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By Way of a Preface: Defining *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense*

Beginning in the earliest years of the 1930s, the Japanese mass media told the imperial subjects who were its audience that this was a time of "erotic grotesque nonsense." The words became the shorthand *ero guro nansensu* in a successful attempt, it would appear, to match what was considered the up-beat tempo of the era. While the intensification of pace in such new public places as cafés and the boulevards of the so-called Modern Girls may have been one breathless

response to the calls for speed-up by Japanese industry, it was at the same time expressive of more liberatory energies. But just as the call to arms took hold during the decade preceding Pearl Harbor, the three part phrase was quickly and has forever since been taken for granted. The phrasing *ero guro nansensu* has been the means to make sense of a culture represented as decadent—a culture ostensibly eager to celebrate the degradation wrought by sensual pleasures while ignoring the pleas of party politics and the unharnessed militancy in the streets.

I agree that yes, the early 1930's – as well as the years immediately preceding the invasion of Manchuria in 1931, up through the years following the attack on Pearl Harbor -- were a time of erotic, grotesque nonsense, and not only because the print and visual media in Japan chose to repeat those terms. This was true, not because these were erotic (meaning pornographic, without here debating the nuances of that term), grotesque (viewed as malformed or unnaturally unseemly), or even nonsensically silly (and thus meaningless) years. I have my own definitions for the erotic, grotesque, and the nonsensical following from my reading of the language of the Japanese mass media of what I call “Japan’s Modern Years.” In the segments that follow, *erotic* connotes an energized, colorful vitality. *Grotesquerie* is culture resulting from such deprivation as that endured by the homeless and by beggars. Finally, *nonsense* makes a great deal of sense, as the filmmaker Itami Mansaku pointed out for us. The boisterousness of popular vaudeville can, and in modern Japan did, challenge relationships of domination of one class, culture, or nation-state by another.

In sum, in Japan from the 1920s into the 1940s, *ero guro nonsense* was expressive of the vitality of the culture of the time. This was a culture which in no small part included fantasies, language, and gestures sold and created by “consumer subjects,” including those rendered down and out by the vicissitudes of capitalism. It is my hope that my montage will show that so-called “nonsense” was no aside, but rather was in fact expressive of a politics that was quite cognizant of the power play involved in the attempts of cultures to colonize.

What follows is one version of a history that continues to be told at the same time it is

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lost to us, while still, and even more so, the noise of the drum roll surrounds all of us.

Los Angeles

September 11, 2005