

Virtual Violence

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The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa

by Yasunari Kawabata, translated from the Japanese by Alisa Freedman, with a foreword and afterword by Donald Richie and illustrations by Ota Saburo

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Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture

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1.

Asakusa, in 1929, had seen better days. Asakusa usually has. That is the elegiac charm of this district in the east of Tokyo, flanking the Sumida River, the scene of the newly translated novel by

Kawabata Yasunari, written in the late 1920s. Since the late seventeenth century, a warren of streets just north of Asakusa, named Yoshiwara, had been a licensed brothel area, whose denizens, ranging from famous courtesans to cheap prostitutes, catered to townsmen, but also to samurai, who sometimes found it necessary to disguise their identities by wearing elaborate hats.[1] Asakusa itself really came into its own as a hub of pleasure in the 1840s. By the late nineteenth century the grounds of Asakusa Park, with its lovely ponds and miniature gardens, and its Senso temple dedicated to Kannon, the Goddess of Mercy, were given over to all manner of entertainments: a Kabuki theater, jugglers, geisha houses, circus acts, photography booths, dancers, comic storytellers, performing monkeys, bars, restaurants, and archery stalls where young women were reputed to have offered a variety of services.

Asakusa's wildest days are said to have been in the 1910s, after the Russo-Japanese War, when Russian girls, performing gypsy numbers in dance revues, known as "operas," added an exotic tang to the Sixth District, where most of the theaters were. The main attraction was to

show off women's legs. Reviews featuring young women performing swordfights were designed for this purpose also. Some of the opera houses actually provided the real thing. An Italian named G.V. Rossi was brought over from London to stage operas at the grandly named Imperial Theater, only to find a scarcity of singers. In his production of *The Magic Flute*, the same singer had to play both Pamina and the Queen of the Night, with a stand-in on hand when the two had to appear in the same scene.[2]

The first movie houses in Japan also were in Asakusa, as was Tokyo's first "skyscraper," the Twelve-Story Tower, or Ryouunkaku. Soon the silent movies, accompanied by splendid storytellers known as benshi, were even more popular than music halls or theater, and Chaplin, Fairbanks, and Bow became the stars of Asakusa. As is usually true of entertainment districts, even the best of them, Asakusa was marked by an ephemeral quality, by a sense of the fleetingness of all pleasure, which was perhaps part of its allure. But Asakusa, in the twentieth century, really did live on the edge; the entire quarter was almost totally destroyed twice: first in the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, which hit just as people were cooking their lunches, and incinerated the mostly wooden houses in a horrific firestorm; and again in the spring of 1945, when American B-29 bombers demolished much of the city and all of Asakusa, causing the deaths of between 60,000 and 70,000 people in a couple

of nights.

After the 1923 earthquake, the famous park was a charred wasteland, the Twelve-Story Tower no more than a ruined stump, and the opera palaces were rubble. Only the Kannon temple survived. It was thought by some that the statue of a famous Kabuki actor striking a heroic pose had held off the approaching flames. (The temple did not survive the American bombs, however, and had to be reconstructed.) And yet, fleeting as its pleasures may have been, Asakusa could not stay down for long. The movie houses and opera halls were rebuilt, and the park, with its pickpockets, prostitutes, Kannon worshipers, dandies, and juvenile delinquents, sprang back to life. In 1929, the Casino Folies was opened, located on the second floor of an aquarium, next to an entomological museum, or Bug House, which had somehow survived the devastation of 1923.

The Casino Folies, named after the Folies Bergère in Paris, was not especially wild, although it was rumored— apparently without any basis in truth —that the dancing girls, sometimes in blond wigs, dropped their drawers on Friday evenings. But it spawned not only talented entertainers, some of whom later became movie stars, but great comedians too. The most famous was Enoken, who appears in Kurosawa's 1945 film *They Who Step on the Tiger's Tail*. Everything that was raffish and fresh about Asakusa

between the wars was exemplified by the Casino Folies, a symbol of the Japanese jazz age of "modern boys" (mobos) and modern girls (mogas). The cultural slogan of the time was *ero, guro, nansensu*, "erotic, grotesque, nonsense." Kawabata Yasunari was one of the writers whose early work was infused by this spirit, and it was his book that made the Folies famous. He hung around Asakusa for three years, wandering the streets, talking to dancers and young gangsters, but mostly just walking and looking, and reported on what he saw in his extraordinary modernist novel, *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*, first published in 1930.

The novel is not so much about developing characters as about expressing a new sensibility, a new way of seeing and describing atmosphere: quick, fragmented, cutting from one scene to another, like editing a film, or assembling a collage, with a mixture of reportage, advertising slogans, lyrics from popular songs, fantasies, and historical anecdotes and legends. There is much *ero, guro, nansensu* there, related in the chatty tone of a congenial flaneur, telling stories about this place or that, and who did what where, while trolling the streets for new sensations. This fragmentary way of storytelling owes a great deal to European expressionism, or "Caligarism," after the German movie *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. However, as Edward Seidensticker, quoted in Donald Richie's excellent foreword, points out, it also owes much to Edo period

stories.

Kawabata himself professed to hate his early experiment in modernist fiction and quickly went on to develop a very different, more classical style, but he still made an important contribution to the Japanese Roaring Twenties. Besides the novel, he also wrote the film script for Kinugasa Teinosuke's expressionist masterpiece, *A Page of Madness* (1926). One of the most remarkable things about *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* is that it was serialized in a mainstream newspaper, the *Asahi Shimbun*, which is, as Donald Richie says, as though *Ulysses* had been picked up by the *London Times*. This testifies to the high-mindedness of the Japanese press—almost unthinkable in our age of Murdoch—but also to the willingness of the Japanese public to accept avant-garde literature in a popular newspaper; it probably helped that the avant-garde expressionism was mixed with accounts of Asakusa's low life.

Mixing high and low is of course part of modernism. Like many artists in the 1920s, Kawabata was interested in detective fiction and Caligarism is often marked by a fascination with violent crime. The use of slang and the references to popular culture of the time must have made *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* extremely difficult

to translate, and Alisa Freedman has done an superb job, even though the full flavor of the original can never be fully reproduced.

The narrator/flaneur introduces the reader to various characters, low-life types like Umekichi, who skins stray cats to sell their pelts, and his girlfriend Yumiko, who poisons an older lover on a riverboat by kissing him with arsenic, and Haruko, dressed in gold crepe, and Tangerine Oshin, "the heroine of every bad girl worth the name," who had "done" 150 men by the time she was sixteen. These are the people who drift into the Scarlet Gang. But there are others, more of the guro than the ero variety: the man in the Asakusa fairground with a mouth in his belly, smoking through his stomach; or the female tramps who dress like men; or the children who clean public toilets because they love modern concrete. The narrator is only interested, he writes, in "lowly women." The lowest kind of prostitutes are the teenagers, known as gokaiya, who sleep with rag-pickers and bums. Tangerine Oshin was one of them.

In true modernist fashion, it is never clear to what extent these people are meant to be real, or pure figments of the narrator's imagination. In fact, the narrator is the first to point out the fictional quality of his story. Artifice is the point. Yumiko, after disappearing from the story for a long stretch, returns near the end of the novel as a hair oil seller. Selling oil, in Japanese, means

fibbing, making up a story. Yumiko and the narrator discuss how the story should go on. The writer compares his story to a boat, like the boat on which Yumiko entertained her lover before murdering him, meandering, without a plotted course. This is where traditional Japanese storytelling meets modernism. Both share this quality.

None of the characters in Kawabata's novel has the depth of such modernist antiheroes as Franz Biberkopf in Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* or Joyce's Bloom. Compared to them Yumiko and the others are flimsy as rice paper. It is in conveying atmosphere that Kawabata, like so many Japanese literary flaneurs, excels. Here is the first sentence of Chapter Four:

While she did her Spanish number (and I did not make this up—this is a true story), I clearly saw that the dancer on stage carried on her biceps needle marks from a recent injection, though a small piece of adhesive tape had been stuck on top. In the grounds of the Senso Temple at around two in the morning, sixteen or seventeen wild dogs let out a terrific howl as they all rush after a single cat. That's what Asakusa is all about. You come to sniff out the scent of a crime.

Or this, about a character the writer is thinking of including in his story:

Another one I would add, a truly sad foreigner,

was the leader of the water circus troupe that came from America that year. Someone put up a hundred-foot ladder on the burnt-out ruins of the Azuma Theater, and the troupe leader jumped from the top into a small pond. There was a large woman who jumped from fifty feet like a seagull, and she really did look like one, too. Beautiful.

Casual, quickly noted in passing, a little sexy, absurd: ero, guro, nansensu. This spirit was all but snuffed out by the late 1930s, when militarism suppressed everything frivolous and pleasurable. And then the bombs finished Asakusa off entirely. Materially at least. For once again, vitality would not be denied. Donald Richie, as a young American with the Allied occupation, met Kawabata in Asakusa in 1947. Neither spoke the other's language. They climbed up the old Subway Tower building and surveyed the wreckage. Richie writes in his afterword:

This had been Asakusa. Around the great temple of the Kannon, now a blackened, empty square, had grown...places where, I had read, the all-girl opera sang and kicked, where the tattooed gamblers met and bet, where trained dogs walked on their hind legs and Japan's fattest lady sat in state.

Now, two years after all this had gone up in

flames...the empty squares were again turning into lanes as tents, reed lean-tos, a few frame buildings began appearing. Girls in wedgies were sitting in front of new tearooms, but I saw no sign of the world's fattest lady. Perhaps she had bubbled away in the fire.

Kawabata said nothing much at the time. Richie had no idea what the older man, dressed in a winter kimono, was thinking. Richie said "Yumiko," and Kawabata smiled and pointed at the Sumida River.

Asakusa today is pretty much like the rest of Tokyo, dense, commercial, a jumble of neon-lit concrete buildings, with the neighborhood around the Kannon temple filled with nostalgic souvenir stores selling trinkets for the tourists. The old Sixth District still has some movie houses and the odd seedy strip joint, but the action has long moved on, to the western suburbs of the city—Shinjuku, Shibuya, and beyond. What happens there, in the twenty-first century, when so much culture takes place no longer in the streets but in the virtual reality of personal computers, is the subject of "Little Boy," the exhibition of Japanese pop art currently at the Japan Society in New York.

2.

The curator of "Little Boy" is Murakami Takashi, the most influential visual artist in Japan today.

He is a painter of cartoon images, both childlike and sinister, a highly successful designer (of Louis Vuitton bags, among other things), a maker of mildly pornographic dolls, an artistic entrepreneur, a theorist, and a guru, with a studio of protégés that is a cross between a traditional Japanese workshop and Andy Warhol's Factory. His main idea is to reverse Warhol's project of turning banal, mass-produced, commercial images into museum art. Murakami wants instead to make art out of advertising, manga—Japanese comic strips—animation films, computer games, etc., and push it back into the market-driven world of mass culture.

Trained as a painter of Nihonga, or modern Japanese-style figurative painting, and an expert on the classical Kano School of painting, which dominated Japanese art between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, Murakami believes that Japanese art never distinguished high from low in the manner of European art. The West, he argues, established a hierarchy, which raised a barrier between high art and "subculture," a barrier that Murakami believes never existed in Japan. To escape from the humiliating and sterile enterprise of copying Western high art, Murakami and his followers wish to rediscover a truly Japanese tradition in the junky world of virtual "Neo Pop."

Since much of this theorizing comes in the manner of manifestoes, a certain exaggeration is

perhaps to be expected. It is not true that traditional Japanese art was not subject to hierarchy. In fact there was a strong sense of high and low. Cultivated aristocrats who attended Noh performances would not have been seen dead in the baroque and raucous Kabuki theaters. The refined scroll and folding screen paintings of the Kano School, mostly done in the Chinese literati-style, were bought by upper-class samurai, most of whom would have treated woodblock prints of courtesans and merchants as the height of vulgarity.[3] Some rich merchants cultivated a taste for "high" art too, but they would have been regarded as snobs, just as samurai with a bent for low life would have been seen as dissolute (hence their need for disguise in the Yoshiwara quarter).

It is true, however, that even court painters of the Kano School made little distinction between decorative and fine art. And mastery of past styles, or the style of masters, was, on the whole, more highly prized in Japan than individual innovation. There have been great individualists and eccentrics in Japanese art, to be sure, but the Romantic European ideal of expressing the unique personality of the artist in wholly new ways was not always understood when Japan first encountered the Impressionists, and the effort to emulate that ideal has stymied many Japanese painters ever since. In this sense, perhaps, Murakami is indeed working in a Japanese tradition. His designs for Louis Vuitton bags and his acrylic paintings are all part of the

same artistic vision.

Certain aspects of both Murakami's own art and that of his colleagues are immediately apparent. One is the infantile quality of much of the imagery: the wide-eyed little girls, the cute, furry animals, the winking, smiling mascots that one normally finds on candy boxes and in comic strips for children (which, by the way, are avidly consumed in Japan by adults too). The word, much used to describe young girls and their girlish tastes, is *kawaii*. The Hello Kitty doll is *kawaii*, as are little pussy cats, or fluffy jumpers with Snoopy dogs. *Kawaii* denotes innocence, sweetness, a complete lack of malice.

In the "Little Boy" exhibition the remarkable thing about the childlike drawings of young girls by Kunikata Mahomi, or the computer-generated prints by Aoshima Chiho, or Ohshima Yuki's plastic dolls of prepubescent girls, or Nara Yoshitomo's paintings of bug-eyed children, is that these supposedly *kawaii* images are actually not innocent at all, and sometimes full of malice. When you look at them carefully, you notice a strain of sexual violence. Everything about Aoshima Chiho's wide-eyed, nude girl lying on the branch of an apricot tree is *kawaii*, apart from the fact that she is tied up. In another picture by the same artist, cartoonish little girls are sinking

into the earth in an apocalyptic-looking shower of meteors. Ohshima Yuki's plastic dolls at first look like the cute little pendants on a nine-year-old's school satchel; but on closer inspection they are objects of pedophile lust, half-naked children in suggestive poses. Murakami's own painting in pink acrylic of a smoky death's head with garlands of flowers in the eye sockets turns out to be a stylized version of the atomic bomb cloud.

In other works, the violence is more overt. Aoshima's *Magma Spirit Explodes*. *Tsunami Is Dreadful* shows a *kawaii* girl as a monster spewing fire, rather like a traditional Buddhist vision of Hell (see illustration on page 12). Komatsuzaki Shigeru is obsessed with the Pacific War, which he depicts in a weird mixture of comic-strip exaggeration and hyperrealism. There is much of the souped-up heroic quality of wartime propaganda art in his paintings that is surely deliberate.

The sense of catastrophe, of apocalyptic doom, in much Japanese Neo Pop imagery, echoing the popularity of Japanese animation films and computer games about world-destroying wars and Godzilla-type monsters, is explained by Murakami as a reflection of Japan's ill-digested wartime past. The horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, smothered in silence during the US occupation, have left a kind of unresolved, largely repressed rage. Japan's own atrocities have not been forthrightly faced either.

Murakami argues that the US has successfully turned Japan into a pacifist nation of irresponsible consumers, encouraged to get richer and richer while leaving matters of war and peace to the Americans.

"Postwar Japan was given life and nurtured by America," writes Murakami in one of the catalog essays:

We were shown that the true meaning of life is meaninglessness, and were taught to live without thought. Our society and hierarchies were dismantled. We were forced into a system that does not produce "adults."

Part of this state of permanent childhood, in Murakami's view, is a sense of impotence, fostered by the US-written pacifist constitution, which robs Japan of its right to wage war. Murakami writes:

Regardless of winning or losing the war, the bottom line is that for the past sixty years, Japan has been a testing ground for an American-style capitalist economy, protected in a greenhouse, nurtured and bloated to the point of explosion. The results are so bizarre, they're perfect. Whatever true intentions underlie "Little Boy," the nickname for Hiroshima's atomic bomb, we Japanese are truly, deeply, pampered children... We throw constant tantrums while enthralled by our own cuteness.

This, we gather, is Murakami's explanation of the images of tied-up little girls, exploding galaxies, atom bomb clouds, Pacific War battles, and angry prepubescent children with tiny bodies and enormous heads—the overheated fantasies of frustrated Peter Pans, dreaming of national and sexual omnipotence, while playing the keyboards of their personal computers in the cramped quarters of suburban apartments. This is the culture of otaku, literally "your home," but used to describe the millions of nerdish fantasizers living inside their own heads, filled with the mental detritus of comic strips and computer games. Not responsible for the real world, the Japanese, Murakami believes, have retreated into a virtual one, which can be blown to smithereens with the click of a mouse. It is all about the war, the bomb, General MacArthur's emasculation of Japan, and American capitalism.

Murakami and other theorists of this persuasion link these infantile "tantrums" and dreams of omnipotence to the actual violence of Aum Shinrikyo, the quasi-Buddhist cult, whose followers in the 1990s murdered unsuspecting Tokyo subway passengers with sarin gas while waiting for Armageddon. They, too, used apocalyptic fantasies to explode the meaninglessness of the postwar greenhouse. The difference is that these deluded men and women,

many of them well-educated scientists, led by the half-blind guru Asahara Shoko, really believed they could find utopia by waging war on the world.

One thing that Aum Shinrikyo, with its paranoid visions of a world governed by a secret cabal of Jews, has in common with the theorists of otaku Neo Pop is a deep self-pity. One of Murakami's most avid admirers, a cultural critic named Sawaragi Noi, writes to Murakami ecstatically that "the time has come to take pride in our art, which is a kind of subculture, ridiculed and deemed 'monstrous' by those in the Western art world." The crowds at the opening night of the show in New York suggested otherwise, as did the hyped-up press coverage. But Sawaragi goes on to say, "Art is made by monsters at odds with the everyday life we live...." To which Murakami adds: "We are deformed monsters. We were discriminated against as 'less than human' in the eyes of the 'humans' of the West."

All this strikes me as wildly exaggerated. No one disputes that the atomic bombings were a terrible catastrophe or that the pumped-up postwar prosperity of Japan did much to bury the traumas of the wartime past. That overdependence on US security—combined with a de facto one-party state—has led to a kind of truncated political consciousness is at least plausible (I have argued this myself). And the humiliation of feeling dominated by Western

civilization for more than two hundred years cannot be dismissed. But to explain contemporary Japanese culture entirely through the prism of postwar trauma is much too glib.

Most modern art movements, waving their banners and manifestoes, like to think they are onto something totally new. But the combination of grotesque violence and sexual perversity is hardly new. In fact, there is more than a little *ero-guro* in Japanese Neo Pop. Nor is the fascination for very young girls, tied up or not, a novelty; Kawabata was obsessed by this theme all his life. Variations of *ero*, *guro*, *nansensu* appear at different stages of Japanese art history. The middle of the nineteenth century, just when Asakusa came into its licentious own, was a rich time for it. The Kabuki stage was given to dark tales of violence by such playwrights as Tsuruya Namboku, and woodblock artists like Yoshitoshi did prints of tortured women, suspended in ropes, and the like. We know about the 1920s, but the 1960s, too, were an *ero-guro* time, when poster designers, photographers, filmmakers, and playwrights borrowed heavily from the Twenties.

Even though the oversized, indeed grotesque proportions of human genitalia in pre-modern Japanese erotic art give a very different impression than the childlike humanoids in current art, a feeling of impotence goes back much further than General MacArthur's

occupation. It might have something to do with the traditional constraints which have been a constant feature of Japanese society. Who knows, it may even have something to do with overbearing mothers, smothering their (male) toddlers with too much care, before the social handcuffs are applied and early childhood becomes a lost Eden to be pined for until death.

I think Murakami, Sawaragi, et al. are right about one thing: the impotence they protest is political, apart from anything else. Sawaragi draws our attention quite rightly to the failure of the left during the 1960s to challenge the power of the state, and the security treaty with the US in particular. They tried. Students were mobilized in large numbers to demonstrate against the treaty and the Vietnam War, but political radicalism was made irrelevant in the end, not by police brutality so much as the blandishments of ever greater material prosperity. When radical energy could no longer find an outlet in politics, it turned inward, first to extreme violence inside the protest movement itself, and then to eroguro. It is interesting to see how many artists turned from political radicalism to pornography in the 1970s. Oshima Nagisa, the filmmaker, is only one example.[4]

In a way, it was always like this. Japan under the shoguns was close to being a police state, with no room for political dissent. Instead, men were

allowed to let off steam in the designated pleasure districts, whose courtesans became the stars of popular art and fiction. Kawabata's Asakusa was a late echo of this. There were periods of rebellion, of course, but when these came to an end, crushed by the authorities, eroguro would usually gather force.

But the latest generation of artists and consumers, represented in the "Little Boy" show, appears to have lost the sheer physical energy of their forebears in the 1840s, 1920s, and 1960s. Otaku and yurui, another term often used by Neo Pop theorists, meaning "loose, lethargic, slack," denote a lack of vigor. The eroticism in contemporary Japanese art is virtual, not physical, narcissistic, and not shared with others. It, too, takes place entirely inside the otaku heads. Here, I think, there is a new departure, which is not uniquely Japanese.

The virtual world, in art and life, is perfect for a generation that has broken away from collective effort, be it political, artistic, or sexual. This is why the novels of Murakami Haruki are so successful, in East Asia especially, but also in the West, where the otaku culture is spreading. His characters are disengaged from society, often isolated, living out their private fantasies in a world of their own. This began, in the 1960s, as a quiet revolt against the extended family with all its duties. Traditional arrangements were increasingly being replaced by nuclear families in

suburban bed towns. But things have progressed since then. Since family is the main symbol of constraint, people tend to interpret individualism in a narrow way, as a retreat into solipsism, where no one can touch you.

The other escape route from traditional life has been to recreate the family in an alternative way, as theater troupes and hippie communes did everywhere in the 1960s. Murakami Takashi has followed this model, with himself as the patriarch of a family of artists. And yet many of these artists show all the signs of deep self-absorption. The world they express is oddly bloodless, indeed a bit slack, in fact rather monstrous, a grotesque world where all sex and violence are unreal. It is certainly interesting to see what is going on in the virtual world of contemporary Japan. That it often looks so pretty

makes it all the more disturbing.

Notes

[1] The Yoshiwara still exists in name, though it has been sadly reduced to a few streets of tawdry massage parlors, known as "soaplands," after the Turkish embassy protested against their earlier designation as Torukos, or Turkish baths.

[2] For a loving description of those days, see Edward Seidensticker, *Low City, High City* (Harvard University Press, 1991).

[3] For excellent examples of high art see the Kano School exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York until June 5.

[4] See my review of Oshima's work in *The New York Review*, October 8, 1992.

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