

# The Uses of Popular Culture for Sex and Violence

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In this discussion paper I would like briefly to describe my experience of incorporating popular culture in the broadest terms in two of my undergraduate courses, “Representations of Sexuality in Modern Japan” and “Violence and the State in Japan.” In each course, I have integrated one or more sessions that take up the popular cultural treatment of the core topics, sexuality in one case, violence in the other. Materials in these sessions range widely from erotic woodblock prints of the nineteenth century to magazine ads for condoms in the twenty-first, and from 1930s racist propaganda imagery to 2010s cartoons designed to increase the appreciation of the Self-Defense Forces, Japan’s current-day military. I have found that the analysis of popular cultural materials can go a long way toward accomplishing a core goal of university-level teaching that, in my mind, has been best articulated by Michel Foucault. In an interview Foucault said that, “The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning.” He wanted his books to be understood as a kind of toolbox for user-readers to “rummage through to find a tool they can use however they wish in their own area” (Gauntlett 2002). Accordingly, my courses are designed to provide blocks of knowledge about a given subject matter, but I also aim to provide students with questions and perspectives that challenge their own views, and with tools better to think through the social and political implications of their perspectives and attitudes.

## Sex

Along these lines, I aim at using popular cultural materials to unsettle students’ sensibilities and thus allow me more effectively to convey, for instance, the specific cultural and historical conditions of sexuality in Japan while denaturalising their own beliefs and attitudes. I have always liked screening parts of Ōshima Nagisa’s 1976 film *Ai no korîda* (*In the Realm of the Senses*) in my upper-division, undergraduate course of 160-plus students on “Representations of Sexuality in Modern Japan.” The course fulfills a number of requirements and is thus populated by students pursuing a broad range of majors, from Japanese Studies to Chemistry, Art History, Mathematics, and other fields. Typically, only a small number of students have taken courses on Japan or have studied the Japanese language. Most generally, the course traces the history of various sex/gender themes and issues from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first century, including sexuality and the nation state; sexuality and the arts; gender ambivalence; homosexuality, LGBT activism and queer identities; traditional, new and international women; family planning from infanticide to the pill; sexual slavery; the politics of prostitution; and sex and visual culture.

For years, the film had seemed like a perfectly provocative match for two very different academic takes on the case of Abe Sada featured in the film, namely William Johnston’s book, *Geisha, Harlot, Strangler, Star: A Woman, Sex, and Morality in Modern Japan* (2004), and Christine L. Marran’s treatment of Sada and other transgressive female figures in *Poison Woman: Figuring Female Transgression in Modern Japan* (2007). Abe Sada’s story is set in the 1930s. She pursues an intense sexual relationship with the (married) owner of an inn. After killing him as the result of one of their sexual plays, she cuts off his penis and testicles, and leaves the scene. Caught by police days after the incident, she becomes a celebrity whose story is widely covered by the print media of the time, frequently adapted as a literary subject, and studied and examined by a number of new kinds of experts from various fields of medicine and

law.

In previous years, students had laughed at scenes that appeared humorous to me as well. For instance, when the male protagonist puts a hard-boiled egg into the vagina of Sada's character, she squats to push it out again while insisting that she is not a hen. Both lead characters deliver the conversation in good humour. Both laugh at this situation and similarly playful, erotically charged activities throughout the film. In general, for a film that used to be censored in Japan and internationally for its explicit, unsimulated sex scenes, there is a whole lot of witty talk, teasing and laughter.

In the dark of the lecture hall, students also occasionally shrieked or, rather light-heartedly, it seemed to me, articulated their disapproval of certain scenes. An audible murmur went through the room when, for instance, Abe Sada goes to bed for monetary compensation with an elderly man whom she refers to as "teacher." Some scenes prompted the occasional "ew" from the student audience but none as noisily as the bloody end.

More importantly, however, the screening of the film in class prompted extensive discussions about sexuality in modern Japan; the production of scientific knowledge; feminism, agency, gendered standards of morality; erotic art versus pornography; among a number of issues. Despite its availability on home video since the 1990s, I suppose that *In the Realm of the Senses* has not been fully absorbed into popular culture. My impression is, however, that at least in the classroom setting, its very radicalism helps students approach more current mainstream popular culture and its treatment of sexual themes with fresh eyes. It also makes the very powerful point that sexual mores aren't on a continuous path towards liberation and freedom. What was shocking in the eyes of many audiences during the 1970s has remained so in those of many undergraduates who populate my courses today.

I should report also that in recent years, more than the usual handful of students began to walk out less than 30 minutes into the film. I am uncertain in what particular ways the film, or the fact that I screened it in class, offended their sensibilities. I have wondered whether part of the reason lies in the fact that sex, and nudity more specifically, have become carefully sanitised in mainstream U.S. media culture. The film's partial nudity is mostly of female bodies and many of those tend to be body doubles, often surgically enhanced, of female actors. Given the general anxiety about nudity and the (at least publicly) celebrated obsession with bodily imperfections in contemporary American popular culture, and the simultaneous rise of ever more perfectly obese bodies, is it possible that a substantial number of current undergraduates have never or only rarely seen an actual human body in the nude on film? In any case, perhaps there are indeed reasons other than being a staunch conservative or religious fundamentalist to fail to appreciate Ōshima's artsy critique of 1970s sexual morals.

Such questions aside, *In the Realm of the Senses* is only one of numerous visual examples that complement and complicate my lectures in that course. Drawing an arch from the significance and uses of erotic wood block prints in the nineteenth century to Ōshima's take on Abe Sada in the late twentieth, and further to current-day television shows such as "Josô Paradaisu" ([Male to] Female Cross-dressing Paradise) that feature cross-dressing individuals on a set that is designed to mock shows devoted to heterosexual partner-matching, allows me to make a particular point (see Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 1.**

Perhaps in contrast to undergraduates' experiences of the North American popular culture of sexuality, in Japan popular cultural representations of sex, among other things, often work as objects of humour and play (Linhart 2000). After all, how could one not be amused by Katsushika Hokusai's "Mr. Prick and Ms. Cunt" (ca. 1810; see Fig. 2) or by the egg sequence in *In the Realm of the Senses*?

**Figure2.**



Most of my students are infected by the television audience's laughter at a transgendered host of a queen show featured in Kim Longinotto's documentary, *Shinjuku Boys* (1995), who solicits confirmation from the audience regarding the fact that despite one performer's remarkable shoe size, she is still a beautiful woman. It is also quite obvious to my students that the participants in annual festivals such as the Penis Festival (see Fig. 3)<sup>2</sup> or the Naked Festival have fun celebrating what appears to be a reinvention of much older rituals once prohibited by a modernising state.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 3.**

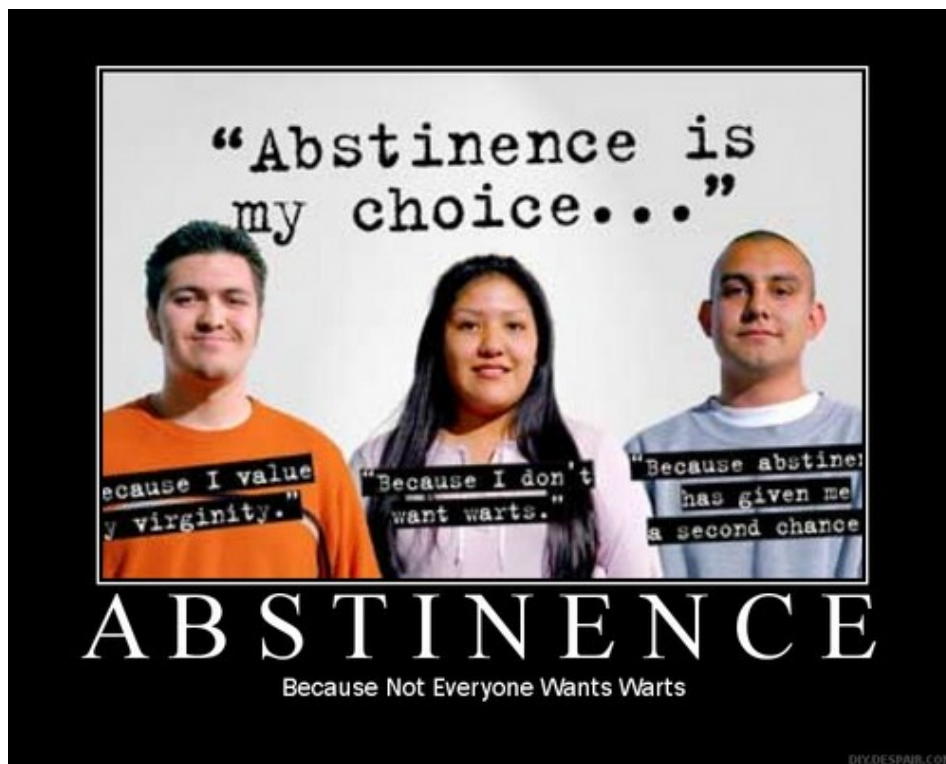


The fact that today's educational campaigns in Japan tend heavily to employ the techniques of advertising and popular culture, ranging from colourful and cheerful elements to cute and endearing imagery, serves as the backdrop to our in-class discussion about the historically evolving approaches to contraception and safe sex. Here too I use examples from popular culture. I begin with the analysis of an advertisement for condoms, such as, for instance, in the 2 July 2002 issue of the youth magazine *Popteen* (see Fig. 4), contrast it with an abstinence advertisement from the George W. Bush-era United States (see Fig. 5), and proceed to a discussion of the legal, religious, cultural and historical conditions within which each of these as well as other images have emerged.<sup>4</sup> Populist for sure. Teaching in a country, however, where abortion continues to be a political issue with the power to dominate presidential campaigns, I have found it most effective to start precisely at the point of greatest difference and division and work from there towards a nuanced and historically and culturally informed analysis.

**Figure 4.**







Visualising the popular culture of sex, then, can guide students who, in California at least, already consume a lot of Japanese popular culture, to new analytical possibilities of what they are already familiar with and open the window to other realms of Japanese culture they aren't yet aware of or knowledgeable about. The use of popular culture allows me fully to employ the potential of such materials for the purposes of entertainment and humour *in line* with the context of their production and consumption in Japan, and to venture into a critical discussion from that particular spot. Perhaps particularly with respect to sexuality, popular culture also serves as a vehicle in the struggle against current-day (American) sensibilities—where “identity is a euphemism for conformity” (Wieseltier 1996)—overpowering what students learn about Japan.

That said, there are topics that lend themselves less to popular cultural treatment than others. I have found that the history of family planning, for instance, particularly the various similarities and connections between early twentieth-century eugenics and current-day prenatal testing, is less suitable for popular culture. I am not sure that this is only because there is nothing to laugh about with the current-day socialisation and individualisation of once state-sanctioned criteria for inferior/superior humankind.

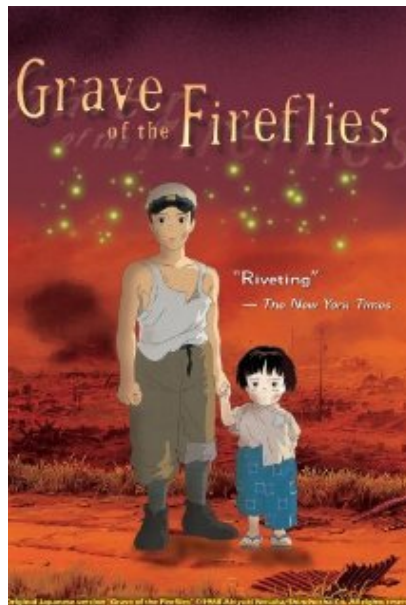
## Violence

Denaturalising their individual beliefs and attitudes and what students understand to be “their own culture” is also a goal when I teach on violence and the state. In what might be construed as a dramatic contrast to sexual content in mainstream media, violence appears almost completely normalised and morphed as a standard feature of entertainment, whether it appears on the news or in entertainment programs proper. Accordingly, I suspect that current undergraduates are consuming and are exposed to perhaps more and more consistent violent media content that is framed as entertainment than the generations before them. This increased exposure does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with the ability critically to analyse violent content when it is presented in the pedagogical setting of a university class and thus endowed with the expectation that such violent content adheres to a certain standard of truth—be it, for instance, footage of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki or of Miyamata disease victims. Quentin Tarantino (2013) believes that the audience of *Django Unchained* can tell the difference between the violence in his film that is meant to entertain and the violence that aims at representing a historical truth. Maybe so.

While Tarantino might be accused of softening the impact of violence representing at least a variation of historical facts by mixing in the kinds of violence familiar from whole film genres, no such respite is provided in my classroom, and hence, perhaps, the strong reaction from at least some students in a lower-division, undergraduate course on “Violence and the State in Japan” that I have been teaching for more than a decade as well.

The course covers various instances and forms of state and anti-state violence from the late nineteenth century to today, including state violence at war; organised and corporate crime; terrorism; religion; gender; among other topics. A substantial component deals with Japanese colonialism and the Asia-Pacific War, in the context of which I introduce and discuss propaganda, war making, the sexual slavery system, and the reinterpretations of that time in recent animation and manga, including the *Grave of the Fireflies* and *Barefoot Gen*. In different ways, both animated films tell the horrific story of war from the perspective of Japanese children who, unsurprisingly, are depicted as victims. Hailed as anti-war films, they succeed at convincingly narrating the tragedy of war for children. They miserably fail, however, at addressing Japan’s role in and responsibility for the war. Many of my students tend to be visibly touched by the fate of the child protagonists in these two sweet, tear-jerking popular cultural icons. They “understand” the sadness of the surviving children but learn nothing about the history of the war (see Fig. 6). The fact that all the familiar heart wrenching conventions combining children with animated film do their work so well, typically prompts me to open the discussion by reminding the students of a very different take on war. I show them England-based street artist Banksy’s wise dictum, “Every picture tells a lie” (see Fig. 7). Originally painted for the number 1 issue of the *Backjumps* exhibition in 2003, the blood-smeared line “Every picture tells a lie” headlines soldiers in combat gear and machine guns in hand, provocatively featured with angel wings and yellow smiley faces.

**Figure 6.**



**Figure 7.**





In contrast to students' accepting reactions to the motif of pacifism as heartwarming entertainment exemplified by *Grave of the Fireflies*, *Barefoot Gen* and similar 1980s' and 1990s' attempts to repackage the Asia-Pacific War for consumption by a young audience that has remained rather undereducated about it in schools, the screening of Dai Sil Kim-Gibson's documentary, *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women*, provoked only one student to break into tears. Shocked by the personal testimonies of survivors of the sexual slavery system that the Japanese military had maintained, she was inconsolable, and it took a while to explain to her the official contemporaneous rationale behind and the rather unexceptional character of that system. I believe that most other students must have already heard about the sexual slavery system of the Imperial Japanese Army, perhaps through recent media reports about now-prime minister Abe Shinzō's repeated doubts about whether it existed at all or at least not in the form historians generally agree it did, and the various governmental and media responses to his statements in China, Korea, the United States, and elsewhere.

Some students began to engage in the discussion that ensued only when they learned that war-making regimes have maintained and continue to maintain similar systems of sexual labour restricted to servicemen to this very day, and that the U.S. armed forces, the most trusted institution in the United States (Roth 2011), have been no exception. Among other plausible reasons, this reflects another observation that I have made in the classroom many times: My undergraduates tend to assume, and thus are not surprised to learn, that other nation states have done terrible things in the past and suffer from a variety of problems in the present. Most are quite certain, however, of the essential goodness—past and present—of the United States. Hence, teaching the modern and contemporary history and sociology of Japan, particularly aided by the visual and often emotionalising power of popular culture, prompts me also to steer them towards a more pronounced interest in all things American.

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## Notes

[1] For clips from this show, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eERVA3L73gc>

[2] For additional photographs, please see the following URL: <http://www.timetravelturtle.com/2013/04/kawasaki-penis-festival-kanamara-matsuri-japan/>

[3] For clips on this Naked Festival, see the youtube files at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVgEU7NkcS8>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTNY3oofv6E>, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=io\\_WDUdCLnU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=io_WDUdCLnU).

[4] This abstinence advertisement is included in an article on “Sex ed proponents defy results of CDC report: Abstinence works,” June 9, 2008, by a certain *Jill Stanek*: *With her typing fingers on the pro-life impulse*. <http://www.jillstanek.com/abstinence/sex-ed-proponen.html>

## About the Author

**Sabine Frühstück** is a professor of modern Japanese cultural studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is the author of *Colonizing Sex: Sexology and Social Control in Modern Japan* (2003) and *Uneasy Warriors: Gender, Memory and Popular Culture in the Japanese Army* (2007; transl. 『不安な兵士たち—ニッポン自衛隊研究』 2008). Currently, she is completing a monograph on the interconnections between childhood and militarism throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. <http://www.eastasian.ucsb.edu/faculty/fruhstuck.htm>

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