

Japanese Girls' Obsessions over Beauty Image and Desire to be Loved
As Portrayed in Ninagawa Mika's *Helter Skelter*

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1. Introduction

My research question for this project is “What have you learned about Japanese culture from the work(s) of your choice?” I chose to use the film *Helter Skelter* (2012) by Ninagawa Mika for my analysis. *Helter Skelter* discusses the human desire for fame, beauty, and love through the lens of Japan’s top fashion idol, Lilico. Lilico is extremely beautiful and represents the girl that every girl in Japan wants to be. However, behind her perfect exterior hides a dark secret: in order to get her fame, she underwent full-body cosmetic surgery at an illegal plastic surgery clinic using dubious practices. As a result, Lilico’s body is gradually deteriorating, and her mental state crumbles as she can do nothing but watch her beauty and fame—everything she’s lived and worked for—slip out of her hands. While the film focuses on Lilico’s downfall into insanity, it also portrays the message that ordinary girls all across Japan deal with the same unhealthy obsessions over beauty image and the desire to be loved.

Helter Skelter was originally a manga written by the manga author and fashion illustrator Okazaki Kyoko (1963-) in 1995. In 2012, the story was adapted into a live action film by the fashion photographer and director, Ninagawa Mika (1972-), and starred one of Japan’s most controversial actresses, Sawajiri Erika (1986-), as the main character and focus of the film. I personally believe that the combination of these three women—given their individual backgrounds in the fashion, film, and entertainment industries—is extremely significant to this film, and that *Helter Skelter* could not have been made by anyone else.

2. Background

At surface level, *Helter Skelter* can be categorized as a story of love and obsession according to Goosen (1997), as the main plot focuses on Lilico's obsession with gaining more fame and beauty, and her desire to be loved—to the point where it literally destroys her. However, looking closer into the subtext of the film, we can also consider *Helter Skelter* to be a story of political and social commentary, as the same struggles and emotions that we see Lilico experience are also reflected in the lives of average, ordinary Japanese girls as well. Thus, the film speaks out against the unhealthy obsession with body image that the media pushes onto young Japanese girls.

Okazaki Kyoko, the original creator of *Helter Skelter*'s story, was one of the most popular and radical manga artists in Japan during the 1980's and 90's. Born in 1963, she falls into the Entertainer generation according to Goosen (1997). Okazaki's works primarily focused on the lives of strong urban women in Tokyo, and often dealt with controversial topics such as sex, drugs, and homosexuality. She was one of the creators of the *Gyaru Manga* genre, as her works were often touched with the *gyaru* characters and *gyaru* slang which were popular among Japanese girls of this time period. Her success as a manga artist was largely due to her ability to understand and realistically capture the mentality of young urban women during this era, which was yet to be done by other manga artists at the time (Women in Comics, 2017).

Ninagawa Mika, the director of the *Helter Skelter* film, is a well-renowned fashion photographer and film director. Born in 1972, she also falls into the Entertainer generation according to Goosen. Ninagawa is not a movie director: although she has filmed one other movie, *Sakuran*, in 2007, her career is mostly focused on fashion and commercial advertising. She has shot music videos for Japan's top idol group AKB48, as well as editorial works for

famous fashion magazines such as Vogue (Wikipedia, 2018). Therefore, as a person whose job is to capture and sell women's beauty through the camera, Ninagawa has a very deep and personal connection with Japan's fashion and entertainment world, as well as the hidden dark side of what goes on with these models behind the scenes.

Lastly, Sawajiri Erika, the actress playing Lilico, the main character of *Helter Skelter*, is one of Japan's most controversial actresses and prior to this film, had taken a 5-year hiatus from the screen. The reason for her hiatus was due to the events of the opening premiere of a movie she had starred in, *Closed Note*. Sawajiri had responded to the reporters' questions in a cold manner, coming off as "rude." This relatively small and petty exchange led to Sawajiri's 5-year banishment from the screen and plagued her career with rumors and slander (Wikipedia, 2018). She continued, however, to voice her disapproval of the restrictive ways that female artists get treated in Japan, but she has since always been portrayed as the industry's "bad girl" (Shilling, 2012). Thus, Sawajiri, who has experienced the same descent from show business as her character Lilico, has a very personal connection to the themes that *Helter Skelter* discusses. In fact, casting Sawajiri as Lilico, in itself, is a bold statement towards the Japanese entertainment industry.

3. The Three Obsessions of *Helter Skelter*: Fame, Beauty, and Love

_____3.1 Fame

The first of the three obsessions presented in *Helter Skelter* is fame. Lilico's worst fear is being forgotten, yet, at the same time, she also recognizes how empty and worthless fame is. This theme is introduced early on in the film after we are presented with a montage of Lilico's great success as a model: we see Lilico go through photoshoot after

photoshoot, fawned upon by fans and surrounded by interviewers, and every magazine with her photo on the cover sell like crazy.

Meanwhile, the sound of excited chattering and camera shutters play in the background throughout the entire montage, acting as a sonific metaphor for Lilico's fame. However, this scene is immediately contrasted with the silence of the following scene, and we see Lilico's smiling, energetic face transition to a very tired and empty as she spaces out on the chair. She then mutters blankly to her makeup artist as we see her opening some medicine, "I feel like every time they click the shutter, I get more empty." Lilico uses the Japanese word 空っぽ to describe the word "empty," and since we see her taking medicine as she delivers this line, we are at first prompted to think that she's referring to her headache at the time, but as we reach the end of the film, this particular line reads as foreshadowing to Lilico's end.

Near the end of the film, we see Lilico preparing for her final press conference, addressing the secret of her full-body plastic surgery, which was leaked to the public by her assistant, Hada. Lilico's body is covered with dark marks from her deteriorating body. She "practically needs special effects makeup" to appear normal again, but her makeup artist takes care of it. We see her take the place on the stage, ready to speak, and flashes from the press cameras overwhelm the screen, mirroring the montage from the beginning of the film. Lilico utters the line, "I'll show them what they want to see," and stabs herself in front of everyone.

Camera flashes overwhelm the screen as the scene transitions to white. Just as foreshadowed at the beginning of the film, Lilico at this stage is empty. She lost her beauty, her reputation, her connections, her job, and is left as an empty shell: even her appearance that she shows at this time is almost entirely redrawn by makeup. She has nothing of her own anymore, and all she can do is “show them what they want to see.”

Lilico’s end is ironic because while the entire film showcases her fear of being forgotten and abandoned by the public, at the very end the camera pans around Shibuya and we see the entire cityscape littered with billboards of Lilico’s face, titled “The Legend of Lilico.” Although her fear of losing her fame caused Lilico’s downfall, in the end, she becomes immortalized as a legend and never forgotten.

3.2 Beauty

The second of the three obsessions in *Helter Skelter* is beauty. The very first scene of the movie flashes between pictures of perfectly made-up eyes, lips, and facial features of models on the cover of Japanese *purikura* booths, to the daily chattering of teenage *gyaru* girls in Shibuya, to young girls getting their nails manicured, getting eyelash extensions, and finally flashes back to the unveiling of Lilico’s new body. The images of daily Japanese girls’ life shown in this scene, contrasted with Lilico being unwrapped from her bandages, serve to show that Lilico herself is the culmination of women’s desire for beauty. This scene opens up the stage to show Lilico’s unhealthy obsession for beauty, but also shows how Lilico’s emotions aren’t that different from normal Japanese girls. The juxtaposition of the image of Lilico’s surgery to the teenage girl getting eyelash extensions, for example, is a message that these two procedures both come from the same, common desire for beauty.

Helter Skelter also portrays the unhealthiness of the obsession for beauty by making the analogy of beauty being like a drug throughout the course of the film. One example is when Hada is driving Lilico back to her house after her photoshoot, and Lilico leans in to her, saying “You know Hada, you’ve got beautiful skin. Why don’t you ever wear makeup? Try to look pretty sometimes.” Hada smiles sheepishly, and replies, “Nothing I could do would make much difference. And I’m old.” Lilico then hands her a stick of Yves Saint Laurent lipstick, and says “Have this. Try it sometime. But watch out, it’s like a drug. The more you do, the more you want.” This line rings especially true for Lilico, as later on in the film we see her undergoing even more dubious plastic surgeries when she feels like her place is being threatened by the popular newbie model in her agency. Furthermore, the very YSL lipstick in this scene is also particularly significant. Yves Saint Laurent Rouge Volupte lipstick--the one being used in this scene--is an iconic luxury makeup item and was also exceptionally popular in Japan. For Japanese girls, it is practically a symbol of status to have in one’s makeup pouch; the status-quo says every fashion-conscious girl should own one. Therefore, for this exact lipstick to be used in this scene, Ninagawa is making a connection between Lilico and these ordinary, fashion-conscious Japanese girls. It is as if to say that the drug of beauty, that corrupts Lilico to her downfall, is the same as that which drives us to buy expensive lipstick.

3.3 Love

The last, and perhaps the most subtle of the three obsessions is love. Because Lilico’s obsession for fame is so obvious and excessive, her underlying obsession for love is overshadowed and less apparent. However, we can see small glimpses in Lilico’s behavior that imply that maybe what she wanted all along wasn’t really fame, but love instead. One example of such a scene is when Hada and Lilico are in Lilico’s room, and Lilico asks Hada if she has a

boyfriend. Hada says yes, to which Lilico gets envious, mentioning that she doesn't have anyone like that. To cheer her up, Hada responds, "But everyone loves you. Lots of people. Hundreds, thousands, millions..." Looking at herself in the mirror, Lilico replies, "But I've never met or talked to any of them. And what's there for them to love?" This line illustrates Lilico's self-awareness of how empty her fame is. Even though she has millions of fans who love her for her image, Lilico is still envious of Hada and her boyfriend, because she has one person who loves her more than surface-deep. Furthermore, Lilico's body is a product of plastic surgery; she knows that her image, that millions of people love, is all fake. None of it is actually hers. Thus, Lilico doesn't even have surface-deep love. She is only showing an illusion for people to love, but she herself has nothing.

4. Conclusion

Overall, *Helter Skelter* tells the tale of Lilico, an over-the-top manic fashion model whose obsession for fame and beauty causes her very own fall from stardom. However, the subtle connections throughout the film convey the message that Lilico is no different from your average Japanese girl. The movie is scattered with shots of the Shibuya city scape and *gyaru* girls taking *purikura* photos, going shopping, and getting their nails done, all things that are considered very normal, but are also a reflection of the same vanity that we see in Lilico. At the end of the film after Lilico's disappearance, the detective who investigated Lilico's case is seen walking around Shibuya. As he looks around Shibuya, he mutters to his assistant, "This city is full of girls like her." *Helter Skelter* is a social commentary on beauty and obsession in Japanese youth, told through the lens of Lilico's story.

5. Work

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