

## A Primer to Cultural Production as an Adult Video (AV) Actress in Japan: Expectations and Realities

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### *Abstract*

Is physical nudity always an expression of emotional liberation? Does sexual intimacy lead to spiritual oneness? These are the questions that my paper is going to explore, against the backdrop of the scintillating industry is credited to the Japanese pornography. It is not only monetary rewards that attract women to stage intercourse, but the promise of cathartic thrill and vocational satisfaction. In this aspect, they are not too different from those artists in the mainstream film-making and cultural producers of other mass media. Yet, is publicizing sex a form of sexual liberation? It seems not. Pornography is an extension, not an escape from the norms and strictures of society. The oppression of real life finds itself in the recreation of reel life. “Outside sex” is itself an insider’s world, with spoken and unspoken rules. The need to be commercially viable by pleasing the “male gaze” dispels any potential of liberation in the porn industry. Hopefully, this short paper will motivate more ethnographical researches to shed new light on this taboo subject.

### *Keywords*

Japan, Pornography, Gender roles, Sexual liberation, Cultural production

A series of articles in “The Tokyo Reporter” reveals intriguing facts with regards to the AV (adult video) actress and the pornography industry in Japan. Consider, for example, that a “flaccid period” of poor sales saw an increase in the hiring of weekend-only amateurs, who filled up roles for cost-cutting porn production companies (Nakano, “Stiff Times”, 2012). Atsuhiko Nakamura, a writer on the Japanese porn industry, is cited as saying: “If one position is available, there will be 25 actresses willing to fill it. It is a highly competitive environment.” Due to the oversupply of such prospects, wages have plummeted for part-timers and idols alike. Most actresses participate in group shots, which garner only 20,000 to 30,000 yen per session (Takahashi, 2012). Genre productions, such as the *chikan* (molestation) theme, fetch an upward of 150,000 yen, though after fees and commissions, merely one-fifth of that sum remains (Nakano, “Money Matters”, 2012). Yet in the late 1990s, a top actress could earn “four million to five million yen per flick” for her performances (“Stiff Times”). Lay discourses in other developed countries, mostly Western societies have often positioned pornography along the shades of taboo, immorality or perversion. To religious and cultural conservatives, sexually-explicit depictions of the human body undermine values of chastity and purity. Feminist activists have protested against the exploitation of women for the service of male sexual urges (Downs, 1989: xi-xvii).

These prescriptions suggest that female artistes enter the AV industry in a moral ignorance and/or in the exigencies of financial need. In contrast, Nakamura claims that “monetary rewards are not behind the current oversupply of actress”. Instead, he describes the “liberated sensation of a woman who resigned from a [banking position] to join the AV world”, and the “drastic change...from the daily grind” that a former nurse experienced as a soft-porn actress (Nakano, “Money Matters”). My brief essay aims to contextualise such accounts by identifying social and sexual liberalism as an ideological motive for the works of certain AV actresses, and especially considering the Japanese treatment of sex and body as the art medium (Moeran, 2010). In addition, I will highlight the discrepancy between the motive and the reality of the said cultural labour, arguing that the structure, conventions and stock roles’ definitive of AV productions do not necessarily permit the ideal of female “liberation” (Wong, 2014; Zamir 2013). Representations of femininity in the pornographic visuals might ironically reify and entrench women within the expectations of the male “gaze”.

According to Menger (1999: 554), cultural work has the potential to bring about “non-monetary, psychological rewards”, which include “high levels of personal autonomy”, “a sense of sociality and community”, “the possibility of self-realisation” and “potentially high degrees of recognition, perhaps

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even celebrity” (Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 255). The logic of finding freedom away from the rigid gender/economic role of Japanese society, and thereby one’s own being, appeals to female “libertarians”, who discover in various modes of erotic production as a gateway for self-expression. Willis (2006) observes the new emergence of diversity in Japan, from “assertions of individuality” to the “surfacing of once-taboo issues [about traditional] gender roles” (50). Albeit not without controversy, the Japanese have generally been recognised as a solitary society, with collectivistic people of “solid homogeneity...of a singular consciousness and indeed, of great insularity”, in contradistinction to white Western cultures (50). Gender is inextricably tied to labour, as seen in the archotyping of woman as *ryosai kenbo* (“good wife, wise mother”) since the Meiji Restoration (Faison, 2007: 8-9). That a woman’s main duty in life should be domestic prevailed as a complicit ideology in modern-day, industrialised Japan; the corporate sphere remains largely male-dominated and patriarchal. Women at the workplace are often relegated to peripheral job scopes and/or are forced to conform to the values, temperaments and work ethics as preferred by their male colleagues (Ogasawara, 1998).

Despite its regimented image of socio-economic life, Japanese culture has, perhaps surprisingly, rendered sexual activity as an art unto itself. Moeran (2010) summarises the historical treatment of sex in Japan. In early times, the emphasis was on “the play (*asobi*) involved in courtships or [brothel visits]”; games of pursuit and seduction between the genders. During the Edo period, sexual tension found expression in the “floating world” (*ukiyo*), or pleasure-seeking culture, complete with rituals of aestheticized flirtation by courtesans, such as singing and dancing (171). “Human passions” were regarded with amorality; “not controlled by an abstract moral code...of sin or chivalry, but by aesthetics, by decorum for its own sake, [akin to] an exquisite piece of theatre (Buruma, 1984 in Moeran: 171).” This complement, even flatters the sexual liberalist view of pornography as “essentially communication relating to sexuality”; “the natural result of the fact that humans are sexual beings (Malamuth and Billing, 1984: 118).” As per the *yakuza* (gangster) practice of tattooing, the body is itself treated as a canvas for beauty and artistry (Moeran: 171). The Japanese norm of sacrificing individual desires to meet communal obligations, as well as its tradition of beautifying the sexual form, thereby converged to foster a sprawling world of porn art; a supposedly isolated avenue for sexual, thus social emancipation. The non-matrimonial bed, as with other staged locales of exhibition, gratification or coitus, serves as a visceral space for the catharsis of repressed lyricism and sensuality. Throughout Japan’s history, socio-cultural upheavals have always been followed by a “spate of [pornographic expression]”; sex is in fact a “pleasurable safety valve”; “a form of “dissent, transgression or disobedience that rejects the effects of Western modernisation (Moeran: 172, Lloyd, 2004: 16).” In the pink realm, the woman is disrobed of her social image, identity and duties, at least theoretically. Via her erotic (re)creation, she finds space to diversify and deconstruct the severe, neo-Confucian binary of gender roles, not to mention the Judeo-Christian morality that yokes bodily intimacy to spousal union and abstinence to singleness.

Yet, as Hesmondhalgh points out, the creativity of the cultural producer must be negotiated with the agendas of business, politics and industry organisation (228-68). The ideal of creative autonomy and independence – “freedom from the influence of commercial goals, from powerful sources and from dominant...values [pertaining to] nation, class and gender”- more often than not loiters on the edge of elusiveness (244). In relation to the AV actress, the narrative sequence as typical of soft-porn features imposes upon femininity a fetishized, male-egoistic view. The prevalent motif in AV assumes that a woman should be subservient, innocent and barely defensible to a man’s advances. In his analysis, Wong (2014) identifies a “three-step process” in a clip starring a *bishojo* (beautiful young girl) (141-4). Firstly, the actress is introduced as “cute, cheerful, gentle and sexually naïve.” Secondly, she is aroused into a sexual mode and “stimulated via prolonged foreplay using various means.” Finally, “as a result of sexual enlightenment”, or being taught the ways of pleasure, she “metamorphoses into a...passionate, active and adventurous partner (144).” Most AV productions (except for some genres) adhere to this formula one way or another, whereas “lighter” works are usually pertained to the first step; for instance, by showing the actress in the nude, happily doing her chores or washing a car.

It is noteworthy that in Japanese traditional theatre forms such as kabuki, the “gender ideal is carefully crafted from a repertoire of markers or forms – gestural, sartorial, bodily, cosmetic and linguistic, that are coded masculine or feminine (Robertson, 1998: 38).” The emphasis on a system of externalised codification persists in the use of female archetypes, or stereotypes in modern AV texts. The housewife, the office lady, the girl-next-door, the schoolgirl and the bus or train passenger awaiting molestation are examples of the predetermined personas that an AV actress is expected to embody. At

the site of erotic performance, she is the subject of male voyeurism, handling, tantalisation, even bondage and discipline. In the wider, societal framework of Japanese patriarchy, the woman is commoditised for men's consumption, and should necessarily suit the market demands (Malamuth and Billing, 1984: 122-4). For most scenarios, she is required to strike a balance between being too lustful or "slutty" and being too frigid in the front of the camera. Hence, a woman is allowed to rebel by joining the AV industry, but "not by too much". Male expectations for her to straddle the best of both worlds govern the expression of erotic, creative selves.

We could thereby posit that although an AV actress might experience initial (and inconsistent) feelings of liberation in "courageous self-disclosure" – the risky (risqué) novelty of being naked in the presence of the other, the moral-ideological goal of emancipation is impeded by textual structure and the very nature of pornographic work itself (Zamir, 2013: 96). A woman might have engaged in sexual role-playing for the purpose of "existential amplification", wherein one's "usually unavailable possibilities are fictionally actualised", perhaps then leading to personal "growth" (96). However, the possibility of liberation, as well as being one's self, is difficult to realise in performative, consumeristic sex. Sexual reactions are remarkably uniform in AV productions, from the contortion of faces in pain/pleasure to high-pitched moans that have been caricatured as "cat-like". Varied responses to arousal, even in actual sensation, are controlled, muted or magnified by the artifice of presentation. An actress, to sum it up, could be either faking an orgasm, having a real orgasm, or having an orgasm but not enjoying it. In other words, her emotional mood could be dissociated from, even opposed to her physiological state. An actress inevitably encounters times during the course of work when her desire and mannerisms, or little thereof, must be subjugated to the duty of meeting directorial demands, which are in turn tailored to company guidelines and market specs. This compromise of self-authenticity is not too different from a woman's sacrifice of self for the majority in the corporate workplace, the household or the everyday practice of Japanese culture. In the world of AV, neither is she exempt from challenges to creative individuality or autonomy that are faced by cultural producers in more mainstream industries.

In conclusion, this essay has briefly examined the AV actress and industry against the backdrop of Japan's societal, historical and philosophical peculiarities. The psychological motivation of her cultural/creative labours, as specified earlier, seems to contradict the multivalent reality of the AV world, which is bodily aesthetics entangled in the web of dominant discourses, power politics and of course, the profit motive. An erotic chamber no longer retains its privacy in the presence of a camera that records for capitalist distribution and consumption; publicised sex accordingly subjects itself to public surveillance and compulsion. In "performing" (rather than just "having") sex, the woman leaves one or few social institutions for yet another; pornography is itself an institution of hierarchies and boundaries. An AV actress, as per the job description, must act – to perform a role, which might compromise as much as improvise upon her gender subjectivity. Finally, I would like to acknowledge a few limitations of this essay, if not a primer for further ethnographic studies and fieldwork. The discussion thus far has been restricted to heterosexual eroticism, while assuming a male majority among its consumers. One would expect the dynamics of creative (in)dependence to change in lesbian-themed productions or those geared towards female sexual tastes and responses, which are allegedly more contoured. The same could be said of the *chijo* (female molester) and *gyaku nanpa* (female pick-up) genres, featuring sexually aggressive women and thus deviating from the ubiquity of Japanese perceptions (Wong: 36-7). In addition, I recognise the dichotomised framing of sexual liberalist/non-liberalist, whereas future interviews might clarify and add nuance to the complex psychology of AV actresses and account for "in-betweens", such as those who take up AV as a short-term change of gears, or as an escapist hobby. Inferences from erotic texts about production norms and performance psyche could and should be corroborated by first-hand or onsite accounts of the filming set and process, answering questions of whether the actress thinks or feels she is truly "liberated".

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