



William Johnson

## A New View of Porn

# The Films of Tatsumi Kumashiro

Above: *Love Letter*

Right: *The Woman with Red Hair*



**P**ornographic film is a genre that exists in critical twilight. Western genre studies usually exclude it.<sup>1</sup> Other theoretical or critical approaches are often overshadowed by a need to conform to feminist criticism of filmed sexual acts as the degradation of women for the pleasure of male viewers.<sup>2</sup> The difficulty of discussing pornography is compounded by the fact that the term itself is pejorative, often paired with evil, violence, greed, and other unsavory acts or desires. Not surprisingly, pornography in film, or in general, is almost impossible to define objectively.<sup>3</sup>

The status of film pornography is further confused when “serious” filmmakers use pornographic elements, as for example Nagisa Oshima (*In the Realm of the Senses*), Catherine Breillat (*Romance*), Claire Denis (*Trouble Every Day*), and Patrice Chéreau (*Intimacy*).<sup>4</sup> Critics almost always treat such films not as representing the pornographic genre but as aberrations, exceptions or justified variations on the auteurs’ usual approaches.<sup>5</sup> I hope to throw a different light on the pornographic film by focusing on the reverse situation—an indisputable maker of screen porn whose films

also deserve “serious” interest: the Japanese director Tatsumi Kumashiro (1927-1995).

Japan has never had a dominant religion that viewed the pleasure of sex as immoral, and although Japanese society may be termed sexist by Western standards, it has generally assumed that women may enjoy sex as much as men.<sup>6</sup> The depiction of sex on Japan’s commercial screens since World War II may seem superficially to have followed a similar pattern to that of the United States, with mainstream films shown in regular theaters and soft-core porn (that is, excluding scenes with genitals or actual sex) shown in specialized theaters, until the development of hard-

core video in the late 1980s drove the latter out of business. In Japan, however, the border between mainstream and porn was much more porous. Many Japanese filmmakers who began in porn moved into the mainstream, while some mainstream directors made films with soft-porn-like content, such as Kon Ichikawa with *Kagi* (*The Key* [*Odd Obsession*], 1959), and Shohei Imamura with *The Pornographers* (1966).<sup>7</sup>

The typical Japanese soft-porn films of the 1960s and 1970s, known as *pinku eiga* (“pink films”), were quickies made on minimal budgets with minimal (and usually inexperienced) crews. They were often filmed in a single location, with little use of color even after color became the standard, and rarely ran longer than one hour. Meanwhile, Kumashiro was gaining film experience of a different kind. He had joined the Nikkatsu Studio in 1955 and became one of the last Japanese filmmakers to go through a traditional mainstream apprenticeship, working as an assistant director and also writing screenplays. When he finally got a chance to direct, in 1968, his film failed at the box office, and he reverted to assistant.

By 1971, attendance at Japanese movie theaters had fallen so low that Nikkatsu was close to bankruptcy. The studio heads therefore decided that from now on they would produce nothing but soft-core porn (and also some films for children). Their porn would, however, be of higher quality than pink films: it would have much bigger budgets (though still small by mainstream standards), experienced crews (including not



*Following Desire*

only Kumashiro but also his frequent cinematographer Shinsaku Himeda, who worked regularly with Imamura), ten-day shooting schedules, running times of 70 to 80 minutes, and widescreen color. The only porn requirement was a sex scene every ten minutes; otherwise filmmakers were free to make whatever kind of films they liked. To distinguish these films from the pink kind, Nikkatsu dubbed them *roman poruno*—romantic porn.<sup>8</sup>

Some directors quit Nikkatsu rather than become involved in porn, and Kumashiro was promoted again. Already 44, he seized the opportunity to extend the range of soft porn to issues, situations, and approaches that appealed to him. His second *roman poruno*, *Following Desire* (*Ichijo Sayuri: nureta yokujo* [1972]) was a tremendous box-office success, and in the next two years Kumashiro completed ten films, acquiring a reputation as the “king” of *roman poruno*. Other companies invited him to direct films for them, and although these had no porn label they fitted into the varied range of *roman poruno* that he continued making for Nikkatsu.<sup>9</sup>

One reason for the fit is that in Kumashiro’s porn and non-porn films alike, he focused on sex and the sexuality of women as a crucial element of human life. In his non-porn films he did this with visual discretion. In his porn films, though they are visually less revealing than many R-rated films today, he could make his sex scenes appear close to hard core. At the same time, he integrated the obligatory sex scenes into an almost



*Bitterness of Youth*

unlimited range of other elements—dramatic, comic, satirical, social, political. In short, Kumashiro saw porn as imposing fewer constraints on theme and narrative than almost any other genre.<sup>10</sup>

## Finding a Flexible Style

Porn involves other constraints, however. Although the budgets and production schedules for *roman poruno* were more generous than those for pink films, they still required strict economies. Kumashiro found ways to turn these practical constraints into advantages, developing a style that blended the porn and extra-porn aspects of his films without in any way overshadowing the latter.

His sets are rarely elaborate or even large, unless they're real interiors (such as a movie theater), but the angles at which they are shot shift frequently, creating a sense of multiple spaces. Kumashiro also includes a surprising number of locations, with a preference for unspectacular streets and open areas. *Twisted Path of Love* (*Koibitotachi wa nureta* [1973]), for instance, consists of more than 90-percent real exteriors, giving the sex scenes a surreal touch. He doesn't attempt to match interiors and exteriors by means of doorway or window views, or to make the different exteriors conform to any mental map. By filming on the fly, Kumashiro creates a notional world that appears both dense and realistic.

For speed of filming, Kumashiro often uses a hand-held camera. There are few if any close-ups, shot/reverse-shots or other setups that require frequent rearrangements, complex lighting, or exact shot matching. Minimizing sync sound by post-recording or other means offers an easy budget-saver, and Kumashiro is expert at exploiting these strategies. He often uses rapid songs or chants as a kind of commentary, as in *Following Desire* and *Twisted Path of Love*. Many scenes, including those involving sex, have little or no dialogue. He also avoids sync sound by using superimposed titles, notably in *The World of Geisha* (*Yojohan fusuma no urabari* [1973]): “Rules for Geisha, No. 1: Don't fall for your first client,” as a young geisha clearly does just that. Often, too, he relies on apparently natural sounds to convey meaning. In *The Bitterness of Youth* (*Seishun no satetsu* [1974]), a gradual and sinister crescendo of what turns out to be rushing water accompanies a pregnant woman and her lover as they approach the unseen mountain torrent where he will murder her.<sup>11</sup> In *Appassionata* (*Modorigawa* [1983]), the camera stays on a woman cradling the dead body of her husband as she rocks in a chair, which creaks and turns gradually in an arc, like the heavy hand of a ticking clock. In several of his other films, similar scenes with little or no dialogue (or rapid action) hold the narrative in suspense.

In editing, Kumashiro makes frequent use of inserts and cutaways. While these allow flexibility in adjusting continuity and pacing and in maintaining the viewer's interest, they also serve a more active purpose. The inserts, unlike the transitional shots of Ozu and other traditional Japanese filmmakers, are jolting rather than restful. In *The World of Geisha*, set in 1918, they refer to historical events of the time, such as a newspaper report of rice riots, a police document banning news reports of the riots, and the dispatch of Japanese troops to Siberia to fight the Reds. In *Love Bites Back* (*Kamu onna* [1988]), a crowd of angry demonstrators threatens a character driving a car. In other films the inserts may be less specific: in *Following Desire*, the same shot of pigeons fluttering up from the street breaks in unexpectedly on three occasions; in *Twisted Path of Love*, the inserts include the hulk of an abandoned freighter and cormorants perched on a huge rock. But in both cases, they remind the viewer that a world exists outside the film's diegesis.

Cutaways from one narrative strand to another also serve to hold the viewer's interest. In *The World of Geisha*, at least one-third of the film's running time is taken up with geisha Sodeko's first night with new client Shinsuke, but this is intercut with subplots

involving other geisha and clients. The rest of the film, in which Sodeko and Shinsuke marry and he becomes progressively more inconsiderate and unfaithful, covers possibly months of diegetic time. This too is intercut with scenes of the other characters, but now the Sodeko/Shinsuke scenes are just as discontinuous as the others, if not more so. Here, as in many other Kumashiro films, the time relation between sequences remains unspecified, even though the narrative events are unilinear or parallel.

Which means that the one kind of cutaway or strategy that Kumashiro does *not* rely on is the flashback. There is little or no backstory in his films: nearly everything that a viewer knows about the characters and situations emerges from what is seen in, or spoken in reference to, the diegetic present. Thus the films create a strong sense of immediacy, even—or especially—when a character appears to act inconsistently or from unclear motives.

Kumashiro uses simple strategies to create a variety of distinctive characters. In some films (including *The World of Geisha* and *Following Desire*), the central narrative is punctuated by subplots whose characters contrast with or comment obliquely on the actions and attitudes of the central characters. In others, such as *Twisted Path of Love* and *Like a Rolling Stone* (*Bo no kanashimi* [1994]), there is one pivotal character who provokes various reactions among the others and in turn reacts differently to them.

Kumashiro brings some characters into relief by giving them an idiosyncratic gesture that usually has a comic aspect. In *Following Desire*, sex performer Harumi raises one leg in the air when she achieves orgasm or is otherwise excited. In *The Bitterness of Youth*, central character Kenichiro and a fellow student are seen in American football uniforms rhythmically practicing shoulder blocks and tapping their helmets together. Afterward, when Kenichiro goes to a friend's home, he taps his head and shoulders on the front door and then, while chatting, taps his way around the walls of the room. In *Like a Rolling Stone*, ruthless *yakuza* Tanaka goes in for energetic polishing of his furniture. Such actions, so common in Kumashiro's films that they were dubbed "Kumashiro



*The World of Geisha*

gymnastics,” bear an unexpected resemblance to Bresson’s “automatism”—the stripping away of conscious acting in his “models.”<sup>12</sup>

## A Convenient Setting: The Sex Trade

After a survey of style that mentions sex only incidentally, it may be difficult to imagine how the pornographic elements fit into Kumashiro’s work. But they fit extremely well. The sex scenes both shape and are shaped by the characters, narrative, and tone of each film. This holds true even for the films that involve the sex trade, which would seem to offer ample pornographic opportunities with a minimum of narrative invention and characterization. *Following Desire* (which Kumashiro also scripted) offers a clear example.

The film focuses on women who perform in *tokudashi* (“special exposure”), or sex shows. Sayuri Ichijo (named in the Japanese title) was both a pioneer of *tokudashi* and the most popular real-life sex performer at the time, and in the film she and other performers not only strip but also display their genitals at close quarters to the audience (though not to the camera), rub their breasts with wax dripping from candles, and simulate masturbation and lesbian coupling. A title informs us that, while the film was being made, Sayuri Ichijo was being prosecuted for public obscenity. Several times during the film the police raid the *tokudashi* house and arrest the women but take no action against

either the audience or the manager, who bails them out so they can return to performing. Without any hypocritical moralizing, the film lets us see how women, and not the men who enjoy or profit from their performances, bear the brunt of official disapproval.

Intertwined with the film's "documentary" elements are various narrative strands that involve an ambitious younger performer, Harumi. Determined to outdo Sayuri, Harumi practices pouring a milky liquid into her vagina, retaining it, and then releasing it at will. The film ends with a triumphant performance of her controlled "wetness"—filmed from the rear in full body framing—as she thrusts one leg "gymnastically" in the air.

As described in isolation, that female "money shot" may be dismissed as simply demeaning to women. Seen in context, however, it becomes multivalent. To American eyes, *tokudashi* is a notorious example of sexism in Japanese culture. Ironically, in Sayuri Ichijo's real-life court case, she fought for and won the right to continue her sex shows on the basis of freedom of expression. As for fictional Harumi, she is far from the idealized passive woman: she's lively, amusing, talkative, manipulative, mendacious, rather mean, and aggressively ambitious. Should one look down on her because she's all too human and her ambition is confined to sex shows? In the final scene, the stage lights in front of her obliterate any sight of the male audience and turn her into a star. The real-life audience among whom I saw the film, at least half of them women, laughed and applauded.<sup>13</sup>

A different kind of female money shot occurs in *The World of Geisha*. A geisha "specialist" arrives to entertain the house. Naked (but filmed from the rear), she places a stack of coins on the floor, crouches down, and takes them into her vagina. Then she stands up and begins to drop the coins, at first one by one and then faster.

That performance, too, may seem merely demeaning, but like Harumi's, it's considerably qualified. The specialist is strikingly tall and self-possessed. Except for an elderly patron and his "jester" (who also entertains the geisha), the onscreen audience consists of women (the house geisha and staff), and they all



*Twisted Path of Love*

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watch in respectful silence. The scene offers a break not only in the narrative but also in the "normal" socioeconomic order, with its equation of money=phallus=power. Symbolically, the specialist controls that power.<sup>14</sup>

Besides *Following Desire* and *The World of Geisha*, Kumashiro made half a dozen other films focusing on the overt sex trade. It can be inferred that he accepted its existence, but also that he sympathized with and even admired the women who plied that trade.

## Outside the Sex Trade

Kumashiro's other films take on the worlds of *yakuza*, truckers, vagabonds, students, urban nouveau riche, and small-town working class, focusing mainly on characters already on the margins of society (as also are those in the sex trade) or else moving in that direction. Sex appears in a variety of narrative contexts and plays a variety of roles, few of them conventional. In *The Bitterness of Youth* (based on a Japanese novel that in outline is the same as Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*), law student Kenichiro is engaged to a wealthy cousin, but after his compulsive desire for the working-class Kyoko leads to pregnancy, he ends up a murderer. In *Like a Rolling Stone*, *yakuza* Tanaka has a comradely sexual relationship with Yoshie, a woman of his clan, while seducing an innocent young woman as a first step to prostituting her—with Yoshie then

taking over. In *Love Bites Back*, hard-core video maker Yuichi says (and demonstrates) that he'll have sex with anyone but his wife Chikako. He also says, in Chikako's hearing, that both wish each other dead—and she acts on her wish.<sup>15</sup>

The most unusual of Kumashiro's films is *Twisted Path of Love*, which he also co-scripted.<sup>16</sup> Here the alternation and simultaneity of sex, comedy, drama, and narrative surprise become extraordinarily complex. Yet the basis of the film is simple: the central character, a young man named Katsu, who has drifted around Japan working at odd jobs, now returns temporarily to his hometown, a small fishing port. His arrival becomes disruptive because he denies that he is Katsu and also because he tends to act like someone unfamiliar with the norms of human behavior. Here I outline only the sex scenes and the ending.

Katsu gets a job at the town's porn movie theater, and the first sex scene occurs when the owner's neglected wife seduces him.

The next day Katsu comes across a young couple, Mitsuo and Yoko, having sex while standing among tall reeds near the sea. He stands close and watches their rising annoyance and sexual animation. Afterward, Mitsuo beats him up.

Later, Mitsuo and Yoko suggest that Katsu needs a woman and introduce him to a friend, Sachiko. She willingly accompanies Katsu into the bushes, but after she calls him by his name he angrily tries to rape her. She fights him off.

Mitsuo and Yoko invite Katsu to meet Sachiko again. She, however, has brought along Katsu's mother to prove his identity. Katsu chases Sachiko down to the beach and again tries to rape her. Mitsuo and Yoko conduct a running commentary on Katsu's attempt. They think he's successful, though when Sachiko gets away she shouts that he wasn't.

When Katsu decides to move on, Mitsuo and Yoko drive him part way. (At one point Yoko gets onto a bus with Katsu, and Mitsuo follows angrily in the car.) The three start playing leapfrog on a beach, gradually stripping naked as they do so. Mitsuo suddenly has sex with Yoko. At first she resists and asks Katsu for help, but then becomes aroused.

Afterward, Katsu is riding a bike in circles with Yoko on the back. He tells her cheerfully that he killed someone for 200 yen and pulls the money out to show her. She laughs. Mitsuo suddenly stabs Katsu in the back and the bike rolls into the sea. He may or may not be dead.

It should be clear that *Twisted Path of Love* is not a conventional narrative into which sex scenes have

been dropped like chocolate chips into cookie batter. Nor are the actors distinguished by superb bodies and little else. The film is a comedy-drama of unease in which sex plays a continual and offbeat role.

## The Redemption of Porn?

*Twisted Path of Love* stands out from Kumashiro's other films mainly for its expansion of their common attributes. The most basic of these is the evocation of more arousing or aroused flesh than (without full frontal nudity, let alone cum shots or parted labia) is actually shown. Thus the rear view of Harumi's wetness in *Following Desire* and of the "specialist" dropping coins in *The World of Geisha* conjures up the physicality of the vagina.<sup>17</sup> In *The Bitterness of Youth*, the rhythmic "uhs" that punctuate Kyoko's singing during sex with Kenichiro manifest the thrusts of his penis inside her body, even though she (with legs on his shoulders) is mostly out of frame below and he partly out of frame above. *Twisted Path of Love* uses a different strategy: in the first sex scene between Mitsuo and Yoko, and in Katsu's second attempt to rape the friend, Kumashiro masks their genital areas with two black rectangles that change shape and position as necessary; for the leapfrog sequence, Yoko's pubic hair is obliterated by Brakhage-style scratches. These devices, required to avoid trouble with the law, in fact call attention and imagination to the censored areas, all the more so because the rectangles are continually shifting and the scratches stand out in fully animated white.

Such arousal scenes evoke more than just the body. The visual dislocation of Kyoko and Kenichiro reflects their cross-purposes: she hopes to marry him, while he wants to break with her and marry his wealthy cousin. In *Like a Rolling Stone*, when Tanaka seduces the young woman he intends to prostitute, he manhandles her breasts, squeezing them in opposite directions—a distortion of her body that foreshadows the distortion of her mind. In *Twisted Path of Love*, the cinema owner's wife wants sex with Katsu mainly because her husband rejects her for another woman, and Katsu responds noncommittally (much as he coolly watches Mitsuo and Yoko), but he becomes fired up to the point of rape when Sachiko threatens his (non)identity. Thus Kumashiro does more than increase the arousal power of his soft porn; he also presents sex as an activity that's fueled by a variety of human aims and mental states, including ambition, anger, fear, power, boredom, loneliness, and obsession.



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*Appassionata*

One disturbing effect in many of Kumashiro's films comes from the mixing of humor (including "gymnastics") into the darker aspects of sex. *The Bitterness of Youth* is among the least disturbing in this particular way because the humor and gymnastics fade out before the intent to murder fades in. But other films bring humor and revulsion much closer together. In *Like a Rolling Stone*, after Tanaka has seduced the innocent young woman, he deliberately provokes her boyfriend to slash him in the abdomen. Tanaka calmly goes home, calls Yoshie to bring needle and thread, spits alcohol over the wound and sutures himself—a scene that goes from bizarre to hilarious as Yoshie is turned on by the procedure and he has to cool her off with a hand shower. In *Following Desire*, humor is continually intertwined with the sex performances and arrests. And in *Twisted Path of Love*, Mitsuo's and Yoko's mock running commentary and the shifting black rectangles superimpose humor on the lengthy (attempted) rape.

It seems almost certain that Kumashiro intended such scenes to be disturbing, since he takes such pains to eliminate the fantasy element of sexual arousal. The viewer sees realistic women with human flaws rather than fantasized sex objects. None of the sex performers in *Following Desire* or the geisha in *The World of Geisha* look or behave alike, and the victim of Katsu's assault is stocky enough for her struggle against him to be believable. The inserts of the "outside world" also militate against any illusion of seamless fantasy in the diegesis.

In addition, the male characters who enjoy sex in Kumashiro's films are far from idealized. While the women's flaws may include a lack of female solidarity (Harumi dissing her fellow performers in *Following Desire*, Yoko calmly watching the rape of her "friend" Sachiko in *Twisted Path of Love*, Yoshie corrupting the innocent woman in *Like a Rolling Stone*), male bonding is even more fragile. In *Twisted Path of Love*, Katsu fights with his former best friend and is stabbed by his new "friend"; in *The World of Geisha*, the elderly patron treats his "jester" with brutal contempt; Yuichi and his closest friend split up in *Love Bites Back*; and the poet in *Appassionata* seduces the wife of his anarchist friend as

soon as the latter goes on the run.

Sexist loners can of course be presented as admirable (witness the Western genre), but Kumashiro's loners possess prominent traits of the ridiculous or the repulsive. Harumi's lover in *Following Desire* is a thickhead just out of jail for murder, and she easily manipulates him. The poet who pursues woman after woman in *Appassionata* is an egotistic liar who eventually commits suicide. Yuichi in *Love Bites Back* is a near-monster of callousness (and aware of it), and he comes to an ignominious end.

In sex scenes, Kumashiro even tweaks the male viewer by making use (where possible) of the transferred gaze. That is, he shows viewers in the film seeing what is denied to those in the theater—and the onscreen gazers rarely flatter the real-life viewer. In *Following Desire*, they're passive elderly men, reminding the male viewer that he too is passive as well as incompletely satisfied. In *Twisted Path of Love*, it's oddball Katsu who gazes at Mitsuo and Yoko having sex, and then it's those unreliable lovers who gaze at Katsu's rape.

There are only two generic points of distinction between the *roman porno* of Kumashiro and the works of the "serious" filmmakers mentioned earlier (Oshima, Breillat, Denis, Chéreau): the requirement of a sex scene every ten minutes and the porn label. Neither tells us Kumashiro's full intent in the sex scenes, let alone in each film as a whole. I've already suggested that the sex scenes were intended to be disturbing as

well as arousing, and virtually all of the films I've discussed have a dark undercurrent that in many cases bursts to the surface: murder in *The Bitterness of Youth*, *Love Bites Back* and (possibly) *Twisted Path of Love*; mental cruelty in *The World of Geisha*, *Appassionata*, *Love Bites Back* and *Like a Rolling Stone*; death and separation in *Love Letter*. Only *Following Desire* ends on a temporarily upbeat note.

In short, Kumashiro shows as much of the dark side of life as do many "serious" filmmakers, although he constantly balances it, and often mixes it, with the lighter side. What's more, he presents both sides with an easy detachment—an attitude that seems paradoxical in a filmmaker concerned with sexual arousal. Yet in his best films, Kumashiro's detachment enables the viewer to see those disparate elements—the dark, the light, and the sexual—as a complex unity.

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## Notes

My thanks to Kyoko Hirano and Reina Higashitani of the Japan Society for help in preparing this article.

1. Most American studies of film genres focus on Hollywood cinema and therefore exclude pornography. Of the texts I checked, the most mentions (some as "adult films" or "stag movies" and all incidental) were five in Rick Altman's *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999). Of course, since the generic requirements for porn filmmakers are usually no more than a minimum number of sexual scenes, other genres often supplement the narrative. Without embarking on a long discussion of the fluidity and mixing of genres, I think it's reasonable to say that the presence and nature of the sex scenes determine whether a film is considered pornographic.
2. Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin are the best known feminist opponents of porn. Linda Williams, in *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and "the Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), is by no means so dismissive. In her conclusion she writes: "Porn is not one thing, but sexual fantasy, genre, culture, and erotic visibility all operating together. And if fantasy, coming from the deepest regions of the psyche, is most resistant to change, then genre and culture are most capable of change" (270).
3. Williams, *ibid.*, defines film pornography as "visual (and sometimes aural) representation of living bodies engaged in explicit, usually unfaked, sexual acts with a primary intent of arousing viewers" (29-30). That definition (offered only as minimal) is as good as a usefully short one could be, but "intent" has to rest on assumptions.
4. Experimental films are rarely taken into account, although they have a fairly long tradition of using porn elements. Barbara Rubin's lyrical *Christmas on Earth* (1962), for example, not only provides its own scenes of frontal nudity and sexual interplay but also borrows a hard-core cum shot. Jack Smith's softer but cheekier *Flaming Creatures* (1963) became legendary for being hounded by the police.
5. Susanne Kapler, in *The Pornography of Representation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), rejects the distinction between porn and "artistic" films containing porn elements, such as Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976), and although I disagree with her blanket condemnation of both she does raise a good point, since Oshima's film is just as likely to arouse viewers as a less polished version of sexual activities. David Desser, in *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), argues that "there is a specifically political dimension to [*In the Realm of the Senses*]. In this instance, politics is present by its absence. . . . We must conclude that any relationship which tries to deny the outside world by creating a private world . . . is doomed" (27-28). This attempt to place the film above porn is ingenious but unconvincing. In the furor that arose in Japan (primarily over the publication of the screenplay, illustrated by stills), Oshima questioned what was wrong with obscenity. The most reasonable political reading of the film is as a call for freedom of pornographic expression.
6. Akane Shiratori, a woman script supervisor who joined Nikkatsu the same year as Kumashiro and worked regularly with him, reports his saying about one of his films: "A woman came to live in a man's room. This is the male point of view. It is also possible to see it as a film about a woman who finds a man who satisfies her sexual desire." Quoted in a speech given at the Japan Society, New York City, March 21, 2001.
7. *Kagi*, based on a novel by Junichiro Tanizaki that involves scopophilia and other erotic variations, was remade by Kumashiro in 1974.
8. Some sources interpret the term as coming from the French word *roman* and meaning "novel-type porn." This would fit Kumashiro's work better than "romantic."
9. Partly because of poor health, Kumashiro's productivity declined sharply in the 1980s. He was in and out of hospital and sometimes had to use an oxygen tank while directing.
10. Note that I have seen only eight of Kumashiro's 34 films, and although I have studied synopses and critiques of his others, my statements about his work in general should be understood as referring fully only to those eight.
11. This was Kumashiro's first non-Nikkatsu film, made for Tokyo Eiga at that company's invitation. Only someone timing the frequency of sex scenes would notice that it is not a *roman porno*.
12. Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography* (New York: Urizen, 1977), 13f. The resemblance seems particularly plausible in the case of *The Bitterness of Youth*: Kenichiro was played by a well-known pop singer, Kenichi Hagiwara, and his performance gives no hint of a microphone idol's persona.
13. It's an indication of the porosity between mainstream and porn in Japan that the annual Kinema Jumbo film awards (Japan's most prestigious) chose Hiroko Isayama as best actress of 1972 for her performance as Harumi. The awards have also included porn films in their ten-best lists.
14. Kyoko Hirano, in the "Japan" chapter of *World Cinema Since 1945* (William Luhr, ed. [New York: Ungar, 1987]),



writes: “Pornographic films normally cater to male fantasies of subjugating women, and, indeed, Nikkatsu’s heroines are often socially oppressed as strippers, prostitutes and barmaids, or sexually oppressed as housewives, teachers, and office workers. However, a number of Nikkatsu productions could be interpreted as feminist films because of their depiction of strong women who spiritually dominate men” (412).

15. Making the central character the ruthless manager of a hard-core video company was no doubt a sideswipe at the industry that was putting Nikkatsu out of the porn business. At the same time, like Kumashiro’s other less than pleasant characters, Yoichi is not a one-dimensional villain.
16. *Twisted Path of Love* was Kumashiro’s own favorite among his films. Clips from it appear on TV sets in *Loves Bites Back* and *Like a Rolling Stone*.
17. Hélène Raymond (in *La petite ourse*, www.fluctuat.net, n.d.) generalizes Kumashiro’s recognition of women’s eroticism both sharply and lyrically: “Unlike phallic eroticism or pleasure [*jouissance*], which Lacan sums up in a brilliant formula as the pleasure of an idiot, Kumashiro enables us to feel our way into the boundless limbo of vaginal pleasure.” (My translation.)

**Abstract** William Johnson: “A New View of Porn: The Films of Tatsumi Kumashiro.” Tatsumi Kumashiro (1927-1995) became a leading maker of Japanese soft-core porn films in the 1970s and 1980s. Because he aimed to make films whose interest ranged beyond sexual arousal, his work sheds new light on the debate over screen pornography. This study examines several of his films and shows the distinctiveness of his approach.