

BOOK REVIEW

The Art of Censorship in Postwar Japan

Kirsten Cather

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While censorship in wartime and Occupation era Japan has received scholarly attention, as Kirsten Cather observes, there has been far less analysis of the on-going dance between artist/producer and censor in the decades since 1952. During this time, successive waves of sexual representations from inside and outside Japan have tested the uneasy relationship between the constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression and the still extant prohibition of obscenity by article 175 of the Criminal Code. The tension between artists and censors remains: the opening night of an exhibition at a Roppongi gallery has recently (February 2013) resulted in the arrest on obscenity charges of a Tokyo-based Singaporean photographer and an executive of the gallery owner for selling catalogues of the show that included depictions of male genitalia.

The Art of Censorship in Postwar Japan extends the study of censorship up to the present, and takes a wide view of obscenity trials, encompassing literary texts, film and hybrid media. It is divided into four thematic and broadly chronological parts: Part 1 discusses prosecutions of translated works from the late Occupation to the 1960s, principally Itō Sei's translation of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Part 2 addresses prosecutions of domestically produced soft-core films from the mid-1960s to 1980, specifically Takechi Tetsuji's *Black Snow* and Nikkatsu's long series of "roman poruno" productions. Part 3 covers censorship of pornographic adaptations or republications of classical works and what could loosely be called antiquarian erotica mostly in the 1970s, in particular the republication of Nagai Kafū's *gesaku*-style "Yojōhan"; and Part 4 discusses two cases between 1976 and 2007 involving hybrid media, namely the illustrated screenplay for Ōshima Nagisa's *In the Realm of the Senses* and the 2002 erotic manga *Honey Room* (*Misshitsu*).

Cather draws largely on the extensive trial records from these prosecutions to analyse the shifting arguments deployed by prosecutors and defendants to define and redefine obscenity. She justifiably insists that her study is of the art of censorship, not just the censorship of art, as the book consistently and convincingly emphasises the degree to which prosecutors, defendants and judges have also acted as critics, engaging with questions of style, form and the artistic process, in particular their foreshadowing and development of reception theory in the service of judicial process. Cather's book also draws out the ways in which censorship, and artists' attempts to dodge censorship, can influence cultural production, as in the case of *Black Snow*, a 1965 film which the director, Takechi, shielded from

the accusation of obscenity, despite its many scenes of sex, rape and murder, by emphasising its political meaning (as a supposedly anti-war, anti-American movie in the context of the Vietnam war and anti-base protests) in the screenplay and in the trial defence. Indeed, pacifist and anti-Western or patriotic rhetoric emerges as a popular tool to justify erotica, notably in the *Chatterley* and Kafū trials, and even in the Nikkatsu *roman poruno* trial, where the studio's embrace of pornography is presented as a means to save the Japanese film industry from foreign domination.

One of the consistent findings of this study is that courts' categorisation of publications or films as obscene was independent of their content and dependent, rather, on what was judged to be the author/publisher/director's intent and the effect on the reader or viewer. So, for example, judges condemned *Honey Room* as obscene, while simultaneously canonising Edo period *shunga* as not obscene in the context of their present day consumption, irrespective of the objective similarity of their content. It is particularly interesting, from a theoretical perspective, to see how the actors in the trial process depended for this critical judgement on the effect of paratexts: commentary, footnotes and translations for the texts in classical literary Japanese, screenplays for films, and the manner in which works were marketed. Salacious advertising could mark a work as obscene in the eyes of the courts, while scholarly apparatus could act as "the perfect insurance."

A further recurring theme is the emphasis on visibility as a precondition for obscenity, a point that is underscored by the range of media covered in this study. Itō's translation of *Chatterley* was judged obscene because the text was believed to conjure up too clear an image in the reader, dangerously stimulating the senses, and *Honey Room* was judged too "filmic" because its sequence of images gave too great a sense of action. An enigma that Cather highlights, but does not entirely resolve, is why, given the greater danger associated with visibility, all of the trials of literary texts, and the manga, resulted in guilty verdicts, while the films were acquitted. Part of the answer, Cather suggests, lies in the shielding role of the film industry's self-regulatory body, the Motion Picture Ethics Regulation and Control Committee ("Eirin"), and the book provides a fascinating account of Eirin's evolving, contradictory position as both industry body and censor, and, in the Nikkatsu trial, co-defendant.

Cather raises a number of other themes in the book, not all of which are fully developed. While the first part gives much attention to the conflicting implications of Japan's new constitution and its unchanged penal code, this seems to be dropped in later chapters. The importance of gender (that of the characters on page and screen, and that of the implied reader or viewer) is discussed intermittently, and comes into play most clearly in the discussions of *In the Realm of the Senses* and *Honey Room*, but ultimately is not addressed in a very clear manner. One further minor deficiency is in the use of Japanese terms and quotations, which is rather patchy. The provision of the original Japanese for short extracts of witnesses' testimony in some cases adds little, while elsewhere it would be informative, but is absent. An example is the repeated references to feelings of "sexual shame" as one of the criteria for obscenity.

However, these are very minor shortcomings in a clear and engaging study of postwar censorship. The book assembles an impressive cast of characters as defendants and witnesses: Itō Sei, Mishima Yukio, Nakamura Mitsuo, Nosaka Akiyuki, Ōshima Nagisa, Yoshiyuki Jun'nosuke, Kanai Mieko, and Suzuki Seijun, among others. The accounts of their testimo-

nies are of great interest, not least because of what they reveal of the artistic implications for writers and directors of the legal arguments and verdicts.

Cather has drawn fascinating insights that are of value both for the study of Japanese cultural history, and for the study of literature and other media more generally.

Reviewed by Duncan Adam