Yutaka Kubo

Feeling the friction: Reworking Japanese film studies/criticism from a queer lens

From 29 September 2020 to 15 January 2021, I curated an exhibition titled, *Inside/Out: LGBTQ+ Representation in Film and Television*, at Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum at Waseda University in Tokyo. It traced how the Japanese film and television industry, from 1945 to early 2020, had depicted the lived experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans people, as well as scenes that could potentially invite viewers to interpret as queer intimacy. Following the recent worldwide movement in museum curation to excavate LGBTQ+ memories in collections (Sullivan & Middleton, 2019), this exhibition attempted to challenge how museum and archival curations have narrated the history of mainstream Japanese cinema and television without sufficient attention to the presence of LGBTQ+ individuals in Japanese visual cultures (Kubo, 2020c, pp. 6–7). To this end, it displayed the museum's collection of scripts, stills, posters, movie pamphlets, film festival programs, lesbian and gay magazines, and manga that showed visitors a limited but rich history of cinema and television in Japan from a queer lens, a critical perspective that questions the power dynamics that normalize heterosexuality (Kikuchi et al., 2019, p. 5).

The exhibition designed the welcome board as a space where visitors could leave their responses to the exhibition content on Post-it notes. Many visitors had dialogues through those Post-it notes, resonating with a shared understanding and attitude with respect to the current state of LGBTQ+ representations in Japanese cinema and television. Some seemed excited about the recent increase in the number of film and television productions with gay male characters; some expressed disappointment at the severe imbalance in representation. What struck me the most was that visitors shared how LGBTQ+ representations in visual media have mattered to their experiences of survival and loss as members of LGBTQ+ communities in contemporary Japanese society, encouraging each other to keep on living no matter what.

Standing in front of this board, one nonbinary teenage visitor expressed how they "felt relieved to be assured that it is okay to live as [they are], though [they] had not felt this way for a long time until [they] had stepped into this exhibition and had seen lots of content that [they] had not known before." Hearing this voice as the curator of this exhibition, responsible for researching and organizing its content and editing the catalogue, I felt relieved that the exhibition might have saved someone's life. It also highlighted how much access to various LGBTQ+ representations in visual media matters to the survival of sexual and gender minor-

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110767995-012

ities whose everyday lives are filled with heteronormative images and expectations.

In preparing the exhibition, I found the literature, both in Japanese and English, on the history and reception of queer films in Japan since the 1960s indispensable (see, e. g., Grossman, 2000; Ishihara, 1996; Izumo, 2002, 2005).[1] Some individual essays on film anthologies in Japanese offered a lesbian/gay/queer reading of Japanese films in the twentieth century (i. e., Mizoguchi, 2005; Shinjō, 2010).[2] However, the more I researched, the more I realized that there was a severe lack of academic research and film criticism that explored cinematic expressions in the Japanese film industry regarding the sexualities and gender identities of people in the past who had been rendered abnormal or strange, and marginalized by the heteronormative expectations of Japanese society.[3] Although queer cinema studies has developed significantly worldwide since the early 1990s, there are still no comprehensive accounts of numerous practices in filmmaking, film criticism, and film reception in Japan from a queer lens.

How successful, then, have Japanese film studies and film criticism been in narrating and preserving the histories of Japanese queer cinema? Despite a surge in the literature from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, it seems that the mainstream discourses since the late 2000s have not yet developed sufficient ways to systematically analyze LGBTQ+ representations in Japanese cinema of the past and the present. In order to answer this question, I examine two aspects in this paper. First, I will trace the development of LGBTQ+ representations in Japanese cinema from the 1990s gay boom to the 2010s LGBT boom, paying attention to similarities and differences between them in terms of the commodification and marketing of homosexuality, while also investigating the meaningful contributions of independent filmmakers in terms of family, aging, disability, and authenticity. Second, I will demonstrate how film studies and film criticism in Japan have struggled to incorporate a queer perspective into research and criticism, arguing that changes for the better have started to emerge though some issues remain to be solved. Overall, my aim in this paper is to expand the scope of film studies and

1 While it is not easy to define queer cinema, for the purposes of this paper I adopt one of the three definitions suggested by Ronald Gregg and Amy Villarejo (2021) in *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema:* "a body of narrative, documentary, and experimental work previously collated under the rubric of homosexual or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) cinema" (p. xi). This emphasizes the existence of Japanese films that depict the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, many of which have been overlooked in film studies in Japan.

2 Most recently, individual pieces have appeared in handbooks of Japanese cinema in English (Kanno, 2020, 2021b) and journals both in Japanese and English (i. e., Jo, 2021; Katō, 2021).

3 However, see, most recently, Kanno (2021a).

film criticism in Japan from a queer lens to trace the history of Japanese queer cinema, record the contemporary state of film practice and reception of LGBTQ+ representations, and envision a hopeful future for more diverse and inclusive films.

1 Moving from the gay boom to the LGBT boom

1.1 The gay boom and the 2000s

A prominent phenomenon in Japanese popular culture during the first half of the 1990s was the so-called gay boom. The boom was already budding by the end of the year 1990 (Hirano 1994, p. 23), but the February 1991 issue of the women's lifestyle magazine *CREA* with its 46-page feature article "Gei runessansu '91" (Gay Renaissance '91) was a notable example that inaugurated the boom and spurred Japanese popular culture, including the moving-image industry on commodifying and marketing male homosexuality in film and television (Hall, 2000, p. 41). For instance, two films from 1992, Matsuoka Jōji's *Kira kira hikaru* (*Twinkle*) and Nakajima Takehiro's *Okoge*, introduced a gay couple as protagonists trying to form a family with a heterosexual woman. While heterosexual filmmakers directed most gay films throughout the 1990s, openly gay independent filmmakers Ōki Hiroyuki and Hashiguchi Ryōsuke also emerged in the same era. Although representations of lesbian relationships and female intimacy had been present in both mainstream and independent Japanese cinema at least since the early 1950s,[4] including films such as Masumura Yasuzō's *Manji* (1964), Yazaki Hitoshi's *Kazetachi no gogo* (*Afternoon Breezes*, 1980), and Nakahara Shun's *Sakura no sono* (*The Cherry Orchard*, 1990), the gay boom mostly visualized gay male experiences and did not provide enough spaces for "films by lesbians, images, narratives, and themes of lesbians, or films for lesbians" (Kanno, 2015, p. 206).[5]

The 1990s Japanese film industry continued to invest in images and stories of gay men more than those of other sexual and gender minorities even after the gay boom. However, the early 2000s saw a growing interest in same-sex relationships between women in their late teens to early 30s within Japanese independent cinema: Shindō Kaze's *Love/Juice* (2000), Kazama Shiori's *Kasei no kanon* (*Mars*

4 There may possibly be queer films from the 1930s, as illustrated by Kawate Jirō's *Fukujusō* (*A Pheasant's Eye*, 1935), which was based on a story from Yoshiya Nobuko's *Hana monogatari* (*Flower Tales*, 1916–1924), a series of tales about romantic friendships between girls.

5 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Japanese in this paper are the author's own.

Canon, 2001), and Andō Hiroshi's *Blue* (2002), to name a few. *Mars Canon* tells of a fragile romance between two women in their early 30s, Kinuko and Sei, who depend on each other emotionally. Their relationship is filled with both pain and warmth, resisting social pressures to end their relationship. Japanese lesbian films tend to have a tragic, painful, and suffocating ending, but *Mars Canon* ends with the hope that this relationship will continue even beyond the narrative and that these women might succeed in leading a life together; its movie pamphlet even shows a glimpse of their life after the film.

Why did this suggestion of two women aging together matter in the early 2000s? Sociologist Ogura Yasutsugu (2009) has argued that issues of aging were gaining attention within the LGBTQ+ community in the early 2000s (pp. 168–170). An important sociologist in the development of gay studies and queer studies in Japan, Kawaguchi Kazuya (2003), noted that LGBTQ+ persons who survived through the 1980s AIDS panic might have started to wonder how they would spend their midlife and older years outside the traditional marital and family system (p. 76). It was an inevitable social consequence because in 2007 Japan was known to be heading toward a super-aging society, of which LGBTQ+ persons would no doubt be a part. Just as *Twinkle* had already offered the possibility of an alternative family unit in 1992 as another platform for aging, some Japanese queer films from the early to mid-2000s, including *Mars Canon*, began to share a similar interest. To give a few examples, Hamano Sachi's *Yurisai* (*Lily Festival*, 2001), Hashiguchi Ryōsuke's *Hasshu!* (*Hush!*, 2001), Takashi Toshiko's *Shukufuku* (*Blessed*, 2001), and Inudō Isshin's *Mezon do Himiko* (*La Maison de Himiko*, or *House of Himiko*, 2005) offered insights into the concerns, anxieties, fears, loneliness, celebrations, and excitement of getting old outside the conventional way. While these films dealt with issues of aging from different perspectives, they shared an interest in showing how LGBTQ+ persons would cope with their desires and anxieties in exploring life options for the remainder of their lives.

1.2 The LGBT boom

According to sociologist Ishida Hitoshi (2019), there has been a so-called LGBT boom in Japan since around 2012 (pp. 12–13). While the budding and spread of this boom may parallel the timing of sociopolitical movements toward equal rights for sexual and gender minorities in Japan throughout the 2010s and onward, the LGBT boom itself has been strongly associated with financial profits and business opportunities for various corporations, for it was inaugurated by business magazines that paid attention to the potential of pink money, such as *Shūkan daiamondo* (*Diamond Weekly*) and *Shūkan Tōyō keizai* (*Weekly Toyo Keizai*). It did not have an

immediate impact on the mainstream moving-image industry, unlike the gay boom in its early stages. Nevertheless, LGBTQ+ characters never really disappeared from Japanese cinema, not only because arthouse theaters and film festivals since the 1980s have functioned as platforms to accommodate LGBTQ+-themed independent films such as Hamano Sachi's *Yuriko, dasuvidāniya* (*Yoshiko & Yuriko*, 2011), but also because such mainstream films as Okita Shūichi's *Yokomichi Yonosuke* (*A Story of Yonosuke*, 2012), Yamada Yōji's *Chiisai ouchi* (*The Little House*, 2014), and Ishikawa Jun'ichi's *Eipuriru fūruzu* (*April Fools*, 2015) included gay and (possibly) lesbian characters.

The influence of the LGBT boom on the Japanese film industry became most evident after the wards of Shibuya and Setagaya implemented a same-sex partnership system in 2015. One of the most significant changes that started to appear within the mainstream cinemas in 2016 was that the production committees (*seisaku iinkai*) of big-budget films began to cast actors who were already very popular among the public for playing a gay man or trans woman. The most notable example was Lee Sang-il's *Ikari* (*Rage*, 2016), based on Yoshida Shūichi's 2014 mystery novel of the same name. The narrative moves around three different arcs in different Japanese locations. One of the arcs narrates an erotic encounter between two gay men in their early 30s, Yuma (Tsumabuki Satoshi) and Naoto (Ayano Gō), which results in a tragic separation. While Ayano had previously played a gay character in *A Story of Yonosuke*, it was the first time for Tsumabuki to play such a role. Much of the promotional media focused on the pair's preparations for their roles, which required a brief sex scene and almost full nudity, making it seem as though gay sex was the only important aspect of the storyline.

If a film makes more than one billion yen at the box office, it is considered a commercial hit in Japan. The all-star-packed film *Rage* earned 1.6 billion yen at the box office, which had a commercial and marketing impact on mainstream film production because casting famous actors in the roles of gay, lesbian, and trans women characters gradually became a trend to garner audiences. But, most importantly, just like the gay boom that was later criticized for its commodification of male homosexuality (Vincent et al., 1997), the LGBT boom also encouraged the mainstream film industry to invest in casting popular actors for gay roles rather than in developing a variety of stories in which lesbians, bisexual women and men, trans women and men, nonbinary persons, and other sexual and gender minorities take central or supporting roles.

It was in 2018, after the budding of the LGBT boom, that LGBTQ+ characters proliferated on film and TV. There were six TV series, including three by the public broadcaster NHK (e.g., *Joshiteki seikatsu*, or *Life As a Girl*), and at least 15 films, ranging from mainstream and independent narrative films to experimental films and documentaries. Even though lesbians, an intersex person, a trans

woman, and a genderfluid person also appeared on screens in 2018, stories about gay men still occupied the majority of the works.[6] The enormously popular TV series *Ossanzu rabu* (*Ossan's Love*) was one such work that centered on a male–male romance. A feature-length film *Ossan's Love: LOVE or DEAD?*, directed by Rūto Tōichirō in 2019, further depicted the life of the two central male characters who had become a couple at the end of the TV series. As an example of typecasting, Hayashi Kento, who had played a gay high school student in Miike Takashi's *Aku no kyōten* (*Lesson of the Evil*, 2012) and a young gay salaryman in Kusano Shōgo's *Nigakute amai* (*Bitter Sweet*, 2016), played Maki, the only central character to disclose his sexual orientation, who exposes the hardships of living as a gay man in Japan.

Manga scholar Fujimoto Yukari (2019) evaluated the TV series *Ossan's Love* as having "succeeded in dismantling every aspect of the public's common understanding [*jōshiki*] about love while presenting possible problems expected even after overcoming discrimination [against gay men]" (pp. 146–147). While I concur to a certain extent, the film adaptation failed to further explore and develop this idea to offer an image of a society that cares about LGBTQ+ persons' political uncertainty regarding equal rights. Instead, the film's trailer hinted that new "possibly gay" characters might interfere in the gay relationship that had been built by the central characters. In the film, however, it turns out that the new characters are heterosexual. This is an example of a queer-baiting strategy that implies, as Judith Fathallah (2015) explained, "a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically den[ies] and laugh[s] off the possibility" (p. 491). Therefore, the film adaptation reflected a strong sense of exploitation and commodification of a same-sex romance (Kubo 2020b, p. 23). Nonetheless, it earned 2.65 billion yen at the box office, making it the highest-grossing LGBTQ+-themed film in Japan as of December 2022.

It is highly likely that the success of the *Ossan's Love* franchise motivated the mainstream film industry to produce more works with gay characters in the late 2010s, as it now invests a larger budget, better-known actors, and broader promo-

6 Films released in 2018 included: Imai Mika's *Niji-iro no asa ga kuru made* (*Until Rainbow Dawn*); Imamura Ayako's *11-sai no kimi e: Ironna katachi ga suki* (*To 11 Year Old You: Various Kinds of Love*); Nakagawa Shun's *Karankoe no hana* (*Kalanchoe*); Watanabe Seigo's *Seibetsu ga, nai! Intāsekkusu mangaka no kuia na hibi* (*No Gender!: The Queer Life of an Intersex Manga Artist*); Masuda Genki's *Watashi wa watashi: Over the Rainbow* (*I Am What I Am: Over the Rainbow*); Minorikawa Osamu's *Kāsan ga donna ni boku o kirai demo* (*No Matter How Much My Mom Hates Me*); Igashi Aya's *Makkana hoshi* (*A Crimson Star*); Takeda Tomokazu's *Watashi no ibasho: Shin sekai monogatari* (*Where I Belong*); Yukisada Isao's *Ribāzu ejji* (*River's Edge*); Nakamura Takuro's *Seihokusei* (*West North West*); Tanimoto Kaori's *Hana wa sakuka* (*Does the Flower Bloom?*); Furukawa Ayaka's *Freedom*, and Kimura Ryō's *KISS*, as well as *21-seiki no onnanoko* (*21st Century Girl*), which was planned and produced by Yamato Yuki with 15 other directors.

tion campaigns to ensure the commercial success of what may be considered "blockbuster Japanese gay films." Since 2019, the mainstream Japanese film industry has constantly produced a body of gay films such as Ōtomo Keishi's *Eiri* (*Beneath the Shadow*, 2020), Yukisada Isao's *Kyūso wa chīzu no yume o miru* (*The Cornered Mouse Dreams of Cheese*, 2020), Nakae Kazuhito's *Kinō nani tabeta?* (*What Did You Eat Yesterday?*, 2021), and Kazama Hiroki's *Cherī mahō! 30-sai made dōteidato mahōtsukai ni narerurashii* (*Cherry Magic! Thirty Years of Virginity Can Make You a Wizard?!: The Movie*, 2022). Their box office success varied depending on the popularity of the novel or manga on which they were based and the timing of their release during the COVID-19 pandemic, but *What Did You Eat Yesterday?* managed to earn 1.39 billion yen.

While it remains necessary to maintain a critical view of the way the LGBT boom commodifies male homosexuality and targets pink money, it is also important to look at the shifts that the LGBT boom appears to have triggered in the film and television industry and their sponsors. For example, the LGBT boom has more than ever before highlighted the subtle audience demography attracted to LGBTQ+ representations, which was most likely founded during the gay boom and continued to grow through the 2000s and 2010s. This development was impossible without the rise and decline of VHS/DVD/Blu-ray rental services, the digitization of film distribution, and the spread of social media, all making access to LGBTQ+ representations much easier than it had been in the twentieth century (Kubo, 2020c). It is true that independent filmmakers tend to struggle to find reliable funding sources compared to mainstream productions, but the growth of this particular audience demography seems to have contributed to a shift in the financial investment in works on LGBTQ+ themes that may challenge stereotypes and imbalances in representation. For example, Tamada Shin'ya's *Sobakasu* (*Freckles*), a 2022 film about an aromantic woman, was financed by grants from the Agency for Cultural Affairs, suggesting that the government sees value in supporting a queer film in order to diversify the scope of its support for Japanese cinema.

Despite these changes in audience and investment, struggles for wider and longer distribution in cinemas across Japan remain, especially for films with LBTQ+ characters and lesser-known actors, and by lesser-known directors. For instance, a 2021 lesbian film called *Haruhara-san no uta* (*Haruhara-san's Recorder*) by Kyōshi Sugita, who had only directed two feature-length films before, first opened in a small number of arthouse theaters. Luckily, it managed to gradually expand its distribution after gaining critical success at international film festivals and positive reviews on social media. While this film managed to reach a wider audience, Japanese films with LBTQ+ characters released at arthouse theaters tend to be missed by many audiences interested in LGBTQ+ representation in general, for two reasons. One reason is the lack of access to arthouse theaters that

show films with LBTQ+ characters, and the other is the lack of clear information in promotions about the presence of LBTQ+ characters in new films. By the time viewers learn about them, the films in question already have limited availability. The imbalance in distribution between films with gay characters and those with other LGBTQ+ characters is serious. However, video-on-demand (VOD) services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, U-Next, and Gaga00Lala now function as platforms to distribute both mainstream and independent LGBTQ+ films, enabling access to some of the 2018 films listed previously, as well as Fukada Kōji's *Yokogao* (*A Girl Missing*, 2019), Shiota Akihiko's *Sayonara kuchibiru* (*Farewell Song*, 2019), Yazaki Hitoshi's *Sakura* (2020), Hiroki Ryūichi's *Kanojo* (*Ride or Die*, 2021), Hamaguchi Ryūsuke's *Gūzen to sōzō* (*Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy*, 2021), and Nakagawa Ryūtarō's *Yagate umi e to todoku* (*One Day, You Will Reach the Sea*, 2022). In addition, Normal Screen, an independent film screening project, provides access to LGBTQ+ films that are rarely available on VOD services. Access to such platforms and screening events is not without problems of economic disparities among viewers, but at the moment, they are one solution to the problem of distribution.

2 Independent cinema: Family, aging, disability, and authenticity

The mainstream Japanese film industry once operated under the studio system, which sustained the structure of film production, marketing and promotion, distribution, and the training of filmmakers, actors, and other essential members of film production, until this system collapsed entirely in the 1980s. Major film companies such as Shōchiku, Tōhō, Tōei, and Nikkatsu still focus primarily on distributing films mostly to cinema complex theaters and managing copyrights. Those films are often produced under the aforementioned production committee, which consists of the film and other companies that share profits depending on the percentage they invest in the production budget. The advantage of the production committee is its financial capability that allows wider options for exploring story ideas, securing adaptation rights, and casting actors and production staff. However, at the same time, to ensure profits, some decisions, for example on which actor to cast to play a trans woman, must be made in favor of the companies that have invested a larger percentage.[7]

7 Open access to documentation from these production committees in future would facilitate further research on their influence on LGBTQ+ representations.

While independent films occasionally operate with a production committee for its financial and distribution advantages, most of them are made outside the release schedule of mainstream commercial films. They have made enormous contributions to Japanese queer cinema. In what follows, I will discuss how independent films have portrayed the experiences of LGBTQ+ persons dealing with issues of family, youth and old age, disabilities, and authenticity with a degree of attention and understanding that the mainstream film industry during the LGBT boom has not shown.

Explorations and visions of the family outside traditional images have appeared in Japanese queer cinema since at least the 1980s. Hashiguchi's *Hush!*, for instance, attempts to queer the standards of the family unit by seeking the possibility of a gay couple and a cis heterosexual woman, all in their early 30s, having a baby together (Kawaguchi, 2003). Almost 20 years after *Hush!*, screenwriter Asada Atsushi explored this idea in a more realistic way with detailed attention to family law in *his* (2020), directed by Imaizumi Rikiya, which dramatizes a court dispute between a gay/bisexual man and his ex-wife over parental rights for their child. Asada is not accusing the parents of failing in their marriage but focuses on bringing the issue of discriminatory consciousness within the law against LGBTQ+ persons and single mothers into the open. Set in the relatively rural town of Shirakawa, *his* ends with a somewhat optimistic solution whereby the man and his same-sex partner, whose relationship eventually becomes open in the community, and the ex-wife, who remains in Tokyo, try to seek a better relationship so that they can raise their child together.

While most of these Japanese queer films center the view of adults who wish to explore the chance to have a family and raise children, Tsukikawa Shō's *Satō-ke no chōshoku, Suzuki-ke no yūshoku* (*Sato Family Breakfast, Suzuki Family Dinner*, or *Breakfast and Dinner*, 2013) focuses on the perspectives of Takumi and Sora, a teenage boy and girl who are raised by same-sex couples. Screened at the 2013 Taiwan International Queer Film Festival, this film depicts the process of Takumi and Sora dispelling ill feelings against their uncertainty not only about their relationship with their parents but also about their own (sexual) identity. Raised by lesbian parents, Takumi starts to wonder who his father may be and asks his uncle about it. His uncle turns out to be the sperm donor, and it is suggested that he may be gay. Learning about his birth causes Takumi to question his sexual orientation and distance himself from his parents, who had not shared anything about his father. His rebellion is dissolved after his sexual exploration with Sora, who has also had unsettling feelings about her relationship with her parents – a gay man and a bisexual man. The film offers an insight into one example of the tremendous efforts sexual minorities in Japan have been making to acquire a family and how children

raised by same-sex parents balance what society thinks is normal and abnormal in terms of family and parenthood.

Mainstream teen films focus on "young heterosexuality" and often involves "a romance plot" (Driscoll, 2011, p. 2). LGBTQ+ youths, who are likely to be struggling with their own sexual orientation and/or gender identity, may be able to find their own experiences in independent films. For example, Kusano Shōgo's *Kanojo ga sukina mono wa* (*What She Likes*, 2021) centers on a gay teen protagonist, Jun, who is oscillating between his (sexual) desires and gay identity and his wish to lead a "normal" life like his heterosexual friends. It depicts his struggles of finding a gay role model successfully exploring a life outside a heteronormative life course. Nishihara Takashi's *Starting Over* (2014) and Nakagawa's *Kalanchoe* also trace the struggles of LGBTQ+ youths in being different in terms of their sexual orientation, and Oda Manabu's *Saimon & Tada Takashi* (*Simon & Tada Takashi*, 2017) warmly depicts a gay teenager's bittersweet first love. Although access to these independent films can be difficult at times depending on where one lives and one's access to VOD subscription services, it is crucial that independent filmmakers continue to produce stories about the everyday experiences of LGBTQ+ youths for younger audiences.

The family theme prevails in queer films because it is closely associated with the anxiety of planning a life course outside the heteronormative family system as one ages. The interest in issues of aging shown by Japanese queer films from the early to mid-2000s seems to have decreased during the LGBT boom, but the question of how and with whom LGBTQ+ persons would spend their later life continued to be pondered. For example, in Take Masaharu's queer road movie *EDEN* (2012), based on Funado Yoichi's short story "Natsu no uzu" (Whirls of Summer, 2001), the gay 42-year-old protagonist Miro finds his friend Noripī, who had been suffering from a heart problem after her sex reassignment surgery, dead in his apartment. Miro and his colleagues/friends mourn Noripī's passing. To their surprise, her body, which her family refused to receive, is returned to Eden, the gay bar where they all work. Spurred not only by anger and disappointment toward her family, but most importantly by their love and affection for Noripī, they take her body home to Chiba. While some may argue that *EDEN* does not subvert the ideals of family, what lies at the core of this film is the caring relationship among gay and trans persons who look after each other when they are older and lonely. *EDEN* offers a vision for a small community bonded by mutual support outside the heteronormative, patriarchal system.

While narrative films have helped to extend the imagination of aging outside the heteronormative family system, documentary films have offered a glimpse into more realistic details of aged LGBTQ+ persons. For instance, Takeda Tomokazu's (2018) *Watashi no ibasho: Shin sekai monogatari* (*Where I Belong*), follows the

life of Nishimoto Noboru, an older male who identified as a woman with a feminine manner and was beloved as "Hiroko-mama" (Mama Hiroko). Hiroko-mama once ran an okonomiyaki eatery called Senryō near the Tsutenkaku Tower in Osaka, which she had started at the age of 40 after having worked in a bar for years. After being diagnosed with cancer, Hiroko-mama decides to visit her hometown of Kagoshima for the first time in 52 years, having left at around the age of 15 for Osaka during the mass employment (*shūdan shūshoku*) nationwide, when postwar Japan was in its early stages of rapid economic growth. Teenage labor forces were valued as golden eggs, especially in the manufacturing industry in which Hiroko-mama was hired as a child worker. The camera follows Hiroko-mama's journey back to Kagoshima, as she reflects on her adolescence and the years that have since passed. Although her life might have been filled with laughter and affection from her customers at Senryo, this rare documentary about an older queer person succeeds in capturing the loneliness that may be peculiar to LGBTQ+ persons who are not yet afforded equal rights and protection in Japan. At the time of filming in 2007, Hiroko-mama was 63 years old; she passed away in 2019 after years of fighting cancer.

While Takeda's *Where I Belong* and other documentary films such as Toda Hikaru's *Ai to hō* (*Of Love and Law*, 2017), Graham Kolbeins's *Queer Japan* (2019), and Asanuma Tomoya's *I Am Here: Watashitachi wa tomo ni ikiteiru* (*I Am Here: We Are Here Together*, 2020) tend to evoke a sense of authenticity through the visualization of actual LGBTQ+ persons, how could narrative films reflect the authentic experiences of LGBTQ+ persons? One of the ongoing discussions regarding representations of LGBTQ+ persons in popular culture is how to provide actors of LGBTQ+ and other socially marginalized communities equal opportunities for performance, including for auditions. While I do not neglect any possibility of non-LGBTQ+ actors succeeding in playing LGBTQ+ characters in inviting and thoughtful ways, it is crucial not to overlook the unique authenticity that only those with lived experience can convey. Some independent films produced outside the mainstream filmmaking system have proven the power of this authenticity. *Niji-iro no asa ga kuru made* (*Until Rainbow Dawn*, 2018), directed by Imai Mika, a deaf and nonbinary filmmaker, depicts the experiences of those positioned as a double minority. The central characters, Hana and Ayumi, who form a lesbian relationship, are played by deaf actors Nagai Eri and Kobayashi Haruka. This casting decision made it possible for Imai and her production team to narrate the film through sign language. The film's spatial setting is also essential. Set in a town in Gunma Prefecture, the film is concerned with how Hana and Ayumi develop their relationship within a closed deaf community that is not necessarily LGBTQ+-friendly. According to an interview with Imai, the deaf communities in each prefecture across Japan tend to be so small that rumors can quickly spread (Kubo, 2020a). Therefore,

Hana and Ayumi visit an LGBTQ+ event for deaf people held in Tokyo to avoid unnecessary conflicts in their hometown. Meeting with other deaf sexual and gender minorities at the event helps to shake off Hana's anxiety in seeking a life with Ayumi.

Another queer film that has proven the power of authenticity is *Katasode no sakana* (*The Fish With One Sleeve*, 2021) by Shōji Tsuyoshi. Based on a poem by Fuzuki Yumi, this film portrays Hikari, a trans woman who believes her self is not as perfect as she wishes it to be. However, after a reunion with her high school classmates, Hikari learns to move on with more confidence in her self. What is unique about *The Fish With One Sleeve* as an independent trans film is its transparent casting process that called trans women actors to an audition for the role of Hikari, for which a fashion model and actor Ishizuka Yū was chosen. This was the first casting process of its kind in Japan, countering the approach of two recent mainstream trans films, Ogigami Naoko's *Karera ga honki de amutoki wa* (*Close-knit*, 2017) and Uchida Eiji's *Middonaito suwan* (*Midnight Swan*, 2020), both of which cast a cis male actor to play the central role of a trans woman. Although *Midnight Swan* did cast a trans woman to play a supporting trans role, these films did not overcome the issues surrounding the labor opportunities for trans actors, such as "a deficiency in stories," "imbalance in casting," "a lack of evaluation standards," and "wage gap" (Suzuki, 2020, p. 28). As a new attempt to address these issues, *The Fish With One Sleeve* received critical acclaim both domestically and internationally.

What can independent filmmakers bring to the landscape of Japanese queer cinema? Independent films tend to subvert the stereotypes often seen in mainstream queer films and question the sugar-coated stories that tend to exclude minority groups within the LGBTQ+ community, causing the imbalance in representation. What independent and mainstream queer films in Japan seem to have in common, though, is that they rarely depict the lives of LGBTQ+ persons in the past, unlike an increase in queer films produced in other countries that try to excavate LGBTQ+ memories of actual people who were known as queer in films such as *Tove* (Zaida Bergroth, 2020) and *Benediction* (Terence Davies, 2021). The obsession with the present in contemporary Japanese queer films may imply the filmmakers' wish to document what is happening now rather than films such as *Carol* (Todd Haynes, 2015) and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Céline Sciamma, 2019), which depict what could have happened in the past.

When film archivist Vito Russo published *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* in 1981, looking back on the past of Hollywood films was a critical approach to thinking about the present in which the mainstream film industry was not offering enough LGBTQ+ representations. It was the result of much-needed efforts to fight homophobia in the film industry. In the case of the Japanese film

industry, at least since the 2010s, both mainstream and independent films have been producing queer films more than ever, focusing on issues that LGBTQ+ persons face today. While it is important to examine changes that the LGBT boom brought to the Japanese film industry's attitude toward LGBTQ+ representations, we must also not forget that the current proliferation of queer films in Japan could also be the result of filmmakers and film audiences fighting homophobia in the twentieth century. I argue that it is a task of Japanese film studies and film criticism to examine the past of Japanese cinema through a queer lens while also paying attention to the present. But how can it succeed?

3 Queering Japanese film studies/film criticism

Film history is never complete because there is always the presence of people whose voices and stories are silenced and overlooked in mainstream discourses. The history of Japanese queer cinema is not an exception. For instance, the recently published *Nihon eiga sakuhin daijiten* (*Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Japanese Cinema*) (Yamane, 2021) maps Japanese cinema history from 1908 to 2018, covering more than 1,300 directors and 19,500 works in total. Although it includes some filmmakers, such as Kinoshita Keisuke, Donald Richie, and the aforementioned Kazama, Hashiguchi, Hamano, and Ōki, who have made queer films, it does not provide sufficient details about the development of Japanese queer cinema. What can Japanese film studies or practices of film criticism do to fill this absence?

Japanese film studies have long dismissed the need to excavate the presence of LGBTQ+ persons and their contributions. While film critics Yodogawa Nagaharu, Mizuno Haruo, Osugi (Sugiura Takaaki), and Masuda Takamitsu are well known to be gay, their contributions have been entirely overlooked and understudied in the heterosexist discipline of Japanese film studies. In her review of *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Cinema* (2014), film scholar Kanno Yūka (2017) pointed out how "Japanese cinema and Japanese film studies have been dominated by men" (p. 108), adding that scholarly discourses on cinema from perspectives of gender, feminism, and sexuality have been virtually overlooked in Japan (p. 109). Kanno's criticism of a lack of studies on women filmmakers in Japan and of attention to representations outside the heteronormative ideology also applies to the roundtable discussion on the future of Japanese cinema and Japanese film studies, featured in Kurosawa et al.'s (2011) *Nihon eiga wa doko made ikuka? (Where Will Japanese Cinema Reach?),* the last installment of the eight-book series *Nihon eiga wa ikiteiru* (*Japanese Cinema Is Alive*). Although the fourth installment of this series, *Sukurīn no naka no tasha (The Other Within the Screen),* had included an article offering a possible way of writing about Japanese queer cinema (Shinjō,

2010), none of the seven scholars at the all-male roundtable presented on the need to bring in a queer lens to Japanese film studies. In addition, the *Research Guide to Japanese Film Studies* (Nornes & Gerow, 2009), which continues to be one of the most detailed, valuable resources for scholars and students engaged in studies of Japanese cinema, industry, market, and other aspects, also lacks insight into how to conduct research on Japanese queer cinema, even in its Japanese translation (see Nornes & Gerow, 2016). One possible interpretation of this absence is that the heteronormative and phallocentric discourses in Japanese film studies have hindered a "queer intrusion into film studies [that] not only brought new themes but also the effect of reconsidering the convention and norm within the discipline, including epistemology and methodology," seen primarily in the US (Kanno, 2021a, p. 4).

Academic conferences on film studies and media studies have functioned as platforms for sharing the possibilities of "queer intrusion" (Kanno, 2021a, p. 4) into Japanese film studies. For instance, the annual conferences of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, which supports LGBTQ+ members through the Queer and Trans Caucus, often include presentations on queering Japanese films. They tend to focus on experimental and independent filmmaking in the 1960s, such as Matsumoto Toshio's *Bara no sōretsu* (*The Funeral Parade of Roses*, 1969), which is one of the few Japanese queer films mentioned in Schoonover and Galt's (2016) *Queer Cinema in the World.* It suggests that studies on Japanese queer cinema have not developed as much as those in other countries and are therefore still narrow and limited in scope. There have also been some presentations from a queer lens at academic conferences on film studies and media studies in Japan since the 2010s, but the total number remains low. The academic space is dominated by heteronormative tension that continues to make early-career scholars and graduate students hesitant to conduct research from a queer lens.

While Japanese film studies struggles to incorporate a queer lens, commercial practices of film criticism have contributed to introducing ways to understand the body of both domestic and imported queer films. Film critic Kodama Mizuki, for example, represents a new generation of such film critics who show empathy and intimacy toward queer films and queer filmmakers (see, e.g., Kodama 2021, 2022a, 2022b). Kodama's writing reminds contemporary readers of the work of film critic Ishihara Ikuko, who led queer film criticism in Japan from the 1980s until her premature death in the early 2000s (see, e.g., Ishihara 2000a, 2000b). The realm of commercial film criticism in Japan operates under the heteronormative system. However, Kodama's contributions in film magazines such as *Kinema junpō* and *Eiga geijutsu* and on various other platforms such as movie pamphlets and websites always offer delicate yet powerful analyses that help readers and viewers explore cinematic complexities. Kodama finds the joy, pain, celebration,

and sorrow of queerness woven into films such as *Sakura* and *Haruhara san's Recorder* in a way that attests to her queer sensibility, which is rare in today's commercial film criticism in Japan.

There are at least two trends in the critiques of queer films in Japan today. First, some tend to fall into a binary trap of evaluating a work only between good and imperfect representations of LGBTQ+ characters. It is crucial to reexamine the necessity of certain stereotypes accumulated historically through media; filmmakers and the film industry must also unlearn the conventional ways of presenting LGBTQ+ characters on the screen. However, this trend may cause an inevitable conflict in discussing the representations of LGBTQ+ characters: it may fail to recognize the danger of creating a new list of conventions that may only praise one-sided portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters and end up excluding anything that does not fit into the narrow scope of "good" representations. Just as B. Ruby Rich coined the term "New Queer Cinema" in a 1992 essay to value a new wave of queer films that demonstrated a counter-approach to the body of apologetic gay films of the 1980s, film criticism in Japan also needs a revolutionary perspective that picks up voices silenced and overlooked by critics who only see the sugar-coated surface of visibility.

The other trend is universalizing the experiences of LGBTQ+ persons in comparison with those of non-LGBTQ+ persons, which may demonstrate similarities between the majority and minority to help viewers and society become more accepting of the presence and lives of LGBTQ+ persons in the flesh. For instance, in writing about the TV version of *What Did You Eat Yesterday?*, which centers on the everyday meals of a gay couple, Shiro and Kenji, journalist Jibu Renge (2021) argued that "this TV drama is simply universally important beyond sexual orientation" (p. 220). It may be true that this series makes the viewers realize that there is no difference in the manner and joy of having meals together with someone important and intimate.

However, universalizing may erase the complexities and differences that LGBTQ+ persons experience in the everyday lives. The producer of the film adaptation of *What Did You Eat Yesterday?*, Seto Mariko (2021), also falls for the trap of universalizing the experiences of the gay couple in their 50s by emphasizing that "everything they experience can be measured up as our own experiences" (p. 5). Yet is it really so? One of the central issues dealt with in its manga, television, and film adaptations is how the gay couple must maintain their health by eating healthy foods because the law does not acknowledge their relationship. Universalizing this work fails to understand how this series is about survival as members of the LGBTQ+ community who still face countless difficulties in contemporary Japan.

4 Conclusion

LGBTQ+ representations significantly matter to the lives of LGBTQ+ persons who are eager to find images upon which they may be able to reflect on their own lived experience. Since the 1990s gay boom, the Japanese film industry, both mainstream and independent, has offered various images and stories of LGBTQ+ persons, despite the imbalance in representation and accessibility that remains to be resolved. Japanese film studies and film criticism have now entered a new phase in which a new generation of film scholars and critics are not only actively revisiting works from the past from a queer lens but also finding meaning and value in contemporary works that may contribute to bringing positive changes to the lives of LGBTQ+ persons.

These collective efforts from multilayered approaches may fill the absence of inclusive research and writing on the development of Japanese queer cinema and queer visual cultures, including film festivals and screenings of imported queer films at arthouse theaters. However, such collective efforts appear to be difficult given the current distance between people inside and outside the academic system, which is also not free from the issue of inequality in labor and wage. Although it should be not required, writing about queer cinema sometimes forces those involved to disclose their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. Such expectations of revelation, or coming out, will continue to be a burden for those who write about queer cinema.

How will Japanese film studies and film criticism from a queer lens develop in response to the growing body of Japanese queer films and imported queer films? Even though it seems that the visualization of LGBTQ+ characters has advanced since the 2010s, the imbalance in representation and accessibility continues to linger, blurring the issue of who has the power to decide whose stories are to be told. Moreover, during the LGBT boom, Japanese queer films targeting mainstream audiences have tended to oversimplify the peculiarities of LGBTQ+ experiences, which may erase the complexities of queer politics. Simplicity is an effective strategy often employed in documentary filmmaking to reach out to a broader audience. However, as the protagonist Jun from *What She Likes* says – "I do not want to make the world simple by ignoring the complexities" – Japanese film studies and film criticism, as well as filmmakers and the film industry, must not look away from a queer perspective. In the process of looking back on history, standing still to examine the present, and looking forward to seeing the future of Japanese queer cinema, we must not miss the moments of erasure but rather navigate the friction of the complexities.

References

Driscoll, C. (2011). *Teen film: A critical introduction.* Berg.

Fathallah, J. (2015). Moriarty's ghosts: Or the queer disruption of the BBC's *Sherlock. Television & New Media*, *16*(5), 490–500. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476414543528.

Fujimoto, Y. (2019). "Ossanzu rabu" to iu bunkiten [*Ossan's Love* as a turning point]. In J. Welker (Ed.), *BL ga hiraku tobira: Henyō suru Ajia no sekushuariti to jendā* [BL opening doors: Sexuality and gender transfigured in Asia] (pp. 141–150). Seidosha.

Gregg, R., & Villarejo, A. (2021). Introduction. In R. Gregg & A. Villarejo (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of queer cinema* (pp. xi–xv). Oxford University Press.

Grossman, A. (Ed.). (2000). *Queer Asian cinema: Shadows in the shade.* Harrington Park Press.

Hall, J. M. (2000). Japan's progressive sex: Male homosexuality, national competition, and the cinema. In A. Grossman (Ed.), *Queer Asian cinema: Shadows in the shade* (pp. 31–82). Harrington Park Press.

Hirano, H. (1994). *Anchi heterosekushizumu* [Anti-heterosexism]. Pandora.

Horvat, A. (2021). *Screening queer memory: LGBTQ pasts in contemporary film and television.* Bloomsbury.

Ishida, H. (2019). *Hajimete manabu LGBT: Kiso kara torendo made* [First lessons about LGBT: From basics to trends]. Natsumesha.

Ishihara, I. (1996). *Za toransu sekushuaru mūbīzu: Sumire iro no eigasai* [The trans sexual movies]. Film Art sha.

Ishihara, I. (2000a). *Īsuto Ajia eiga no bi* [The beauty of East Asian cinema]. Hōga Shoten.

Ishihara, I. (2000b). *Eiga o tōshite ikoku e* [To foreign countries through cinema]. Hōga Shoten.

Izumo, M. (2002). *Chanbara quīn* [Chambara queen]. Pandora.

Izumo, M. (Ed.) (2005). *Niji no kanata ni: Rezubian, gei, kuia eiga o yomu* [Over the rainbow: Reading lesbian, gay, and queer films]. Pandora.

Jibu, R. (2021). *Jendā de miru hitto dorama: Kankoku, Amerika, Ōshū, Nihon* [Analyzing successful TV drama series through gender: South Korea, US, Europe, and Japan]. Kōbunsha.

Jo, G. [Xú, Y.]. (2021). Bosei gensō to rezubian kansei: "Banka" to "Onna de arukoto" ni okeru Kuga Yoshiko [Maternal fantasy and lesbian sensibility: Yoshiko Kuga in Banka and Onna de arukoto]. *Eiga kenkyū*, *15*, 4–26.

Kanno, Y. (2015). Kuia LGBT eigasai shiron [Essay on the queer LGBT film festival]. *Gendai shisō*, *43*(16), 202–209.

Kanno, Y. (2017). Review of the book *The Oxford handbook of Japanese cinema*, by Daisuke Miyao, ed. *Eizōgaku*, *97*, 106–110.

Kanno, Y. (2020). Queer resonance: The stardom of Miwa Akihiro. In H. Fujiki & A. Phillips (Eds.), *The Japanese cinema book* (pp. 179–191). Bloomsbury.

Kanno, Y. (2021a). Kuia to shinema o meguru shikō to jissen [Thinking and practice on queerness and cinema]. In Y. Kanno (Ed.), *Kuia shinema stadīzu* [Queer cinema studies] (pp. 1–12). Kōyō Shobō.

Kanno, Y. (2021b). When Marnie was there: Female friendship film and the genealogy of queer girls' culture. In J. Bernardi & S. T. Ogawa (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of Japanese cinema* (pp. 68–80). Routledge.

Katō, K. (2021). A man with whom men fall in love: Homosociality and effeminophobia in the Abashiri bangaichi series. *Japanese Studies*, *41*(1), 59–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/10371397.2020.1851178.

Kawaguchi, K. (2003). *Kuia studīzu* [Queer studies]. Iwanami Shoten.

Kikuchi, N., Horie, Y., & Iino, Y. (2019). Joshō: Kuia sutadīzu to wa nanika [Preface: What is queer studies?]. In N. Kikuchi, Y. Horie, & Y. Iino (Eds.), *Kuia sutadīzu o hiraku: Aidentiti, komyuniti, supēsu* [Exploring queer studies: Identity, community, space] (pp.1–14). Kōyō Shobō.

Kodama, M. (2021). Dakishime au no ni, dareka no shōnin wa iranai [We don't need approval to love each other]. In *Kanojo ga sukina mono wa* [What she likes] [pamphlet] (pp. 25–26).

Kodama, M. (2022a). Kono uta wa watashi o kizu tsuke nai [This song will not hurt me]. In *Haruhara-san no uta* [Haruhara-san's recorder] [pamphlet] (pp. 40–43).

Kodama, M. (2022b). Yukidoke ni oitsukarenai hayasa de [Before the snow melts]. In *Yunhi e* [Yunhui-ege/Moonlit winter] [pamphlet] (pp. 25–26).

Kubo, Y. (2020a, December). *Imai Mika kantoku ni eiga seisaku no katei o kiku: Dare no tame ni tsukuru no ka – "Niji-iro no asa ga kuru made" jōeikai* [Interview with director Imai Mika at the screening of *Until rainbow dawn*]. Waseda University Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum event report. http://www.waseda.jp/enpaku/ex/11629.

Kubo, Y. (2020b, August). Nihon eiga ni okeru dansei dōseiai hyōshō no kako genzai mirai [The past, present, and future of gay male representations in Japanese cinema]. *Kinema junpō*, *1846*, 21–24.

Kubo, Y. (2020c). Tenrankai shushi [The purpose of the exhibition]. In Y. Kubo (Ed.), *Inside/out: LGBTQ + to eizō bunka* [Inside/out: LGBTQ+ representations in film and television] (pp. 6–7). Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum.

Kurosawa, K., Yomota, I., Yoshimi, S., & Lee, B. (Eds.). (2010). *Sukurīn no naka no tasha* [The Other within the screen]. Iwanami Shoten.

Kurosawa, K., Yomota, I., Yoshimi, S., & Lee, B. (Eds.) (2011). *Nihon eiga wa doko made ikuka* [Where will Japanese cinema reach?]. Iwanami Shoten.

Mizoguchi, A. (2005). "Suna no onna" saidoku: Rezubian rīdingu no aratana kanōsei [Rereading *The woman in the dunes:* A new lesbian reading]. In N. Nisihjima (Ed.), *Eizō hyōgen no orutanatibu: 1960 nendai no itsudatsu to sōzō* [Alternatives of cinematic expressions: Deviation and creation in the 1960s] (pp. 246–274). Shinwasha.

Nornes, M., & Gerow, A. (2009). *Research guide to Japanese film studies.* University of Michigan Press. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9340103.

Nornes, M., & Gerow, A. (2016). *Nihon eiga kenkyū e no gaidobukku* [Research guide to Japanese film studies] (M. Dougase, Trans.). Yumani Shobō. (Original work published 2009)

Ogura, Y. (2009). Gei no eijingu to iu fīrudo no toikake: Ikikata o jikken shiau kyōdōsei e [Questioning gay aging in the field: Toward exploring life choices as a community]. In O. Seki & T. Shida (Eds.), *Chōhatsu suru sekushuariti* [Provoking sexuality] (pp. 168–191). Shinseisha.

Rich, B. R. (1992). The new queer cinema. *Sight & Sound*, *2*(5), 30–34.

Russo, V. (1981). *The celluloid closet: Homosexuality in the movies.* Harper & Row.

Schoonover, K., & Galt, R. (2016). *Queer cinema in the world.* Duke University Press.

Seto, M. (2021). Production note. In *Kinō nani tabeta?* [What did you eat yesterday?] [pamphlet] (pp. 5–6).

Shinjō, I. (2010). Nihon kuia eigaron josetsu: Ōshima Nagisa "Senjō no merī kurisumasu" o kōgen to shite [An introduction to Japanese queer cinema: An analysis of Nagisa Oshima's *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence*]. In K. Kurosawa, I. Yomota, S. Yoshimi, & B. Lee (Eds.), *Sukurīn no naka no tasha* [The Other within the screen] (pp. 113–139). Iwanami Shoten.

Sullivan, N., & Middleton, C. (2019). *Queering the museum.* Routledge.

Suzuki, M. (2020, September). “Toransu yaku wa toransu no haiyū ni” to iu shuchō ō dō kangaeruka? [Examining the claim: “Trans roles should be offered to trans actors”]. *Kinema junpō*, *1849*, 28–29.

Vincent, K., Kazama, T., & Kawaguchi, K. (1997). *Gei sutadīzu* [Gay studies]. Seidosha.

Yamane, S. (Ed.). (2021). *Nihon eiga sakuhin daijiten* [Comprehensive encyclopedia of Japanese cinema]. Sanseidō.