the categorical standards without understanding specific Japanese cultural situations. A censor criticized Shindo's screenplay in 1946 insisting that an inn's owner must be portrayed to be villainous because he is a "boss" character exploiting his workers and thus opposed to democracy. Surprised Shindo protested that in small-scale enterprises such as noodle shops, the proprietors had to work among their employees, doing exactly the same kind of work that the latter did and not all "bosses" could automatically be considered negatively. The censor was reluctant but the film was allowed to be made with Shindo's original ideas almost intact. (Hirano 1992: 99-100)

The portrayal of the Japanese Emperor in film created a unique dilemma for the American censors, caught between their reformist mission and the imperatives of the post-World War II Cold War politics. This dilemma was most vividly revealed in the process of banning the 1946 documentary *Nippon no higeiki* [*The Japanese Tragedy*] made by leftist director Fumio Kamei suggesting that the Japanese Emperor Hirohito bears responsibility for the war along with other politicians. (Hirano 1992: 105-145) Similarly, the rise of the labor union movement in the film industry drew a sharp response from the increasingly anti-communist American bureaucracy and its Japanese representatives, climaxing in the summer of 1948 with suppression of the third labor strike at Toho Studio, one of Japan's three major commercial film production companies then. (Hirano 1992: 205-240) The Red purge followed in the Japanese film industry expelling communist party members, their sympathizers and any suspects from their workplaces. (Hirano 1992: 252-257)

TWO KISSING FILMS

The Japanese filmmaking during this period was shaped by political, cultural and ideological conflicts on many levels. Most ironically, Americans were trying hard to democratize Japan using their own censorship, which philosophy is intrinsically undemocratic. Eventually, idealistic and enthusiastic New Dealers who wanted to radically reform Japan through cinema were won over by more conservative red-hunters whose priority was to protect American interest in the international politics. As a curious example of what Americans considered "democratic" at the early stage of the occupation, the unique genre of "seppun eiga [kissing film]" appeared on the Japanese screens. (Hirano 1992: 154-165; Hirano 2008; 177-184)

Prewar and wartime Japanese censors prohibited kissing as a symbol of Western decadence. Kissing scenes in foreign films were eliminated. As the war became increasingly desperate, any amorous expression on the screen began to be criticized by the censors as frivolous, not serious enough for the war time, and Anglo-American, thus determined undesirable.

As soon as Americans stepped onto this austere land of repressed sexuality, the ardent censors began to pressure Japanese filmmakers, demanding that Japanese make films with kissing scenes. Some Japanese protested that Japanese do not kiss in public, and therefore, it is not appropriate to show kissing on the Japanese screens. The American censors replied that such thinking is the evil source of the so-called "Pearl Harbor mentality," which means that "Japanese tend to do things sneakily. They should do

things openly.” Director Yasushi Sasaki who was assigned to make a film with kissing scenes at Shochiku Studio thus remembered the American censor’s argument. (Koike 1986)

The demand came more as an order than as a suggestion. Therefore, two major studios, Shochiku and Daiei, simultaneously released the films on May 23, 1946, which respectively included kissing scenes. Shochiku’s film, *Hatachi no seishun* [*Twenty-Year-Old Youth*] directed by Sasaki was originally conceived as a romantic comedy. The occupation document, *SCAP Non-Military Activities, Summation 8* (May 1946: 244), describes this film as “a light comedy revolving around a father’s attempt to marry his daughter to the son of his employer.” However, the daughter (played by Michiko Ikuno) wants to marry the young man (played by Shiro Osaka) whom she really loves. Its story fits the recommended subjects being anti-feudalistic because of its depiction of the young people choosing their spouses according to their own free will. Then, a censor insisted that the film should include kissing scenes and the filmmakers had to comply.

The first kissing takes place in a house in which the male lead is speaking to the heroine that “It can be a bit complicated. Your father is tenacious, and mine is impatient.” The postwar value is expressed in this scene by demonstrating the young man’s will to overcome the opposition coming from his parent’s generation. Then he looks down at the heroine who is seated by. His facial close-up shot is followed by that of her moving her face to a side but when she returns her face back, she suggests that she is happy and welcoming his action. Then, their faces slowly approach each other. As is seen in the Hollywood film tradition, the romantic mood is climaxed by the lover’s kissing.

This was a historic moment. Masahiro Shinoda’s 1984 film *Setouchi shonen yakyu-dan* [*MacArthur’s Children*] portraying life on a small Inland Sea island during the occupation period includes a scene of school children cheering up this film’s kissing scenes at a local theater. It must have been an exciting moment not only for the children who shouted out “Yariotta (They did it)!” but also for the adults who then burst into the roaring laughter in the full theater.

In the second kissing scene in *Hatachi no seishun*, the two lovers are in a boat on a pond. A close-up of him looking down at her while she looks up at him followed by a close-up of their kissing in the same position. This idyllic and romantic image, backed up with the theme song of the “cute flowers of the sweet pea” in an animated rhythm, closes the film. The image of flowers in a vase placed near where she is seated in the first kissing scene, and cherry blossoms outside in the park near the pond, is associated with lovers in kissing, which softens the impact of kissing and romanticizes it. Shochiku’s treatment of kissing affirms the Hollywood convention of the normal visual composition of a man and a woman kissing in which he is positioned in the upper side, she in the lower side.

The shooting of these landmark scenes proceeded in an intense atmosphere. Ikuno wrote an essay which appeared in March 1946, two months before the film’s release, seemingly as a part of promotion for the film (Ikuno 1946). She gives a reason for showing kissing for the first time: “I heard that it is more natural to show kissing. We have been kissing in real life, nonetheless in film, we always showed our backs to the camera or the camera panned to a side in love scenes.” Kissing is considered as a natural

result for a loving couple's emotional upsurge. She mentioned that she placed a small piece of gauze on her lips "maybe because of an epidemic spreading around" in order to avoid direct contact with the actor's lips. She jokingly contends that "Isn't it so hygienic? But gauze for kissing is so unromantic."

This essay may have been written by a PR department staff at Shochiku, and it seems that the filmmakers are trying to alleviate its emotional impact because its moralistic concerns must have been equally important as its hygienic concerns. Ikuno argues that she felt more embarrassed when she saw the film rather than when she was actually shooting the kissing scenes. Her mother was shocked by the film's promotional still photographs and told her daughter to decline to shoot such scenes again. However, Ikuno contends that she wants to learn everything, thus wants any kind of challenge. This episode itself indicates the new postwar generation's willingness to adapt new ideas, thinking and behavior.

The other film, Daiei's *Aruyo no seppun* [*Aruyo no seppun*], directed by Yasuki Chiba, is about the romance of three young couples, a poet (Masao Wakahara) and a singer (Mitsue Nara); an architect (Ichiro Izawa) and a secretary (Michiko Suzuki); and an inventor (Osamu Maruyama) and a hairdresser (Hiroko Machida). Daiei selected middle-class working men and women as the film's heroes and heroines. The occupation censors, on the other hand, noticed the professions of the male characters but ignored those of the female characters by stating that the film is "a light picture with a touch of comedy about an architect, an inventor, a poet and their girls." (SCAP 1946, 244)

The kissing scene takes place at the end of the film between the poet and the singer standing face to face in the rain. She enters the frame running with an umbrella in her hand, looking for him. His face is zoomed up. She grabs him and he holds her, gently touching her hair. She looks up at him, and he looks down. A close-up shot of the two taken from a side, slightly diagonally from her back, captures the moment of their faces coming closer. Suddenly, her umbrella falls from the top of the screen to covers the action in progress, while the music starts in the soundtrack. The shot of the umbrella remains on the screen for several seconds, followed by a close-up shot of her slightly looking down as if embarrassed, then, looking up at him, and of him similarly slightly looking down, then, looking at her. He holds her shoulders and the two slowly walk away in the rain, while her romantic song continues in the soundtrack. The camera shifts to a close up shot of the forgotten umbrella on the ground in the rain. From the above treatment of the two lovers with their facial expression of the mixture of embarrassment and determination unmistakably suggests that "they did it" between their facial close-ups. Certainly, the then audiences understood in this way. The pouring rain wetting the lovers also adds sensation to the scene.

Both directors who were assigned to these epoch-making kissing films, Sasaki (1908-1993) and Chiba (1910-1985), were at their mid-career, having been commercially successful and have directed fifty to sixty films by then. Shochiku selected two new comers as their film's leads: Osaka (1920-1989) had appeared only in three films before, because his career was stopped when he was drafted to war. *Hatachi no seishun* was also her fourth film for Ikuno (1924-). Relatively unknown two actors should have given a fresh image to the audiences.

Daiei used two established stars, Wakahara (1917-) who was already popular for his good looks; and well-known singer Nara (1923-1977) who appeared in film for the first time and sang the film's theme song. From the above choices of the directors and casting, it is evident that both Shochiku and Daiei studios took this project seriously aiming at commercial success and selected a genre of light comedy featuring music. However, both films were typically non-artistic commercial products and probably because of this reason, they were almost forgotten in the official Japanese film history if not kissing is the agenda^[4].

ARE KISSING FILMS DEMOCRATIC?

Whether or not kissing films are democratic is debatable, however, kissing films immediately began to flood the market, after the release of the above two films. Newspapers and magazines from this period include both the pros and cons of this new genre. For example, three months after the release of the first kissing films, the daily *Yomiuri Shimbun* on August 14, 1946 published the result of the solicitation of its reader's opinions concerning the kissing films. Out of 411 responses, 73% were for kissing films and 27% were against them. Defenders advocated kissing as contributing to the liberation of Japanese film and thoughts from feudalistic thinking, allowing freedom of sexual expression and healthy sexuality. Critics argued that kissing films are the product of commercialism and fashion; actors are unskillful and awkward; kissing is not a Japanese habit; kissing is immoral; kissing is not hygienic; kissing is aesthetically unsuitable for Japanese physiognomy, and so on.

Japanese view of kissing as Western was prevalent. Some critics maintained that kissing seen in American and European films is natural, while that seen in Japanese films would create some uneasy feeling. (Hirano 2008: 180-181) Other critics sensed that kissing did not belong to Japanese cinematic expression. Because kissing was not seen in public as a part of Japanese daily life, the kissing scene seems to be out of place, included in the film only because it had to be, not as a result of natural development of love between two people in the film's narrative. (Hirano 2008: 181-182)

Some filmmakers took advantage of this freedom and explored the new kind of cinematic expression to portray kissing and open a new horizon. Director Fumio Kamei admitted that the current popularity of kissing films was largely due to sensationalism. However, he took this new challenge in order to achieve a higher artistic realm. (Kamei 1949). Actress Yoshiko Yamaguchi, on the other hand, emphasized the necessity for actors to analyze the camera angles in relation to where they stand, where their heads and eyes should be placed, how their hand gestures are created and they should study further in order to accomplish the best visual effects. (Yamaguchi 1949)

It is significant that kissing films encouraged the freer expression of sexuality on the Japanese screen. During the immediate postwar period, in the field of literature, so-called "kasutori zasshi" pulp magazines, exclusively dedicated to sexual exploration, began to saturate the market. In theater, nudity shows entitled "gakubuchi [frame] show," in which semi-nude young women posed in front of a frame on the stage, began to be produced. The "Nikutai-ha [Flesh School]" which advocated the importance of

physical desire and one's awareness of his/her physicality began to appear in all fields of literature, film and theater, becoming an immediate and smashing success for the sensational portrayal of eroticism.(Hirano 1992: 162-165)

The significance of the kissing films should be understood in the context of the postwar liberation of artistic expression. At the same time, the hard fact of commercial pressure in the face of economic distress in the midst of the postwar devastation cannot be ignored, either. The postwar social and cultural chaos also encouraged anarchic ideas. In addition, there was an element of arrogance of cultural imperialism of the conquerors enforcing their own cultural values and ignoring the indigenous cultural habit. The Japanese viewer's feeling that kissing scenes in Japanese films was strange and somewhat embarrassing came from the fact that Japanese did not see Japanese kissing in public in real life and were not accustomed to seeing it openly. Today, probably no Japanese viewers will feel awkward or embarrassed when they watch kissing scenes on the screen. This is simply because during the last sixty years Japanese have become accustomed to seeing kissing in television dramas and movies, thus began to take them to be natural when they are exposed to such scenes. This change was indeed initiated by Americans during their occupation period, and along with other radical reform policies such as the equal rights for women and agrarian reform implemented during this period, it may not have been possible without American intervention. As a whole, kissing film should have been a welcoming imposition seen from the Japanese side because any kind of restriction is harmful for artistic expression.

NOTES

^[1] See Hirano 1992 for the comprehensive discussion on the subject matter.

^[2] The film combines the stories based on two real-life characters: Yuktoki Takigawa, a political science professor forced to resign from his position at the University of Kyoto due to his liberal ideas in 1933; and Hotsumi Ozaki, a journalist executed by the Japanese government as a spy committing the treason against Japan in 1944. Kurosawa and his screenplay writer Keiji Matsuzaki created a fictional character Yukie as the only daughter of Prof. Yagihara, a character modeling after Takigawa, and makes Noge, a writer modeling after Ozaki, as one of Yagihara's students. Kurosawa and Matsuzaki contrasted Noge who is principled pacifist, with another student of Yagihara's, an opportunistic public prosecutor handling Noge's case. Both young men are romantically interested in Yukie who is played by the then popular star Setsuko Hara, and Yukie chooses Noge. After Noge dies in prison, she moves in to his parents who are persecuted by the villagers, and after the war, she decides to dedicate her life to the modernization of the local farming. See Hirano 1992: 179-204.

^[3] Kurosawa fondly remembers the pleasure of discussing his play with an American censor, stating that "having lived through an age that had no respect for creation, I recognized for the first time that freedom of creation can exist. (...) Of course I am not saying that all the American censors were like him. But they all behaved toward us in a gentlemanly fashion. Not a single one among them treated us as criminals, the way the Japanese censors had."

^[4] Neither film is mentioned in many of the Japanese film encyclopedia including *Sekai eiga sekuhin daijiten/A Dictionary of World Motion Pictures* (Kinema Jumbo-sha, 1970), *Nihon eiga sakuhiin zenshu [A Dictionary of Japanese Motion Pictures]* (Kinema Jumbo-sha, 1973), and *Pia Cinema Club '89* (Pia, 1989)

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