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Refereed article

The Beautiful *Shōnen* of the Deep and Moonless Night: The Boyish Aesthetic in Modern Japan

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Summary
Men increasingly define themselves through the management of their bodies in today's media-driven society, and bodily ideals operate as a major point of cultural reference — influencing men's perceptions of their own bodies, and indeed their self-identities. One of the dominant modes of ideal male beauty in contemporary Japan, as embodied by many of the country's male actors, models, and celebrities, differs from the generalized Western ideal of muscularity; being slender, *shōnen*-like (boyish), and predominantly *kawaii* (cute) are in vogue. These clean-cut, boyish demeanors, I argue, visually allude to a type of male identity that is situated in a liminal realm between boyhood and manhood, embodied not only by adolescent boys but also by young men in that timescape between "adolescence" and what some societies see as manhood. The primary aim of this article is to examine a particular sector of the significance of this male beauty in contemporary Japanese popular culture — namely the *bishōnen*, the beautiful boy positioned between child and adult. While the term *bishōnen* has been used extensively in its literal sense — any beautiful young man, in studies of the aesthetic imagination of Japanese boyhood — it is much more than just a genre label; it denotes a critical concept and an imagined figure of the boy. This article examines *bishōnen* as a cultural imagination, a complex ideal of boyish identity in Japanese popular culture, and argues that the way *bishōnen* is perceived and conceptualized calls into question the widely assumed equation of human beauty with sexual desire — pointing to the potential of *bishōnen* beauty to be appreciated purely on an aesthetic level.

Keywords: Japanese popular culture, *bishōnen*, boys, bodily aesthetics, prolonged youth, gender

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Introduction

Hayase Kei, a nineteen-year-old, first-year student of Tokyo University of Science, is one of the 20 finalists in "Mr. of Mr. Campus Contest 2017," a beauty pageant for male university students.[1] Twenty universities each elect a "Mr. Campus" to represent them, and these 20 young men then compete in the national final — where Hayase received a special jury award (ADS 2017). A single glance at his picture on the pageant's website or on his Instagram profile is enough for one to recognize that he perfectly captures one of the dominant modes of male beauty in contemporary Japan, a kind of masculinity that is cute and boyish — as if embodying what is known in Japanese as the look of *bishōnen*.

Beauty is a subjective construct (Imamichi 1984: 3). Beauty, we are told, is in the eye of the beholder (Marwick 2004: 9). It may be, as John Keats says, truth, and it is certainly no less problematic as a concept. Beauty ideals can vary according to the aesthetics of any given period (Marwick 2004: 7–8). Definitions of beauty are notoriously difficult to pin down (Ribeiro 2011: 4) because it is an evanescent quality, always changing (Miller 2006: 40; Ribeiro 2011: 13). One of the dominant modes of ideal male beauty in contemporary Japan differs from the generalized Western one of muscularity; *bishōnen* is contrariwise slender, boyish, and predominantly *kawaii* (cute). This *kawaii* masculinity is omnipresent in contemporary Japanese culture, from advertising to television programs, from magazines to fashion media, exerting influence upon the self-image of contemporary Japanese men. The term *bishōnen* has been used extensively in its literal sense — any beautiful young man. Yet, as this article articulates, the term is much more than just a genre label; in studies of the aesthetic imagination of Japanese boyhood, it denotes a critical concept and an imagined figure of the boy.

This article explores visual representations of male beauty in contemporary Japan, particularly of the type of masculinity that is situated in the realm in-between boyhood and manhood, embodied not only by adolescent boys but also by young men — the timescape between "adolescence" and maturity. This article will first look at the general idea of beauty. I will then explore some issues surrounding male physical beauty, including the concept of *kawaii*. Finally, I move on to the culturally defined boyish ideal of *bishōnen* in the Japanese context, and what significance we might derive from it. I will argue that the way *bishōnen*, as an iconic and aesthetic representation of the boy, is perceived and conceptualized calls into question the widely assumed equation of human beauty with sexual desire, and thus points to the potential of *bishōnen* beauty to be appreciated purely on an aesthetic level.

1 The Japanese names that appear in this article are in the traditional Japanese order, with the surname before the given name; however, when writing about Japanese writers and scholars whose works appear in English, I refer to them in these cases in the English order.

Beauty

What is beauty? As writer Susan Sontag (2002: 23) noted, beauty is precisely beyond words. Everyone, it seems, has a view about beauty, although only the brave would attempt an objective definition (Ribeiro 2011: 13). While I acknowledge that beauty is indeed subjective, I would like to suggest that it "goes beyond personal predilection or fancy; it appeals to *majorities*; it is in the eye of all beholders" (Marwick 2004: 9; italics in the original). Or, given that the idiosyncratic are always with us, "*almost* all beholders" (Marwick 2004: 9; italics in the original).

The beauty we are discussing here is primarily a surface quality, one which is registered on sight (Marwick 2004: 9). Fashion historian Aileen Ribeiro (2011: 2) declares that beauty is largely mediated through the visual, and the human face is an important factor in the creation of that quality. According to her the face is the most naked — in the sense of vulnerable — part of the body, and the signifier of identity (Ribeiro 2011: 36). This definition of beauty calls for a more subtle and intricate treatment in non-European cultures like Japan. One's beauty here was registered more in manners, tastes, and the senses, as measured through calligraphy, fabric selection, and color combination in the Heian period between the ninth and twelfth centuries, to note just one example.[2] Nonetheless most of these qualities also call for a visual judgement being made, and thus do imply the key importance of visuality in defining beauty.

A beautiful face is to be looked at and admired. Ugliness is a perception that evokes feelings of disgust and pain, and that makes one turn away. Refusal to look is the fundamental definition of ugliness (Tōhata 2012: 70). Researcher Janine Willis and psychologist Alexander Todorov (2006) discovered that we make these appearance judgements instinctively, in less than one-tenth of a second. The eyes of others and their gaze are also important when forming awareness of our own appearance (Tōhata 2011: 136–7). We cannot perceive our face and body as others do. We can only imagine our body by piecing together a mosaic of the parts we can see or feel, such as our reflected image, and what others "say" or "describe" about our appearance. In this sense, our own body is to each of us an assembled, crafted image (Washida 2005: 17).

We compare this individually constructed image to the socially constructed body ideal. And ideal representations of the male are central to understanding gender and self-identity. In recent times, as work is becoming displaced as the primary source of identity for men, they increasingly define themselves instead through their bodies. The male body ideal operates as a major point of cultural reference and has significant influence on men's perceptions of their own bodies, and hence their self-

2 I thank Laura Miller for her suggestion of more complex and different beauty standards across cultures, including the importance of male beauty in Africa and in the Pacific.

identities (Gill et al. 2005: 39; Wienke 1998). In Japanese culture, celebrities are particularly important in this process. This is because "the celebrity [in Japan] not only gets attention, but also arouses desire," as they "shape audience behavior through the desire to become closer to or more like the star" (Karlin 2012: 79). In other words the image of celebrity "becomes a source of pleasure achieved through identification" (Karlin 2012: 79), and many of them embody the socially constructed body ideal in contemporary Japanese media culture.

Beauty and men

A significant amount of value has been attached to male beauty in some cultures, like in Africa and in the Pacific (e.g. Gilmore 1994: 198). In Euro-American cultures, however, while there have certainly been exceptions throughout history, the concept of beauty has often been less relevant to men than it has to women (Ribeiro 2011: 12). There are a number of reasons for this. Male attractiveness in Euro-American cultures is often measured in terms of power or wealth, over appearance (Gilmore 1994: 192). But perhaps when we assess beauty in men, we relate this — consciously or unconsciously — to what we perceive as "feminine" traits (Ribeiro 2011: 12). Of course, male beauty — of a similar kind to what is today considered as feminine beauty, a pale skin, a slender body, and a gentle, fine visage, for example — has been an object of admiration in European history at various points in time (e.g. Greer 2003: 9; Vigarello 2012 [2004]: 216–218). Having said that, the body of the young male "as an embodiment of ideal beauty all but disappeared from straight iconography" at the end of the eighteenth century in many European cultures (Greer 2003: 10). This has contributed to the (modern) notion, influenced by Freud's psychoanalytic theory, that women are being looked at whereas men are the ones doing the looking — thus not the objects to be observed. Psychoanalytic theory claims that men, unless they are homosexuals, do not wish to gaze at other men because homoeroticism and narcissism are tied to the male gaze of other men, and such a gaze would invoke sexuality (Warner 1990: 192). This idea was most famously taken up and developed first by visual critics and theorists such as John Berger (e.g. 1972: 47) and Laura Mulvey (e.g. 2001[1975]: 397) in the 1970s.

Recent studies (e.g. Gilmore 1994; Dutton 1995; Bordo 1999; Greer 2003) have paid more attention to beauty as it relates to the male. Scholar of French Studies Kenneth Dutton (1995: 343), for example, argues in his study of the attractive male body in Euro-American culture that there are, broadly, two prototypes for the traditional depiction of the male body-as-object. One of them stresses its heroic, supermasculine traits, while the other presents features associated with the passive object of desire. Heavy muscularity in the "heroic" mode is conceptually quite distinct from the youthful, slender physique of the "aesthetic" one. The "heroic" supermesomorph body is primarily a form of dominance display aimed at other men rather than a form of aesthetic pleasure (Dutton 1995: 345; Ueno 2015 [1989]: 131). This might reflect

men's anxiety about appearing effeminate — or indeed as a sex object at all (e.g. Steele 1989: 60). The passive male sex object is regarded with ambivalence, and even disapproval, in most contexts — even within the LGBTI community. Only men regarded as ultramasculine (such as baseball or football stars) have been able to appear in an objective way without concern, at least until women's desires were recognized only well into the 1970s or even in the 1980s (Steele 1989: 49). This also encompasses the sense of ambivalence attached to men's interest in fashion and appearance. As fashion historian Valerie Steele (2000: 78) finds, fashion is not fundamentally "feminine." This is especially true when we examine history, but for the majority of men, especially in wider Anglo-American culture, a professed lack of concern with clothes and appearance is seen as defining their "masculine" identities.

The contemporary Western world's assertive masculinity is visually conveyed through an emphasis on a rugged, muscular body. For example Zac Efron of *High School Musical* (2006) fame or pop star Justin Bieber (b. 1994) and their transformation from squeaky-clean, boyish figures into their significantly more macho, rugged current selves is a great representation of the Western conception of male maturity. While some argue that the youthful male body is increasingly apparent in advertisements and media (Dutton 1995: 343; Bordo 1999: 185), from a Japanese perspective even if they have cute, boyish faces their bodies are emphatically muscular (Seki 1996: 50; Monden 2015: 53).

A slender, adolescent-like male body can be interpreted as signaling a childlike, nonthreatening quality that denies messages of aggression (Dutton 1995: 306; Ueno 2015 [1998]: 118). Feminist writer Germaine Greer (2003: 10), in her famous book *The Beautiful Boy*, has argued that appreciating such beauty has become increasingly difficult in Euro-American cultures because of the guilty panic of pedophilia that equates awareness of the charms of boys with criminality. In other words, a display of appreciation of the ectomorphic male body carries a danger of accusations of sexual abnormality in such a culture. In contrast, less stigma has historically been attached to such desires in Japanese culture (McLelland 2005: 22–3; Aoyama 2005: 50; Screech 2009 [1999]; Hartley 2015).

Boyish beauty in Japanese culture

There seem to be two main reasons for the cultural difference between Euro-American and Japanese cultures in appreciating adolescent-like male beauty. The first, as cultural linguist and anthropologist Laura Miller (2006) in her study of body aesthetics in contemporary Japan suggests, is that Japanese women have traditionally also occupied the position of the "viewer." As far as the Japanese visual media is concerned, not only the male but also the female gaze has traditionally been recognized and incorporated (Miller 2006: 155). Indeed, both men and women are

presumed to have consumed erotic woodblock prints (*shunga*) during the eighteenth century (Screech 2009: 93; Miller 2006: 155). We should, however, take into account that, as art historian Timon Screech (2009: 97) points out, sexual depictions in this period operated less through sexual binaries and more through an age hierarchy that divided couples into passive (young) and active (older) roles. Moreover while the encounters with Western perspectives, like with the introduction of vanishing point in the eighteenth century, had altered "Japanese constructions of the meaning of sight" (Screech 2009: 221), gender was coded not through sexual characteristics so much as

> the way in which the assimilation of the two bodies made social gender-coding through dress or hairstyle [was] commensurately more important. If a person dressed her or himself in the clothes of a certain gender, they became a true representative of that gender (Screech 2009: 104).

Whether or not this attitude attached to the "Japanese way" of viewing is still relevant to contemporary times requires further research, but the coding of the gaze still seems to be less gendered in Japanese culture. An example is found in Japanese men's fashion magazines, which in contrast to Western men's "lifestyle" magazines (Steele 2000: 78) are often explicitly marketed as "fashion" magazines, and their discourse is often constructed around the imagined female gaze (Miller 2006; Monden 2015). Miller's contention is also firmly supported by scholar of Japanese literature Tomoko Aoyama (2005: 50), who, in relation to Greer's *The Beautiful Boy*, notes that it is unnecessary for Japanese women to advocate for, in Greer's words, "reclaiming their capacity for and right to visual pleasure" (2003: 50). This is because individuals, irrespective of gender, did and still explicitly do appreciate beauty in (young) men as well as (young) women in Japan.

The second reason for these cultural differences is that there is more than one single way of appreciating beauty. That is, beauty as something we appreciate and admire (not necessarily sexual), and beauty as sexual attraction (often gender-specific, for example male beauty with a muscular body and female beauty with a curved figure in the Euro-American standard). When human beauty is considered, many authors seem to perceive physical beauty to be linked with sexuality, sexual attractiveness, and sexual desirability (Marwick 2004: 1); Greer's view on the criminalization of adolescent male beauty reflects this idea. As social historian Arthur Marwick writes: "Beauty in human beings is always perceived as sexually desirable, though everything that is sexually arousing is not necessarily beautiful" (2004: 11). If our appreciation of beauty is inextricably associated with sexual desire, then appreciating the beauty of adolescent boys and youthful, (relatively) ungendered bodies (Ueno 2015: 118) could be analogous to the sexual objectification of minors. While the intention here is not to deny any relationship between human beauty and sexual desire in Japan (as elsewhere), beauty can, as Immanuel Kant defined, also

be something that we gaze/appraise from a distance without desiring it — like when we appreciate an art object (Tōhata 2011: 96).

Furthermore, unlike modern Euro-American cultures where Freud's psychoanalytic theory has been so influential that it is widely taken as common sense (Warner 1990: 198), Japan is a nation that has not been structured via the lens of such psychoanalysis (Nakamura and Matsuo 2003). As a result "the possibility of asexualized relations or the transcendence of gender" (Nakamura and Matsuo 2003: 61) is found in Japanese culture, alluding also to the potential of the admiring gaze to exist without inherently invoking sexuality. Therefore, Japanese culture and its regard of ectomorphic male beauty, in some cases at least, highlights the subtlety of appreciating male beauty where sexual desire is, at least on surface, nuanced and even downplayed. This is evident in one mode of male beauty prominent in contemporary Japan, *shōnen* and specifically *bishōnen* (beautiful boy) — that is boyish, rather clean-cut, and above all *kawaii*.

Kawaii aesthetics

What is *kawaii*? Unfortunately, it is another question that has no definitive answer. As Miller (2011: 24) points out, although literally the word *kawaii* means "cute" it has a much broader and complex semantic meaning. Likewise, kinds of *kawaii* can vary from "infantile," "teen," "adult," "sexy," and "corporate" to even "pornographic" (McVeigh 2000: 135). *Kawaii* is therefore not only used to describe straightforward, hyperbolic cuteness, but can also combine the elements of cute with seemingly opposing qualities such as grotesque or erotic (e.g. *guro-kawaii*/*kimo-kawaii*, and *ero-kawaii*; Miller 2011: 24). In simple definitional terms, *kawaii* refers to an aesthetic that celebrates adorable, childlike, delicate, and pretty visual, physical, and/or behavioral qualities (Kinsella 1995: 220). One of the core elements of the *kawaii* aesthetic is to appreciate "youthfulness," and one archetype of *kawaii* fashion is that it is deliberately designed to make the wearer appear childlike (Kinsella 1995: 229) — boyish or girlish without obvious sexual undertones (Monden 2015: 80). While women's fashion and appearance are where the concept is most conventionally invoked, *kawaii* is just as applicable to men too (Monden 2015; Koga 2009). When the six young male actors of the film *Tei'ichi no Kuni* (*Tei'ichi: Battle of Supreme High*, 2017), appeared in popular variety TV show *VS Arashi* (Fuji Television, April 17, 2017), one of them, Suda Masaki, called the cast "old and new *kawaii*." This not only refers humorously to the age difference among the cast members (with six years between Chiba Yūdai and Shison Jun) who all played high school boys, but also that Chiba, who is 28 years old, still perfectly embodies *kawaii* — perhaps more so than any of the other cast members.

When the concept of *kawaii* is applied to the body ideal, it can be divided into two main categories: one that is essentially *kawaii* — like a person with youthfully-

proportioned, fine facial features — and a second as a sign (in the formal semiotic sense) that is constructed via props such as hairstyles, clothes, and makeup. The 1980s popstar Matsuda Seiko (b. 1962), a paragon of girlish cuteness, is a good example of the latter. While her facial proportions were not particularly *kawaii* compared to some of her contemporaries, she performed and parodied the concept with dresses, hairstyles, the way that she spoke and behaved — especially in her early career. Most people regarded as *kawaii* mix both natural features and such signaling.

The *kawaii* male image as an object of the (romantic) objectifying gaze can be dated at least as far back as the mid-1950s, when illustrator Naito Rune (1932–2007), pupil of fashion designer, illustrator, and magazine editor Nakahara Jun'ichi, started drawing cute and fashionable boy characters with a small face, large eyes, and long limbs alongside his girl ones in teens' fashion magazine *Junia soreiyu* (*Junior Soleil*; Naito 2005: 75–79). It has been argued that as periods of peace continue, so increases men's consciousness of beauty — such as in Renaissance Europe, or Japan in the Edo period (1603–1868; Kuon 2011: 14–15). While this might sound simplistic, it is true that in 1956 the Economic White Paper officially declared that the postwar era had arrived in Japan, heralding the country's economic recovery. So Naito's introduction of *kawaii* boy images coincided with the beginning of "peacetime" in post–World War II Japan. Moreover coeducation in high schools was implemented in 1947, setting a framework for Naito's innovative depiction of candid boy characters in the context of girls' culture.

According to Naito, before his own attempts it was considered taboo to draw teen boy characters as the possible romantic interests of girls (both for characters and readers alike). Naito's illustrations of fashionable boys became popular not only with female readers but also male ones too (Naito 2005: 79). Soon after Naito, Mizuno Hideko wrote her *shōjo manga* (girls' comics) series *Hoshi no tategoto* (*Harp of the Stars*, 1960–63) — considered to be the first to introduce heterosexual romance to *shōjo manga* (Monden 2014: 279) — thus giving a greater significance to male characters. As popular media shifted from radio to television, the 1960s onward also saw cute, boyish stars in on-screen culture, including Mita Akira (b. 1947), Ōta Hiroyuki (b. 1947), Sawada Kenji (b. 1948), Gō Hiromi (b. 1955), Satō Yūsuke (b. 1959), and others. This led to the flourishing of cute male *aidoru* (idol) performers in the 1970s and 1980s. Rather than being described as *kawaii*, these boys were better known as *bishōnen* — a concept to which I will return later.

Kurumada Masami's *Ringu ni kakero* (*Put It All in the Ring*, 1977–1981) is said to have been the first *shōnen manga* (boys' comics) to win considerable popularity among female readers, setting a paradigm of *shōnen manga* that attracts female (and male) readership — with the inclusion of beautiful boy or male characters as one important factor herein (Shibata and Hirayama 2012). The late 1970s coincided with male critics' "discovery" of *shōjo manga*, and the rise of it as their popular object in

manga criticism (Takeuchi 2010: 83). This also brought attention to the presence of a male readership of *shōjo manga*, including college students — like the members of the Society for the Study of *Shōjo Manga* at Waseda University (est. 1981), which had a significant number of male members (Ito n.d.). In terms of graphic styles, Shintani Kaoru (b. 1951) and Takada Yūzō (b. 1963) in the late 1970s and early 1980s already articulated the possibility of incorporating *shōjo manga* graphic styles in *shōnen manga*, symbolizing the transition of *kawaii* male image to boys' culture — and thus to a mass audience.[3]

In contemporary Japan, male celebrities like Chiba (b. 1989) and Seto Kōji (b. 1988) arguably embody a mode of *kawaii* male beauty. These men are clearly cute, unthreatening, and almost delicate — with large eyes, smooth skin, an elfin facial shape, and a very slender physique. Seto, for example, appears in the photograph of himself sold by his agency in 2014 for St. Valentine's Day wearing a frilled shirt with a velvet bowtie, a plaid vest, and a jacket of burnt umber adorned with cookie-shaped brooches. In his left hand he is holding a teddy bear, and in his right he holds a heart-shaped lollypop, as if he is about to lick it. In addition, his loose, slightly permed hair with the bangs gently covering his eyebrows and his delicate, pink lips, enhance his childlike, *kawaii* image — despite him being 25 years old at the time the photograph was taken. Seto's photograph is a good example of *kawaii* as a mix of both natural features and signaling, as well as the applicability of the *kawaii* aesthetic to men — even those who have already passed the age of adolescent "boyhood."

This *kawaii* mode of male beauty appears less gender subversive than deliberately androgynous or "genderless" *kei* (modes), where young men appear and dress in conventionally feminine ways (e.g. Rich 2017; Freeman 2016). Although critics and the media tend to be drawn to extreme examples such as "genderless" *kei* that challenge the status quo in some way, they often ignore more normative styles. But examining these is vital to form an accurate picture of male identity and gender as it is more broadly imagined in contemporary Japanese culture.

What, then, is the significance of this mode of *kawaii* male beauty? Beauty is not merely a beautiful-looking person, but also a cultural standard that includes layers of symbolic meaning (Kura 1993: 26). Finding reasons for why a certain kind of male beauty is present in a society can show us ways to investigate that society within a broader context, including its own particular challenges (Imamichi 1973: 53). Some men in Japan prefer to be called *kakkoii*, or cool, rather than *kawaii.* Perhaps, as we have seen, that is because *kawaii* connotes something fragile and delicate, that does not completely fit with what we regard as ideal masculine attributes. Yet this boyish, unthreatening male beauty is favored by many

3 It should also be noted that a number of male *manga* artists, before making their fame in *shōnen manga*, wrote *shōjo manga*. This was notable as early as the 1950s.

heterosexual women in Japan, as attested to by the popularity of male celebrities like Chiba and Seto — and we should not, of course, underestimate the lengths to which young men will go to attract admirers.

Innocent and erotic: *Kawaii* males and the objectifying female gaze

Members of Japanese boy group Arashi are known for their boyish charm (Nagaike 2012: 104–5). Although we should note members of Arashi are now in their mid-thirties, their management, Johnny's and Associates, specialize in creating and managing male popstar groups and have a continuous turnover of new talent. These young men have been theorized about by authors like Kazumi Nagaike, an expert on studies of female desire and boys love (also BL, *yaoi*, *shōnen'ai* — a fictional genre that depicts homosexual relationships between beautiful men), as embodying a female fantasy of nonthreatening, idealized male figures that reflect "a subconscious female denial of the patriarchal, masculine male" (2012: 104). This is because they are biologically male, but their *kawaii* appearance alludes to the impression that they are yet to fully bloom into sexually mature manhood. In this reading, an apparent lack of mature, sexual masculinity in Arashi has been seen by their fans, the majority of them women, as desirable precisely because they are unthreatening and because they create the impression that they will not dominate women in the traditional mode of a patriarchal society.

Offering an alternative reading, Miller (2006: 151) has argued that this *kawaii* (slender and smooth-skinned, in Miller's terms) male aesthetic can also be highly appealing to a group of Japanese women as realistically, romantically, and perhaps also erotically attractive. Anthropologist Merry White, in her cross-cultural study of teenagers in Japan and the United States (1994 [1993]), has pointed out that in that East Asian culture an innocent appearance does not necessarily have to indicate sexual naïveté. Thus this apparent "lack" of sexuality among young men might still appear erotically charged to a certain group of individuals.

In reconciling these positions it is important to both recognize the different contexts of individual consumers and what they might find stimulating, as well as to also define eroticism versus sexuality. Eroticism is a concept that has various meanings depending on the culture and period in question. For the purposes of this examination we might broadly define it as relating to desire and the aesthetics of desire; a delayed or postponed promise of gratification, as opposed to the immediacy of sexualization. Eroticism, according to aesthete Roger Scruton, is within the realm of aesthetics. It is about gazing at and contemplating from a distance, which relies on suggestion and allusion but is never actually explicit (Scruton 2009: 159). An erotic imagination of male beauty, for example, is an aesthetic appreciation that requires the individualization of the human subject. Sexualization, on the other hand, jumps from

aesthetic appreciation to the outright desire to embrace the particular instance of male beauty, which explicitly reduces people into their sexualized bodies — taking away their individuality and making them into objects of sexual fantasy (Scruton 2009: 165).

The fact that this *kawaii* male image flourishes as an ideal in cultural products targeted primarily at women, whether in *shōjo manga* or *aidoru* boybands, reinforces Miller's aforementioned idea. Mark McLelland (2000: 277), a cultural historian specializing in Japanese culture, tells us that the stereotypical image of the ideal male in men's popular culture — whether the target audience is straight or gay men — had tended to emphasize "the muscularity of the male figures" at least until recent times. Such "hypermasculine" muscularity of the male body is in stark contrast to the elf-like, beautiful man type generally believed to be preferred by girls and women (Miller 2006: 151; McLelland 2000: 277). These competing modes of male beauty evident in contemporary Japanese popular culture — one muscular, as embodied by actors and athletes like Nakamura Joe (b.1974), Suzuki Ryōhei (b. 1983), and Gorōmaru Ayumu (b. 1986), who all appear in Japanese TV commercials at the time of writing, the other slender and boyish — signal a degree of flexibility in appreciating the male physique (Monden 2018: 429).[4] Many of the latter type of actors, including Chiba, Seto, Okada Masaki (b. 1989), and the members of Arashi, have also appeared in live-action versions of *shōjo manga* works, playing the typical beautiful/*kawaii* boy characters — and thereby further strengthening the affinity between the two.

The popularity of *kawaii* male beauty is also taken by some as a refusal by young men to embrace the traditional masculine values of the salaryman (Miller 2006; Bardsley 2011: 11–16; Ueno 2015: 118). In the collective consciousness, the middle-aged, middle-level corporate salaryman has traditionally aesthetically symbolized a rather unattractive, undesirable, authoritarian mode of mature masculinity in Japan (Bardsley 2011). Needless to say, in reality there are some stylish, nice-looking salarymen in Japan, and a niche of sexualized salaryman-fetish publications as well, but that is beyond our scope here. The adoption of a youthful-looking, stylish, nonthreatening masculinity by young men (and, significantly, its appreciation by a large number of women) is seen by some as a "delicate revolt" against the traditional patriarchal masculinity. In this sense, boyish beauty can be read as a form of resistance. Influential feminist scholar Ueno Chizuko (2015: 118) also sees the increase of male consciousness vis-à-vis their own physical beauty as related to their refusal to embrace mature masculinity, which has, as already mentioned, been strongly tied to the image of salarymen in post-WWII Japan. In more recent times

4 Suntory, a brewing and distilling company in Japan, created a series of TV commercials for its product "Protein Water" (2009), in which the comparison between muscular and slender male body types were comically and clearly made. I thank Laura Miller for bringing this advert to my attention.

the image of the salaryman seems to have become less relevant to young men's motivation for fashionableness, but their adoption of the youthful look also brings our attention to the concept of *shōnen*. *Shōjo* is the equivalent term for girls, but it often carries an additional layer of meaning too — signifying a constructed, ideal girlish identity.

Bishōnen as an aesthetically ideal boyish identity

The concept of "child" as a specific, different timescape than adult in Japan, was said to have first been articulated in the mid-Edo period (c. 1716 and after, Honda 1991: 21). The introduction of a middle class after the Meiji Restoration in 1868 created a prolongation of the time that such children remained in school, and this led to a moratorium period enabling the creation of *shōnen* and *shōjo* (Takahara 2003: 230). Established in 1888, the magazine *Shōnen en* (*Boys' Garden*) differentiated *shōnen* from *kodomo* (children), and gave the former an independent identity (Yamada 1991: 14). In July and then later in September 1895 too, issues of another magazine for boys *Shōnen sekai* (*Boys' World*) added *yōnen* (children) and *shōjo* sections — and that signaled the further differentiation of *shōnen* from children and from girls (Yamada 1991: 15). According to Honda Masuko (1980), a pioneer figure in childhood studies in Japan, the state of *shōjo* is a temporary one, a liminal state in-between that of child and adult. In this conceptual, suspended timescape, the girl is spared from being too mature and responsible, and is allowed to direct her main concerns toward her inner world. She calls this in-between space *hirahira*, due to its fluttering sounds and qualities of items like flowers, ribbons, and frills that visually define it — the equivalent of poetic, fragmentary language in text (Honda 1992 [1980]: 150).

In contrast to *shōjo*, the *shōnen* — adolescent boy — has traditionally been theorized as being bound to duties, responsibilities, future goals, and ambitions (Yagawa 2006 [1983]: 220; Takahara 1999: 8), thus being instructed to prioritize functionality over aesthetics. Moreover Honda (1991: 23) has argued that the idea of *shōjo* was originally conceptualized by denying all things masculine/*shōnen*-like; poetic, romantic, lyrical, and sentimental had come to characterize *shōjo*/girls' culture and the aesthetics associated with it meanwhile. In other words, *shōjo* and *shōnen* have conventionally been treated quite separately and, in contrast to *shōjo*, the state of *shōnen* has yet to receive adequate academic attention. However there does exist a kind of *shōnen* image that is very similar to *shōjo* too, one worthy of further scholarly investigation.

After the country's victories in the Russo-Japanese War and during World War I, the image of the "strong Japanese" became popular in the early twentieth century. The Japanese government, influenced by the army, consequently imposed a physically healthy, robust, and active image of boys as the ideal one (Matsunami

2002). Honda's idea of *shōnen* alludes to this type of boy (the antithesis of her dreamy, romanticized, and highly aesthetic *shōjo*). However there is another view of *shōnen* as, like *shōjo*, an ideal boyish identity that is differentiated from that of the "typical" young male. This is the *bishōnen*, or beautiful boy.

Artists and writers such as novelists Origuchi Nobuo (1887–1953), Edogawa Ranpo (1894–1965), and Yokomizo Seishi (1902–1981) became interested in this newly articulated liminal space, and they used not only the image of *shōjo* but also the fragile beauty of *shōnen* as an antithesis to the imposed notion of the strong Japanese (Takahara 2003: 230). In terms of visuality, as we have seen earlier, the mid-1950s saw the birth of pop, stylish, and cute boy images with Naito's illustrations. In contrast, *jōjō ga* (the lyrical illustrations) works of painter and illustrator Takabatake Kashō (1988–1966) in pre-WWII Japan are known for their depiction of the *bishōnen* with an androgynous, melancholic, and erotic beauty (Hartley 2015; Nakamura 2003: 6–31). This imagining of *shōnen* is as an ephemeral being, impractical and nonproductive, and both cultural consciousness and financial stability are necessary precursors to the appreciation of his beauty (Naruse 1982: 91). This cultural ideal of boyish identity, though less recognized than the stereotypical strong, simple-minded and active kind, survived after WWII and has become amalgamated with the concept of *bishōnen*.

Swedish teenager Björn Andrésen's portrayal of Thaddeus/Tadzio in Luchino Visconti's film adaptation of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1971), along with Visconti's other films as well as iconic figures like British music star David Bowie (1947–2016) and kabuki actor Bandō Tamasaburō (b. 1950), had a strong influence on the characterization of *bishōnen* in 1970s *shōjo manga* (e.g. Oshima 2008 [1975]: 100).[5] While the term *bishōnen* has been used extensively in its literal sense — that is, any beautiful young man — in studies of the aesthetic imagination of *shōnen* the term is much more than just a genre label; it denotes a critical concept and an imagined figure of the boy. Like the cultural concept of *shōjo, bishōnen* has come to mean something more specific than just a physically beautiful young man in Japanese culture.

Melancholic ennui and decadence: *Bishōnen* qualities

Bishōnen as a label to describe this specific boyish image is a separate identity from the mainstream "boy" — the archetypical, robust *shōnen* portrayed in manga

5 After the release of Visconti's *Death in Venice* in Japan in 1971, both literary and film magazines frequently discussed the theme of *shōnen* (*Gendai shi techō*, 1982 May issue; *Eiga hyōron*, 1971). Ishida Minori (2008: 141), in her study of the BL subgenre, also points out the notable popularity of Visconti films among *shōjo manga* artists in the 1970s. Even in the 1980s, popular girls' fashion magazine *Olive* (Yamakita 1983: 59–61) referred to Andrésen, along with Bowie, Tamasaburō, and 18-year-old actor Honda Yasuaki, in its feature story on *bishōnen*. *Olive* listed androgynous, decadent, and erotic beauty as defining qualities of *bishōnen* too.

magazines such as *Shōnen Janpu* (*Weekly Jump*). *Bishōnen* is associated with eroticism (Yamada 1991: 14).[6] Writer and literary critic Takahara Eiri, in his study of representations of melancholic *shōnen* in Japanese literature, argues that boys are characterized by their display of agency — which marks their commonality with mature men. For them, objectification is nothing but negative — signaling weakness, unwillingness, and a lack of agency. Indeed, tall, pale, slender, and handsome men were depicted in this period, as exemplified by the works of artists like Japanese-style painter Mizuno Toshikata (1866–1908), but they were often soldiers in combat and thus their agency and robustness distinguished them from the melancholy *bishōnen*.[7] On the other hand, *bishōnen* in Meiji (1868–1912)/Taishō (1912–1926) culture is an object of admiration and characterized by their precise lack of agency — which makes them pure and ethereal, often complete with their own lack of desire (Takahara 2003: 17).[8]

Indeed, many authors have perceived *bishōnen* as an object of the gaze, often seen as evoking a sense of androgyny. Writer Inagaki Taruho (1973[1986]: 39), famous for his *Shōnen'ai no bigaku* (*The Aesthetics of the Love for Adolescent Boys*, 1968), argues that fundamental human beauty lies in the *shōnen*, but due to its ephemerality it will soon be consumed by beautiful women instead. While this kind of ephemeral beauty is a feature of both the *shōnen* and *shōjo,* when associated with the former it is seen as rarer because physically boys undergo more dramatic and visible changes in secondary sexual characteristics when maturing than girls do — like their voice breaking and the growing of facial hair (Sunaga 2002: 9). *Bishōnen*, then, is an opaque category — a transitional body between a boy and a man (Matsuura 1985: 160).

Rather than depicting boys as simply cheeky, active, naughty, and mischievous, the cultural image of *bishōnen* is associated with an expressionlessness, indifferent, melancholic, almost decadent beauty (Matsuura 1985: 164) — often marked by death. The expressionlessness of *bishōnen* signals subtlety, an empty vessel that

6 Hereafter I use the term *bishōnen* to refer to this specific type of melancholic and beautified boyish identity, and "boy" to mean both a stereotypical image of boys and also young men as an antithesis of Honda's *shōjo*, as well as any adolescent male in general. It needs to be noted that the term *shōnen*, not *bishōnen*, has been used in many of the studies of this kind of melancholic, aesthetic imagination of boys in Japan (e.g. Yasō 1985 Vol. 15; Sunaga 1989; Takahara 2003). Hashimoto (1982: 102) indeed states that by *shōnen* these studies about *shōnen-ai* (love between boys) specifically mean *bishōnen*/beautiful *shōnen*. This article nonetheless uses the term *bishōnen* in order to avoid any confusion.

7 I thank Laura Miller for sharing her analysis of the beautiful male soldiers in Meiji woodblock prints (e.g. the exhibition at the Saint Louis Art Museum, 2016–17).

8 In contemporary *shōnen manga*, there is a tradition whereby the principal boy character is depicted as a candid, simple-minded, and somehow immature boy, and his main rival, while not entirely passive or delicate, is a more beautiful, mysterious, and less excitable one. This tradition can be seen as a modern take on a typical boy–*shōnen* association. See, for example, Tatara and Kiyoharu in Takeuchi Tomo's shōnen *manga* Bōrurūmu e yōkoso (*Welcome to the Ballroom*, 2011–present).

receives the objective gaze and desire of those who view it. The beauty of *bishōnen* is a privilege only given to those with a tragic fate, writes Inagaki (2017 [1968]: 152; Hagiwara 1971: 33). Manga artist Hagio Moto (2014: 176), one of the leading exponents of *bishōnen* characters in the *shōjo manga* of the 1970s, also asserts that trauma or agony is a crucial component of her idea of *bishōnen*. This notion of him as the object of the admiring gaze, according to Sunaga Asahiko (1989: 213), author of several books on *shōnen*, positions the *bishōnen* as passive yet still occupying a position of authority. The poet, critic, and translator Yagawa Sumiko (1981 [1978]: 134), also an advocator of *shōjo* culture, interprets the imprisoned maiden in fairytales — who she sees as a typical *shōjo* — as not necessarily powerless. According to her, the *shōjo* has to be chosen from among many other girls to be imprisoned and become the object of the gaze; in so doing, she monopolizes people's attention. Yagawa's reading of *shōjo* fits well with Sunaga's view of *bishōnen*. The *bishōnen's* nonproductivity as a member of society equates to Honda's idea of *shōjo*. Honda (2010) herself, moreover, would later argue that popular culture of twenty-first century Japan has seen an increased likeness of *shōnen* and *shōjo*, with *shōnen* culture, like manga, embracing *shōjo* characteristics and vice versa — a trend that, as we have seen, was already visible by the late 1970s. A convergence between the socially constructed concepts of *shōjo* and (*bi*)*shōnen* is thus suggested.

Similarly, poet Shiraishi Kōko writes that "for my image of [*bi*]*shōnen*, he should not have his self-hood" (1982: 99). He has to be subtle, and passive, like a doll. The analogy with a doll again evokes the *bishōnen's* comparison with *shōjo* (see, for example, Kotani 2007; Shibusawa 1985). What Shiraishi (1982: 99) sees as the charm of *bishōnen* is his unconscious "menace" — the *bishōnen*, while being passive and fragile, unconsciously and cruelly betrays the care of his protector/giver, perhaps like Tadzio being seductive yet unattainable to Aschenbach in *Death in Venice*. This brings in a subtle sense of decadence and immorality (Yamada 1991: 14). From these characteristics, it can be deduced that an air of melancholic ennui, decadence, and delicate indifference often transform a *kawaii* young male into a *bishōnen*. The delicate and nuanced subtlety of *bishōnen* is, then, what attracts us (Matsuura 1985: 164).

Beautiful *shōnen* has most frequently been discussed in relation to homosexuality. This is partly because the *bishōnen* has been presented to be quite feminine in a conventional sense, and also due to the typical denial of sexuality and the gaze of women up until the 1970s. Even in the context of the BL genre, where the majority of readers are female, those who desire the *bishōnen* are male characters.[9] While such works are important, this point also brings up the question of whether a desire

9 For the analysis of *(bi)shōnen* in homosexual contexts see Jeffrey Angles, *Writing the Love of Boys: Origins of Bishōnen Culture in Modernist Japanese Literature* (2011), and Mark McLelland et al. (eds.), *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan* (2015).

for beauty necessarily has to be synonymous with sexual desire. For example, Marwick (2004: 1) states that beauty is precisely what arouses sexual desire by our looking at it. Likewise male beauty, as a variant with emphatically masculine attributes, is frequently seen as synonymous with male sexual appeal (Katsura 1963: 145). The *bishōnen*, however, allows us to see beauty in a more complex way. This is because Japanese culture has perceived *bishōnen* as not only an object of sexual desire, but also of pure aesthetic appreciation (Takahara 2003: 15). This means that the appraisal of the *shōnen's* beauty might indeed be separated out from pure sexual desire.

Sunaga (1989: 214) points out that a beautiful boy is, whether with accompanying sexual feelings or not, very attractive. Here it is useful to turn to the actual portrayal of *bishōnen* in Japanese culture to examine this point. An example to be used here is TV comedy drama series *Kaiki Ren'ai Sakusen* (Operation: Romance and Mystery 2015). This series was created by TV Tokyo Corporation, a major TV station with a reputation for broadcasting quite autonomous and individualistic programs, for the timeslot that allows creative exploration. The drama series is full of parodies and intertextual references. In an interview, the director Keralino Sandorovich (Terebi Dogatch 2015) said that the show carries no obvious sexual undertones — in order to create an atmosphere comparable to pure and gentle, classic *shōjo manga*. While a simplistic assumption of a direct, linear connection between popular cultural texts and the society wherein they are produced should be avoided, fictional texts such as TV dramas draw on preexisting ways of thinking about culture and social values, such as gender (Mackie 2014: 442). They also are (at least partially) reflective of real life in the society in which their audience lives — and thus are part of the society or culture that first produced them (Humm et al. 1986: 5; Crane 1992: 106).

We can, therefore, explore these dynamics through weaving "together the text, the genre, and the specific history of the period" (Humm et al. 1986: 3; Mackie 2014: 443). Moreover, through their media appearances such as in TV commercials, celebrities and actors in Japan often attempt to create an affinity between their public image and the receiving audience (Karlin 2014: 79). Media representations of the masculinity embodied by these men can, then, both reflect and shape certain ideals and ideas of the male image, ones that are consumed by individuals — including men — in Japan.

A Portrait of *bishōnen*: a vampire boy Ikurō

Operation: Romance and Mystery was a TV comedy drama series broadcast from January to March2015, with highly popular actress Aso Kumiko (b. 1978) as the lead. The story, presented in twelve 30-minute episodes with six themes, follows three women on the verge of middle age, Natsumi (Aso), Akiko (Sakai Maki), and Fuyu (Ogawa Tamaki), and depicts them as having no prospects of a career or

marriage. Along with Natsumi's childhood friend Noboru (played by Nakamura Tōru), a detective, in each episode the women are involved in paranormal incidents which they overcome through their friendship and teamwork. The two-part episodes five and six, *Yamiyo no shōnen* (*The Shōnen of the Moonless Night*), are about a schoolboy who becomes romantically involved with Akiko while she works as a high school music teacher. The boy, Ikurō, played by fashion model and actor 17-year-old Matsui Kenta, is a vampire who possesses eternal life. Since this is a comedy full of parodies and nonsense, my intention here is not to analyze the full content of this episode. Rather, I want to explore the play on stereotypes and hyperbolic images, including the idea of the *bishōnen*. Ikurō is an epitome of the *bishōnen* as a cultural boyish ideal; a lithe, fair-complexioned schoolboy who melancholically plays the piano.

As a vampire, he is an eternal *shōnen*. While originally an idea imported from European culture, the image of the vampire has been prominent in Japanese popular culture for some time now (Kan 2010: 54). The vampire image is said to have been born with John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819), which transformed the previously raw, filthy undead in European folklore into a seductively aristocratic, Byron-esque style class (Morrison and Baldick 1997: xii). Similarly the image of vampire has also been highly aesthetically (re)imagined in Japanese culture, especially in *shōjo manga* — and *The Shōnen of the Moonless Night* without doubt reflects this tradition, bringing it to a mass television audience.

This romantic and aesthetic reimagining of the vampire fits perfectly with the image of *bishōnen*. While he has a superhuman physical strength, which he demonstrates when protecting Akiko from her sexually perverted colleague Abiko, Ikurō is somehow reluctant to prey on humans himself, and is instead fed by Mina, his human companion who acts as his mother. In one of the scenes, jealous Mina tells Akiko that Ikurō is weak and is unable to survive by himself, and later Akiko tells Ikurō that she will protect him. This passivity, combined with his destiny to be a nonhuman who only feeds upon live human blood and possesses eternal life, shows that Ikurō is a *bishōnen* whose beauty is a sign of privilege only afforded to those with a tragic fate. The beauty of *bishōnen*, as exemplified by Ikurō, is like the *shōjo* often associated with death (Aoyama 2015: 60). This is because *bishōnen's* corporeal beauty is ephemeral and delicate, and is therefore suggestive of mortality (Hagiwara 1971: 33). Ikurō represents a transitional body between a boy and a man (Matsuura 1985: 160), but as a vampire he stays in this liminal realm for eternity. His mental maturity, as a *shōnen* alive for hundreds of years, also evokes the melancholy of the inevitable loss of human companions and sets him apart from conventional image of boys with candid immaturity, ignorant innocence, and inherent simplicity.

The beauty of Ikurō is further enhanced by his unconscious "menace." As referenced earlier, Shiraishi (1982: 99) writes that *bishōnen* can unconsciously and cruelly betray the care of their protector/giver — creating a subtle sense of decadence,

immorality, and unattainability (Yamada 1991: 14). Ikurō betrays his carer Mina, who has devoted almost her entire life to looking after him, and falls in love with Akiko. Oginome Keiko, the actor who plays Mina, has a reputation in the media that is both voluptuous and scandalous, unlike Sakai Maki (b. 1970) whose public image is wholesome, cute, and clean. Casting of 50-year-old Oginome in this role, and her scenes with Matsui, therefore adds a sense of decadence and eroticism to Matsui's boyish beauty, even though he almost never engages in scenes with sexual undertones or is ever seen in a sexualized way — never revealing his body, for example. Eroticism in human beauty, as we have seen, is based rather on suggestion and allusion (Scruton 2009: 159).

The idea of Ikurō as a paragon of *bishōnen* is incomplete without Matsui providing a corporeal depiction of his beauty. As previously mentioned a body — and especially the facial features — is where human beauty resides, attracting our gaze and evoking a sense of beauty in those who peer at it (Scruton 2009: 49; Ribeiro 2011: 2). At the time a popular male fashion model for a teen girls' fashion magazine and once a member of a boys' *aidoru* group too, Matsui is an ideal *bishōnen* image. A tall (178 centimeters) and lithe figure, he has an elfin face with large almond-shaped eyes, a pale complexion (perhaps emphasized due to his role as a night crawler who will perish in sunlight), and a softly spoken voice. His pouting lips and plump cheeks make him appear both childlike and almost girlish, and thus is symbolic of *kawaii* male beauty. One of the important points that Honda (1992: 182) makes in relation to the *shōjo* identity is that while fashion with embellishments such as ribbons signals girlishness it also simultaneously draws attention away from the body of the one who wears it, by concealing their shape — and so avoids sexualization.

Similarly the mode of *shōnen* masculinity in Japan, with its display of boyish charm, allows Japanese men a simultaneous denial of maturity and emphasis of boyish masculinity (Seki 1996: 92–3). With the case of Ikurō/Matsui, such corporeal qualities as his already-deepened voice and tall frame signal his manhood, yet his clean and smooth, *kawaii* face, plus his soft, long, swoopy bangs and slender body — which is always covered in a beige blazer school uniform, the formal regalia of adolescent boys and symbolic of liminal masculinity — are far from "manly" muscularity in the conventional sense. His "sexual" body plays down "manhood" then, emphasizing boyishness in its place.

Matsui/Ikurō's *bishōnen* qualities are strikingly contrasted with those of other male figures in the drama. The 49-year-old Nakamura Tōru, who plays Detective Noboru, is highly attractive but his wrinkles, low voice, and strong, masculine jaw, as well as his business suit, display his mature masculinity. The 49-year-old Morita Ganz, who plays the role of the pervert teacher Abiko, is meanwhile a caricature of the dowdy and unpleasant image of the middle-aged Japanese man, with a typical side-parting hairstyle (see, for example, Dasgupta 2013: 34, 93; Barsdley 2011: 117).

Against these established mature male images, Matsui/Ikurō appears a clean-cut, innocent, and youthful *kawaii*. His melancholic expression, which is hyperbolically endorsed by his association with classical music, a form of high culture, at the same time alludes to indifference, expressionless, and delicacy.

Ikurō in *Operation: Romance and Mystery* is by no means the only example of this *bishōnen* image in contemporary Japanese mass culture. For instance, acclaimed film director Iwai Shunji's 2014 adaptation of Mayumura Taku's young adult novel *Nazo no tenkōsei* (*Mysterious Transfer Student*, 1967) was broadcast by the same TV station in the same timeslot one year previously, and has a very similar ambience to *The Shōnen of the Moonless Night*. One of the principle characters of this science fiction mystery, set in a contemporary high school in Japan, is Norio, played by 23-year-old popular actor Hongō Kanata. Norio signals the same kind of *bishōnen* beauty as Ikurō; a slender, delicate *kawaii* face and a highly boyish male look marked by apparent innocence, expressionlessness (we later find out that Norio is actually an android from another planet), and also tragedy — that as a result of nuclear war on his home planet. Both via the soundtrack and narrative context, Norio is also recurrently associated with a piano piece of Frédéric Chopin — precisely the Prelude Op. 28, No. 15, the "Raindrop" prelude — and thus just like Ikurō his melancholic nature is highlighted.

His *bishōnen* beauty is contrasted, though not as dramatically as between Ikurō and other male characters in *Operation: Romance and Mystery*, with the taller, more wholesome, and more stereotypically ordinary schoolboy Kōichi, played by boyish actor Nakamura Aoi (b. 1991). Kōichi/Nakamura, however, is physically closer to the idea of *bishōnen*, in contrast to his horny and mischievous friend Kenjirō, played by Miyazato Shun (b. 1992). Miyazato's symbolic shaved-head, a typical sign of an old-fashioned, wholesome, active yet unfashionable mode of Japanese boyhood, visually enhances the long, swoopy hair of Hongō and Nakamura, and their rather melancholic, beautiful boyish qualities. The *bishōnen* beauty and looks of Hongō and Nakamura thus mark their roles as different from the rest of the male characters in the drama, indicating their positions as boy protagonists. It is thus obvious that Iwai's version of *Mysterious Transfer Student* treats the idea of the *bishōnen* as both significant and more appealing than the typical image of boys.

While, as already mentioned, a sense of eroticism is alluded to by Ikurō's portrayal in *Operation: Romance and Mystery* as a vampire who sucks blood, with this reinforced by his relationship with Mina and by he himself being a romantic object of both her and Akiko, Ikurō himself is not explicitly sexualized. Similarly in *Mysterious Transfer Student*, Hongō's characterization of Norio — who attracts the heroine Midori (played by Sakurai Minami), whose romantic affection is never requited in the drama — offers an impersonal, objectified, yet not overtly sexualized portrayal of boyish beauty. This indicates that the beauty of *bishōnen* can be (but is not necessarily always) detached from sexuality and sexual desire. This creates a

unique balance between a certain kind of male beauty and the male in question being in the passive position of being objectified yet not sexualized, demonstrating the potential for *bishōnen* beauty to be an object of appreciation on purely an aesthetic level.

While Matsui was 17 years old when he portrayed Ikurō, Hongō and Nakamura were both well into their twenties when they appeared as the beautiful boys. Likewise, as previously mentioned, actors like Chiba, Seto, and Okada, as well as members of boys' *aidoru* group Arashi, are now in their late twenties or even their mid-thirties. These beautiful, boyish demeanors are, indeed, embodied not only by adolescent boys but also by young men in the realm between adolescence and what some societies see as manhood. How do we make sense of their slender, boyish masculine beauty that in fact extends well past adolescence? The increasing prolongation of the stages of youth in contemporary Japan, a phenomenon that has been given momentum with recent decades being marked by precarity and uncertainty, is key to understanding this.

Fountains of youth: The prolongation of adolescence in Japan

Like childhood, adolescence is a social construction — and therefore its age demographic has shifted according to specific time and place (Arnett 2000; Cunningham 2006). Late teens through the twenties (e.g. 18–29) can be considered today as one demographic category of "emerging adulthood" (Arnett 2000), making this issue even more pertinent. Indeed,

> one unmistakable cultural change in the past half century is that the transition to adulthood has become longer, and in developed countries happens later in life than previously, as measured by the timing of traditional markers such as the entry to stable work, marriage, and parenthood. (Arnett et al. 2014: 568)

This is equally so in Japan, where it is clear that identities of students (*gakusei*) differ from those of full-time workers (*shakaijin*) — and becoming the latter marks a graduation from a specific kind of youth identity. However there is also some suggestion that this period of youth is expanding, in keeping with the global trend where the "transition to adulthood has become prolonged and more uneven and uncertain" (Hollands 2002: 159). In 2012 approximately 63.3 percent of Japanese youth aged between 15 and 24 were students (Intelligence 2015: 5). The same survey indicated that 18 percent were full-time workers and 6.3 percent part-time ones. Eighty percent of Japanese youth attend higher education (of which 56.7 percent are university or junior college students; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology 2016: 1), while 55.7 percent of university students are believed to live at home (Benesse Educational Research and Development Center 2012: 57). Some 64.4 percent believe that their family will offer financial support if

necessary, rather than turning to casual employment (Benesse Educational Research and Development Center 2012: 135). In this sense, like teenagers, tertiary students in contemporary Japan "are right in the middle of emerging adulthood, in which they have freedom in social roles and opportunities to explore a wide range of life options" (Sugimoto et al. 2015: 6).

This trend of prolonged youth in contemporary Japan is associated with changing employment structures and economic uncertainty. This is contributed to by such factors as the collapse of older employment systems like "lifetime employment," which first gained momentum in the recession years of the mid-1990s (Mackie 2015: 152). This uncertainty has affected young people's attitudes to marriage and starting a family, making older modes of femininity and masculinity inadequate for many young women and especially men (e.g. Cook 2013; Dales 2015). Indeed the average age at which one first marries, often one of the indicators of change in the demographic patterns of the transition to adulthood, had reached 31.1 for men and 29.4 for women in 2015, having risen from 27.8 and 25.2 respectively in 1980 (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan 2017: 12). This can be seen in the context of broader social changes, which include *freeters* (people who lack full-time employment), and "NEETs" (young people "Not in Education, Employment, or Training"). According to a survey conducted by the Cabinet Office, Government of Japan (2014), approximately 9 percent of Japanese youth aged 15 to 35 are now either NEETs or *freeters*. While these numbers are significant, these "unfixed" social positions may also be symbolic of a social mechanism by which some counter contemporary precarity, wherewith it has become difficult to plan their future and therefore they are required to remain flexible and less attached (Blatterer 2010: 13; Muraoka 2003: 124).

While this view might sound a little too utopian given the often grim realities faced by young people with job insecurity in Japan (*Mainichi shinbun* 2015), many of the country's youths, not to mention males, seek alternative modes of identity through an emerging form of cultural awareness that is based on affection, tenderness, and an emotive self — which the West often codes as feminine (Grājdian 2015: 120). As previously mentioned, conventionally *shōnen* was theorized to be both bound by and to aspire to the goal of rising in the world (*risshin shusse*) (Yagawa 2006 [1983]: 220; Takahara 1999: 8), from which the *shōjo* was spared. The latter's exclusion from these worldly concerns, it is believed, contributed to the enrichment and augmentation of beauty and sentimentality in girls' culture (Honda 1991: 23). Increased insecurity and change in the social systems of contemporary Japan have affected especially, but not exclusively, young men and their career paths and future goals (Cook 2013). This uncertainty arguably makes it more and more difficult for young men to be defined by such conventionally masculine characteristics as the maturity of the salaryman in contemporary Japan. Instead it renders young men as correspondents to the romantic concept of *shōjo*, detached from the masculine world

of the rational, practical, and logical — celebrating now, rather, delicate senses of liberty, agency, and, consequently, resistance (Honda 1990).

In this sense *kawaii* aesthetics — which can transport us, however momentarily, to a dreamlike, optimistic world of a mythical past or future (Stevens 2014) — might be all the more relevant as a mode of masculinity for men in contemporary Japan, and indeed to the future of Japanese society. It is tempting to speculate that increasing emphasis on the *kawaii*/*bishōnen* look in Japan mirrors changes in a society that has traditionally valued maturity and stability. The slender, boyish masculine aesthetic that characterizes the *shōnen*-scape is attractive to heterosexual women, and this may reflect a change in their attitudes and aspirations as well. The increasing similarities between the *shōjo*- and *shōnen*-scape (Honda 2010), and particularly the prolongation of both spaces into the twenties and thirties for some, seems to indicate a desire for retreat to a safer, liminal space protected from the precarity of modern times. While in a sense this is nostalgia, it is perhaps a personal — rather than a societal — one. *Bishōnen* figures like Ikurō and Norio represent a boyish individual who is, however temporarily, allowed to be in a sphere that is free from the business-oriented world of masculinity and the mainstream pedestrian activity associated with it. Instead their identities are primarily defined through their physical beauty, and the pleasure that it gives to those around them — and implicitly to the watching audience.

While these fictional characters, and the celebrities who embody them, do not represent the "average," as we have seen we tend to compare our own individually constructed image to the socially constructed body ideal. And these celebrities and their images distributed through the media both reflect and shape certain ideas and ideals of gender which are consumed by men. The body is both the personal and social symbol of our identity, as well as the means whereby that identity is constituted. For the *bishōnen*, his body, his beauty, operates as a major point of cultural reference — and of his selfhood. Perhaps this is more real, solid, and appropriate in times of precarity, with men increasingly defining themselves through their bodies.

Conclusion

Shortly after *Operation: Romance and Mystery*, Matsui retired from acting — thus leaving his public image, just like the vampire boy that he personated, eternally as *bishōnen*. Male beauty is a contested subject in modern Western culture, where the word "beauty" has historically not commonly been used to describe the male appearance (Gilmore 1994: 192; Greer 2003: 7). In that context it comes rather with ambivalence, and often stirs controversy. This becomes even more problematic when male beauty alludes to an adolescent physical quality.

In contrast, the appreciation of aesthetic male beauty has been common in Japanese culture. The history of the adolescent-like, ectomorphic beauty of *bishōnen* might be traced back to ancient and even mythical Japan (e.g. Sunaga 2002), but the concept of beauty itself, as an abstract idea, "changes over time" (Miller 2006: 40). This has been beyond the scope of this article, which focused only contemporary examples. A boyish, *kawaii* male aesthetic is an increasingly popular male look in contemporary Japan, one favored by many girls and women, and is gradually infiltrating boys' and men's cultures, not to mention manga and cinema as well as the beauty pageant for male university students. When combined with the ambience of melancholic ennui and decadence, the *kawaii* male look forms the genus of *bishōnen*. Often a sense of eroticism and objectification accompanies this, but without overt sexualization. This possible diminuendo of sexual desire attached to the portrayal of *bishōnen* points to the potential of such beauty to be appreciated purely on an aesthetic level, and calls into question the widely assumed equation of human beauty with sexual desire. The potential of *bishōnen* is a gratification deferred, and the appreciation of the aesthetic is attractive in a delicately subversive way in a traditionally patriarchal society — alluding to the popular refusal to conform to conventional gender roles.

As we have seen, the similarities between the *shōjo*- and *shōnen*-scape seem to indicate a desire for a retreat to a safer, liminal space protected from the precarity of modern times. The ability of the *shōnen* to be read in Japanese culture without necessarily being sexualized allows the aesthetics of *kawaii* and *bishōnen* to be appreciated without the moral panic of pedophilia that would accompany it in many modern Euro-American cultures. While there may be some similarities with the appreciation of youthful male beauty in such cultures, Japan gives, unlike the West, principality to the image and aesthetic of adolescent boys and young men who retain the charms of such a male beauty.

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