Obscene Kayaks and Violent Pornography: Censorship in Japan

Controversy erupted when Japanese artist Megumi Igarashi, who 3D printed a kayak in the image of her own genitalia, was arrested by the Japanese government on obscenity charges. This arrest alone sounded misogynistic and absurd, but what made it worse was finding out that there is an annual penis festival in Kawasaki, Japan, at which vendors sell phallic and lifelike foods, novelty items and decorations, while gargantuan penis floats putter along the crowded streets. Even more appalling is the fact that Japan has only this past year illegalized child pornography, but continues to permit artistic renderings, such as in manga and anime, of child pornography for general consumption. For there to be such a discrepancy in opinion on what is obscene and what is acceptable hinted that there is likely deeply ingrained sexist tendencies in the Japanese censorship industry that need to be addressed, and that the purposes on which this industry was built need to be reformatted to meet the human rights standards of a modern society.

Igarashi’s vaginal kayak itself isn’t exactly what got her arrested and subsequently indicted. It was her distribution of its 3D printing code to her fans, so if by any chance they had access to a 3D printer massive enough to spit out a boat, they, too, could enjoy the vast pleasures of traversing waterways inside a 42 year old woman’s vagina. This is what the government had an issue with – distribution of obscene data. If they manage to convict her, she could end up with as much as two years in prison and tens of thousands of dollars in fines (Chappell). Perhaps the
critics of the arrest are just a bunch of hippie liberals, but many find nothing blatantly offensive in regards to this not even flesh-colored kayak. What could be so obscene about a vaguely vaginal boat?

    Well, obscenity in Japan is defined as “the state of being offensive to accepted standards of decency or modesty” (Shibata 123) or “that which produces a sense of shame in a ‘normal’ Japanese person who encounters, in public, an image or text whose primary intention or effect is to stimulate sexual desire” (qtd. in Helms 130). Obviously, these definitions are incredibly vague, and their interpretations are up to law enforcement agencies and official committees such as the Motion Picture Code of Ethics Committee, also known as Eirin. In terms of making a decision on the matter of obscenity, these enforcers will often refer to the precedents of previous cases to back up their decision-making. Eirin reluctantly submitted to allowing untouched glimpses of pubic hair in movies as recently as the 90’s, but even to this day, bare genitalia are standardly considered unfit for public viewing and are blurred out in movies and pornography (Helms 131). Okay, so it’s the fact that Igarashi’s kayak is in the image of her bare vagina, and that has time and time again been deemed unacceptable by censorship authorities. But, hold on a minute, pornography is legal in Japan, but not if the genitalia are shown? Aren’t exposed genitalia doing…well, what they do best, sort of the whole point of pornography?

    Not in Japan, apparently, and definitely not to those who decide on the terms of obscenity. Tomo Shibata explains:

    [The Japanese police’s] criterion of judgment effectively legalizes any production, distribution, and consumption of these materials that incite a desire to commit sexual crimes, including scripted and real rape videos, as long as the genitals are not displayed. Indeed,
numerous videos and DVDs that record real scenes of gang rape and intense physical assault resulting in physical injury requiring more than a half year of hospitalization are sold legally in Japan.

(124)
The misplacement of priorities here is deeply troubling – extremely violent content that might negatively influence its viewers and definitely traumatizes its on-screen victims is deemed fit for consumption – just make sure to blur out the wee-wees.

Furthermore, the capitalistically conditioned modern porn viewers seem totally complicit to such a system. And sex sells, in Japan as much as it does anywhere else. Quoting anthropologist Anne Allison, who specializes in Japanese society, Udo Helms writes:

The packaging of bodily exposure that decenters or obscures genitalia is big business. It sells products and is productive itself of a construction of leisure that is sold to Japanese consumers as escapist recreation. The state has in fact endorsed and encouraged a sexual economy of a particular order, one that evades the state surveillance of pubic realism and therefore constructs the stimulation and simulation of sexuality as a fantasy. Such mass sexual tropes as voyeurism, infantilization, and sadomasochism are something other than ‘obscene’ and other than ‘real’. (140)

Pornography is incredibly common and normalized in Japan, and its kinkier, more violent subgenres are nearly as common. It isn’t unthinkable to see a man on the subway flipping through a manga comic where twelve year old girls perform sado-masochistic acts on one
another. Apparently, “a Japanese civil servant has been demoted for visiting porn sites more than 780,000 times over nine months while at work… upon discovery, the man, whose name is not being released to the public, was not fired. However his pay was docked by $190 a month” (Maclean’s). Pornography is so normalized and deeply integrated into Japanese society that this sort of misbehavior at work is frowned upon, but won’t result in termination.

Herein lies the biggest problem with the arrest and subsequent indictment of Megumi Igarashi – her piece of artwork, rather vaguely depicting her own, adult vagina, is obscene. A woman’s body part in a basic, non-sexual state, is unacceptable. Meanwhile, women are objectified and humiliated and abused and raped and filmed for pornographic entertainment – and the Japanese government writes this off as fit for the public and good for the economy just so long as there’s a black bar over any exposed genitalia. The body part every biological female is born with is obscene, yet her recorded for profit rape is not? This screams objectification and dehumanization – according to this logic, biological womanhood is only acceptable, is only legal, if it is a product for men to consume.

This isn’t just about a woman being able to embrace her body and celebrate it in her artwork freely – Igarashi’s yonic kayak aside, the prevalent and completely legal violent pornography in Japan has devastating effects on its viewers’ internalized instincts about sexuality, and quite often breeds rapists. According to the United States Department of Justice in 1986:

“When clinical and experimental research has focused particularly on sexually violent material, the conclusions have been virtually unanimous. In both clinical and experimental settings, exposure to sexually violent materials has indicated an increase in the likelihood of
aggression…substantial exposure to materials of this type (sexually violent materials) bears some causal relationship to the level of sexual violence, sexual coercion, or unwanted sexual aggression in the population so exposed”. (qtd. in Shibata 117)

The Japanese government seems to believe that Igarashi’s kayak is inappropriate and damaging to the general public, but rape porn has a right to be out there, despite its clear link to augmenting male aggression towards women. A society that perpetuates profitable violence but condemns a rather benign artistic expression of pride and self-love within the female form has a disconcerting moral code.

Countless other studies, plenty of them done in Japan, support the idea that the viewing of violent porn frequently influences the desire and decision to sexually assault others. One such study explains, “a total of 553 sex crime suspects (281 suspected of rape and 264 suspected of forced obscenity) in Japan were asked if they committed sexual crimes in order to imitate what they viewed in pornographic videos. 40.6% of rape suspects and 49.2% of juvenile sex crime suspects (rape and sexual assault) answered positively to this question” (Shibata 118) – and yet only last year did the Japanese government implement consequences of jail for up to a year or a ten thousand dollar fine for the possession of child pornography (Hellmann). However, illustrations of child pornography are not included in these new prevention laws. Many argue they ought to be, because rates of child abuse are at currently at their highest since the nineties, hinting strongly at a possible, and dangerous, correlation.

Others claim it will fell too large a part of the booming manga industry, for artists will be too afraid to publish their sexual stories in fear of violating censorship laws (Ripley, et al). It is
probable that the risk of economic downfall in an industry is a key reason to why child pornography, fictional or not, is allowed to continue on. Artistic expression isn’t the government’s concern – if it were, Igarashi’s kayak codes probably wouldn’t have landed her an indictment. Analyzing the history of censorship in Japan, Rachael Hutchinson writes, “the process of ‘non-censorship’ receives less attention than enacted censorship, but the question of why some texts might evade censorship is significant, providing insight into how artists can manage their reputation and calculate the effects of their art” (277). Writers, film-makers, artists and the like are constantly keeping in mind the ideals of the government in order to make a profit. However, if their product helps the Japanese economy and fuels an industry, the promise of money might just keep the government at bay – grossly violent content or not.

Returning to other initial questions for a moment, in regards to Kanamara Matsuri, or the ‘Festival of the Steel Phallus’, the explanation for why it hasn’t been labeled by the Japanese government as ‘obscene’ seems to be a combination of its economic profitability and its Shinto origins. The festival is a huge tourist attraction, especially for foreigners, and raises money and awareness for HIV protection and safe sexual practices. Its inception came from a tradition of praying for sexual health at the local Shinto shrine (Huffington Post). Therefore, this genital image ridden celebration of fertility seems to get the approval stamp from the Japanese government. Why there aren’t also massive vulva floats featured at this so-called fertility festival beats me, but I digress. This exposed genitalia is akin to exactly the type of obscene content Megumi Igarashi got in trouble for, but it seems to me that when you throw the label of ‘religious expression’ or ‘tradition’ onto something, it’s likely to get its way into public view uninhibited – especially if it’s profitable. This profitability seems to be the impetus for the prevalence of violent pornography in Japan.
So how can we fix this sexism that is so deeply entrenched in Japan’s economy? How does one even begin trying to downsize the porn industry? Firstly, reforming Japan’s obscenity laws themselves must be considered. Tomo Shibata refers to other countries’ legislation, offering that:

The methods used in present laws to determine the illegality of sexual materials in Japan are precisely quantified, and, in being so, the locus of the problem is critically displaced: the exposure of genitals constitutes the crime of distributing obscene materials. First and foremost, any enactment of violence in adult videos (DVDs) and other forms of the media (unless expressed from the victim’s point of view with the objective of ending violence) ought to be criminalized, for example Canadian obscenity law criminalizes the ‘undue exploitation of sex, or of sex and any one or more of the following subjects, namely, crime, horror, cruelty and violence’”. (126)

No longer should Japan’s freedom of speech laws protect such content that consistently assaults the freedoms of its victims. Legislation that promotes freedom while also keeping an eye on content that could exploit and dehumanize people and infringe upon their own freedoms, as seen in the above Canadian example, should be lobbied for in Japan.

A common rebuttal to such a constitutional modifications has and will always be, “But that’s infringing upon my freedom!” In order to respond, one first must take a look at the definition of freedom. The Declaration of the Rights of Man, one of the most critical and influential documents of the French Revolution, many parts of which hold similar to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by the United Nations, states, ““Liberty
consists in the ability to do whatever does not harm another’” (qtd. in Shibata 123). Shibata explains this as, “in other words, the kind of freedom that harms another’s freedom should not be qualified as a freedom at all, from the very outset. As argued above, sexually objectifying merchandise ominously harms those who are most susceptible to sexual violence (children, incest survivors, women with intellectual disabilities, and so forth)” (123). One could argue that just about anything can lead to the harm of others, but the proof that violent pornography leads to a higher number of sexual assaults and male aggression is constantly reiterated in countless studies like the ones highlighted here. Freedom is not truly freedom if it survives by damaging the freedoms of others.

Furthermore, Shibata argues that those striving for sexual liberation and more leeway in terms of artistic expression and speech in Japan need to nix the inclusion of objectifying media in their arguments. In order to create a society that feels more sexually comfortable and identifies positively with consensual sex and the natural human body, literature and film featuring consensual content should be promoted as fit for general viewing (127). This is entirely in contrast to the reality, in which violent pornography is marketed as a fantasy outlet and sexually liberating, while it actually dissolves women and children’s freedom from oppression and abuse, and damages the chances for their own liberation. Intersubjective modality is what Shibata refers to as the opposite of sexual content that objectifies. It focuses on the consensual, the mutual pleasures of each party, and bringing this sort of content into the mainstream is one of the only ways to lessen the fallacious idea that aggression and objectification lay the groundwork for human sexuality (115).

In addition to promoting a perception of sexuality as inherently consensual rather than inherently aggressive, young citizens of Japan (and in the US as well) should push towards
desexualizing their idea of the naked body. Japanese feminists and others involved in social justice should organize and create grassroots marches and promotions for self-love, acceptance and equality. Such activists should involve themselves in politics and lobby for criminalizing the sale of illustrated yet blatant child porn, and work towards spreading this message in the scope of the masses.

Yes, genitalia are sexual organs, bare breasts secondary sex characteristics, but the vast majority of the time, these body parts are not participating in sexual acts. They simply exist, as every person’s body does, in a basic state as our everyday lives carry on. Nudity is so frequently seen in terms of sexuality, vulnerability, and obscenity, but what is so inherently perverted about the human body? In our globalized, capitalistic society, women are brought up to hate their bodies. They see the billboards, magazines, and TV advertisements marketing a hyper-sexualized and idealistic version of their bodies. Barraged with these images on a daily basis, women in particular so often lose themselves in the vicious cycle of buying products to improve their bodies and hating themselves when they can’t meet society’s unrealistic standards. One of the first steps towards lessening the commodification of women’s bodies in capitalist societies is to fight the idea that some bodies are better than others. If a person is raised to feel normal and comfortable in their own skin, they will begin to see others’ bodies as normal too. Hate only breeds hate – the disgust of one’s own body will inevitably lead to the repulsion or jealousy of others, creating a system in which others bodies are something to consume, replicate, or abhor. This is the mindset from which violent, objectifying pornography thrives.

Until such a body positive culture is more prevalent in Japanese society, supporters and social justice activists in Japan ought to speak out as they can and fight against Megumi Igarashi’s indictment. The unlucky artist may have technically broken the rules, but realistically,
Japan’s system itself is broken. If human genitalia is obscene, then the commodification, normalization and sexualization of abusing women and children’s bodies had better be considered obscene as well. The Japanese government needs to take a serious look at its definition of obscenity, and ask what kind of freedom they are really protecting: human rights, or economic gain? Furthermore, the official definition of freedom needs to be explicitly altered to exclude expressiveness that dehumanizes others and promotes violence in order to ensure that its own existence does not rely on taking away others’ freedoms – even if there’s money to be made. The promotion of a policy of self-love and respect for others’ bodies is the initial step into dismantling the cycle of being repulsed by bare genitals and drawn to violent depictions of sexuality. This reform is one that Megumi Igarashi, the victims of rape porn, and all the women and children of Japan need to be truly free from this government sanctioned rape culture.
Works Cited


“Japan’s Annual Penis Festival Is As Phallic As You’d Expect.” Huffington Post. 7 Apr. 2014. Web. 29 Mar. 2015.

