Navigating a Continuum of Hegemonic Masculinity in Oshima Nagisa's Gohatto

Japanese filmmaker Oshima Nagisa is considered one of the great Japanese directors and a principle example of Japan's post-war New Wave and avant-garde cinema styles. Throughout his career, a span of approximately forty years, Oshima remained a staunch critic of Japan, tackling issues he saw on both the right and left of the political spectrum. (Messier, 1992: 71) He has tackled Fascism, Communism, militarism, Japan's defeat, censorship, desire, and sexuality. In the west, he is perhaps known for for *In the Realm of the Senses, Merry Christmas Mr*. *Lawrence*, and *Gohatto*. However, while the two former films have received critical acclaim for their boldness and originality, the latter, *Gohatto*, has been dismissed by many as a poor attempt to radicalize the jidaigeki genre with the inclusion of Japan's valorized shinsengumi being subverted by growing desire and jealousy for a young handsome recruit.

Following in a similar social construct as *Lawrence*, *Gohatto* takes place mainly in an enclosed space nearly completely devoid of heterosocial contact. Here it is possible to argue that *Gohatto* is Oshima doing jidaigeki, drawing attention to the homoeroticism and control within militant homosociality, similar to *Lawrence*. After all, *Gohatto* is a jidaigeki, which conventionally showcase samurai masculinity and sideline or completely remove women from the scene much in the same vein as *Lawrence* defied the typically held heterosexuality in POW genre films. (Lehman: 1987, 25) This argument is undone though, both through Lehman's analysis of Oshima as a director and *Gohatto* as a jidaigeki. Lehman notes specifically that Oshima resists developing a signature style, making a stylistic break between his films. If Oshima were to be described as having a particular style, it would be seen as a lack of continuity. (Lehman, 1987: 29)

Furthermore, constructing *Gohatto* as a jidaigeki entry into the so called 90's "gay boom," we would have to ignore both the cinematic and aural styles, and the blatant historical

inaccuracies that Oshima chose to include despite the shinsengumi being one of the most popular topics in Japanese popular culture. Sakamoto's score is radically different from other traditional jidaigeki films, focusing on achieving a more mysterious ambience with his electronic and synth based sounds. Cinematically, the film has many critics calling out Oshima as making *Gohatto* in the tradition of Mizoguchi or Ozu, rather than the "avant-garde" style the west has come to expect from him. Are we left to conceive and judge *Gohatto* as Oshima paying homage to the techniques and styles of Mizoguchi, Ozu, or Kurosawa, the directors Oshima spent his career distancing himself from as an independent avant-garde director? (Lehman, 1987) If the film truly does invoke the cinematic styling of those directors, then perhaps it serves for a purpose of communication. The only element of *Gohatto* that routinely embraces jidaigeki would be those very associations. In an interview with Max Tessier, Oshima explicitly stated that he "didn't make Gohatto as a historical film." Oshima then rejects the separation of genres, suggesting that, for him, "there is no difference whatsoever with this or another genre film." This suggests that Oshima made a "jidaigeki" by accident, picking the shinsengumi purely so as to communicate something else, picking the story because the elements played into the particular ideology Oshima wanted to convey. So we cannot, then, simply dismiss *Gohatto* as a visual and aural beauty without Oshima's critique of Japan. After all, that simply would not be his (lack) style.

Rather, in a tiny footnote in James Vincent's PhD dissertation, Vincent asserts Oshima's admission that the film is about "modern Japanese salarymen's homosocializing." (2000: 138) I find this suggest intriguing as well as limited. *Gohatto* is not limited to simply commenting on the homosociality of Japanese dominant culture of masculinity, but reveals a glimpse of a continuum of masculinity defined in homosocial confines tracing from pre-modern to present Japan. Furthermore, simply stopping at the salaryman analogy is rather dismissive of the

inclusion of homoeroticism that is at odds with the historical record of Tokugawa Era homosocial relationships. The intertwining of theoretical frames of reference regarding homosocial desire, homonationalism, and hegemonic masculinity, *Gohatto* is revealed to be a visual transmission and criticism of hegemonic Japanese masculinity, linked through the 150 years between the setting of the film and now, through an interwoven thread of privileging misogynistic homosocial desire that exists through the historic text of the shinsengumi, the construction of post-war masculinity and homofascism, and the present day salaryman.

Theoretical Frames

Before engaging in my analysis of *Gohatto*, it is important to provide a brief summary of homosocial desire, hegemonic masculinity, and homonationalism so as to bridge the theory gap between film criticism and gender/queer theory.

Homosocial desire is a concept theorized by Eve Sedgwick in her 1985 book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. While homosocial has been used previously in history and social science discourses, Sedgwick modified it by bringing desire into the mix. She conceives of homosocial as simultaneously distinguished from and analogous with homosexual. (1985: 1) Desire plays the important role of revealing the tensions and behaviors we regularly think of in depictions of single-sex social groups. Single gender schools and organizations, such as Boy Scouts, have long since drawn a quizzical eye to the suggestion of homoeroticism by the staunch homosocial relations. By revealing the inherent homoeroticism in masculine assemblages, Sedgwick provides a significant framework to problematize particularly male dominated groups such as military and business where men position their camaraderie with their male peers, superiors, and inferiors, as above the inclusion of women. That "bros before hos" privilege we see in popular depictions of American fraternity culture.

Inherent to a discussion of homosocial assemblages in Japan, and especially in reference to *Gohatto*, is hegemonic masculinity. R. W. Connell helped develop the theory of hegemonic masculinity beginning in the mid-1980's. Her theories, while widely praised and criticized, are considerably important to analyzing the subtleties in patriarchal hierarchies. (Connell, 2005) This meant that men were revealed from behind the veil of patriarchy that had obscured the variety of positions of power within the male gender. Hegemonic masculinity is not one single transhistoric embodiment of masculinity, but rather a shifting concept defined by whatever the dominant ideology of gender is present at that specific time and place. This provides us with the theoretical grounding for discussing the shift in masculinity in Japan over time and the possibility for seeing a continuity at work between the pre-modern samurai and the present day salaryman.

Homonationalism is a far more recent development in queer theory largely by Jasbir Puar, who established homonationalism in order to explain United States exceptionalism and the growing inclusion of queer subjects into the nationalist discourse of the US war on terror. (Puar, 2007) This simultaneously constructed a normative equivalency for homosexuals, by which inclusion was based on participation within state situated boundaries of performativity. Queer desires then became reified, with specific experiences in line with the state's nationalist project receiving privileges leading to inclusion and equality at the expense of another "other." Homonationalism provides an exciting frame to view *Gohatto* in and, by extension, the various links of homoeroticism and nationalism in Japan.

The Film as Jidaigeki

While I previously asserted it wrong to view *Gohatto* as a jidaigeki, it nevertheless depicts historic fact and fiction. There is considerable usefulness viewing the historicism of *Gohatto* as part of the multifaceted portrayal of hegemonic masculinity and in order to establish the historic, valorized depiction of samurai as the ideal Japanese masculinity for later periods. Furthermore, the historic representation of homoeroticism is integral to developing an understanding of the firm link in Japan between right-wing Fascism and homosexuality.

Before engaging directly with the film, it is necessary to point out the obvious historical inaccuracies and the role they play in the film. The far most noticeable inaccuracy is the costuming. In Tessier's interview with Oshima, Oshima reveals that the black and gold costumes were a conscious choice between him and Wada Emi, the costume designer. He does not reveal why he chose to favor fiction to the well-known and recognizable light blue uniforms they actually wore. (Oshima and Tessier, 2000) One blogger's critique of *Gohatto* says Wada's designs were created in order to invoke a parallel between the shinsengumi and Hitlerites. (Constantine, 2010) This is an intriguing concept, but is unverified without traceable evidence to Wada or Oshima. However, the shinsengumi has often been viewed in parallel with Fascism in Japan and by extension linking them to Nazism is not a farfetched concept. Regardless, Oshima and Wada's decision to privilege a fictional uniform to one of Japan's most iconic period costumes, indicates Oshima had some specific intention, which I will return to later in the paper.

The other interesting inaccuracy in the film is far more difficult to assess. Throughout the film, characters' discussions on homoerotic desire refer to "this character" or "that character" leaning "that way." Placing desire on a directional path to "this" or "that" way is a product of

sexological usurpation of desire in the late 19th century Europe. Sexology became popular in Japan later, in the 20th century, following Ogai Mori's publication *Vita Sexualis*, an erotic novel heavily indebted to the sexology tradition of clinicizing and defining desire in terms of normative and deviant. (Fruhstuck, 2007: 78 also: McLelland, 2000: 41) This misrepresentation of pre-modern homoeroticism obscures the multitude of homoerotic formations that existed in both samurai, monastic, and merchant class traditions. However, it is difficult to decide as to the nature of this modern occupation of pre-modern desire, whether it is intentionally there, to produce a greater link to contemporary society, or simply an easy slip that many people fall into in trying to communicate homoeroticism that predates the language we have today.

The shinsengumi represents an extreme homosocial amalgamation of Japanese militarists who support the feudal shogun and isolationism. Throughout *Gohatto* we are barely given a glimpse into femininity, and certainly not within the confines of the militia housing. Oshima focuses our attention on the way relationships are constructed through violence and competition. While most jidaigeki contain fantastic sword fights, they largely function as an antagonistic relationship, the show down between the hero and the villain. The sword fights Oshima gives us are, for the most part, competitive bouts within the homosocial confines of the militia. It is primarily through the analogy that presents the practice fights as allegorical sex. Kitano's character, Captain Hijikata, is able to determine the relationship status between the two new recruits, Matsuda's Kano and Asano's Tashiro, after witness Kano's defeat despite being the more skilled fighter of the pair, suggesting to the viewer Tashiro's aggressiveness and Kano's passiveness.

Kano's passiveness in the practice match with Tashiro is contradictory to his other practice matches. Oshima shows Kano fighting Lieutenant Okita, Captain Hijikata, and

Lieutenant Inoue. In the case of his matches with Okita and Hijikata, they both evaluated Kano as greater skilled than Tashiro. When Kano loses to Tashiro, Hijikata takes that as evidence that the two are lovers. Kano's apparent inability to defeat Tashiro, along with Kano's looks, suggests the two are engaged in the traditional wakashudo relationship. Wakashudo is a Japanese specific construction of pederasty, where the adolescent male performs the passive role in sex for his older male mentor. While many critics of the film discuss Kano as effeminate or androgynous I disagree. While it is easy to view Kano as androgynous or effeminate, particularly from a contemporary western perspective, especially as we see him in the passive receiver of anal intercourse, that ignores the multitude of masculinities that are dependent on other factors. For one, the shinsengumi is a homosocial environment, thereby marking the members as masculine, and as some historians have considered hypermasculine. Kano's visual aesthetics is in-keeping with the traditional markers of adolescent male youth. The long forelocks that are constantly a site of erotic tension within the film were traditionally kept until the male youth comes of age, around eighteen or nineteen years of age. (Pflugfelder, 1999: 32-34) Kano claims to be eighteen years old, but Hijikata and Vice Commander Kondo both appear skeptical. His long ponytail, rather than the top knot worn by all by Okita, is not particularly feminine as it is the same style as Okita's.

Kano's youthful masculinity is further distanced from femininity with the brief appearance of Nishiki, an oiran hired for the purpose of introducing Kano to heterosexuality. Oshima focuses the camera on the processional as Nishiki walks slowly down the hall. We are put in the position of Sergeant Yamazaki, Kano's chaperone, as he (we) focus our gaze on this "normative" portrayal of masculine desire. The camera is focused on Nishiki far longer than the almost shameful glances we get of Kano's eyes and forehead and his lips. As a figure of

normative male desire, Nishiki constructs the ideal form of femininity. She is the best woman at the establishment, a woman for a samurai and a rich man's son. There is no aesthetic connection between the image of Nishiki and Kano, therefore Kano exists in the subordinate masculine position of having yet to achieve the hegemonic masculinity exuded by the older members. Oshima constructs this dichotomy of masculinities with the scruffiness of Tashiro who wears his hakama loosely displaying his chest hair, as well as facial hair. He bears significant resemblance to the type of masculinity Mifune Toshiro exudes in his samurai roles.

The demise of both the subordinate Kano and the hegemonic Tashiro exemplify the power of nationalism to reify personal behavior and desire that interferes with the project of state. Destruction and control of homoerotic desire in *Gohatto*, is emblematic of homonationalism. As Oshima has positioned himself in relation to government censorship of sexuality, particularly in regards to his film In the Realm of the Senses, the state's censorship "made his pure film dirty." (Richie, 2001: 201) Further writing on his trial for obscenity, Oshima comments that "the police and the public prosecuters hated the person [Oshima] who made a film that went beyond the confines of sexual expression in Japan..." (Oshima, 1992: 282) By privileging his expression of sexuality over the condoned version of sexual expression, Oshima finds himself in court. Likewise, the ultimate destruction of Kano and Tashiro represent the disorder they sewed in the ranks of the shinsengumi. Their sentence is not given because of their expression of desire, but rather at the privileging of homoerotic desire above the group, a transgression explicitly invoked when Oshima flashes the shinsengumi's code of conduct on the screen. Tashiro put his desire for Kano, a personal relationship, in front of his desire to perform for the group. While Oshima plants the seed of doubt at Tashiro's guilt, Tashiro has already transgressed the rules of the shinsengumi when he invaded the private space to watch Kano

perform an execution as a rite of initiation. This seed of doubt is what leads to Kano's off-screen demise at the hand of Okita. The possibility that someone other than Tashiro has committed crimes against the group disrupted the order the group relied on and Kano's death was the only way to insure the disruption stops. This parallels the interaction between Lawrence and Yonoi in *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence*, where Lawrence is informed that he is to die in order to punish a radio smuggled into the POW camp. Lawrence gets Yonoi to admit that Lawrence's execution is to preserve order, and it does not matter who committed the crime as long as someone is punished. The death of Tashiro, even done quietly as Kondo urges, is enough for the leaders to maintain control as the only option for a vanished member is death. Even if Tashiro is not guilty of the crimes, his obsession with possessing Kano provides a scapegoat to punish the crime. The death of Kano, similarly reflects the need for the leaders of the shinsengumi to control desirable elements within their walls.

The question of misogyny is only a passing note in *Gohatto*, partially because women just are not present. Historians have linked the homosocial samurai culture to misogyny, but what Oshima provides in *Gohatto* is perhaps more complex. (Pflugfelder, 1999) With the homosocial environment displayed in the film, we are only witness to women outside the complex, either serving in the pleasure quarters or assisting the anti-shogunate men escape from the inn. At the realization of Kano's virginity, we briefly see a glimpse of the men ridiculing him by showing him pornographic drawings. The exact details of the scene are obscured, but from the heteronormative position that society operates from, along with the title card specifying that Kano "has never known a woman," suggest the images were of women. This homosocial ridicule of Kano bears striking resemblance to contemporary construction of homosocial masculinity, particularly in the United States, where homosocial environments, such as fraternities and the

military, reward points for heterosexual encounters. Thus, the issue of heterosexual desire, in the homosocial space, further extends the preoccupation of masculinity with misogynistic traits that can be suggestive of underlying homoeroticism. Even the supposed heterosexuality of the members of the shinsengumi can be challenged as the only value Oshima allows for women in the film is to add to the competitive relationship between the members, which clearly invokes Sedgwick's analysis of homosocial desire. (Childers & Hentzi, 1995)

From Homofascism to Salarymen

With Japan's defeat in World War II, so to was Japan's hegemonic masculinity of their imperialist expansion period. Perhaps the most symbolic representative of the required shifting of masculinity from martial strength to financial strength is the body politics of Mishima Yukio. Mishima, not known only for being one of Japan's most iconic and important post-war literati, but also for his particular experience of right-wing nationalist politics. A large part of Mishima's aesthetic is built on nostalgia for the abstract Japan's past and samurai culture. (McLelland, 2000: 29) His embrace of nostalgic masculinity also signified his abandonment of modernism. (Mackie, 2005: 135 [in McLelland and Dasgupta, 2005]) Academics and writers, including Oshima have commented on the contradictory relationship in Mishima's politics. (Oshima, 1992: 224-225) Rather than seeing Mishima as enacting politics, essentially a politician, his performance of politics and alliance with right-wing fascism, was a narcissistic endeavor to perform Mishima's ideological aesthetics. (Cornyetz, 2007: 134) James Vincent also discusses the links between post-war right-wing, fascism, and homoeroticism (thus providing the identity of homofascist) with the historic links to samurai and particularly the shinsengumi. (Vincent, 2000) The problematic nature of the intersectionality of Mishima's homofascism and the shift from militarism to capitalism created the continuum that connects salarymen to samurai.

One popular conception of contemporary salarymen is as the contemporary samurai, requiring loyalty and dedication to succeed. Mishima, like the shinsengumi, both portray a rightwing hegemonic masculinity that was soon suppressed in favor of modernization. They further complicate homoerotic aesthetics in Japan through their expressions of hypermasculinity, the complete elimination of possible femininity through martial exercise.¹ McLelland notes particularly the peculiar position of homosexual stereotypes in Japan linked to excessive narcissistic behavior such as body building. (2000: 52) This is the site of separation for masculinity in Japan. Salaryman masculinity became the recognized privileged class of masculinity and nostalgic masculinity became subordinated and suppressed, partially represented in homosexual identity in contemporary Japan.

Vincent's suggestion that Oshima's intention with *Gohatto* was to comment on the homoeroticism of homosocial salarymen culture is the companion to the historic analysis of *Gohatto*. Murakami Ryu's *Audition*, for example, layers the homosocial misogyny of salaryman identity in Japan with Oyama's revelation of his adulterous past. Oshima's linking salarymen to the shinsengumi is further established through the main gendering of labor. The shinsengumi in *Gohatto* is entirely homosocial, with women only serving men's pleasure outside of "work." Similarly, the widely recognize motif of the central relationship between salarymen occur outside of work in the bars and hostess clubs, a practice highly (in)famously recognized in US thought.

¹ Bara-kei (Ordeal by Roses) is a photography portfolio of homoerotic/sadomasochistic images of Mishima by Eikoh Hosoe. Links have been made to the development of homo-culture in Japan with the rise of the "Rose Tribe" that grew in popularity in the late 60's. Furthermore, "bara" is also a modifier for homoerotic pornography general assume to be for a male homosexual audience (as opposed to the bishounen of ladies boys love).

The volume *Genders, Transgenders and Sexualities in Japan* heavily features discussions on the construction of salarymen as representing the hegemonic masculinity in Japan. In McLelland's contribution to the volume, he particularly points to the precarious nature of actual masculinity in Japanese culture. (McLelland, 2005b: 96-97) Connell's conception of hegemonic masculinities and masculinities in general, is the inherent instability requiring the ever changing and assertion of masculine through performance. Hegemonic masculinity is best understood as an idealized construction of masculinity, something that is strived for but never achieved. In essence it is the failure to ever attain the full expression of masculinity that leads to the masculine assertion of control over women and subordinate masculinity. Oshima visually represents this with how unsettled the shinsengumi becomes with the introduction of Kano as an object of desire among the men.

In a moment of jest among the leaders and Yamazaki, Oshima suggest the aesthetics of desire constructed in the group. He symbolically places Yuzawa and Kano in comparative spheres where Kano's beauty is placed opposite of Yuzawa's ugliness. Rather than establishing a heteronormative homosociety to the shinsengumi, this suggests simply a lack of sexual appeal, perpetuating the homoerotic undertones to the homosocial experience. Oshima further develops this particular mode of experience by the level of acceptance for Kano's rumored relationship with Tashiro. Whereas Kano's sexual relationship with Yuzawa is reified on the grounds of aesthetic appropriations of beauty and ugliness, between Kano and Tashiro there is an unspoken level of understanding. This suggests Tashiro embodies a particular performance of masculinity that is seen as attractive and in line with hegemonic masculinity. The disruption of order is symbolic of the complications of salarymen masculinity highlighted by McLelland and

Dasgupta's work on hegemonic masculinity in Japan. (Dasgupta, 2005: 172-173 in [McLelland and Dasgupta, 2005])

Hegemonic masculinity is established in conjunction with nationalism, in Japanese context it is particularly represented by shakaijin and sekentei. (McLelland, 2005b: 98-99) Defined as social person and social responsibility, respectively, these carry the burden of requiring certain criteria for Japanese men to be fully recognized as adult men. Social responsibility, extracted from any geographical specific location, posits duty expected of an individual to benefit society. Thus, social responsibility exists as a condition of adulthood requiring the participation in a form of nationalism. In the Japanese context, some of the specific responsibilities expected of males to fully enter society are marriage and salaried employment. (McLelland, 2005b: 98-99)

If we examine Kano as a pre-shakaijin, symbolized in his youthful appearance and the persistence focus of his forelocks, we can understand Kano's failure to attain subjecthood. Throughout the film Kano remains unemotional and passive. He strives to remain an object, desiring to be desired, embodied by his rapid change in demeanor after Yamazaki declares no interest in Kano. His death, suggested to be necessary, symbolizes the position Kano is constructed in as a being choosing to not grow up, to not become a responsible subject. Furthermore, Kano's death, the only way to ever leave the shinsengumi is symbolizes the expected reaction to a "gay" salaryman, the expectation that not only will they lose their job, but also suffer a symbolic death of the loss of shakaijin. With salarymen privileged as the state's hegemonic masculinity, this presents the space for an examination of homonationalism.

In *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan* McLelland highlights the problematic positionality of homoeroticism in contemporary Japan. He established the acceptable locations of homoerotic desire, confined to areas of entertainment and firmly separate from shakaijin. In the concluding chapter "Is there a Japanese Gay Identity?" McLelland shows the problematic situation that men involved in homoerotic expressions have in relation to shakaijin and sekentei. The overwhelming response he received in his interviews of gay identified men expressing the desire to remain "closeted" so as to still marry and have full inclusion in society.² (McLelland, 2000: 218-219) Many of the men McLelland interviewed are essentially subordinating their acknowledged homoerotic desire to national expectations of them. Japan, with their long history of homoeroticism, never really developed the politicized "homophobia" that the heavily Christian west has. In turn, Japan appears to many to be a "pro-gay" country, despite the heavy weight of national expectations that oppress and repress homoerotic desire.

By presenting *Gohatto* as a commentary on salarymen homosocializing, Oshima is critiquing the Japanese continuum of homosocial hegemonic masculinity which intersects in problematic spheres of nationalism, militarism, and politics. The film further works as an expression of homoerotic subtext of homosocial experiences in a historic continuum of Japanese masculinity. By setting the film in the past with the shinsengumi, the homoeroticism is easily recognized where it could otherwise be obscured if Oshima had critiqued the homosocial community of salarymen literally. If Oshima had directly engaged in a homoeroticism of

² In discourses of globalization of sexuality and the spread of western sexology, concepts such as the closet and sexual identity have been problematized. While it is important to problematize the complexities in the growth of identity politics, it is not necessary to address for the purpose of this paper.

salarymen the film could have been seen as more radical, but it also could have easily been swept aside as another bombastic ideological excess from an "enemy of the state."³

Gohatto works both in literal and allegorical interpretations as seen through the frames of homosocial desire, homonationalism, and hegemonic masculinity. As I have shown, it is possible to engage with the film from the perspective of a jidaigeki, fully separated from contemporary contexts, in addition to addressing post-war homofascism (to a lesser extent). The film, however, stands out largely due to the continuum of masculinity extending from the historic period of the shinsengumi to the salaryman of today. Oshima's construction of the shinsengumi as easily unsettled speaks directly to the precariousness of masculinity. With the complications of inherent misogyny of samurai culture, he directly accuses the contemporary nationalist/capitalist project that remains incredibly homosocial to this day, not to mention elsewhere in other national contexts. Oshima's inclusion of homoeroticism, one of, if not the first time in jidaigeki genre, further critiques the interference of state and society in sexual desire, fully cementing Gohatto into his oeuvre alongside In the Realm of the Senses, Empire of Passion, and Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence. This furthers Oshima's critique to also include the extremely precarious nature of contemporary hegemonic masculinity that is heterosexualized through national expectations of male subjects in order to fully obtain adulthood. The key to Kano's character is the issue of adulthood, and the failure, represented in his appearance and as passive partner in anal intercourse, and Kano's desire to not assume the responsibilities of adulthood. We never see Kano fully take responsibility for his actions, only miming responsibility through following the [absolute] orders of his superiors. Hence, perhaps the last bit of critique Oshima will offer is of

³ Here I am referencing Oshima's comments on being hated by the Japanese government while on trial for obscenity that I previously visited.

the effect that Japanese capitalist focus has on the construction of adolescents preparing to come-

of-age and the high level of expectations placed on them.

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