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Off-Genre: Notes on (Dis) -Locating Ôshima Nagisa's *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (1983) / Katsuhiko Suganuma

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Abstract

In this essay, I examine some key elements of 1983 iconoclastic classic *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*, directed by Ôshima Nagisa, that potentially prevent it from being recognized under the rubric of queer cinema. Focusing on the narratives of failure and shame, I point to the ways in which Ôshima's film unsettles and shatters the processes of subject formation of potentially homosexual characters, particularly that of Captain Yonoi. I also suggest the possibility of *Merry Christmas* as being instrumental in leading audiences continuously to ponder the nature of queer desire. As one of the first visual depictions deploying the discourse of homoeroticism within the contexts of cross-cultural contact between Japan and the West, I argue that the film continues to be "off-genre," dis-located and left fleeting somewhere among the peripheral fringe of that genealogy we now accept as Japanese queer cinema.

Keywords: genre, queer, gay, cinema, shame, homosexual, homosocial, Japan

Where It Stands?

<1> Genres of moving images are often given through comparison and classification. We are aware, however, that these processes are always imbedded in cultural values and biases. We need only consider any of the numerous pornographic websites from North America, for example, many of which describe their contents with the tags of various genres, "hardcore," "group-sex," "blowjob," "big-tits," and "anal." Each are further distinguished according to either difference in body type or sexual act. These generic genres collapse altogether, however, once actors and actresses of color make their appearance on the screen. Once bodies of color "penetrate" the pornographic, the moving images themselves must be redefined to become the contents of "Black," "Asian," "Latino," or "Inter-racial," regardless of body or action. Unlike

whiteness with affordable variations, limited genres are given-and give currency-to the socially and culturally marginalized.

<2> Queer cinema has suffered a similar, certainly equal marginalization at the hand of undeniably heteronormative Hollywood industries and by their consumption cultures. It was only after the early 1990s that what Michele Aaron terms "new queer cinema" (2004), a series of films featuring queer protagonists, began to emerge. Even then, the very notion of a "new queer cinema" bundles, lumps one with another, irrespective of form, documentary, drama, and comedy, for example.

<3> In comparison to the number of queer cinemas from North America, what might be termed as Japanese queer cinema comprises a much shorter list. The genre of *kuia eiga*, or queer cinema, is conceivable, certainly, and yet far from being recognized among the mainstream cinema audience. It is not my intent to present the genealogy of the form. My particular interest is, instead, to shed light on a particular film that does not fit neatly into any preconceived genres, including all that is subsumed under the term *Japanese queer cinema*.

<4> Consider the iconoclastic classic *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (戦場のメリークリスマス *Senjō no merī kurisumasu*, 1983), directed by Ōshima Nagisa (1932-2013). Loosely based on Sir Laurens van de Post's semi-autobiographical memoirs, *The Seed and the Sower* (1963) and *The Night of the New Moon* (1970), Ōshima refocused the screenplay of the film on the interactions between Japanese men and foreign prisoners of war at the site of the Japanese camp in Java towards the end of the Second World War. *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (*Merry Christmas* hereafter) stands as one of Ōshima's early attempts for major international cinema production, and the "eclectic, oft-criticized casting" of renown actors such as David Bowie and Tom Conti alongside their somewhat fledgling Japanese, Sakamoto Ryūichi and Kitano Takeshi (Bingham 2011: 63), stirred much expectation within the cinema industry at the height of Japan's rapid economic growth. Despite the collective anticipation of advanced review, however, *Merry Christmas* failed to garner the prestigious Palme d'Or. Neither did it receive similar awards at the Cannes Film Festival in 1983.

<5> Strangely enough, its failure to receive any recognition from major international film festivals notwithstanding, today *Merry Christmas* is often perceived in the popular imagination as what Japanese media calls one of Ōshima's "chō-taisaku," or true masterpiece. For instance, one of the largest Japanese bookstore chains Kinokuniya featured this work at their Third Monumental Film Festival in 2014; they go so far as to proclaim it a "true masterpiece that mesmerized the world" ("'dai sankai kinokuniya rēberu meigasai' kaisai kettei"). Supplementing

the lack of status, the likes of "Cannes-winning" or "Oscar-winning," with such a description as "true" masterpiece is an attempt to place the film outside of, or even above, the league of established genres. Given Ôshima's acclaimed status and reputation within the Japanese film industry, it is hardly surprising that the cinematography of the work to be praised.

<6> But what is so "true," distinctive, or even unsettling about *Merry Christmas*?

<7> The somewhat ambivalent nature of *Merry Christmas* as occupying the realm of "off-genre" extends itself to the equally unsettling question of whether it could be thought of as "queer" cinema at all. The write-up by Kinokuniya also contains the descriptive term "atsui otokotachi no dorama," or heated drama among men, where the adjective "atsui," with its mild connotation of "passionate" and "amorous" applies to the homoerotic undertone presented throughout in the infatuation between Captain Yonoi (Sakamoto Ryūichi) for Major Celliers (David Bowie). The DVD label of the same film (distributed by Magna Pacific in 2003), however, makes no mention of homoeroticism, but saves a single vague and wildly abstract mention of "a bond between enemies." It is beyond question a common practice among major distributors to tone down or at times camouflage any elements of homoeroticism in order that they might market to relatively wider and mainstream audiences.

<8> At the same time, the difficulty of grasping the genre of *Merry Christmas* is, it seems, equally shared among queer-oriented critics and writers alike. On the one hand, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of LGBT Issues Worldwide*, lists Ôshima's *Merry Christmas* under the heading of "key film reference" and describes it as "a homoerotic story between men" (Suganuma et al. 2010: 434). On the other, Japanese gay critic and writer Fushimi Noriaki, who was instrumental in initiating and promoting the gay liberation movement from the 1990s (Suganuma 2006), fails to recognize it within a larger influential chronology including numerous written and visual texts that have had, in his assessment, profound and lasting effect on the gay liberation movement in Japan or its genealogy (Fushimi, 2002). Included, however, are other films that might more obviously be acknowledged within the confines of so-called Japanese queer cinema, most notable among them the 1993 film *Hatachi no binetsu (A Touch of Fever)*, directed by Hashiguchi Ryōsuke.

<9> Writer and cinema critic Izumo Marou (2005), a key figure in Japan's lesbian and queer movement, has edited an anthology of queer cinema, entitled *Niji no kantani (Beyond the Rainbow)*. Including essays by numerous critics and queer scholars, her volume offers cutting-edge insights into a variety of queer cinemas from Japan and abroad. What is most relevant to the concern of this essay is that once again *Merry Christmas* is overlooked, failing

any acknowledgement, albeit Ôshima's later film *Gohatto* (*Taboo*, 1999), a portrait of male-homoerotic interaction among the mid-nineteenth century samurai squadron called *shinsengumi* is reviewed, if only because of depiction of the recruitment of beautiful, young soldier.

<10> Having said as much, in this essay, I examine some key elements of *Merry Christmas* that potentially prevent it from being recognized under the rubric of queer cinema. Focusing on the narratives of failure and shame, I point to the ways in which Ôshima's film unsettles and shatters the processes of subject formation of potentially homosexual characters, particularly that of Captain Yonoi. I also suggest the possibility of *Merry Christmas* as a film instrumental in leading audiences continuously to ponder the nature of queer desire. The overall effect felt by viewers results in the film's "dis-location," as being off-genre.

Lack of Master Subject

<11> It is perhaps helpful to point out from the onset that *Merry Christmas* does not offer any clear leading character with whom viewers can identify. Adam Bingham instead focuses critical attention on the complex relations among four major characters, attesting to the fact that the "point" of the narrative of the film is multivalent, resisting a simple reading (2011).

<12> I would like to quote at length here Bingham's concise description of the complex relations among key male characters.

An already volatile atmosphere between inmates and captors, oppressors and oppressed, is further underlined by the arrival of David Bowie's Major Jack Celliers, a captured soldier with a past trauma who exerts a deep sexual fascination over the young camp commandant, Captain Yonoi ... whose feelings and desires become sublimated in actions that threaten the order of the prison. The constantly shifting subjective sands of this enmity are mediated to an extent by Tom Conti's titular Mr. Lawrence—a Japanese-speaking Lieutenant Colonel with a knowledge of Japan and its customs—and his burgeoning friendship with the otherwise sadistic sergeant Hara ... forms the film's spine and point of dramatic departure, a framing story against which to measure the increasingly tortuous emotions and personalities on display elsewhere. (2011: 62–63)

<13> Albeit the relation between Lawrence and Hara, as Bingham suggests, could configure the "spine" of narrative, the characters might otherwise fail to exert any meaning and significance without associating themselves with Celliers and Yonoi. Furthermore, were their

interaction absent, the question of whether *Merry Christmas* constitutes queer cinema writ large would itself be moot, perhaps never be constituted in the first place. As point of fact, in comparison to van der Post's original memoirs, Ôshima's reiteration substantially expands the portion of the exchange between Celliers and Yonoi (Jackson, Jr. 1994: 156).

<14> Focusing on the interactions between Celliers and Yonoi, Earl Jackson, Jr. develops his argument on ambivalent subject position that the viewers of *Merry Christmas* would assume (1994). Drawing on contemporary film theory, he posits that the film unsettles both Western and Japanese viewing subject positions. Yonoi's infatuation and intense gaze for Celliers throughout the film puts male Western viewing subjects as objects of desire from the Eastern eyes, interesting in itself as not commonly found in the Occidental cinemas to which the viewers are readily and often exposed. Unlike many films that allow viewers to identify themselves with characters who assume the main viewing and objectifying subject positions - in this case, the Japanese imperial subject, however, Jackson argues that Ôshima's film, in particular through his work with the camera, resists suturing viewers to Yonoi's intensive gaze for Celliers (1994: 159). As a result of Ôshima's betrayal of conventional film techniques, the audience is, in turn, forced to figure out the apparatus of the desires that floats around the film without any definitive confirmation of the exact dynamics between Celliers and Yonoi.

<15> In *Merry Christmas*, "homosexual desire," as Jackson aptly summarizes, "is not the political imperative or conceptual content of the filmic utterance, but a strategy of its presentation" (1994: 157). It is of course anachronistic to treat some characters so very straightforwardly as homosexual or gay subjects, as the film is set during the Second World War, well before the advent of politics of a discourse of post-Stonewall gay identity. Further still, the year in which the film was first released, 1983, pre-dates by almost a decade the robust politics of gay identity as a collective movement beginning to mobilize in Japan. With regard to his analysis on *Merry Christmas*, Jackson also contends, and I think rightly so, that "the real advantage of sexually marginal critical practice is the willingness to *not pay attention* to homosexuality" (1994: 157).

<16> What is important for us to ask, then, is what sort of discursive desire is shed light on, revealed through an optic of homoeroticism, rather than rescuing homosexual subjects in the film. To my mind, what is spoken in the film is the unspeakable element or impossibility of subject formation within the context of cross-cultural contacts. And the destined course to achieve its own mastery subject, failed, is best exemplified in the character of Yonoi, or more specifically in his uncanny desire towards Celliers.

<17> Unlike the counter intercultural duo of Lawrence and Hara who might demonstrate a mutual bond toward each other as the film comes to a close, Yonoi's relation to Celliers, despite intense feeling of the former, never comes to fruition. Similar to what Jackson understands, Ōshima never offers an autonomous agency to Yonoi's point of view, in what could become a master subject through which to objectify or eroticize the Occidental Other of the latter. What *Merry Christmas* does achieve so very well instead is its depiction of the constant failure behind Yonoi's attempt to realize his desire towards the Other-not only through filmic technique, but also by way of narrative application.

<18> Even before being sent to the Japanese P.O.W. camp, Celliers shows no sign of yielding to Japanese Imperial authority. At the Batavia center, Yonoi first sees him in a courtroom mockery of a trial. Celliers defiantly proclaims his innocence before the Japanese military tribunal who are adamant to impose the death sentence on the British soldier. The trial begins as the judge confirms with Celliers whether Jack Celliers is indeed his real name. He responds not with an answer but a question redirected at the judges as to why he would give a false name in the first place. Commander Iwata interjects, reiterating for Celliers that Japanese soldiers would always give false names to enemies when caught, that or choose to commit suicide rather than submitting to capture. As he does so, Iwata here reminds the courtroom of the Japanese *Bushidō* ethical code of *hagakure*, especially of self-sacrifice for a greater collective purpose, even as he attempts to demean Celliers, who elected the option of surrender to the Japanese authority over death. Celliers, however, simply dismisses this alien code of honor by reasserting to Iwata, "but, then, I am not Japanese."

<19> What the audience is invited to observe in this particular scene is that Yonoi is himself not "in line" with the Japanese moral code. When the judge forcefully mutes Celliers' testimony in an attempt to rush to a pre-determined sentencing, Yonoi abruptly intervenes, interrupting the force of the judge's gesture, and asks for further hearing. Yonoi begins his line of questioning by quoting from, "To be, or not to be. That is the question," almost as if he endeavors to create an alternative platform through which to initiate a dialogue with this British soldier whom he has yet to meet by demonstrating his own familiarity to an alien culture.

<20> During the course of their exchange in the courtroom, Celliers up-ends the routine of questioning as he asks his name. Yonoi quickly, without any hesitation, complies with the request and provides Celliers with his real, not false, name. On top of his not showing any precaution for laying bare his own identity to a man who clearly belongs on the side of the enemy, Yonoi quickly rushes to Celliers' defense by proposing to the

judge that they should take him as a war prisoner instead of sentencing him to death. Commander Itawa disagrees with Yonoi, noting the lack of credibility of Celliers' testimony, but Yonoi once more injects, with an uncharacteristic haste, responds to him saying that "I can believe his words."

<21> So, Yonoi has his wish granted; Celliers is transferred to his own camp as a P.O.W. from Batavia. Following his arrival, Yonoi shows exceptional attention to this new inmate, for example as he presses his medical squad to recover his physical condition. Celliers had, after all, suffered a prolonged series of systematic tortures at the hands of his Japanese captors. Yonoi's special treatment of Celliers is hard for many to fathom, so much so that rumors to the effect that Yonoi was to replace the current British camp commander with Celliers began to circulate.

<22> Yonoi covers a large distance to entrust something to Celliers, only to be betrayed. Almost indifferent to his affection, Celliers, unlike his compatriot Lawrence who always attempts to mediate any cross-cultural conflicts arising between Japanese authorities and the alien prison population, remains steadfastly rebellious, refusing to abide by-or give credence to-Japanese code of morality. One day, in spite of Yonoi's orders directed at the entire camp to abstain from eating for two days, his intent to punish their perceived laziness, it is Celliers who undermines his authority and smuggles Japanese-styled steamed buns into the barrack by hiding them inside a basket of flowers. When his contraband is revealed, Yonoi asks him, "Who do you think you are? Are you an evil spirit?" In response, he proclaims himself "one of yours, I hope," before munching on a flower. Even with such a provocation-being accused of possession by an evil spirit, it is not enough for Yonoi to give him an ultimatum. In the scene, he quietly instructs his subordinates to throw Celliers into solitary confinement. His continuous rebellion does, in fact, render Yonoi's subjectivity unstable, underscoring for others his constant failings to sustain his own status as a Japanese Imperial/master subject.

Japanese Sword That Lost Its Edge

<23> This discourse of authoritative failure as a Japanese Imperial/master subject is hinted throughout the film in the forms of phallic representation, namely a Japanese sword. But here, an already over-rated, abused and "Orientalized" representation of the Japanese sword is at once deployed in *Merry Christmas* only to be rendered bankrupt.

<24> Dissatisfied with his indecisive and lenient attitude towards Celliers, one of Yonoi's foot soldiers at one point, using a short sword, attempts to murder Celliers who is asleep in solitary confinement. The foot soldier had learned

from the cell guard that Yonoi would routinely visit him in confinement every evening, an action which only further provoked his discomfort with his once-entrusted senior officer. And perhaps echoing the undermining of authority, the soldier, likewise, fails, unable to stab Celliers—who outmaneuvers his surprise attacker. He can do no more than kill the prison guard and, then, only after he has refused to give him a key to Celliers' cell.

<25> It is Yonoi who happens upon Celliers, who had subsequently wandered out from his cell. The commander is, tellingly, on his routine evening visit to a man who has further undermined his authority as a prison-escapee. Yonoi confronts him and draws his own sword, provoking Celliers to fight with him. Instead of engaging him, Celliers drops the sword he had himself captured from his attacker—all the while possessed of a huge grin on his face. Arriving on the scene only slightly later, Hara says to Yonoi that he would kill Celliers. As he does so, he points a gun at him. And yet again, Yonoi interjects himself ahead of Celliers and disconsolately orders him back to his own cell. The Japanese sword, the most phallic representation of Japanese authority, simply cannot hold power over a Western, and in turn lays bare the vulnerability of the very subject position it purports to stabilize.

<26> Put differently, Japanese swords appeared in scenes of *Merry Christmas* not to valorize the cultural authority of the Japanese Imperial subject, but to expose its inherent instability. Earlier in the film, Yonoi would practice a form of sword fighting with his foot soldier, the very same one who would later attempt Celliers' murder. It is significant in and of itself that Yonoi fails at any mastery of the form. Failing, he holds his sword an inch away from his partner's flesh, and however much his intentions are unsuccessful, he does nonetheless manage, quite accidentally, something of a penetration of sorts, as he scratches the forehead of his foot soldier. As represented through the narrative of this sword fight, Yonoi attempts to live up to the expectations worthy of a captain of the camp, only to lay bare for all to see his own inability.

<27> Bingham echoes as much when he notes that the film "plays out in a hermetic, enclosed milieu in which notions, indeed clichés, of national character and identity become performative, almost ritualistic rites of passage" (2011: 63). In such times of war, when national sovereignty is itself already on shaky ground, as Judith Butler rightly argues, a repetitious performative imperative arises to consolidate and sustain an otherwise identity in-flux (2004). This performative nature of the character—essentially self-defeating—is perhaps best exemplified by Yonoi's actions throughout the film. Undermining these actions is the unusual and yet flamboyant make-up that he wears, especially around his eyes. Reminiscent of that applied to the faces of female characters in

traditional Chinese opera, for example, this visual representation proves effective not only to direct our attentions toward and underline the relatively effeminate and vulnerable personality of Yonoi, but it also highlights the performative nature and theatrical elements of actions delivered by him.

<28> The inevitable collapsing of Japanese cultural authority vis-a-vis the symbolism of the sword is best presented in one of the most telling scenes from the film—a "kiss" between Celliers and Yonoi. As the camp commander Hicksley continues to be defiant of Yonoi's direct orders by not disclosing the military significance of his force, Yonoi is himself provoked to action by Hicksley's stubbornness: he orders him to line up the entire camp in the field. Soon after Yonoi arrives on-site, he notices almost immediately that some prisoners, especially ones confined to the camp hospital, are missing, so he subsequently orders them to "come out" and join the drill. This order, an overt violation of the rules of the Geneva Convention, is nonetheless carried out. In the process, one of the frailest of patients faints and falls to his death.

<29> Enraged by this outcome, Hicksley yells at Yonoi what is obvious to all: "He is dead!" Irritated, Yonoi persists in ordering the commander, along with several other key inmates of the British air force, to come near him; he continues to insist that they disclose military information for the very last time. His urges go unsatisfied. Unable to coax anything out of them, he finds his patience exhausted, and with that decides to behead Hicksley with his own Japanese sword. But as he is about to be executed, Celliers, who is observing the entire scene, abruptly walks towards Yonoi and blocks the intended path of his sword toward him. However taken aback he may be by this impromptu action, Yonoi nonetheless forces Celliers to get back in line, but to little avail. Knocked down by Yonoi's hand, Celliers quickly recomposes himself and, as he holds him still, "pecks" Yonoi on his cheek. No longer able to maintain his distance and to maintain his air of dissociation, he can do no more than strain to raise his sword against Celliers. Dumfounded and rendered powerless, it is he who collapses.

<30> Such is the ineptness of this last act by Yonoi, as he struggles to embody the Imperial Japanese master subject. Time and again, however, it remains for Yonoi the Japanese sword, as a phallic symbol of national identity, that continues to disable-disembowel, dare I say—the very nature of that identity.

<31> After this incident and his subsequent collapse, Yonoi is transferred elsewhere, and his successor assumes the very role that Yonoi himself had failed to live up to. He takes immediate action and has Celliers buried in a pit of sand, leaving him disembodied as it were, only his head

above the ground and exposed to the elements.
There he dies.

Impossible Desire and Shame

<32> Undoubtedly, this climax with the "kiss" is instrumental in orchestrating certain generalized views of the relationship between Yonoi and Celliers being romantic, or homo-erotic at best. Celliers' presentation of a kiss might appear to the audience to reciprocate his affection. Closer inspection of the film's narratives, however, reveals that it is not so much of an act meant to enhance emotional dialogue between the two characters involved, but the outward expression manifesting from Celliers' self-serving and personal imperative.

<33> Viewers cannot but recall that Celliers is a man with a troubled past. On more than one occasion, extended shots of his face lead into flashbacks, early memories of experiences with his younger brother, a gifted vocalist and often a target of bullying by his peers from which he under different circumstances would have tried to protect him. Both enrolled in public school, his younger brother is almost immediately subjected to a tradition of ritual bullying taking place in the school courtyard. Celliers, a senior student with a significant respect from and influence on his peers, might have shielded his brother from this act of collective castration, but he did not. Instead, during the initiation, his brother is forced to reveal his heretofore hidden talent at singing, only to be demeaned by the mob. Hiding himself away under the staircase, he passively stands there and listens to the cacophony, an amalgamation of his brother's calling out his name for help, juxtaposed against a background of chanting by the mob. Traumatized by the event, the younger brother goes silent. He never sings again.

<34> In the minds of viewers, the kiss, therefore, might also appear a matter of *déjà vu*, of Celliers' traumatic memory from his past and his betrayal of someone who held him in great respect, and who loved him. His kiss becomes a conscious and conspicuous attempt to regain his honor. Instead of forsaking the helpless camp commander Hicksley who was about to be a victim of irrational order-reminiscent of his younger brother's mistreatment by an irrational mob, Celliers this time takes action. He stands up for the weak. Hardly a gesture intended to reciprocate his affections for a man already obsessed with him, his kissing of Yonoi constitutes his only means by which he might come to terms with his own past and his overwhelming regret for his inactions.

<35> As Celliers helplessly awaits his eventual demise, now having fallen into a daze while buried within the sandpit, he images a dreamlike scenario where he, re-encounters his younger brother, forever frozen in time as a young boy. Thus transported, Celliers apologizes to his brother for

having wronged him in the past; and his brother, without holding grudge of any sort, responds by comforting his older brother. The hallucination ends the lad starts once more to sing-after having reached out to and taking ahold of Celliers' hand in a garden. Throughout the entirety of the film, he seems truly only to care for one person, his younger brother, or more accurately, his painful memory of his own transgressions against him. Under no circumstances is there a place in his mind that Yonoi, unlike the younger brother, might come to occupy.

<36> Celliers' self-observed conduct and his obvious indifference to Yonoi, however, does not stop the latter from pursuing his infatuation to the very end. Celliers, left for dead, is approached from behind by Yonoi, who pulls out his small blade. Betraying any anticipation that Yonoi might possibly restore his sense of honor by ending Celliers' suffering on his behalf, he instead uses his blade to cut away strand of blond hair from his head. He departs without further adieu, taking the lock of hair with him. We later learn from the conversation between Lawrence and Hara that Yonoi, who was himself eventually executed after the war, had asked Lawrence to take the hair to the shrine located in Yonoi's village.

<37> Having examined Yonoi's incessant obsession with Celliers, it is plausible to understand this final act as a desperate attempt to come closer to him, if only in death. His desire, left unaddressed, wholly without satisfaction or even being intelligible within the socio-temporal constraints in place in his lifetime, about to evaporate into oblivion, the lock of blond hair represents his only hope-and then only if placed within local shrine. Only there, in a life beyond death might any promises be met.

<38> Unlike Celliers, who somehow manages to reconcile with his past trauma and shame before dying, Yonoi carries his shame with him, even in death. Audiences might recall that Yonoi himself also had his own self-inflicted sense of shame buried in his past. As he confesses to Lawrence at one point, he had been among an elite group of young right-wing officers who collectively had gathered and become involved in the 1936 military *coup d'état*, the so-called 2.26 Incident, the expressed purpose of which had been the restoration of authority to the Japanese Emperor. He, however, been deployed to Manchuria only three months prior to the coup and, hence, missed any opportunity to participate in a shared destiny with his comrades, most of whom would be executed after their uprising failed. Since that time, Yonoi had given himself to live in order that he might one day realize the mission of his late fellow soldiers of establishing-restoring-the strong Japanese Imperial subject on their behalf. And yet, as we have already seen, his every effort within his own camp to that end was doomed almost from the beginning to failure. In this way, his already fragile sense of worth is further

aggravated. An increased sense of shame is all that remains.

Participating from Off-Genre

<38> Perhaps it is important for us in the end to come back to the discussion with which this essay started, namely the difficulty inherent to pigeonholing *Merry Christmas* into a particular genre of cinema, including the likes of Japanese queer cinema. Among those examples of this form having appeared in the last two decades or so, we see an increasing numbers of characters as protagonists who are assertive of their gay or lesbian identities. In other words, queer lives and identities are explored as potential forms of living. This is not to argue that the majority of these works ignore the portrayal of the still-ongoing discrimination facing queer peoples in Japan. But similar to their North American counterparts, many films that collect under the umbrella of "new queer cinema," present an increasing sense of "defiance" or at the very least certain elements which speak to their oppression with pride, rather than by repressing queer desire altogether with shame. Given such a condition, there is little wonder that *Merry Christmas* can easily fall off the radar of queer cinema critics and fans.

<39> *Merry Christmas* opens with a scene in which homosexual acts are rendered suspect-the object of shaming. Recall, for example, how Sergeant Hara humiliates the Korean guard Kanemoto who allegedly had had anal sex with a Dutch inmate. In the later conversation with Lawrence regarding the consequence of this incidence, Hara reminds Lawrence that a "samurai is not afraid of homosexuals!" In this instance, homosexuality is deployed as a rhetorical device by which to distance the Japanese subject from the object of shame. Shameful homosexuality is associated here with the culture of the alien Other, notably Korean (i.e., the Other Asian country to become a colonial subject), and Dutch (i.e., the Western enemy), which does in fact secure the heteronormative status of Japan.

<40> This particular moment alone could readily lead to an accusation of complicity insofar as it succeeds in perpetuating a looming sense of homophobia. As we have already discussed, however, we know that Hara's attempt to secure the heteronormative subject position of the Japanese in the camp-Japanese pride can never be restored, given Yonoi's retrogressive behaviors-is possible only with the strengthening of a Japanese sense of shame. All in all, if anything, the undertone of male-male homoeroticism in *Merry Christmas* is perhaps best inscribed through shame rather than pride.

<41> As it is well recognized today that the notion of pride has been instrumental in mobilizing numerous iterations of gay and lesbian liberation movements and culture in our time. In

more general terms, pride is assumed to provide the impetus that enables some alternative identities in society. At the other extreme, shame is often perceived as deconstructive and non-generative, or at one point detrimental to subject formation. In this vein, it makes all the more sense that *Merry Christmas*, riddled as it is with that shame heaped upon the Japanese subject, is rarely recognized as an essential visual text significantly impacting on the constitution of Japanese gay liberation and an ensuing culture of any sort.

<42> But were *Merry Christmas* removed from a certain genre, then what would be the significance of this text in so being, especially in terms of our understanding of queer cultures of Japan? Is there a possibility that *Merry Christmas* constitutes a part of a larger queer culture in Japan without squarely belonging to any particular cinema genre? I end by suggesting just such a possibility.

<43> Genre is not always rigid, as John Frow reminds us, but in fact remains fragile and always already accompanies expressions of excess (2005). Were we to attempt to trace a genre within the genealogy that is Japanese queer cinema, *Merry Christmas*, a cinema of shame and homoeroticism would inevitably occupy realms of excess. In broader contexts, some queer scholars point to sequences of shameful queer memories from the past, as opposed to heroic and commendable ones, for the former are more often intentionally forgotten, or remain unrecognized. Heather Love, in particular, advances her critique of current tendencies toward looking for a heroic ancestry buried within the past and with whom contemporary gay and lesbian activists and scholars alike can proudly identify themselves. Doing so, she underscores the importance of recognizing our queer past through a different lens. Put differently, there exists a need for us to encounter our queer past not as a way of "consoling," but of "shattering"-and given wider berth to "explore more extensively the negative or ambivalent identifications that we have with the past" (2009: 268-269).

<44> Viewing *Merry Christmas*, then, is more of a "shattering" of homosexual subject or identity through shame, rather than as a source of consolation or solace. We might not observe any concrete recognition of an enabled or viable homosexual subject, and yet homoerotic desire throughout the film speaks volumes. To put it differently, we witness an abundance of homoerotic desire, precisely because they are loudly and resolutely "shattered" throughout by the various discourses and narratives. This fundamental question of "to be queer or not to be" is further amplified with the parallel cross-cultural inquiry, "to be Japanese or not to be." Ambivalence and negation of feeling together with the sense of shame present, in turn, propels us to

think about and remember queer desire only within multivalent contexts.

<45> Drawing on works on shame by theorists Eve K. Sedgwick (1993) and Elspeth Probyn (2005) for example, I have elsewhere in my recent work captured points, if not the genealogy, of historical moments in which a Japanese sense of self-shame in relation to the Western hegemony has played a key role in, and in fact continues to enable, rather than terminate, new desires and feelings, if not identities (Suganuma 2012). I read *Merry Christmas* in a similar light. Yonoi's affection to Celliers, as I have observed earlier, is never requited. Neither is it affirmed by the presence of other characters or narratives within the film. Instead, it is the persistence of his shame at his own incompleteness that continues to propel him to explore his as-yet unspeakable or unintelligible desire. His final act, his taking of Celliers' blond hair with him before he departs, never once proffers any clear confirmation or affirmation of Yonoi's desire. It does however invite us as viewers to remain aware that his desire continues, if at times rather haltingly.

<46> By no means do I intend to suggest that Ôshima's *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* is the *only* visual text that deserves a place within such a particular discussion. Other works certainly embody similar elements. But as one of the first visual depictions deploying the discourse of homoeroticism within the contexts of cross-cultural contact between Japan and the West, it remains-continues to be off-genre, dis-located and left fleeting somewhere among the peripheral fringe of that genealogy we now accept as Japanese queer cinema.

Principal Cast and Crew

Director: Ôshima Nagisa
 Writers: Ôshima Nagisa and Paul Mayersberg
 Maj. Jack "Strafer" Celliers (David Bowie)
 Col. John Lawrence (Tom Conti)
 Capt. Yonoi (Sakamoto Ryûichi)
 Sgt. Gengo Hara (Kitano Takeshi)
 Group Capt. Hicksley (Jack Thompson)
 Kanemoto (Johnny Ohkura)
 De Jong (Alistair Browning)
 Celliers' little brother (James Malcolm)

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