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The stereotype of the woman-object in Japan: Playing with dolls, playing the failed man

In 1977, in "The Arrangement Between the Sexes," the sociologist Erving Goffman put forward the hypothesis that, in each society, male-female relationships are codified in such a way that they maintain a social order—typically an asymmetrical one.[1] He argued that "gender stereotypes"—which he equates with "*beliefs*. . . about masculinity-femininity"—are "in close interaction with actual gender behavior," basing his remarks on analyses of a wide range of practices: seduction rituals, chivalry, separate toilets, the differential socialization of children, and so on. In all of these, he condemns the assumption that the (strong) man must protect the (fragile) woman—even from mice and spiders. While biological differences undeniably exist, they absolutely fail to explain these practices, which Goffman calls "arrangements." Working from this starting point, he emphasizes their historical character. They are contingent, composite, and can even function as mirrors for resistance to norms. Indeed, gender stereotypes reveal changes in society and the contradictory currents running through it. In the hands of certain actors, these stereotypes can even become tools for breaking down the gendered order—which is shown by the unusual case of love dolls.

Love dolls (*rabu dōru*) are produced by a niche artisanal industry, with around a dozen companies sharing the market in Japan. The attitudes of these realistic dolls—which are produced to be life-size in order to serve as sentimental and/or sexual partners—are as puerile or idiotic as the customer wants. To all appearances, these dolls reproduce negative gender stereotypes, those of weak, intellectually deficient women whose only qualities are their measurements: they are shapely, blank-eyed, and silent. The very function of the dolls is unnerving: on first glance, there seems to be no reason to think of them as anything more than silicone eye candy, encouraging in the imagination men's dominance over women's bodies and fates. Indeed, users are happy to describe themselves as the "owners" (*mochi-nushi*) of these dolls, or as their "managers" (*kanrishoku*), "teachers" (*kateikyōshi*), "big brothers" (*o-nii-san*), or "caretakers" (*kanrinin*)—all in line with a vocabulary that explicitly treats the doll as a passive object or helpless being that must be educated and supervised.

Is this a form of misogyny? We would be tempted to think so, especially if we look at the discourse of the companies that make these dolls, particularly Orient Industry, which pioneered them. Created in 1977 by Tsuchiya Hideo, a former sex shop manager, Orient Industry developed the image of the dolls as helpless and needing to be kept under supervision. Hideo uses the word *musume* (my daughter) when talking about them: "Each one is my daughter [*musume*]. When a doll leaves my business, it's as though I were entrusting her to someone else to take care of her." He sometimes also uses the word *satogo* (foster child) to stress the idea that the dolls are not sold but "entrusted" to the care of a loving man. A client who marries or adopts a love doll has the right to give her a new name, following a now-defunct custom by which a woman changes her first name when she marries. And, indeed, "when Orient Industry receives an order and dispatches it, we call it a 'marriage' [*yomeiri*]." In this move from the authority of her "biological" father to that of her "name-giving father"—who is also her husband—the doll is therefore still a minor. Following the same metaphorical system, when her *husband* no

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longer wants her, he can send her back to her *biological father*—i.e., Orient Industry's factory: the return is called a "return to her house of birth" (*sato-gaeri*).

This paternalistic discourse is obviously unsettling. The very way the dolls are designed is disturbing: their bodies are merely sketched out, and their faces express a sort of stupefaction. Why do they have such a mindless look? It is tempting to conclude that the makers have in mind a clientele of men seeking to reaffirm their virility through contact with a beautiful idiot. But the reality is of course more complex. As revealed by a field survey carried out between 2012 and 2015 on the main Japanese dollmakers—Orient Industry, 4Woods, Level D, and Trottla—, the dolls are deliberately designed as pitiable creatures, based on the principle of parodic conformism. The expression "parodic conformism" was coined in 2002 by the sociologist Alessandro Gomarasca, just as the Lolita fashion trend in Japan (which included sweet Lolita, Gothic Lolita, pink Lolita, etc.) was leading thousands of young women to dress up as dolls. In *La bambola e il robottone* [The Doll and the Robot] (2002), Gomarasca summarizes the phenomenon as follows: "As male discourse increasingly projects onto them the image of helplessness, they correspondingly fetishize their infantile personality to the extreme." In the same book, the researcher Sharon Kinsella agreed: adolescents taking the image of the "virgin" (*shōjo*) to extremes in order to reflect back society's image of them. Such a caricature of femininity enables them to take an ironic distance from the demands placed on them.

Hijacking dominant values

It is extremely revealing that love dolls became popular at the same time—as though men too were hijacking dominant values through these dolls made to look like immature women. Starting a relationship with one of these objects is no small matter. There is a heavy stigma against men who (with a certain insolent humor) claim to prefer "artificial virgins" (*jinzō otome*) to "flesh-and-blood women" (*namami no josei*). They say that they want to play—play, that is, rather than imitate their parents and start a family. This discourse is often misunderstood. The media especially tends to take it at face value. In the press, men who "play with dolls"—an activity that does not conform with their "gender"—are accused of being "herbivores" (*sōshoku*), immature, and weak: emasculated wimps. Buying a doll is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it allows the owner to reinforce his masculine identity by showing off his trophy wife; on the other, it exposes him to rejection, denigration, and mockery. Which leads us to ask: are these dolls made to look like pretty idiots, not in order to reproduce gender norms, but to challenge them?

Certainly, a man who plays with dolls looks more like a loser than a predator. According to the manufacturers, the love dolls' immature appearance reinforces this impression through a mirror effect: "They are incomplete," I was told, which makes them all the more attractive, because "men who like dolls want something that resembles them." These men see themselves as excluded. Kodama, an engineer at Orient Industry, explained to me: "The dolls are cute [*kawaii*]—that is, you feel a little sorry for them." He insists that it is a matter of making them pathetic: the more vapid (vulnerable) and stupid (incomplete) they seem, the more they encourage the idea of failure. It may seem strange that the owners want to form a relationship with such pitiable creatures, but there is always something derisive about such a framing: when they publicly display themselves as failed men, alongside a doll designed specifically to evoke failure, these men always reflect back on society its own scornful view of them. The fact that love dolls are a stereotype of the woman-object is very much part of this strategy.

This strangely twisted strategy consists in mimicking the standard model of success (a responsible man and a brainless beauty) as part of a game that mocks the values upon which society is founded. According to the norms,

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men—real men—must prove their value by showing off their beautiful wives. Taking a sly pleasure in manipulating these codes, "owners" amuse themselves by using their doll to reproduce social gender relations, attributing to their love doll—who is as innocent, inexperienced, ethereal, or dazed as they wish—the extremely clichéd roles of the damsel or the stuck-up woman. The fact that the doll is so puerile provokes a feeling of dismay. The very fact that it is a doll makes the situation even more upsetting. Its fakeness throws a new light on the old roles: everything seems false. The sense of dissonance caused by the doll reveals the artificiality of the social conventions of the heteronormative order. This example allows us to see clearly that the reproduction of degrading female stereotypes (passivity, weakness, dependence) may well be part of a subversive strategy. Ambivalent and ambiguous, this form of resistance is of course limited, because it keeps women inside the symbolic limits assigned by their gender. But the sabotage of the system is nonetheless, and harmfully, effective.

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NOTE

1. This article was written during postdoctoral research at the Free University of Berlin, as part of the European EMTECH project, directed by Elena Giannoulis.

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