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Emperor Tomato Ketchup: Some Reflections on Carnality and Politics

Abstract: Terayama Shuji is one of the most prominent Japanese avant-garde artists of the 20th century. This paper explores Terayama's experimental film *Emperor Tomato Ketchup* (1971), dealing with children's rebellion against (masculine) authority. With an apparent lack of conventional narrative, this 16mm tinted black and white feature, shot in documentary style, was filmed in public without permission, demonstrating the guerilla tactics of Terayama's experimental approach. Reflecting the turbulent times of Japan's 1960s, when the quest for reinvention of national identity was compellingly engaged both right and left, *Emperor Tomato Ketchup* illustrates a dystopian Japan where the brutal revolution of 'innocent' and immature takes place. The focus of this paper is on the notion of carnality and politics of postwar Japan, as film's transgressive graphic content of pre-pubescent children's sexual encounter with women can still be perceived as radical.

Keywords: Terayama Shuji; *Emperor Tomato Ketchup*; children; carnality; politics; non-revolution

The only real revolution was in the imagination.
Terayama Shuji

… And all the children are insane, all the children are insane
Jim Morrison

Avant-garde artist provocateur, poet, dramatist, critic, photographer, theatre director and filmmaker – Terayama Shuji (1935–83) is a renowned cultural icon of postwar Japan. This prolific auteur was a distinguished member of the *angura* (underground) movement whose subversive artistic experiments foregrounded a revolutionary spirit of Japanese youth, dissatisfied with contradictions of everyday life. Along with underground theatre representatives such as Kara Juro, Suzuki Tadashi, and Hijikata Tatsumi, Terayama's theatre company Tenjo Saijiki (Les Enfants de Paradis) has been one of the most prominent and highly influential Japanese *angura* troupes of the

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1960s and 70s. "Surrealistic, confrontational and much imitated, Terayama's theatre incorporated rich and imaginative visual qualities steeped in Japanese retro to reflect sex, violence and oedipal Freudian symbolism."[1]

A similar perspective applies to his work in the field of experimental film where he continues to challenge the notion of (masculine) authority and promote an anarchic, disturbing and idiosyncratic vision of the world. Known for a "notoriety, on account of his widely publicized calls for teenagers to run away from their oppressive families and, in particular, to break with their domineering mothers"[2], Terayama further delineates this standpoint in infamous experimental film *Emperor Tomato Ketchup* [*Tomato Kecchappu Kotei*, 1971],[3] shot in documentary style, and with cast assembled from the members of Tenjo Sajiki theatre group and seventy children. This 16mm, tinted black and white film has been released at least in two versions – 28 and 76 minutes – and is considered to be a further developed adaptation of his radio-play *Adult Hunting* [*Otona gari*, 1960], dealing with children's rebellion against their parents, which had a similar effect on Japanese audience as Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds* did in the USA.[4] Released in 1971, his experimental film *Throw Away Your Books, Rally in the Streets* [*Sho o suteyo machi e deyou*], also meditating on the issue of sexuality and violence, as well as Japan's rapid descent into materialism, received domestic and international acclaim.[5] Nevertheless, *Emperor Tomato Ketchup*, with its long shots and voice-over offering the only sense of linear progression, did not remarkably correspond with audience and critics. This reception has deeply influenced Terayama's subsequent films, both stylistically and conceptually.

This paper explores *Emperor Tomato Ketchup* through the notion of carnality and the turbulent political history of Japan in the aftermath of the Second World War. In spite of, or precisely due to, an apparent lack of conventional narrative, this film's provocative conception, established by both a fragmented plot (of children ruling the state by overthrowing their parents who are sent to concentration camps) and visual imagery (of

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[1] Nicholas Bornoff, "Sex and Consumerism: the Japanese State of the Arts," in *Consuming Bodies*, ed. Fran Lloyd, (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 47–8.

[2] Tony Rayns, "Where the mountain meets the street: Terayama Shuji," *Sight & Sound* – Web exclusive, 15 March 2012, http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/where-mountain-meets-street-terayama-shuji, acc. January, 15, 2018.

[3] Terayama uses the word (皇帝) *koutei* for emperor, instead of (天皇) *tennou* which marks the emperor of Japan (a heavenly king), implying that his cinematic critique does not refer solely to the Emperor himself but rather a whole Japanese nation or other earthly idols.

[4] This paper considers the 76-minute cut of the film, which is available as an integral part of DVD box set *The Experimental Image World of Shuji Terayama* (2006). Terayama initially edited 85-minute feature length film, but later re-edited it to versions mentioned above. Also, a 12-minute segment of the integral version is released as experimental film *The War of Jan-Ken Pon (Janken senso).*

[5] A collage-like narrative about a socioeconomically marginalized young man rebelling against conservatism, combining fictional, musical and documentary style with an opening intended to bring discomfort to the audience with a minute-long blank screen and peculiar sounds, won a Grand Prize at the San Remo Film Festival and received highly positive reviews by *Kinema Junpo* critics. This film was co-produced by the eminent independent film production company Art Theatre Guild (ATG) famously known for collaborating with the Japanese New Wave directors.

explicit sexual encounter of pre-pubescent children with several women), can still, even after almost half a century, be perceived as radical. At the time of its release, the film's intentionally graphic content managed to disturb both the right and the left sides of the Japanese political spectrum, while scandalizing the Western audience, and it continues its agonizing flicker before conservative eyes to this day. This paper should not be read as an attempt of reassuring those appalled by Terayama's work, but rather as an (experimental) endeavor to illuminate the auteur's perspective on all the hindrances to a general pursuit of freedom. The following segment deals with the issue of the body and politics in the cultural context in which Terayama generated his artistic expression.

Long Live the New Flesh

The body was "an obsessive object of focus"[6] in Japanese postwar literature and cinema. Douglas N. Slaymaker's seminal work *The Body in Postwar Japanese Fiction* (2004) thoroughly examines the ideological and historical state of affairs which led to redefining the concepts of corporeal images and narratives of that time. According to Slaymaker, the body as a central point in the writings of the 'flesh writers' is a consequence of several circumstances: 1) bodily preoccupation of a daily life – the need for food and shelter in ruined urban environments among a population with weakened health, 2) liberated carnality of an individual, which stands as an opposing force to the militaristic ideology of wartime, and 3) reaction to governmental censorship of writings denouncing the politics of war and its devastating outcome.

Slaymaker also emphasizes the influence of Sartre's work on Japanese writers, in particular his short story *Intimité* which has been praised by Ango Sakaguchi and Noma Hiroshi. This approval comes from the assertions that Sartre's characters "think only through their bodies, that they are only *nikutai*"[7] and that the body *thinks and speaks*. Sartrean freedom occurs without excluding, but on contrary, involving the physical (肉体*nikutai*).[8]

The fundamental standpoint that addresses these issues and proposes the notion of a body as a tool of revolution, protest and subversion is to be found in Tamura Taijiro's claim:

> 'Thought' [*shiso*] is, at this time threatening to push us down; it does nothing else. 'Thought' has, for a long time, been draped with the authoritarian robes of a despotic government, but now the body is rising

[6] Douglas N. Slaymaker, *The Body in Postwar Japanese Fiction,* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), i.

[7] Ibid, 25.

[8] The overall importance of corporeality in Japanese culture could also be recognized in the realm of language. The *Kenkyusha Luminous Dictionary* (2001) offers numerous entries on bodily terms: (体) *karada* relating to physical body, as well as（身) *mi* - bodily position/place, whole body or joined together in synonymous (身体) *shintai,* marking its materiality and mostly used in phenomenological discourse, opposed to above-mentioned（肉体) *nikutai* which demonstrates carnality of the flesh. Anatomical aspect of the body is accentuated in (胴体) *doutai*, whereas (物体) *buttai* calls attention to physical objects. (国体) *kokutai* stands for political imagery of the body as a nation.

> up in opposition. The distrust of 'thought' is complete. We now believe in nothing but our own bodies. Only the body is real [*jijitsu*]. The body's weariness, the body's desires, the body's anger, the body's intoxications, the body's confusion, the body's fatigue – only these are real. It is because of all these things that we realize, for the first time, that we are alive.[9]

Following Tamura's logic, one could assert that the freedom that the body proclaims could be acquired in a post-militarist state of Japan as the means of democratization and liberation of an individual, and as a device that subverts dominant ideological discourses. From the late 1950s, the carnal body was also in the focus of filmmakers who belong to the Sun Tribe (*taiyozoku*) movement and the Japanese New Wave. In that period, films by notable directors such as Nakahira Ko, Shinoda Masahiro, Yoshida Yoshishige, Immamura Shohei and Oshima Nagisa caused a stir among the government officials. Nakahira's *Crazed Fruit* (1956) provoked the picket protest, while Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976) brought director to trial for obscenity and remains censored in Japan. Often depicting marginalized people in Japanese postwar society, these cinematic explorations were ironic, potent and subversive political commentaries. The Japanese *pinku eiga* (*pink film)* genre, dealing primarily with nudity and sex, does not have its entirely analogous Western counterpart. From the 1960s, these immensely popular films were produced both independently and through major studios such as Nikkatsu and Toei. The remarkable film directors such as Wakamatsu Koji, Suzuki Norifumi and Morita Yoshimitsu have contributed to this genre as well. Although there was a high demand for sexploitation films, the filmmakers had been restrained by the censorship laws of Eirin – the Commission for the Administration of the Motion Picture Code of Ethics. However, experimental films did not need the Eirin seal of approval and, hence, Terayama was allowed to test the boundaries of sexual transgression onscreen.

Be obscene, be be obscene

As referred to above, rebelling against postwar conservatism, imposed on Japanese society by American culture (along with advanced consumerism and the idea of democracy) was an ideological stance of numerous filmmakers. Due to these pressing issues, overall concern about national identity had been brewing among intellectuals and artists, regardless of their political standpoint. Both left and rightwing activists vehemently expressed their attitudes whether by anti-war protests, or pro-military governing outcries for the reestablishment of imperial power. In the late 1960s, Japanese student protests for university reforms and peace in Vietnam,[10] provoked violent police reaction, and become an increasingly common occurrence. Therefore, it is not

[9] Quoted in Slaymaker, *The Body in Postwar Japanese Fiction*, 3.

[10] Students believed that Japan bore a certain responsibility for the Vietnam issue, since the U.S. military had many bases on Japanese soil.

unexpected that failed protests resulted in wider public disinterest for the students' cause. On the other hand, the ineffectiveness of the ultra-right movement reached its peak with famous novelist Mishima Yukio's[11] unsuccessful military coup and the spectacle of his suicide. In the year of the renewal of the U.S.–Japan Security Treaty, Terayama's *Emperor Tomato Ketchup* evoked these futile revolutionary attempts.

Self-named as his favorite brand – Tomato Ketchup,[12] the child-emperor announces the X-mark code which supposes the death penalty or life in prison for any adult who "reduces a child's snacks, disturbs a child's drinking and smoking, takes the freedom of a child's eroticism, and pushes their own educational fixations". What social and political representations can we draw from the way Terayama depicts children in the film? One could argue that rebellious Japanese students who failed to achieve their goals, partly because of their recurrent disputes over the methods of resistance, displayed childish manners. Mishima's ridiculed speech, intended to inspire soldiers to conduct a *coup d'ětat* and restore emperor's power, renders a naïve and immature reasoning. Additionally, I would like to draw attention to an analogy between a twelve-year old child and Japan, made by general Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, during his speech in front of the United States Senate in 1951. MacArthur's own position, as a representative of the U.S. government, denoted that of the father figure whose unquestionable authority would teach Japan of proper behavior. These children also emanate Japan's capitalistic values, forcibly imported from the United States through marketed items such as (Heinz) Tomato Ketchup or Coca-Cola, indulging in a superficial atavistic craze. Terayama could be implying that Japan's postwar government regime figures as an American marionette, enforcing capitalistic hegemony and pushing brand culture onto Japanese youth, thus, transforming the nation's political system into the authoritarian rule of infants who are forcing adults into absolute consumerist obedience.

At the very beginning, Terayama liberates the children from the diverse ideological perspectives of prominent foreign icons – Mao Zedong, Jean Harlow, Karl Marx, Dostoevsky, and Mary Pickford – by crossing out their portraits with black pen. Once erasing them from the register of dominance, all the children are free to 'conspire', 'betray' or 'practice sodomy on the Army Minister of the State'. Juvenile sexuality is a point of Terayama's interest – its very essence of being 'unprocreative' appoints to anti-revolution, as a counter strategy for 'creation' of humanity. *Emperor Tomato Ketchup* palpably emphasizes the following – "I don't believe in political revolution at all. Rather, I am interested in a sexual revolution which includes a revolution in language, in touching, in writing."[13]

A scene with an older naked woman forced to pedal a 'pleasure machine' (evidently a child's invention, designed to enable dissatisfaction rather than enjoyment) supremely depicts children's curiosity about human anatomy and sexuality. Sex is a

[11] Terayama and Mishima's discussion on the subject of *eros* as a basis of resistance ("Taidan: Erosu wa Teikou no Kyoten ni Narieruka," *Ushio*, July 1970) reveals Terayama's doubt of the notion of sexuality as a significant factor of political change.

[12] Refers to Heinz Tomato Ketchup.

[13] Joan Mellen, *Voices From Japanese Cinema*, (New York: Liverlight, 1975), 283.

matter of enquiry, a child's play which could not be comprehended prior to adulthood. Later, we see a child soldier compelling a woman ("the girl [who] changed into a witch") to participate in the exploration of his 'immature' *eros*. His caress and kisses bring pleasure to the woman, but emanate in his desire for a breast-feeding mother (a caregiver) instead of a sexual partner. Another child soldier engages in an erotic encounter with four women – three of them wearing large white wigs and one, dressed all in black, smoking a long cigarette holder. A child's innocence was effectively portrayed when the boy-soldier, who is stripped naked, laughs and plays with the women's breasts, not knowing what is he supposed to do in a sexual act, nor how. However, the brutality of these 'innocents' does seem to be equally severe and alarming as atrocities conducted during the Second World War.[14] Deliberately focusing on the obscene, Terayama pushes the viewer to re-evaluate already established limits of the acceptable, reasonable and civilized. Juxtaposing pure childish eroticism with scenes depicting the torture of adults, Terayama recognizes an ambiguous fundamental of power.

Drawing on Wilhelm Reich's idea that the "fascist mentality is the mentality of the 'little man'", Taro E.F. Nettleton suggests that *Emperor Tomato Ketchup* is Terayama's parodic vison of Japan's infantility. "If, in this narrative of capitalist democracy, Japan's fascist past was explained through its infantility, then ideal development into maturity, as it were, entailed a process of identification with the U.S. politico-economic model."[15] Intriguingly, the authoritarian state depicted in the film is a result of a devastation of a family structure that allowed the child emperor's freedom to dictate his intolerable and absurd law. Unlike Reich's standpoint that destruction of the patriarchal family model would lead to emancipation of citizens in a totalitarian state, "or at least from fascism, which he argues, we all carry within ourselves"[16] Terayama unveils a fundamental *status quo* of power structure regardless of the reversal of roles of those involved. Hence, the transformative power of Japan's political state of affairs is an illusionary matter – the imperialistic fascism that led Japan into the Second World War and the imposed democracy of the postwar period are oppressive to the same extent. The emperor's wish for the country's advancement and development might be genuine, but inheriting the model of governing that includes the code that "the emperor's father will polish his shoes by licking them with his tongue", seems to profess that the real revolution is unattainable. In two different scenes, the boy-soldiers are seen losing their helmets during amorous activities with women, an act which is not acceptable for the emperor himself as "no matter what, he does not take it off". The emperor's hat represents an essential unchangeability of the state system despite the numerous revolutionary heads eager to wear it.

As a thirteen-year old boy, with a father who passed away during the war and a mother who left him in order to work in an occupation base camp, Terayama was

[14] Terayama refers to Nazi symbolism with apparent swastika on the uniform of a certain child soldier.

[15] Taro E.F. Nettleton, "Throw Out the Books, Get Out in the Streets: Subjectivity and Space in Japanese Underground Art of the 1960s," (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 2010), 74.

[16] Ibid, 100.

raised by relatives in a cinema house. His bed was on the reverse side of the big movie screen, and this "other side of the looking glass" destined him to continuously invert the conventional ideas and images throughout his artistic pursuits. The commoditization of sex in postwar Japan challenged him to further break down the taboos of eroticism and simultaneously unmask the ideals of the revolutionary spirit. Under the rule of *Emperor Tomato Ketchup*, it becomes intelligible that the revolution continues to be an anarchic child's play in a global playground of totalitarianism.

On the set of Emperor Tomato Ketchup, 1971.

Terayama Shuji with the cast of Emperor Tomato Ketchup, 1971.

Emperor Tomato Ketchup, 1971.

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