

Michiko Oki

Unleashing Fantastic Nightmares: *Ee ja nai ka* (1867–1868)

The Dawn of Transgression in Japan

Introduction

The international character of the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century is often described in terms of ‘simultaneity’, or the speed with which they spread around the world. For example, André Breton’s Surrealism, which began in Paris in 1924, spread rapidly around the world within a decade. It was brought to Japan as early as in 1925 by the poet Junzaburo Nishiwaki who had just returned from studying in England. Subsequently, the Japanese ‘version’ of the movement was developed by poets and artists hand in hand with the European groups. This kind of canonical narrative of the arrival of avant-garde spirits in non-European countries is problematic. For it constantly feeds the myth that emphasises the singularity of Europe as the artistic and intellectual ground zero of the twentieth century, as the cultural missionary to ‘enlighten’ the world.

In this paper, I explore an alternative narrative behind the reception of avant-garde spirits in non-European countries, using the case of Japan as an example. I will discuss *ee ja nai ka* as a peculiar touchstone in the process of modernisation and westernisation in Japan which unleashed a transgressive drive for the coming century. *Ee ja nai ka* were the carnivalesque riots that swept the country from the summer of 1867 to the spring of 1868. They began as religious celebrations and communal activities and eventually evolved into a protest that included frenzied dancing, cross-dressing, nudity, sex and mob violence. ‘*Ee ja nai ka*’ was the refrain the revellers sang, often translated as ‘Why not?’, ‘Who cares?’, ‘I don’t care’ or ‘It doesn’t matter’. It reflected the Dionysian mentality of the time when Japan was emerging from nearly two hundred years of isolationist foreign policy and undergoing major social and political reforms at the start of the Meiji Restoration. In a sense, *ee ja nai ka* unleashed the frustration of the people against the long-standing feudal oppression of the shogunate, triggered by the chaotic confusion resulting from the polarisation of the country in the face of a regime change, modernisation and Western influence.

The transgressive mentality of *ee ja nai ka* recurs throughout the twentieth century in the form of countercultural provocations against conservatives and

normative society. By shifting the historical touchstone for narrating the dawn of the avant-garde from the European epicentre to *ee ja nai ka*, that is, a crucial yet underrepresented event in Japanese modernism, I aim to challenge the methodological problem of modernism and avant-garde studies, which are persistently self-referential and Eurocentric.

The eruption of *Ee ja nai ka* (1867–1868)

The British diplomat Ernest Satow tells of an extraordinary crowd of people he encountered in the city of Osaka in December 1867. On his way to a restaurant, he saw “the crowds of people in flaming red garments dancing and shouting the refrain *ii ja nai ka*”. On reaching the restaurant, “a herd of young men and boys trooped in, shouting and dancing, and tossing about in their midst a palanquin occupied by a fat doll clad in the most gorgeous robes”.¹ Satow’s description of the feverish troupe, dressed in eccentric costumes and performing “a violent united dance”, is only a small part of what was really happening at that time. What he saw in the city of Osaka was part of the nationwide riots that swept Japan in 1867, what is the so-called *ee ja nai ka*. For days and nights on end, thousands of people in strange costumes poured into the streets, dancing, marching, singing, and breaking into houses and shops. Banquets were held. Hundreds of barrels of sake were opened. Masquerade was characteristic of the riots. Men dressed up as women, women as men, the young as the old, the old as the young. Some were dressed as who knows what. Some were naked. Sexual libertinism broke out. Sometimes violence was involved. In Kyoto, a man disguised as a maid sneaked into the Old Imperial Palace where he witnessed a samurai in the service of a court nobleman prostrating himself before a costumed boy.² Social, sexual and class subversion and confusion were the common landscape of the riots. Paper talismans and all sorts of bizarre objects fell from the sky – coins, paper amulets, masks, stones, metals or sacred objects. Among the strangest were boys, young women, severed arms and heads, horse bones and excrement, although this remains the realm of hearsay.³ The revellers cheerfully sang the refrain ‘*ee ja*

¹ Ernest Mason Satow, *A Diplomat in Japan: The inner history of the critical years in the evolution of Japan when the ports were opened and the monarchy restored, recorded by a diplomatist who took an active part in the events of the time, with an account of his personal experiences during that period*, London 2013, 575–576.

² Seiji Nishigaki, *Ee ja nai ka: Minshū undō no keifu*, Tokyo 1997, 19.

³ Kazutoshi Watanabe, *Ee ja nai ka*, Toyohashi 2001, 76.

nai ka' with musical instruments such as drums, flutes and shamisen (a traditional Japanese three-stringed instrument), which followed by a variety of improvised obscene and humorous phrases. The literal meaning of 'ee ja nai ka' is 'Isn't it good?', which functions as a rhetorical negative, translating, as aforementioned, as 'Why not?', 'Who cares?', 'I don't care' or 'It doesn't matter'. As George Macklin Wilson, whose work marks one of the first research interests in *ee ja nai ka* for Anglophone academia, pointed out, the term "*ee ja nai ka* was a defiant semiotic incarnation 'thick' with possibilities of multiple layers of meanings" and "it was a collective protocol exhorting the crowd to carry on with its frolic".⁴ It has nihilistic, passive, yet rebellious and blasphemous connotation, with a sense of self-affirmation and boldness of confrontation that could be translated as 'What the hell' or 'I don't give a shit'. Those who join the riots leave behind everyday concerns, abandon husbands, wives and children, undermine their social status, unleash wild desires and delusions, and indulge in the hedonistic state of exception.

To give an idea of the scale of the movement, *ee ja nai ka* began in the summer of 1867 in Toyohashi, a town south of Nagoya in central Japan. It quickly spread east and west until it calmed down in the early spring of 1868. Focusing on major cities such as Tokyo, Yokohama, Nagoya, Osaka, Kyoto and Hiroshima, the riots swept through Japan's most populous area. Around four million people took part in the activity, up to ten per cent of the total population at the time.⁵ A great deal of ethnographic and historical research has been carried out in an attempt to get a full picture of *ee ja nai ka*. While the detailed organisation of the activities varied from region to region, the following general characteristics of *ee ja nai ka* have been identified. First, paper talismans fell from the sky. The talismans often bore the name of the Ise Grand Shrine, dedicated to the sun goddess Amaterasu, the supreme deity in Japanese mythology and Shintoism. Anyone who found a talisman must have built an altar at home to enshrine it and organised a banquet for the neighbours. While enjoying the banquet, people began to gather out of nowhere and indulged in changing their identities, singing, dancing, acting idiosyncratically and marching through the town for days and nights. Eventually, the revelry calmed down under the command of a local feudal lord.

The frantic details of *ee ja nai ka* probably sound far-fetched and anecdotal to people today. It sounds exotic even to contemporary Japanese, or to anyone who hasn't lived through the period. This was also the case for Kunio Yanagida

4 George Macklin Wilson, *Patriots and Redeemers in Japan: Motives in the Meiji Restoration*, Chicago and London 1992, 99.

5 Katsuyoshi Yamamoto, *Ee ja nai ka: Yamataikoku no mai no fukko*, unidentified location 2021, 8.

(1875–1962), the founder of ethnography and folklore studies in Japan, who first paid scholarly attention to *ee ja nai ka* in the early twentieth century. In his memoirs, written in 1954, Yanagida tells the story of his grandfather who lived during the time of *ee ja nai ka*. Yanagida's mother told him that one night his grandfather fidgeted, told her he had to do some business and disappeared with a hand towel. Yanagida recalls: "My mother would laugh sadly and say, 'My father, who was so steady and serious, went dancing ee ja nai ka' [...] My mother, who was rational and was not fooled by the crowd mentality, probably found his attitude that night both funny and sad".⁶ It is pregnant that Yanagida describes his grandfather's secret affair with *ee ja nai ka* as 'funny and sad'. For his scholarly mind, who was striving to establish an academic field of ethnography, the irrational quality of *ee ja nai ka* must have been an object of his avid intellectual curiosity. But it must also have had a disturbing nuance for his reason, especially at the time when ethnography was an urgent project to define the cultural and ethnic contour of Japan in pursuit of establishing the country as a solid, rational nation-state. Yanagida saw the public boisterous dancing of *ee ja nai ka* as a "dance fad", a "strange phenomenon in the psychology of the mob", and "a dance born out of the uneasy moods that hovered around the public before the advent of political change".⁷ His initial response to *ee ja nai ka* foreshadowed the scholarship that developed throughout the twentieth century. In fact, as Wilson points out, it wasn't until the seventies that positive assessments of *ee ja nai ka* began to appear in the studies of the Meiji Restoration.⁸ As their concern shifted to rescuing 'popular consciousness' and recognising the agency of ordinary people in social transformation, a view fostered by the culmination of the various civil rights movements in the sixties and seventies, *ee ja nai ka* began to be evaluated as a revolutionary aspiration from below. On another front, in the Western context, an earlier study was made by Canadian diplomat and historian Egerton Herbert Norman who wrote papers for the planning of the Allied occupation of Japan in 1945. Norman compared the sudden and contagious frenzies of *ee ja nai ka* to the ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia, the messianic movements of Brazil and the

⁶ Kunio Yanagida, *Kokyō nana jū nen*, Tokyo 2016. Author's translation.

⁷ Yanagida, "Odori no ima to mukashi", in: *Jinruigaku zasshi*, 27, 1911, No. 1–5, cited in Tamura, Sadao, "Ee ja nai ka kenkyū no genjyō to mondai ten" in: Nobutaka Ochiai (ed.), *Ishin henkaku to minshu*, Tokyo 2000, 32–66, 33. Author's translation.

⁸ Wilson, "Ee ja nai ka on the eve of the Meiji Restoration in Japan", in: *Semiotica*, 70, 1988, No. 3–4, 301–320, 317.

Danse Macabre of medieval Europe.⁹ While making a Marxist/leftist critique of the old Japanese feudal regime of the Tokugawa shogunate, he saw popular uprisings arising from mass psychology as something generally apolitical, claiming that they had no revolutionary forces to lead people to regime change. Decades later in the nineties, Wilson's study, which incorporated Japanese scholarship on the subject, updated Norman's condescending, leftist perspectives by emphasising the political potential of grassroots revolts like *ee ja nai ka*. Indeed, *ee ja nai ka* occupies a unique place in the popular history of Japan. It went far beyond the peasant or popular uprisings led by a local leader or a group with a specific political agenda and direct demands on the powerful and wealthy, usually against unreasonable taxation, which were quite common in medieval and modern times. *Ee ja nai ka* was a leaderless movement that spread across the country, seemingly without a clear political call, and yet, it left significant traces at a time of drastic social change in mid-nineteenth-century Japan.

The socio-political landscape of mid-nineteenth-century Japan

The socio-political landscape of mid-nineteenth-century Japan was a turbulent one. It revolved around the Meiji Restoration, which changed Japanese society as fundamentally as the French Revolution changed the Western world. Japan was emerging from over two hundred years of the Tokugawa shogunate (known as the Edo period). This military government, established in the early seventeenth century after hundreds of years of civil war, unified the country in a feudal system and brought unprecedented political and economic stability and domestic peace. They adopted an isolationist foreign policy (*sakoku*), sealing the country off from foreign intervention, colonialism and Western influences. Movement of people, trade and foreign relations were severely restricted. In 1854, after more than two centuries of isolation, Japan was pressured by the gunboat diplomacy of the United States to open its ports to American trade. The following decade saw a brief return to civil war. A major ideological-political struggle erupted between the anti-foreign forces of the ruling shogunate and the pro-imperial nationalists who sought to return political power to the imperial court and resume diplomatic

⁹ Egerton Herbert Norman, "Feudal Background of Japanese Politics", in: John W. Dower (ed.), *Origins of the Modern Japanese State: Selected Writings of E. H. Norman*, New York 1975, 317–464, 352.

relations with other countries. It was not until October 1867 that the last shogun Yoshinobu Tokugawa agreed to transfer power to the Meiji Emperor and the Restoration of Imperial Rule was proclaimed, ending the long feudal rule of the shogunate. This was followed by the Meiji Restoration in January 1868, which ushered in a major political, economic, and social reform that modernised and westernised the country. This marked the transformation of the Japanese political system from isolated feudalism to its modern form of a nation-state.

The period from the restoration of imperial rule in October 1867 to the Meiji Restoration in January 1868 was the heyday of *ee ja nai ka*. According to historian Sadao Tamura, who has written extensively on the history of the *ee ja nai ka* scholarship, early studies tended to downplay the movement as people's passive engagement with the uncertainty of political upheaval, dismissing it as the result of mass confusion among the people, who didn't have sufficient political maturity and who were unable to have their own vanguard.¹⁰ As Yanagida felt 'sad' and 'fooled' about people including his grandfather who participated in *ee ja nai ka*, early studies tend to emphasise the psychology of the agitated masses in the specific political context of 1867–8. They claim that the people's frustration with the oppressive rule of a feudal shogunate exploded in line with the drastic political change and manifested itself in popular revolutionary aspirations from below. On another front, it has also been suggested that there was a degree of political manipulation and conspiracy on the part of the anti-shogunate revolutionaries to cause the riots. Indeed, some researchers have shown that the area where the talismans fell was either the route used to invade Edo (modern Tokyo) in the Boshin Civil War, or a route that was included in the plan, while others show that the date and time of the fall of the talismans by region didn't necessarily coincide with the political timetable of the time.¹¹ In any case, as the historian Kazuo Watanabe points out, it is important to note that *ee ja nai ka* had no clear political demands for improvements in daily life or tax reductions, nor did they directly denounce problems in the social system. This ambiguity has led to two opposing interpretations of the political impact of *ee ja nai ka*. Some claim that it paralysed the revolutionary energy, while others argue that it paralysed the existing power of the shogunate.¹² All in all, in the clamour of *ee ja nai ka*, a change of political power took place, whether or not we recognise the active agency of the ordinary people involved.

¹⁰ Tamura, "Ee ja nai ka kenkyū no genjyō to mondai ten", 35.

¹¹ Watanabe, *Ee ja nai ka*, 82.

¹² Watanabe, *Ee ja nai ka*, 87.

The tradition of *Okage mairi*: The extraordinary in the divine state of exception

Recent ethnological studies have shown the importance of understanding *ee ja nai ka* through the Shinto ritual tradition of *okage mairi*, mass pilgrimages to the Ise Grand Shrine, which occurred recurrently from the seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. There were several large-scale *okage mairi*, first recorded in 1650. The one recorded in 1705 is known as the first nationwide mass pilgrimage of *okage mairi*. About 3.6 million people visited the Ise Grand Shrine, that is, about fifteen percent of the population at the time. Large-scale *okage mairi* were also held in 1718, 1723, 1771 and 1830. Historians such as Toshio Fujitani and Seiji Nishigaki have shown how the Shinto ritual conditions laid the groundwork for the outbreak of *ee ja nai ka*, emphasising its continuity with *okage mairi*.¹³ In a sense, *ee ja nai ka* in 1867 could be seen as the last appearance of *okage mairi*, which was banned after the Meiji Restoration. In the occurrence of mass pilgrimages of *okage mairi*, someone first finds a fallen Shinto talisman of the Ise Grand Shrine or others, and then sneaks out of a village to pay a visit to the Ise Grand Shrine. After the initial move, the crowd of people gradually joins the pilgrimage and grows into a massive group tour. The pilgrims were treated well with a variety of roadside services for their daily needs, including free meals, tea, lodging, hair-dressing, bathing and so on. The people welcomed the pilgrims with cheers of music and dance, while the pilgrims themselves indulged in merrymaking, dancing, singing and clowning around. It is believed that *onshi*, low-ranking Shinto priests and exorcists associated with the major shrines and temples, played some role in the initiation of *ee ja nai ka*, as the talismans were mostly thrown by *onshi*. They travelled around the country distributing talismans and other items to worshippers in order to promote the shrines or temples to which they belonged. Many *onshi* ran an inn in their homes to accommodate pilgrims, and sometimes worked as tour guides for visits to the Ise Grand Shrine. It is plausible that *onshi* were to some extent involved in triggering the initial movement of *ee ja nai ka*.

During the Edo period, the movement of the ordinary people was strictly regulated, but in the name of a pilgrimage, a pass was easily issued. Since Amaterasu, the deity worshipped at the Ise Grand Shrine, was the guardian deity of prosperity and a bountiful harvest, common people, especially farmers, were allowed to travel to the Shrine. Even if they sneaked out of a village without permission, they would not be punished as long as they brought back evidence such

13 Toshio Fujitani, *Okage mairi to ee ja nai ka*, Tokyo 1993; Nishigaki, *Ee ja nai ka*, 224–278.

as amulets and charms.¹⁴ Unusual or abnormal behaviour was one of the characteristics of *okage mairi*, particularly prevalent among women, children, the poor or the young, which was seen as the result of the divine power exercised in the state of exception endorsed by fallen talismans. The pilgrimage to the Ise Grand Shrine became a justification for travel, especially for the poor and the young.

Okage mairi itself had a rather extraordinary, hedonistic realm in which the ordinary and fixed social orders were disrupted. From the perspective of *okage mairi*, the transgressive nature of *ee ja nai ka*, which involved class, social and sexual fluidity and transformation, doesn't seem so far-fetched. In *ee ja nai ka*, the emancipatory methodology cultivated by the people outside of the ruling classes in previous centuries was effectively appropriated. As Watanabe notes, the descent of talismans, followed by group pilgrimages to shrines and temples, and dancing in religious ecstasy, wasn't a special phenomenon that only occurred during *okage mairi* or *ee ja nai ka*.¹⁵ The carnivalesque state of mind seen in *okage mairi* was actively practised throughout the Edo period by those who wished to temporarily suspend the boredom and harshness of their daily lives. The way in which it was accepted by a large number of people and developed into a mass movement depended on the social context of the time. The mid-nineteenth century, as I discussed, was quite a complicated period. There were also a number of other factors that upset social stability, such as the outbreaks of cholera in 1858 and 1862, the unprecedented upsurge of farmers revolts and crushes in response to a poor harvest in 1866, and the sudden turnaround to a good harvest the following year. These events reinforced the belief in the coming of Miroku – the utopian belief of Japanese Buddhism combined with agrarian rites of fertility dances.¹⁶ At the height of social and political complexity, *okage mairi* was appropriated in the form of *ee ja nai ka*, and developed into a mass movement. It grew into something more rebellious and pleasure-seeking, spreading rapidly among the population and articulating expectations of the transformation of everyday life.

***Ee ja nai ka*: The dawn of transgression in Japan**

Ee ja nai ka wasn't exactly a popular movement with any religious or political demands. Nor was it simply mass hysteria in the face of a cataclysmic time. It was

¹⁴ Watanabe, *Ee ja nai ka*, 20–23.

¹⁵ Watanabe, *Ee ja nai ka*, 43.

¹⁶ Yoshitomo Watanabe, “*Ee ja nai ka no minshū undo (II)*”, in: *The Bulletin of Aokayama Gakuin Women's Junior College*, 1996, 50, 251–284, 264–267.

a complicated amalgam of many local rituals and festivals that had been repeated over centuries. People themselves became involved without being aware of it, formulating a certain state of the collective unconscious. By re-enacting the form of customary festivals such as masquerades, boisterous dances and pilgrimages, drawn from religion, traditional rituals and the performing arts, the abnormal and extraordinary activities of the people were covered under the divine state of exception. In this state, people rejected the existing social order and the morality of their everyday world, expressing a temporary abandonment of the drudgery of daily life and labour, while the upper classes also indulged in uninhibited revelry, regardless of rank or seniority. *Ee ja nai ka* wasn't an active protest with clear demands, but a passive-aggressive expression of their struggle against the everyday norm, which eventually served as a driving force that influenced the existing social system. In this respect, there is an aesthetic quality to *ee ja nai ka* that is about expressing rather than acting upon immediate demands. I would argue that there is a continuity between the aesthetic quality of *ee ja nai ka* and what drove Japanese modernism. As is most evident in the range of political and creative activities initiated by Dada and Surrealism, the European avant-garde artists sought to subvert and disrupt existing social norms and orders through a series of interventions that posed a perennial challenge between aesthetics and politics. Sometimes these were directly political, but more often they were symbolic and expressive through art, poetry, literature, music and the performing arts. Needless to say, the main bearers of *ee ja nai ka*, the poor and the young in mid-nineteenth-century Japan, weren't imbued with Marxist critique. Nor did they receive intellectual and ideological input from those who were the driving force behind European avant-garde movements (such as bourgeois intellectuals and bohemians). Japan didn't even have the idea of 'art' in the Western sense, which was introduced after the Meiji Restoration. Nevertheless, I am tempted to see the transgressive mentality of *ee ja nai ka* as a precursor of what defines Japanese modernism that flourished in the early twentieth century.

The reappearance of the *Ee ja nai ka* spirit in *Ero guro nansensu* in the twenties and thirties

What followed *ee ja nai ka* and the subsequent Meiji Restoration was the kaleidoscopic transformation of Japanese society, leading to enormous changes in Japan's political and social structure. The next few decades saw the aggressive industrialisation and westernisation of the country. In short, Japan rapidly adopted

Western ideas, a capitalist economy, production methods and technologies that it had lagged behind during the two hundred years of *sakoku*. The modern cabinet system, constitution and the national parliament were established. Shinto was reorganised as the national religion and the newly established centralised government built a country in which the emperor, as the high priest of Shinto, played a leading role. The old, 'primitive', vulgar Japan had to be cleaned up. The new government banned many traditional cultures; public nudity, mixed bathing, tattooing, sumo wrestling, shunga (erotic art), and traditional theatre plays were all frowned upon by the authority's censorship. They adopted Western clothing, education and health systems, a modern army and so on, and increasingly cultivated the ideology of an empire. Japan was busy assimilating the Western world in order to defend itself against the Western colonial powers themselves.

The frenzied fumes of *ee ja nai ka* seem to have died out in the nationalist and aggressively industrialised Meiji period (1868–1912). However, before the advent of the repressive, fascist government that plunged Japan into the Second World War, there was a brief period in which I would like to explore the resurgence of the transgressive air of *ee ja nai ka*. It is from the twenties and the early thirties, a peculiar interwar period when Japan enjoyed the most democratic climate of political liberalism, the so-called Taisho democracy (as the period from 1912 to 1926 is called).¹⁷ The Western-style democracy that was introduced after the Meiji Restoration flourished with various civil rights movements popping up. With the economic growth after the First World War came a maturing consumer society and mass culture. It was at this time that the Western idea of 'art' was introduced. Many young artists were sent to Europe to study, and European artists were hired to set up art schools (Kobu Bijutsu Gakko, the first government school to teach Western-style fine arts, was founded in 1876). The official 'academia' of art was born, which led to the exalted adaptation of 'high art' and intellectualism and their flourishing in higher education. In this climate, the mass cultural movement *ero guro nansensu*, short for 'erotic, grotesque, nonsense', emerged, as if crystallising the old 'dirt' that was to be swept away at the time of the Meiji Restoration.

As a part of the concluding remarks, I could only give a brief sketch of what *ero guro nansensu* really was, but *ero guro nansensu* is a term that emerged in the

¹⁷ The General Election Law was passed, extending suffrage to all men over the age of twenty-five in 1925 (Women were granted the right to vote in 1945). The first socialist parties appeared during the mid-twenties including the first Communist Party in 1922, and the labour movement began in earnest. The feminism movement flourished with the founding of the New Women's Association by Raicho Hiratsuka in 1919.

late twenties and peaked in the early thirties, referring to a mass cultural movement that encompassed literature, magazines, comedy, popular theatre and music, cinema, or sometimes ‘life-style’ itself. Underpinning the movement was a rigorous curiosity and fascination with the bizarre, the absurd, the perverse, the distorted, the deviant, the decaying, the erotic, queer sexuality, abnormal sex, crime and so on. ‘Curiosity hunting’ was the unquenchable thirst of the *zeitgeist*.¹⁸ It devoured everything that bent the social and cultural norms, as if to resist the homogenisation of people and culture under the Meiji government’s ideology of a unified people of the nation-state. Decadence and hedonism permeated the air of the period, while the idea of high and low of culture was challenged by the eclectic synthesis of intellectualism and mass culture. Publications played an important role as agents of the movement and a variety of books, magazines and leaflets, both legitimate and illegitimate, flourished.¹⁹ With the introduction of Western science and medicine (especially the 1913 republication of Japanese translation of the German psychiatrist Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing’s book *Psychopathia Sexualis*), people became enthusiastic about pathologising sexuality, crime, perverse desires and romance. For the first time, the mass media began to feature ‘queer’ sexuality, sparking an interest in lesbian desire as equivalent to gay male desire.²⁰ New characters called *moga* (Modern Girls) and *mobo* (Modern Boys) emerged, dressed in fashionable western clothes and indulging

18 Jeffrey Angels discusses the concept of ‘ryōki’ (which literal meaning is ‘the search for the strange’, translated as ‘curiosity hunting’) as a significant reference point preceding to *ero guro nansensu*. The spirit of ‘curiosity hunting’ can be seen in various cultural phenomena of the Edo period, such as *shun-ga* (erotic art), *muzan-e* (‘bloody’ prints depicting violent scenes) or *misemono* (an exhibition including aspects of cabinets of curiosities, zoos, carnivals, freak and spectacle shows etc.). Jeffrey Angels, “‘Ryōki’ and the navigation of normality in interwar Japan”, in: *Monumenta Nipponica*, 63, 2008, No. 1, 101–141.

19 There has been research on the role of underground publications in *ero guro nansensu*, particularly around Hokumei Umehara (1901–1946), an indomitable writer and editor who published numerous banned books and was considered one of the leading figures of *ero guro nansensu*. See Masami Akita, “Umehara Hokumei to gurotesuku ryūko: modan erochishizumu no paionia”, in: *Sei no ryōki modan: Nihon hentai kenkyū ōrai*, Tokyo 1994, 33–63; Mori, Masato, “Sanmi ittai no shinwa”, in: *Nippon Ero Guro Nansensu: Shōwa modan no hikari to kage*, Tokyo 2016, 11–33. For a most recent study of the place of underground publications in the publishing culture and literary circle of the period, see Obi, Yuko, *Chika shuppan no media shi: Ero guro, chinsho-ya, kyōyō shugi*, Tokyo 2022.

20 Beverly Currant and James Welker, “From *The Well of Loneliness* to the *akarui rezubian*: Western translations and Japanese lesbian identities”, in: *Genders, Transgenders and Sexualities in Japan*, 65–80. For the study of ‘queerness’ in relation to the then emerging concept of ‘hentai’ seen in literature and publishing culture, see Akita, *Sei no ryōki modan*; Mizuho Takeuchi and Kenkyukai Metamo (eds), *‘Hentai’ nijyū menō: Mōhitotsuno kindai nihon seishinshi*, Tokyo 2016.

themselves in aimless strolls around Ginza (then the vibrant, cultural heart of Tokyo, a symbol of modernisation with western-style shops, restaurants and offices). Sometimes the terms included references to ‘Marx Boys’ and ‘Engels Girls’ actively discussing the politics and social change empowered by the ideology of communism, socialism or feminism. *Moga*, in particular, became the polemical target of people’s fantasies fabricated by the media, simultaneously demonised and idealised, serving a new image of a Japanese woman with a free will, economically independent, sexually liberated and erotic, not bound by the social obligation of a monogamous relationship. It is interesting to note that for the Marxist feminist Kikue Yamakawa (1890–1980), *moga* seemed to be “reminiscent of the antics of the ‘degenerate customs and the ephemeral epicureanism’ of functionaries in the closing years of the feudal era in Japan”, which implies her negative reference to the era of *ee ja nai ka*.²¹

Due to the nature of the subject, the primary sources, including large numbers of the underground publications, were banned at the time, and this continued until the seventies. It was not until the nineties that scholarship on *ero guro nansensu* began to develop, assessing the movement’s significance in the formation of Japanese modernism.²² For the Anglophone scholarship, Miriam Silverberg’s work (2006) has become a milestone in *ero guro nansensu* studies. Silverberg sees *ero guro nansensu* as a touchstone for the study of Japanese modernism, illuminating the complex layers that have been formulated in the process of westernisation and modernisation: The emergence of consumer subjects and capitalism; the politicisation of people with newly introduced Western ideologies; the lingering mood of anxiety and resistance to Western forces rewriting a country’s culture and society, and to the domination/normalisation of people’s lifestyles and culture by the nation-state. Silverberg’s meticulous research sheds light on the social and political dimensions of the three terms beyond a sense of ‘shock’ spectacle. *Ero* refers not only to “discussions of sexual promiscuity and to the configuration of the female (and sometimes the male) body”, but also “to a variety of sensual gratifications, physical expressiveness, and the affirmation of social intimacy”. *Guro* is not reduced to “the malformed or obscenely criminal” but is associated “with the social inequities and ensuing social practices of those

²¹ Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times*, Berkeley 2006, 59.

²² For details of the history of *ero guro nansensu* studies and related scholarship in East Asian countries, see Tsuyoshi Namigata, “Shōwa modan to bunka honyaku: Ero guro nansensu no ryōiki”, in: *The Journal of Association of Japanese Literature Kyushu University*, 2009, No. 13, 47–63. Also, for the study of Japanese modernism in literature in the wider East Asian context, see Tsuyoshi Namigata (ed.), *Kindai higashi ajia ni okeru ‘honyaku’ to ‘nihon bungaku’*, Fukuoka 2019.

living within a consumer culture defined by the economic hardships of the depression". *Nansensu* is not only about the genre of slapstick comedy, but also about "a political, ironic humor that took on such themes as the transformations wrought by a modernity dominated by Euro-American mores."²³

In relation to *ee ja nai ka*, it is particularly interesting to note Silverberg's emphasis on the significance of Asakusa as "the honkey-tonk exemplification of erotic grotesque nonsense" and "a modern site of desperation and of liberatory energies".²⁴ Asakusa, in contrast to Ginza, was the downtown area where various mass amusements developed during the Edo period, exuding a vibrant air with a jumble of all kinds of entertainment, including popular theatres, opera, cinema, acrobatics, show tents, zoo, café, food-stalls, working-class alleys, etc., crowded with locals, tourists, homeless and beggars, behind which was the well-known red-light district of Yoshiwara. Silverberg describes: "Asakusa was about 'being out'", out of one's ordinary/normal space, "at the same time 'being down' at the bottom of the social order", being "tomboyish, scattered brained, vital, alcoholic and openly, refreshingly unapologetically, stark, naked, as though it had washed its backside in a big river – and, at the same time, had wallowed in Asakusa filth."²⁵ *Ee ja nai ka*'s nameless, reckless and yet daring energy of 'Who cares? Why not?' seems to have been rearticulated in early twentieth-century Asakusa as the crystallisation of *ero guro nansensu*, as if the whole town were in the fumes of the *ee ja nai ka* festivity.

Conclusion

This paper is conceived as a preliminary sketch for tracing the transgressive mentality of *ee ja nai ka* in the twentieth-century art and culture in Japan, re-evaluating it as a touchstone for narrating Japanese modernism and avant-gardes. The aim of this research is to explore the methodological turn in modernism and avant-garde studies, which has increasingly sought to move away from the conventional narratives based on the idea of centre (Western)/periphery (non-Western) or origin (Western)/derivative (non-Western). In the case of Japanese modernism, scholars have paid great attention to how Japan, among other Asian have countries, adopted modernism that 'originated' in the West, and have

²³ Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense*, 29–30.

²⁴ Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense*, 5.

²⁵ Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense*, 203, 207.

sought to investigate the influential relationship between Western modernism and Japanese modernism.²⁶ As Tsuyoshi Namigata aptly points out, the politics of culture that generated *ero guro nansensu* illuminate not only a mere aspect of the translation of Western culture, but also how to define ‘modernism’ in its uniqueness beyond the translation of the Western ‘original’ in a broader East Asian context.²⁷ While there have been many studies of *ee ja nai ka* from ethnographic, socio-political and historical perspectives, there has been little research on this peculiar riot in relation to the rise of Japanese modernism. The ‘dirt’, or the hedonistic irrationality of *ee ja nai ka*, which involved an early form of gender-bending, performative sexuality, nudity and violence, recurs throughout the twentieth century, first reappearing in *ero guro nansensu* and then in the postwar underground radical performance/activist culture as well as subculture that thrived on manga, film and underground publications. *Ee ja nai ka* reveals what remains underneath the aseptic surface of modern/contemporary Japan, embodying the accumulation of premodern times that could not be eradicated in the purifying process of westernisation and modernisation.

²⁶ Namigata, *Ekkyō no avangyarudo*, Tokyo 2005.

²⁷ Namigata, “Shōwa modan to bunka honyaku”, 49.