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Can Film Be Gay?

—Re-thinking “Gay” as a Film Genre in Japanese

Context—

映画はゲイであり得るのか

—日本における映画ジャンルとしての「ゲイ」概念再考—

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概要

本論文では映画ジャンル理論を切り口に、映画ジャンルを形成する概念としての「ゲイ」について再考を試みる。現代日本社会では、Netflixのような映像ストリーミング事業などの影響により、性的指向とジェンダー・アイデンティティをテーマにした映画を容易に視聴できるようになった。しかし、性的指向とジェンダー・アイデンティティは一つの映画ジャンルを形成する概念として機能しているのだろうか。この問に答え、「ゲイ映画」とは何かを考えるために、本論文は、まず、ジャンル研究における権威であるリック・アルトマンとバリー・グラントによる映画ジャンル理論を概観し、これらを「ゲイ映画」の考察に批判的に応用する。つぎに、本論文は、日本映画における性的指向の表象、および、男性同性愛的な欲望の表象にかんする先行研究を挙げ、とくに「ゲイ」が映画ジャンルを形成する機能を果たしているのか、果たすことができるのかを論じる。そして結論として、先行研究が少いとはいえ、日本において「ゲイ映画」がジャンルとして成立する要素はある程度そろっていること、および、ゲイ映画の研究にあたっては、オーサーシップと作品の志向性についての研究を今後深めなければならないことを主張する。

Keywords

JAPAN, CINEMA, REPRESENTATION, FILM GENRE, GAY/QUEER STUDIES

I Introduction

Netflix in Japan acknowledges the idea of “LGBT films” or “LGBT series”. Through

Netflix's interface, the viewer can search for content in the search menu by typing "LGBT" or related words such as "lesbian", "gay", "trans", or else, in the search engine to access LGBT related content. However, such content does not enjoy an established category in the menu, such as SF, fantasy films or comedies. Moreover, most of the LGBT content the viewer can access this way is western films depicting gay male characters. The fact that Netflix is an American streaming platform surely plays an important part in the nature of the content library accessible to Japanese users. Nevertheless, it is worth stating that in sociology – and especially in the area of gender and sexual minorities – Japanese input is usually done by borrowing or referencing American (or more generally English) contributions.

To a certain degree, Netflix's system of compiling film texts according to their capacity to display LGBT characters hints to the idea that in today's western society, elements like sexual orientation or gender identity might be understood as film categories – genres – just like action films, comedies, or science fiction films. However, the reality is not that inclusive of sexual orientations and gender identities, and most of the time the LGBT aspects of films are relegated to the subplot, while more conventional genre labels, such as comedy, drama, or science-fiction, for example, are put forward as the descriptive and generic part of a film. For example, the film *Imitation Game*, directed by Morten Tyldum in 2014, portrays the life of Alan Turing, a British cryptanalyst who also was a homosexual. The film is mainly focusing on the historical events of Alan Turing's life and the personal aspects are rather toned down.

Here, a question emerges more encompassing than the precariousness of fashionable streaming platforms: are sexual orientations or gender identities-related film genres a functioning label to categorize films? To try to answer this question, I focus on the field of film generic studies and emphasize what elements are being expected of individual films and how they work together to form a film genre. This paper mainly focuses on whether and how "gay film" can stand on its own as a genre, but the theoretical discourse around the establishment of gender identity and sexual orientation as one film genre is common to all sexual orientations and gender identities.

In the first section, I provide the elements to understand and justify the language used in this paper. In the second section, I focus on the theoretical elements in order to understand the general idea of film genre. This section mainly focuses on Rick Altman and Barry Grant's work on the main developments of generic theory. After discerning the fundamentals of the generic formation for gay film, the discussion proceeds to review some of the contributions made to the idea of a "gay film" category. This section presents examples of contributions about Japanese films that can be understood to be part of a "gay film" corpus, and in what aspects these contributions are useful for the establishment of the idea of "gay film" in Japan.

II Vocabulary issues

Words such as “gay”, “queer”, “LGBT”, or even “film” – redundant in our everyday life – have meanings and politics that can bear a different meaning to different individuals and cultures. Before starting this analysis on how film genre and sexual orientation or gender identity can be related in the framework of our study, firstly, the taxonomy used in this paper needs to be specified.

2.1 Refusing “LGBT”

A present worldwide trend is to address the complexity of genders and sexualities through the acronym “LGBT”, which stands for “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender”. As Tomoyuki Kaneta (金田智之: 2019) has shown, this trend is also present in Japan and was started through an article on the subject by Amnesty International in 2003. The word was validated by the works of Kanako Otsuji (尾辻かな子) in 2005 and 2006, and eventually reached general press in 2007¹⁾. “LGBT” is now an acronym generally used in Japan to address people and cultural productions in relations to sexual orientation and gender identity. However, a certain number of problems come from such wording.

2.1.1 The unstoppable growth of the “LGBT” acronym

As introduced above, “LGBT” results from the combination of the first letter of 3 different sexualities (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual) and 1 gender identity (Transgender). The history of the word shows that this form is an update of “LG” (Lesbian and Gay) which was firstly used during the seventies and eighties in the United States. Also, more recent usages of the acronym can be found with different variations such as “LGBTQ”, “LGBTIA” or “LGBT+”, which echoes the will to make the “LGBT” acronym even more inclusive of different sexual orientations and gender identities by including “Intersex” or “Asexual” people, for example. Therefore, we can safely state that the “LGBT” acronym is bound to continually grow, as newer and more precise identities are socially recognized, making it more complicated to use.

Aware of such expansion, variations such as “LGBT+” try to prevent this unpracticability by using the “+” symbol to signify “and others”. However, the replacement of others identities, by regrouping them behind the “+” symbol, leads these identities to be vaguely acknowledged but never really represented. Then, the obvious focus on the first four identities (L.G.B.T.) points to the prioritization of them over others, therefore implying a leveling of identities within sexual orientations and gender identities. A questioning of the usage of the “+” symbol makes us aware of the power relationships existing among sexual orientations and gender identities.

2.1.2 “LGBT” as a market

Besides issues regarding the wording of the “LGBT” acronym, Kaneta remarked the fact that the generalization of “LGBT” within general press was implied by a worldwide consensus of an “LGBT market”²⁾, which is why the acronym started to appear within business reviews. The idea of “LGBT market” operates on two levels.

The first level is the participation of “LGBT” people within the general economy. Yuichi Kuroiwa (黒岩裕市: 2016) shows that such participation is encouraged through the essentialization of “LGBT” as a creative workforce that the general job market could benefit from³⁾. However, in the essentializing of profitable “LGBT” people, the formation of a “double criterion” regarding the assimilation of “LGBT” people can be apprehended (Chitose Masaki (マサキチトセ) 2015). According to Masaki, a double criterion of assimilation implies the normalization of the experience of “LGBT” people, therefore preventing the assimilation of “LGBT” people that do not correspond to such experience⁴⁾.

The second level of marketization of “LGBT” operates as an exteriorizing process. It is no longer the participation of “LGBT” people that is encouraged, but rather the access to an “LGBT market”, a market formed within “LGBT” communities that is targeted. In this sense, a value is attributed to such markets, and “LGBT” as an exterior market justifies the rise of an “LGBT” branding meant to capitalize on this “LGBT” market.

For the politics discussed here above, this paper tries to avoid “LGBT”, at the exception of notions or event voluntarily branded as “LGBT”, such as “LGBT film festival”, etc. Therefore, toward the defining of male-male representation, the words “queer” and “gay” are valuable replacements but need to be contextualized.

2.2 The difference between gay and queer

2.2.1 Overview of the occidental usage of “gay” and “queer”

It goes without saying that “gay” and “queer” have been explained multiple times and are still being redefined in the present days. This ongoing process of definition is mostly due to the fact that the meaning of these words varies with time and according to the people using them or not. What is common to the words “gay” and “queer” in the occidental usage of those words is the history of the dynamics of the discourses behind them. In both cases, the primary meaning is indisputably pejorative and not inherently related to homosexuality. Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin point at the evolution of the word “gay” in the United States, in the introduction of *Queer Images, a History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America*.⁵⁾ In the first part of the 20th century, the word “gay” was used to mean “outside wedlock” which can both refer to homosexual and heterosexual desire. The word then was used in a narrower manner, meaning “lightly”, “happy”, but also “feminine” in a certain manner, referring mainly to male homosexuals. It continued to be used pejoratively, but from the 1960s-70s, “gay” was used as an affirmative identity label, that classifies male and female homosexuals. Nowadays, even though the expression “gay girls” can be seen from time to time, it is rare and female homosexuals are often referred to as “lesbians”. Similarly, the word “queer”, which means “strange” or “odd”, was firstly used in a pejorative way to classify perverse people. The word “perverse” here refers to the 20th century psychoanalytic usage of the word, that is non-normative sexual behavior. Therefore, the word “queer” itself was used to

pinpoint people having non-normative sexualities/desires. However, from the 1990s, sustained by queer theory, the word became used in a reaffirming manner. It insists on the non-normativity of people and also their “misfitness” according to the system they live in.

The word “queer” is a very elusive term. It mostly refers to the fluidity and diversity of the human experience, in particular its sexual orientation. The parameter of this fluidity is what varies the most with the gay-lesbian criticism of the 1970s and where the two currents of ideas conflict. While gay-lesbian criticism mostly claims sexual orientation within a fixed gender identity practice, queer theory rather claims the non-fixity of identity. However, the current labeling of cultural productions or people as “queer” clearly works as a defined category, so that it becomes harder to distinguish “gay” from “queer”. If in the beginning “queer” was mostly used to talk about non-binary sexuality and about the diversity of the sexual experience, it now relates itself to vaster issues such as racism, ableism, classism, etc.

2.2.2 “Gay” and “queer” within Japanese context

Previous researches on the matter of male-male relationships within the Japanese context points to the conclusion that no clear connection can be made between historical male-male sexual practices (Danshoku 男色 or Shudo 衆道) and the idea of a historical Japanese gay male identity (Gary Leup: 1995, Gregory Pflugfelder: 1999 and Mark McLelland 2005)⁶⁾. Their arguments mainly rest on the idea that sexuality only appears as a component of an individual identity during the 20th century, therefore historical sexual practices between men were not in any way regarded as actions of identification. On the other hand, class status may have been a core element of identification and also modelling the way sexual practices were conducted.

Yet, as McLelland demonstrates, after a short popularization of the expression “gei boi” (ゲイ・ボーイ) among urban night life during the 1960s and 1970s – mostly addressing male crossdressers, male sex workers and MtF transgender people –, the word “gay” (“gei” ゲイ in Japanese) became used to signify men who love men – as an identity – during the 1990s⁷⁾. In this sense, the Japanese version and American version of the word “gay” are not so different in terms of identity politics. However, cultural backgrounds of the two notions of “gay” should not be put aside.

As for the word “queer”, it appeared in Japan at the same time “gay” and “lesbian” did during the 1990s. However, contrary to “gay” and “lesbian”, “queer” was, and is, mostly used within the academia⁸⁾. Kaneta argues that because it appeared at the same time as “gay” and “lesbian” identities, “queer” in Japan never had the same deconstructivist impact as in the United States and Europe. And, while it came before “LGBT”, “queer” is usually used as a transposition of “LGBT”⁹⁾.

2.2.3 The wording of this paper

As for the present paper, even though it sincerely embraces the polymorphism of

“queer” and its positionality, it focuses on the representation and the characterization of male same sex desire, therefore it will consciously refer to male same sex desire as “gay”, when desire between male characters can be identified as an identity component. On a political level, the word “gay” clearly erases non-identity same sex practices by men in favor of identity-connoted ones. The word “queer”, on the contrary, will be mostly used to refer to non-normative practices, or to same-sex desire when the word “gay” cannot be used with conviction, for example, when talking about non-clearly-defined male-male desire. By “non-normative” practices, I refer to sexual and/or affective practices that do not participate in heteronormativity and the exclusion of non-heteronormative behaviors.

The most troubling part of trying to differentiate “gay” from “queer” is when “gay”, inscribed in a feminist point of view, criticizes, just like “queer”, the idea of gender. Indeed, one of the main criticisms addressed to gay/lesbian film critique is the fact that gay and lesbian critics are deeply embedded in gender normativity, reproducing its binarity. However, “gay” as a concept can also be a window to criticize the gender order, masculinity and social expectations towards men in particular. In this sense it might be useful to find a new wording for non-normative gay identities such as “gay queerness” or “queer gayness”.

2.3 Vocabulary around cinema

Another issue to be considered concerning the redaction of this paper is the vocabulary used to write about cinema. In English, there are three words that have a very similar meaning: “cinema”, “film” and “movie”.

A first distinction to be made is of technical nature, between the word “film” and “movie”. Generally speaking, a “film” refers to the celluloid material used to capture images and constitutes the support of such film, from which negative and positive copies will be created. Consequently, images captured with a digital device, rather than a filmic one, should not be really called a “film”. The reality of the usage of this word is however different and even digital productions are referred to as “films”. The word “film” also implies the action of capturing images by the verb “to film”, therefore also implying techniques of capturing through the noun “filming”. Yet, the word “film” is rarely transposed into an expression signifying “going to a specific space to see a film”. On the other hand, the word “movie”, besides being a word most commonly used in the United States, appears to be mostly used to talk about a production made for an economic purpose. Also, contrary to the word “film”, “movie” does not have a verbal form directly derived from the noun, but it does benefit from an expression used to translate viewing practices: “going to the movies”. It is important to note that certain types of productions – usually minor or individual productions – are not linked to the idea of “movie”, for example “auteur movie” is a very rare expression while “auteur film” and “auteur cinema” are more common wordings.

The word “cinema” rather refers to the invention of capturing “moving images” and

to the constitution of this invention as the “7th art”. It covers the entire cinematic apparatus, from the productions of images, to the reception and consumption of the produced images. For the sense of globality the word “cinema” implies, it feels more adequate to use it to describe systemized production of images.

The reading of several film studies rather shows that “cinema”, “film” and “movie” are used without specific distinction. In this paper, I will be focusing on the word “film”, as I feel it is more oriented towards the production. It will be used through the following expressions:

- gay film: a film I attribute to the “gay genre”, or a film that is mostly about gay characters. Similarly, it is possible to find the idea of “lesbian film”, or “queer film”. (On the idea of “queer film”, further explanations are given in section IV.)
- gay film genre: refers to idea of “gay” as a filmic genre (see V).
- film genre: refers to the idea of genre within filmic production (see following section).
- filmmaking: refers to the production of films.
- genre film: a film that is an example of a given film genre, e.g. a western, a musical.

III Altman, Grant, understanding film genre

Now that vocabulary issues have been resolved and that the wording of my paper has been made clear, I focus now on the issues at the core of my study: first, what a film genre is and how it works. And later, what literature allow us to glimpse at the idea of a gay film genre in Japan.

In order to discuss the characteristics of film genre, I mainly follow the developments exposed by Rick Altman, in *Film/Genre* (1999), and by Barry Keith Grant, in *Film Genre: From Iconography to Ideology* (2007). These two references are relevant in the way they present a genealogy of how film genre has been approached, how it works, but also what elements are susceptible to be revised.

3.1 A brief definition

Altman, starts his study of film genre by giving a simple definition, through the words of Richard T. Jameson:

“**Genre** isn’t a word that pops up in every conversation about films – or every review – but the idea is second nature to the movies and our awareness of them. Movies belong to genres much the way people belong to families or ethnic groups. Name one of the classic, bedrock genres – Western, comedy, musical, war film, gangster picture, science fiction, horror – and even the most casual moviegoer will come up with a mental image of it, partly visual, partly conceptual.”¹⁰⁾

Jameson's definition of film genre emphasizes the understanding of genre as a category, an element of film taxonomy. The notion of "mental image" connotes visual elements, film structures, but also brings in conceptual elements such as the working of film genre in itself and within the production process and the viewing process. From such a definition Altman tries to summarize ten developments made about generic theory. Since it is not necessary to go through all those developments, I only present those that I believe are pertinent to understand better the idea of film genre.

3.2 Altman's contribution to the defining of film genre dynamics

First, Altman reviews the idea that genre is a rare category in that it overtly involves every aspect of the cinema economy. That is, genre is a tool understandable by all the parties involved in the cinematographic apparatus: the industry of cinema (e.g. cinema studios), the film production (e.g. director, actor, etc.), the marketing system, and finally the consumer, that is the viewer. Therefore, film genre works simultaneously as a "blueprint", a "structure", a "label", and a "contract"¹¹). Such polyvalence gives film genre meaning for the all the parties involved in the production-distribution-viewing system of cinema, encouraging its transcendence over individual films. The particularity of Altman's work is in the describing of how commercial arguments, in the form of adjectives, shows that genres are initiated, not through a rigid and pre-existing category – as the general consensus about film genre puts it – but by the overlapping of various categories. Then, as those adjectives gain authority in the appreciation of the film object, they operate a transposition to nouns, signifiers of separates categories – new film genres.

Secondly, since film genre has been put as a transcendent categorizing tool thought in a vertical structure where the instances of film production are controlling the meaning given to film genre itself, it is therefore implied that genres' conception does not undergo a re-defining process from audiences. Altman singles out the fact that the receiving part of the production-distribution-viewing system of the cinematic equation has been wrongly conceived as a uniform entity unable to produce conflicts of understandings within itself. Consequently, genres – as shaped by the film industry, their terminology – is believed to be uniformly communicated with the "audience" (singular). In this way, film genre becomes the result of the material conditions of filmmaking, that is, film genre is subordinated to production's imperatives, censorship, financing, but also technological limitations. Refusing to locate genre properties in the film text only, genre critics have assumed a relationship between industry purposes and the audience's responses, where the audience's consumption of the films becomes an indicative answer of how good the film's structure is, and how far it can be reused. Also, genre film production allows the film industry to grasp what the audience believes both on individual and on communal levels about the categories made up by the film industry. Film industry produces keywords, film forms that are to be recognized and understood by the audience. On the other hand, the audience's reactions are gauged and re-interpreted by the film industry

in order to produce a more understandable and saleable system of representation. The system repeats itself as long as the films' structures are deemed valid by the audience, and profitable for the film industry.

However, objects Altman, the singular "audience" discussed by generic criticism is in fact plural and "widely dispersed in terms of time, space and experience"¹¹⁾. For Altman, it brings up a new instance of definition of film genre; film genre is also defined by the audiences (the viewers), and between themselves. In the ninth chapter of his monograph, Altman discusses what roles genres play in relation to audiences in the viewing process and concludes as follows:

- The counter-cultural commitments involved in generic spectatorship create an invisible bond among fans of the same genre.
- Membership in the resultant 'constellated community' surrounding each genre constitutes an important source of spectator pleasure.
- Genres thus serve indirectly as a form of 'lateral communication' among constellated community members.¹²⁾

In these concluding statements, Altman also makes another point clear: generic determination is not only vertical, between the film industry and a singular audience, but also lateral between plural audiences themselves. Such description emphasizes the idea of appropriation of the content by the audiences, and contradicts the passivity the previous generic criticism would attribute to it. It also refers to the idea of communal formation around the film-object.

Thirdly, the understanding of film genre categories relies on the coincidence between industrial and audiences' perceptions of films whose genres are immediately and transparently recognizable. Yet, according to Altman, all films clearly do not follow generic rules. There are films that cannot be clearly and automatically defined along guidelines provided by monolithic film genres. He observes that "[g]enre is conceived as a conduit down which are poured textual structures linking production, exhibition and reception"¹³⁾. In other words, generic theory before him produces satisfactory results only when it has the right type of material to work with. Therefore, adds Altman, such genre theory has systematically disregarded films that fail to exhibit clear generic qualifications. This consensus results in having genre theorists rather deal with films that are clearly and unquestionably tied to a genre in question, therefore reducing enormous corpora to a narrow corpus more suited to define a genre. In addition, the criterion of validation for the films within one film genre is generally the content of the films and in how such content is dealt with. Consequently, in a sense, film genre has come to be considered as the corpus of film texts dealing with the same topic and in a similar manner:

If genre-ness is thought to reside in a particular complex of topic and structure (or 'semantics' and 'syntax', the terms used in my 1984 article [...]),

the genre itself is typically thought of as a corpus of films. When we hear the expression ‘the Hollywood musical’ we understand that someone is referring not to the production, exhibition, or reception concerns, but to an existing, largely agreed on corpus of films.¹⁴⁾

This perception, according to Altman, has strongly impacted generic theory and its practice, so that recent generic studies feel compelled to list a corpus of film, or start with a predefined genre or corpus.

Finally, the repetition of topics and ways to treat these topics creates sameness that peaks when the genre film uses the same scenes, editing, similar acting or lines over and over again, leading to the very common critic of genre film that they are all alike. Consequently, the resolution of narrative conflicts, films’ endings, tend to be overseen. Genre film strategizes more on a cumulative effect of common places, common patterns attributed to the genre’s structure and themes, therefore it is rather common that genre film text uses similar film devices (scenes, shots, etc.), intratextually and intertextually.

The word intratextuality comes from the work of French literary theorist Gérard Genette, in *Palimpsestes, Littérature au Second Degré* and derives from the idea of “trans-textuality” which is “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts”¹⁵⁾. Intratextuality is a critical tool to analyze the relationship between precise elements and the integrity of a text. Intertextuality, on the other hand, is a word coined by the French literary critic Julia Kristeva, in 1966, by joining the theory of sign from Saussure with Bakhtin’s dialogism. More precisely, Saussure’s theory stipulates that signs get meaning from textual structures. And as for Bakhtin’s dialogism, it suggests a continual dialogue of one text with other works of literature and other authors. From such dialogue results a plurality of meanings beyond the intentions of speakers and authors because language is characterized by heteroglossia, the fact that words resonate differently according to the instances of speech¹⁶⁾. This concept means that literary text cannot be viewed as a unique entity, but rather as the weaving of multiple pre-existing codes, texts and discourses. Therefore, to be fully understood, a text has to be explained through the meanings of multiple other texts. Intertextuality supports Roland Barthes idea that the meaning of a text is produced not by the text itself, but by the reader and the complex network of texts invoked in the reading process¹⁷⁾.

In film genre, the use of intratextuality and intertextuality allows the repetitiveness constitutive of genre film and the recurring of film forms, motives that the commonplace genre films viewer are looking for. It works as a type of referencing to previous examples of what is considered essential to a film genre. In the case of intratextuality, the referencing is within one film text, or within one same series of film texts around the same universe, and from the same author. For example, the 2016 film *Moonlight*, by Barry Jenkins, repeats the scene where the main character is confronted by his drug-addicted mother. Such repetition gives structure to the narration, and allows

the viewer to understand that scene in context of the development of the main character. Regarding intertextuality, the referencing is made from another text. It can be within the film genre in itself, but it can also be borrowing from another film genre or text. For example, and without specifying any concrete film, one of the intertextual clichés of western film genre is a scene where the main character and the villain are facing each other for a duel. In between, the wind blows straw away. This type of scene has been reused so many times within film history; it encompasses the western genre and is found in animation films as well. The repetition of such borrowings consolidates film clichés necessary for genre film pleasure.

Indeed, repetitiveness, argues Altman, also indicates a great deal about spectatorship. The pleasure of genre film spectatorship derives more from the repetition of situations and reaffirmation of certain narratives rather than from novelty. Audiences go to genre films to participate in events that somehow seem familiar. In a way, they are enjoying their excitement in a controlled environment that they recognize. To participate in the film's emotion or suspense, the spectator has to pretend to not know how the narrative is going to unfold itself. Genre films work in a closeted world and depend on the use of previous texts to even create novelty, therefore justifying the development of a strong intertextuality.

3.3 Complementary elements of film genre from Grant

In Grant's study some complementary elements are provided to further my reflection about the characteristics of film genre.

First and foremost, Grant links the development of generic film production to the development of Hollywood film production during the 20th century. As it is well known, during the 20th century, the Hollywood studio system is the most fruitful film industry. It implies the will to be understandable to most people, and the necessity to produce a large amount of films in a very short span of time. And the answer to requirements of such film industry is film genres as they operate as codified shortcuts to deliver ready-to-be-consumed stories. This is what Grant defines as "conventions" and "iconography", which are not different to the "blueprints" and "structures" that Altman evokes. Conventions and iconography are means to create an economy of cinematic language. According to Colin McArthur, the repetition of certain visual patterns in genre films allow audiences to know "immediately what to expect of them by their physical attributes, their dress and deportment. [They know] too, by the disposition of the figures, which is dominant, which is subordinate" (McArthur: 1972)¹⁸). Therefore, conventions and iconography are systems of signification developed over time and repetition.

More precisely, conventions are frequently used stylistic techniques or narrative devices typical (or made typical, but not necessarily unique to) particular generic traditions (Grant: 2007). They include aspects of style associated with particular genres (i.e. low-key lightning in film noir), or specific sounds and soundtracks. On the other hand, iconography correspond to themes or concepts expressed by symbolically charged

objects and events (Erwin Panofsky: 1982). Lawrence Alloway (1971) states that symbols in works of art have cultural meanings beyond the context of the individual work in which they appear. It relates to the idea of “intertextuality” developed by Kristeva. For Ed Buscombe (2003), iconography is present between inner (themes) and outer (various objects found repeatedly in genre films) forms. Grant remarks that the transposability of iconography from one work to another, or through time, implies that iconography bears little relation with historical reality. It is a visual shortcut conveying information and meaning¹⁹⁾.

As detailed in Altman’s analysis at the end of section 3.2 of my paper, the pleasure of genre film viewing is mainly focused on the repetition of film structures, conventions and iconography. Such repetition allows the viewers to be in control of their viewing experience. However, Grant analyses that not only repetition, but also misusages and violations of those codes can renew the viewing experiences allowing other text forms, such as parodies or satires. Either way, the viewing pleasure linked to the conformity or the violation of those codes is only possible through a thorough knowledge of such codes²⁰⁾.

Grant also links film genre to society by discussing the way film genre can operate as a myth, in the anthropological perception of the word. For Grant, in occidental culture, myths, initially transmitted orally then in print, have been spread through mass culture, including films. Through their repetitions and variations, films are instances of mass-mediated contemporary myth. Grant adds:

Comparable to myths, genre movies may be understood as secular stories that seek to address and sometimes seemingly resolve our problems and dilemmas, some specifically historical and others more deeply rooted in our collective psyches. ²¹⁾

In their mythic capacity, genre films are a means for cultural dialogue, engaging their audiences in reading strategies that are dependent on the framework of film genre in order to challenge and test cultural values and identity. However, if films have mythical capacity, it does not mean that they are not revealing of the time they were made in. On the contrary, heroes of genre stories embody values a culture holds virtuous at a given time (Grant: 2007).

Consequently, the fact that genre stories and films are influenced by what is virtuous or not in a given society at a given time implies the idea that film genre is also the place where ideology merges with cultural production. According to Roland Barthes, cultural myths endorse the dominant values of the society that produces them and makes these values “natural” and “right”, while marginalizing and delegitimizing alternatives (Barthes: 1972). This is easily linkable with notions such as the “naturalness” of heterosexuality and the oppositions to homosexuality. Yet, as Grant shows film genre is not only the place for ideological discourse and as Altman argues, lateral communications within viewers are held, making film genre also the place to counter-

ideological discourses by re-appropriation of conventions and iconography and violation of the normative codes²²).

3.4 To conclude on film genre

Strongly borrowing from Rick Altman and Barry Keith Grant's works on generic theory, this research has tried to underline some of the generic features to understand how film genre works. As presented overall in this section, a certain repetition of conventions and iconography (i.e. structural and graphical elements) are essential elements to the constitution of film genre. For Grant, conventions and iconography provide the structures of repetition or violation inducing viewing pleasures. In addition, film genres are also the place for discourses and ideologies and the ways to navigate through social dilemmas, but also a means to create counter-ideologies or opposition to normativity. However, not only formal elements, but also evaluating authorities such as the viewers or critics, are important elements in the defining of a given film genre. Understood in this way, film genre can be easily linked to elements such as sexual orientations and gender identities. In order to pursue this idea, this paper will examine examples of literature about Japanese cinema dealing with representations of male-male relationships in order to grasp in how the idea of a gay film genre can become tangible within academia.

IV Contributions on Japanese gay film:

In this section, I review literature on Japanese cinema depicting male-male relationships in order to discuss the possibility of a gay film genre in Japan. But, in order to introduce an element of comparison, I first briefly look at the same type of literature about American cinema, notably because an important part of male-male representations in today's cinema are from the American film industry, but also because film genre and generic theory have been greatly influenced by American cinema.

4.1 Overview of literature on American cinema.

In this brief overview, my paper focuses on the works of Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet, Homosexuality in the Movies* (1987), Harry M. Benshoff & Sean Griffin, *Queer Cinema, the Film Reader* (2004) and *Queer Images, a History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America* (2006), and Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (2013). I selected these works because they discuss important elements to address "gay" as a film genre.

First, the work of Vito Russo, one of the pioneers of works regarding film and sexual orientations, provides a rich history of the representations of "homosexuals" (Russo's word) throughout the 1st century of Hollywood cinema. By addressing the variety of paradigms used in the representation of "homosexuals" within Hollywood cinema, Russo compiles elements of conventions and iconography, that, as he shows, are very regularly

reused to depict “homosexual” characters. Beyond formal elements, Russo also positions himself as a critic of the filmic production depicting “homosexuals” and raises questions concerning the future of such filmmaking. However, his work is only relevant until the 1980s since Russo died in 1990²³⁾.

Therefore, I back up my research with the works of Benshoff & Griffin, primarily because they offer a second historical approach of male-male representations exceeding the 1980s and including complementary elements such as the analysis of reception practices within queer (here, non-normative) communities, such as camp. But, also because in their 2004 study, they also adopt a more critical approach of such filmmaking which analyzes elements of receptions, authority and structures. By doing so, they go past the analysis of one film to address tendencies and dynamics between different films dealing with similar topics²⁴⁾.

Finally, I bring in the work of Ruby Rich mostly because she offers a radically strong approach to the queer film genre (see below for more input on queer film genre) and criticizes the phenomenon of absorption into mainstream film production of queer film and the normalization of queer audiences’ responses to queer film. Ruby Rich’s work provides a relevant example of the role of the film critic in the defining of film genre, and why it is important to preserve it from falling into mainstream production²⁵⁾.

This literature review shows a clear difference of vocabulary employed to deal with what I call “gay film”. When Russo champions the word “homosexual”, he mainly focuses on male homosexuality. As for Benshoff & Griffin and Rich, they rather write about “queer” film, mostly because they try to go past discourses about male-male representations – clearly dominant in today’s academia – to include discourses on female-female representations, bisexuality and transgender identities. Yet, I cannot help but sensing that even though they write about “queer” films, most of the example used are either about “gay” or “lesbian” films. In this sense, I feel that their work fails to embrace the complexity of “queer” in its entirety.

If it is true that this literature review on western film genre and its application to a corpus of western “gay films” is not exactly lacking (even though it hardly covers the generic aspects), unfortunately the resources available on Japanese film production is not that developed, and it can be easily said that few foresee the idea of a gay film genre. Most of this literature is focused on a very precise aspect or technical dimension of a movie and the idea of general structure is rarely hinted. In the following examples, this paper intends to demonstrate how some of those researchers’ works can point their readers towards the general structure of a Japanese gay genre, or at least a Japanese gay film corpus.

4.2 Queer Film reading: a corpus to historicize Japanese “gay film genre”?

The first contribution is from Kubo Yutaka (久保豊) and his two 2015 articles,²⁶⁾ who, with great sensibility, worked on post-war melodramas by the director Kinoshita Keisuke (木下恵介). Kubo’s work mostly studies how technical means such as the

shot/reverse shot editing used by Kinoshita participate in the inscribing of queer desire among male characters in postwar studio film production. Kubo's approach, inspired by the works of Benshoff and Griffin, relies more on queer theory than on gay studies. While still acknowledging this possibility, Kubo's goal is not to demonstrate that Kinoshita was homosexual and producing films with hidden homosexual subtext but to show that formal features, such as shots, themes, shooting technics of a film, can be reinterpreted, posteriorly, as evoking queer desire. He also shows, by analyzing contemporary critics to the text, that people at that time were not fooled and most of the time understood the subtext for what it was. In the two articles presented here, Kubo demonstrates the insistence of Kinoshita filming physical tenderness between men/young men, when they hold hands, or mental proximity, when they look in each other's eyes.

ここで木下は異性愛主義を逆手に取り、彼らの情動の表象をテキストに織り込んだ。また、規範から逸脱したクィアネスのコードとして、洋一の魚臭さを原田に肯定させることで、クィアネスをホームドラマに共存させることに成功した。²⁷⁾

“Here, Kinoshita goes against heteronormativity and weaves the symbols of their affection within the text. Also, by making Harada validate Yoichi's fish smell, the code of his queerness, Kinoshita managed to make queerness and domestic drama co-exist.” (my translation)

As mentioned before, Kubo's stance does not evolve around the representations of gay characters or gay love, especially because the historical context does not allow him to label those interactions in this way. Therefore, his contributions do not stress the idea of a gay corpus, but rather traces of non-normative desire emerging from formal features and narrative devices. He does not voluntarily participate in the edification of a history of gay cinematographic representations, especially because his demonstration implies the inscription of queer desire within the domestic drama genre. Yet, the non-normativity he refers to is synonymous to male homosexuality because he does not really look into traces of unconventional desire among female characters. By focusing on the work of Kinoshita, he creates a corpus of representations of postwar male-male desire that might be used to historicize such Japanese “gay film genre”. Similar to Vito Russo, Kubo also offers us a precious account of technical and structural means deployed to dissimulate such representations within the context of 1950's Japanese studio film production.

4.3 1990s' heteronormative discourse and stereotypes: discussing intentionality and authorship

The second contribution my paper focuses on is the master dissertation of a Canadian researcher, Jeffrey Dobbins, who, in 2000, wrote “Becoming Imaginable: Japanese Gay Male Identity as Mediated Through Popular Culture”. In his paper, Dobbins tackles the representation of male-male sexuality through three media:

bishonen ai (美少年愛) manga (beautiful boys' love manga), gay films from the 1990's and gay men's magazines. For the purpose of the present paper, only the second medium is of interest, essentially because it presents the idea that the films of the 1990s depicting gay characters are all doing so through a male heteronormative discourse.

His analysis relies on technical and discursive approaches to show that homosexuality is over-sexualized, pathologized, and portrayed as a menace for the heteronormative world. Using mostly western references such as Vito Russo or Richard Dyer, he tries to connect the representations of male homosexuality in these filmic productions to the general consensus of gay people being made invisible in Japan. Dobbins' work is an important contribution because it refers to the tropes most commonly used in Japanese mainstream movie production at that time showing the fact that, in Japan as well, representations are varying through time. On a second level, Dobbins reflects on the notions of intentionality and authorship of such films. Indeed, despite the fact that he includes two films from Hashiguchi Ryosuke (橋口亮輔), who is an overtly gay film director, Dobbins argues that the film production of the 1990s is fundamentally embedded within a heteronormative perspective. It translates as Dobbins putting gay film directors and heterosexual ones on a common ground:

[His corpus of film] should not be taken as the expression of gay men in Japan, for, as mentioned previously, they are heterosexually authored and created for the voyeuristic pleasure of heterosexual viewers.²⁸⁾

While I believe that such an argument can be refuted in matters of subjective implications from the film directors in their movies, I understand that film production, as a heterosexual-male-centered system, has the means to alter expressions of subjectivity through forms of repressions. Besides, filmmaking is an expensive art practice; it would not be surprising that censorship operates at the level of gathering funds for filmmaking. Even Hashiguchi partly paid his first feature-length film, *Hatachi no Binetsu* (『二十歳の微熱』 A Touch of Fever, 1993), through the scholarship he was attributed by the Pia Film Festival, which partly explains the relative freedom he enjoyed in his writing of adolescent gay sex-workers.

Moreover, Dobbins' study marks a difference between the representations of gay characters in movies and gay characters in the *bishonen ai* manga. Dobbins says that while sharing a common motif, in the latter, the interest is in the boys' relationship and how female audiences experience it and experience some kind of liberation from the society's pressure on women. On the other hand, gay people in the movies are "understood from a male heterosexual point of view, facilitating a cultural tourism or voyeurism of the gay world"²⁹⁾. Though I do not fully agree with Dobbins whose analysis tends to ignore film traces of subjectivity, I concur with him about the fact that *bishonen ai* manga, addressed to female audiences, shows a different type of intentionality from gay-themed Japanese films.

4.4 Separating gay movies

In Akiko Mizoguchi (溝口彰子) study on BL (ボーイズ・ラブ, Boy's Love) from 2015, Mizoguchi addresses in an appendix to her main study the filmic representations of male-male relationships. Her sample for this short appendix is based on American and Japanese movies from 1991 to 2008. Her study revolves around the analysis of narrative structures and paradigms used to portray male-male relationships. She notices recurrent ways of portraying the characters, what I think can be therefore thought of as conventions and iconography. However, where I find her work the most interesting is in the way she separates gay films between people concerned by the issue (*tojisha* 当事者) and persons not concerned by the theme of such films (*hi-tojisha* 非当事者). Besides the fact that she clearly names the filmic production of her sample “gay films”, it is important to note that she voluntarily separates two positions of production. I believe that what she tries to achieve in this appendix is to show that the nature and the means of representation vary, according to the positionality (or identity) of the filmmaker³⁰.

4.5 “Beyond the Rainbow”

In 2005, the collective opus *Beyond the Rainbow: Reading Lesbian, Gay and Queer Cinema* (『虹の彼方に レズビアン・ゲイ・クィア映画を読む』), edited by Maro Izumo (出雲まろう) is a very interesting attempt at an overview of the plurality of filmmaking in relation with sexual orientations and gender identities. It is a collection of short essays of over fifty-six films from around the world, including eight Japanese films. Among the authors, some of them are people concerned by discourses on sexual orientations and gender identity, and some of them are famous amongst sexual minority communities for shedding light on what Japanese gay, lesbian or queer people experience in Japan. Even though some of the authors have a strong connection with film studies and/or the field of sexual minorities studies it must be noted that the length of the essays tends to leave little place to discuss the specificities of those films, the general trend in the whole book being more a superficial account of the interest of one film or another. However, it must be mentioned that the partition of the study, in four chapters, representing a chronologic evolution of such film production, points at the idea of a film genre and allows a historical reflection on the matter. *虹の彼方に* seems to underline the idea that it is complicated to compile a history of films representing non normative sexual orientations and gender identities. The fact that almost half of the films presented in this book are from the United States shows a clear imbalance in worldwide reception of such films³¹.

To conclude on literature dealing with Japanese gay/queer production, while several groupings of individual films are made, the idea of a coded and historicized uniform “gay film” genre is rarely put forward. This indecisive state is mostly due to the impossibility to link numerous examples of male-male desire representations together. Even though representations from the past might be very clear for today’s viewers, it is hard to determine whether such representations were relevant to gay identity, or just

the manifestation of male-male non sexual/non-romantic relationships at the time. More recent productions are divided according to their positioning within the film industry, that is, the nature of their content and what it promotes. They are either organized in heteronormative voyeuristic productions or minor productions made by gay directors. In the end, issues such as intentionality, historicity, authorship seem to be disrupting the constitution of a uniformly functioning “gay film genre”, despite the existence of many individual films around the subject.

V Conclusion

5.1 Conclusion on the object of this paper

This paper started with the task to answer the question “Is it possible in Japan to acknowledge “gay” as a viable label of film genre?”. On a general level, film genre can be defined as a distinctive type or category of film composition. However, despite critics’ attempts to systematize, a clear definition has not been achieved.

From a theoretical point of view, using the work of Rick Altman and Barry Keith Grant, the present paper has demonstrated that what is important to assess the constitution of a given film genre is 1) the existence and the evolutions of structural elements such as conventions and iconography, 2) the historicity of a film the genre, 3) the weaving of ideological discourses within the film textures, and the possibility to go against such ideology by re-appropriation of formal elements, 4) the constitution of communities of viewers and the possibility of communication about film genre within these communities, 5) the possibility for viewers and critics to redefine film genre to correspond to their understanding and practice of it, outside of the definition given by the production circuits

This paper has applied this understanding of film genre to pin down the idea of a “gay film genre”. In doing so, it reviewed various works on the matter, mainly on Japanese film production, but starting with an occidental referent to draw a comparison. The conclusions are the following. 1) In American literature, while using diverse expressions, it seems to be already including “gay film” as a valid film genre, Japanese literature does not allow such a frank statement. 2) However, even though the general tendency is to discuss films on an individual level, some recent studies are allowing a more general understanding of a category of films dealing with sexual and identity matters, within a historical context. 3) Through such contributions, it is also possible to understand that Japanese gay filmic production is diverse and needs to be refined into other unities that would include the intentionality of filmmaking and the position of all the agents around the object, would they be agent of production or consumption.

5.2 My perspective on where to go from here

While Altman warns about the essentialist dangers of only considering film texts that would coincide with a monolithic film genre, my research cannot help but question

its own practice: how can I determine what is the corpora of Japanese “gay film genre” without resolving structural conflicts within a production this diverse? And what exactly is a Japanese “gay film”?

Part of the answer of the second question was brought by my reading of Altman and Grant. I, as viewer but also a critic, have the power to determine what is a Japanese gay film. Not because a given film is providing me with a crystallization of what “gay” or “gay film” should be, but rather because the depiction of male-male relationships corresponds to my understanding of what I recognize as gay. Therefore, this film is not a depiction of “gay” in itself, but the narrative and formal elements displayed come to echo with my experience of same-sex intimacy, that I can apprehend only through the prism of my own vocabulary and consciousness.

However, a remaining problem is to address issues of agency within the context of filmmaking to understand under what social structures films portraying a gay sexual orientation are made and distributed. To try and suggest part of the answer, I think it would be interesting to focus on ideas of authorship – if the author needs to be gay – and intentionality – if there is a consciousness of making it as gay – by focusing on the production from concerned people (当事者) to discuss politics of representation. The idea is to voluntarily take an essentialist position, in a strategic manner, in order to emphasize on the differences of representational politics within one corpus of individual films.

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Notes

- 1) 金田智之 (2019) 「コミュニティ」 綾部六郎・池田弘乃 (編) 『クィアと法 性規範の解放／開放』 p.111-132
- 2) 金田, Ibid.p.122
- 3) 黒岩裕市 (2016) 『ゲイの可視化を読む 現代文学に描かれる〈性の耐用性〉』 pp.4-15
- 4) マサキ・チトセ (2015) 「排除と忘却に支えられたグロテスクな世間体政治としての米国主流「LGBT運動」と同性婚推進運動の欺瞞」
- 5) BENSHOFF Harry M. and GRIFFIN Sean (2006) *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America*.
- 6) McLELLAND Mark (2005) *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age* p.155
- 7) McLelland, Ibid. pp 104
- 8) 金田, Ibid. pp.118-121
- 9) 金田, Ibid. pp.119
- 10) JAMESON Richard T. (1994) *They Went Thathaway*, , p.ix. The reference comes from ALTMAN Rick, *Film/Genre*, p.13
- 11) ALTMAN, Ibid.p.14
- 12) ALTMAN, Ibid. p.15
- 13) ALTMAN, Ibid. p.17

- 14) ALTMAN, Ibid. p.24
- 15) SIWKOWSKI Michał, *Intertextuality and Intratextuality in Stephen King's "The Dark Tower" Series*, Munich, GRIN Verlag, 2012, accessed online at <https://www.grin.com/document/305875> on the 10/21/2019
- 16) SIWKOWSKI, op.cit.
- 17) BARTHE Roland, "La mort de l'auteur", 1967
- 18) McARTHUR Colin (1972) *Underworld USA*, in GRANT Barry Keith, *Film Genre from Iconography to Ideology*, p.8
- 19) GRANT, Ibid. pp.10-12
- 20) GRANT, Ibid. pp.11-12
- 21) GRANT, Ibid. p.29
- 22) GRANT, Ibid. p.32
- 23) RUSSO Vito. *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*
- 24) BENSHOFF and GRIFFIN (2004) *Queer Cinema, the Film Reader*
 —— (2006) *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America*
- 25) RICH B. Ruby (2013) *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*
- 26) 久保豊、(2015a) 「切り返し編集による男性間の親密性表象：木下恵介『海の花火』をクィア映画として読む」
 —— (2015b) 「『夕やけ雲』(1956)における木下恵介のクィアな感性—少年同士の情動表象をめぐって」
- 27) 久保豊. 「『夕やけ雲』(1956)における木下恵介のクィアな感性—少年同士の情動表象をめぐって」, p.58
- 28) DOBBINS Jeffrey, 'Becoming Imaginable, Japanese Gay Male Identity as Mediated Through Popular Culture', p. 28
- 29) DOBBINS, Ibid. pp 41-42
- 30) 溝口彰子 (2015) 『BL進化論—ボーイズラブが社会を動かす』
- 31) 出雲まろう (2005) (編) 『虹の彼方に レズビアン・ゲイ・クィア映画を読む』

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