Warai:
Laughter, Comedy and the Television Cultures of 1970s, 80s and 90s Japan

by

David Christopher Humphrey

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Committee in charge:

Professor Daniel O’Neill, Chair
Professor Alan Tansman
Professor H Horton
Professor Abigail De Kosnik

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Abstract

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An examination of Japanese television comedy from the 1970s, 80s and early 90s, the dissertation traces changes in laughter’s imagined social role, as well as its use within the television medium. Narratives of the era frequently depict the period as one characterized by a turn towards consumerism and political apathy, and single out television’s role in this shift. I employ television comedy as a lens through which to re-examine these shifts. My analysis focuses on the genre’s laughter as discursive object, and reveals the emergence within Japanese television of an ambivalent form of laughter, which functioned within the medium to both order and disrupt. While television laughter worked to coordinate the affective rhythms of viewers, that same laughter hid beneath its seemingly cheery surface discordant notes and jarring beats. Against this backdrop, I consider both the mechanisms that maintain media culture in Japan, as well as the possibilities for eruption that still lie below its surface.

Comprised of four chapters, the dissertation divides the years covered into roughly two, overlapping phases. The first two chapters cover a period from the early 1970s to the mid-80s, and explore the rise on Japanese television of communally binding forms of laughter. The first chapter considers how producers of the popular comedy show _Hachi ji da yo! Zen’in shūgō_ (It’s 8 O’clock! Everyone Gather ‘Round, 1969-1985) contrived to produce on the show a rhythmic and socially unifying form of comedy. The second chapter focuses on the show _Kinchan no doko made yaru no!_ (How Far Will Kinchan Go! 1976-1986), and examines how its producers mobilized the show’s putatively “warm” tone of laughter in constructing the show’s affective pull on its viewers.

The final two chapters cover a period form the early 80s to the mid-90s, and explore the eruption within Japanese television of more explosive and disruptive forms of laughter. The third chapter turns to the 1980-81 _manzai_ (duo standup comedy) revival, and examines how boom-era shows co-opted the voice of youth laughter as a signifier of authenticity within the broadcast. The final chapter examines the evolution of the Japanese reality-style “documentary variety” genre, and considers how the genre employed its “documents of laughter” to transform sites of political and social contestation into spaces of laughter and mischief, and thus divorce them of their historical context.
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Introduction
Breathing Laughter Into Television

It is said that there are few races that, like the Japanese, have so little laughter in their lives and have little understanding of humor. Certainly, we have little to laugh loudly about in our daily lives, which is perhaps because of some peculiarity of our traditional culture.

We live in a society where almost everything has become mechanistic and business-like, and every day spins by at a dizzying speed, and so, it might be that we have lost even our humanity and the ability to laugh. However, if there is no laughter, what remains then to serve as a balm [uruoi] in our lives?

Recently, people speak of a rakugo boom, and even though it is a “manufactured comedy,” the fact that there are so many people who desire such suggests that we are at present starving just that much for laughter. In the end, we want to spend our lives enjoyably, laughing loudly.

-Japanese university student in a letter to the Yomiuri shinbun, 1966

It’s a show that’s maintained by the speed of the audience’s reactions. These reactions are a type of breath exchanged by those performing and those laughing. That’s why we use high fidelity microphones to capture a clear recording of the audience’s applause and vocal reactions. It’s comedy that the audience participates in creating.

-Fuji television producer Yokozawa Takeshi, 1981

The epigraphs above represent two poles in the evolution of television laughter in Japan: one in the early years of commercial broadcast television’s rise in the 1960s; and one after it had unquestionably established its dominance in the 1980s. During the period between the two, laughter had, like television itself, travelled from the periphery of Japanese society to its center. At one pole, it was perceived, by those such as the university student, to be something essentially human yet, irreconcilably foreign. Caught between traditional culture on the one hand and industrial mechanization on the other, Japanese had become, according to this viewpoint, estranged from this most human of activities, unable to enjoy the natural “balm” that might otherwise soothe the stresses of modern, high-speed life. Laughter had begun its return, the student suggests, but it was “manufactured”—the product of a rakugo boom springing from the new television medium, rather than from the performance halls of Japan.

At the other pole—a pole closer to the present—laughter is no longer an alien presence, no longer a balm to be topically applied to the weary wheels of an industrial society. As the Yokozawa characterizes the individuals who attend his shows as audience members, they are no strangers to laughter. It is in fact their native and most comfortable voice, a breath they share with the show’s performers in an organic creation of the comic television broadcast. They do not hunger for laughter. They breathe laughter and fun, and the television medium is their soapbox and megaphone. The television apparatus no longer needs to inject this life breath into society at large; it merely needs to point its microphones in its direction and broadcast it to televisions across the nation. Laughter is not, according to this later viewpoint, a “manufactured” phenomenon that television contributes to society at large. It is instead that society’s voice within the medium—its unmediated and vital energy, which television simply channels and broadcasts.
A study of Japanese television comedy of the 1970s, 80s and early 90s, the present work examines the evolution of laughter within both television and Japanese society at large. The early 1970s are often characterized as a turning point in Japan’s late 20th century history, in which it shifted away from the rapid industrial growth and the student activism of the 1960s, and pivoted towards a period of increasing consumerism and political apathy. Within narratives of the period, television is often singled out for its role in this shift. The medium, according to many such accounts, blurred the line between the real and the imaginary, and, enveloping viewers in a phantasmatic hyper-reality, lulled them into a complacent acceptance of a late capitalist status quo. In many ways, the evolution of television laughter sketched above parallels this historical narrative. Pivoting from a societal “balm” to a vital “breath” of the television broadcast, it might as well figure, in such accounts, as one of the basic materials in the construction of the medium’s hyper-reality. Whereas in the student’s account it serves as the safety valve to life in an industrialized society, in accounts such as Yokozawa’s it is a constitutive rhythm and logic of the post-industrial society, training the viewer’s desire to the television screen and the new reality that lay beyond. Like the “intensity” of euphoria, which Fredric Jameson locates in the postmodern, the later, post-1960s laughter seems to rise from the lips of no one in particular, but to float around the television studio as atmosphere, where it imbues the broadcast’s audiovisual image with a generalized air of giddy fun.

While I will not dispute such narratives in the following chapters, I will seek to complicate them. Focusing on television laughter as both discursive object and audiovisual element in the broadcast, I will trace changes in how its social role is imagined during these decades, and in how it is mobilized within the television medium. I will examine how producers increasingly turned to laughter as an affective buffer, as well as how a dominant strain within television discourse came to frame laughter as the authentic voice of a new media-centric culture. At the same time, I will explore a decline in the satirical, and a rise in a more ambivalent form of laughter—an arc that parallels the wider de-politicization and apathy of these years. Through a study of both the discourse and use of television laughter, I will emphasize the role historical and discursive contexts have played in shaping the medium’s reception and circulation. While television laughter, like television itself, often appeared to affect viewers on a visceral and unquestionable level, the perceived reach of such influence, I will argue, was rooted as much in such perceptions as they were in any aspect of laughter or the television medium. My aim here is both descriptive and critical. By examining this life “breath” of contemporary Japanese media culture, I hope to uncover both the mechanisms at work in the maintenance of that culture’s unassuming façade, and the possibilities for eruption and change that still lie below. Japan may have been laughing during these decades, but as will be seen in the following chapters, that laughter hid beneath its seemingly cheery surface discordant notes and jarring rhythms.

On Laughter and Television

One might well argue that the history of contemporary Japanese comedy and laughter amounts to a history of Japanese television itself (and vice versa). Denoted in Japanese by the near homophonic terms warai and owarai, laughter and comedy have, from broadcast television’s early days in Japan, played a central role in the medium’s development and reception. From variety shows such as Yume de aimashō (“Let’s Meet In Our Dreams,” 1961-6), to the 1970s and 80s juggernaut Hachi ji da yo! Zen’in shūgō (It’s 8 O’clock! Everyone Gather ‘Round, 1969-85), to perennial year-end comedy competitions such as the 2001-2010 M-1 Guran puri
(M-1 Grand Prix), some of the most highly viewed and noted programs have been shows either fully or partially devoted to laughter. With the regularity of waves, perennial comedy “booms” (būmu) have punctuated this history: Following the 1960s rakugo boom, the early 1980s witnessed a manzai (duo standup comedy) boom, and the turn of the century brought a similar comedy performance boom. Largely manufactured, the booms offer a yin to the yang of everyday programming—a moment of crisis and excitement that punctuates the monotony of television while restructuring what follows. Bringing to the screen a supposedly undiscovered and raw group of new comic talent, each wave injects new life into the networks’ lineups, while introducing viewers to a new generation and cast of television personalities. The comedy booms are of course not the only “booms” to fill this role, and other booms such as the recent “idol boom” follow similar playbooks. However, comedy booms are perhaps among the most cyclical, suggesting laughter’s firm position as a mainstay and staple of Japanese television programming. Notably, even when the tide of each boom recedes, laughter and the comedians that create it remain, and from daytime to late night, shows that seek to make viewers laugh—whether they be so-called neta bangumi (comic material and performance shows), sketch-based shows, or general variety shows—continue to saturate the Japanese airwaves.

The period of this study—the 1970s, 80s, and early 90s—represented a particularly successful one for television comedy, as it did for television in general. As Jayson Makoto Chun has detailed in his social history of early Japanese television, the period from Japanese broadcast television’s start in the early 1950s to the early 1970s marked a period of the medium’s initial spread and gradual acceptance within Japanese households. Following an initially slow period of adoption during the 1950s, household ownership of televisions during the 1960s jumped dramatically, until it reached near universal saturation by the end of the decade. Whereas television had previously served as one amongst several mass media including film and radio, it increasingly became, in the minds of many, the mass medium. Accordingly, the medium’s physical and metaphorical position within Japanese households shifted during this period, tracing an arc similar to that described by Lynn Spigel in the U.S. case, in which the television set went from foreign presence to a central and socially organizing object within the family living space. Following upon the heels of this initial period, the 1970s and 80s can be broadly understood as a second phase in Japanese television, in which the medium cemented its position within Japanese society at large. While the television set became an increasingly unremarkable object within people’s daily lives, it strengthened its reputation as the central producer of mass culture, and it became a matter of near-unquestioned common knowledge that the eyes of Japan’s mass public were trained singularly on the glassy screens of televisions across the nation. While the 1980s witnessed a gradual fragmentation of the medium’s viewership, this did little to challenge its imagined position at the center of a mass public: The interior boundaries of the public may have become more pronounced, but television remained the common element tying them all together, ubiquitous and ever present.

Gone from the post-1970s phase of television’s development was much of the heady optimism, which had originally accompanied the medium’s arrival, and which had envisioned in it a culturally and socially edifying potential. By the 1980s, commercial broadcasters had solidified their dominance, effectively bringing an end to debates, which had ensued from the 1950s through the 1960s regarding their ability to provide content that would serve the public’s interest. The airwaves, many had argued in the medium’s early days, were a public resource, and should be filled with content that was enlightening—a role best filled by the publically run NHK. Raising the example of the more developed U.S. television market, numerous critics opposed the
spread of commercial broadcasters during these early years, arguing that they would serve to the lowest common denominator with lowbrow, vulgar (teizoku) material. However, through the 1960s, commercial broadcasters began to chip away at NHK’s dominance, and so too did entertainment-oriented content begin to crowd out educational and so-called “edifying” (kyōyō) fare. Perhaps most indicative of this shift was the short history of the network NET TV: begun in 1957 by the film studio Tōei and other interests, it received its license on the condition that it would be an educational broadcaster, providing a minimum of 50% educational and 30% edifying programming. However, the channel failed to attract viewers, and by the time of its renaming to TV Asahi in 1977, its schedule had become dominated, like the remainder of its commercial peers, by entertainment programming.

By the 1980s, the well-known slogan of the commercial broadcaster Fuji TV would assume an air of unassailable truth: “If it’s not fun, it’s not TV.” While some critics would continue to assail the “massification” (taishūka) of Japanese culture, their critiques would increasingly fall on deaf ears. Massification had become established fact it would seem, and television now delivered the life spent “enjoyably [and] laughing loudly,” of which the above-cited university student had dreamed.

In his book Shakai wa warau (Society Laughs, 2002), the sociologist Ōta Shōichi’s provides a socio-historical framework within which to appreciate the growing centrality of television’s “fun” culture of comedy and laughter in Japanese media in specific, and society in general. Contemporary Japanese society, according to Ōta, has become a “society that laughs” (warau shakai), and television has played a central role in the history that established it as such. His argument rests in large part on an analysis of the evolution of Japanese television comedy from 1970s variety shows through the 1980s manzai (duo standup comedy) revival—an evolution that he argues played a central role in reconfiguring laughter’s social role in Japan. Within this historical analysis, Ōta contends that laughter—or, rather, the object of “getting laughs” (warai o toru)—has become the cornerstone of a manzai-esque communication style that informs social relations in Japan both on-screen and off. Central to Ōta’s analysis is the inversion of manzai’s tsukkomi-boke (straight man-funnyman) binary with the rise of television comedy. Ōta argues that the television era radically transformed the balance of the two roles, and that the boke funnyman has taken on an increasingly outsized role vis-à-vis the tsukkomi straight man. In pre-television manzai, according to Ōta, audiences were meant to identify with the tsukkomi, who would represent the everyman viewpoint as he (and sometimes she) responded to and countered the boke’s absurd and outlandish comments. Television comedy upended this dynamic, replacing it with one in which the tsukkomi typically played an almost absent role alongside the boke. Ōta concludes that this new dynamic not only encouraged viewers to identify primarily with the boke, but that it had lasting effects on both television comedy and social forms in general. Namely, as viewers sought to emulate the boke funnyman—and as television increasingly saturated Japanese society—they increasingly pursued the object of “getting laughs” in their everyday lives.

Ōta’s study introduces a welcome dose of historical specificity into the study of Japanese comedy, but it leaves largely unaddressed the role discursive processes and commercial interests played in the rise of television comedy and laughter during these years. Ōta’s argument relies on a sender/receiver model, and analyzes the activity of “getting laughs” as one between laugh getter (sender) and laugher (receiver). Within this framework, television models the interaction between the two parties through its portrayal of the comic performer and the laughing studio audience. Home viewers implicitly receive the model as message, and integrate it into their own lives as a sort of script in which they themselves assume the respective roles of laugh getter and...
laugher. Although it may be true that “getting laughs” represents a real and dominant social paradigm in contemporary Japan, Ōta’s sender/receiver model treats the process as a transparent one, and as a result discounts the social context and position of both sender and receiver, as well as the role of the television producers that model the relationship. In his discussion of the manzai boom and its social consequences, for example, Ōta notes how the producers of the then popular THE MANZAI (1980-2) sought to create a “more natural laughter” by replacing the typical older waraiya (paid “laughers”) of 1970s variety shows with teenage and university-age studio audiences. This new production strategy, Ōta argues, subsequently changed the relationship between performer and audience, leveling the distinction between the two parties so that the laughter they shared became one they shared as equals, creating a “feeling of solidarity” (ittaikan). While interesting, this argument rests upon the claim, put forward by the show’s producers and repeated by Ōta, that the laughter of the show’s youth audience represented a “more natural” and thus more authentic laughter. It leaves aside the question of why this youth laughter, included by design (and also edited in the final broadcast, one might add), should be considered any less artificial than the waraiya laughter that preceded it.

As will be seen in the following chapters, the manner in which Japanese television constructs the comedy broadcast and thus models the activity of “getting laughs” is hardly benign or innocent. The use of waraiya and other paid audience members did not disappear with the manzai boom, and persists to this day. While the term waraiya is often associated with the image of an easily tickled middle-aged women, paid audience members can span age and genders, and on many contemporary programs, tend to be young women. Beginning at least as early as the 1960s, the practice of using such “regular guests” began as a means of modulating audience reaction such as laughter, and ensuring that it would come at the right moments and have the tone and feel, which producers sought for their programs. While the practice appeared to have been ad hoc in the beginning, it is at present a very efficient one, in which networks typically outsource the job to “talent agencies” that specialize in screening and supplying the wage-based (and sometimes volunteer) workers. The dominance of women both young and old in this shadow industry underscores the importance of interrogating the manner in which television has modeled the process of getting laughs as one of male laugh getter and female laugher. As I will argue in the second chapter in particular, this arrangement represents a form of affective labor that both props up male-dominance within the comedy genre and industry, while also providing the very material that draws in viewers affectively, infecting them with laughter while feeding the impression that viewers and performers laugh together as members of a broad, mass public.

While the canned laughter of laugh tracks has drawn both speculative and analytic attention over the years, the function of live studio audiences and their careful management by producers remains under-theorized. In a historical analysis of the use of recorded laughter in North America, Jacob Smith argues that such laughter has served, from the earliest audio recordings to the present, as “an important index of authentic presence used to bridge the gap between recorded sound and the listener” since it is “particularly able to represent a sense of immediacy when mechanically reproduced for audiences” spatially and temporally removed from the performer. The live audience laughter of Japanese television comedy certainly plays a similar role, dissolving the salience of the television screen as mediating term and creating for viewers the impression of laughing while sitting before the performer’s very eyes. However, this sense of immediacy created by live audience laughter also functions to inject into any given program a veneer of reality that exceeds that of shared presence. Namely, it creates the aura of a
palpable social bond between not only performer and viewers, but also between viewers and one another. As one laughs together with the studio audience, one laughs together with an unseen mass public.

While the purposes for which producers use such in-studio laughter vary by degree, they do not differ in kind. As will be seen in Chapter 2, 1970s shows such as those of the comedian Hagimoto Kin’ichi consciously used middle-aged female waraiya, since the shows’ producers perceived their laughter to be just the right pitch for creating a warm and intimate tone. As youth laughter displaced this older laughter during the 1980s, it merely changed its imagined tone rather than its perceived function. Supposedly more raw and “natural,” it served as a proxy voice of the sensibilities of a new generation of the mass public. The above comments from Yokozawa comparing the studio audience’s laughter to a form of life’s breath represent one aspect of this thinking. Typically young and female, the audiences of this later era existed within the studio to ensure through their laughter that the comic performance was not only mildly humorous, but that it was the most current and radically hilarious. The sound of that laughter pouring through the television’s speakers served as both a stamp of that authenticity, and as a means for the viewer to join in and feel that they too stood at the cutting edge of the public’s comic sensibilities. As will be seen in the following chapters, this branding of shows through the voice of audience laughter had significant effects on how the shows were both received and circulated.

An Age of Laughter

The perceived expansion, from the 1970s onwards, of television and cognate media’s role in structuring social relations, as well as perceptions of social reality, has led many to characterize the period as one of increasing hyper-reality and fantasy. The sociologist Mita Munesuke, for example, has labeled the decades of the 1970s and 80s an “era of fiction” (kyokō no jidai). Dividing the half-century following the Asia-Pacific War (1937-45) into three periods, Mita argues that each can be characterized in terms of its changing relationship to a perceived reality. Preceding the later era of fiction within his framework, the period from 1945 to 1960 marked a time of “ideals” (riso); and the years of rapid economic expansion from 1960 to the early 1970s, a time of “dreams” (yume). For Mita, the “fictional” Japan of the 1970s onwards represents a betrayal of the possibility for social change and progress inherent in the respective ideals and dreams of the preceding two eras. Both the Japan of the postwar era and of the 1960s had sought to ground itself in reality, according to Mita. Where those of the postwar era had sought to realize their ideals within the constraints of lived reality, those of the 1960s had sought to change reality to fit their vision of a better society. In contrast, the Japan of the 1970s onwards, Mita argues, “had no love for reality,” seeking instead to sanitize it with a commercial, media-based fiction that was “cute” (kawaii), “chic” (oshare), and “clean” (kirei). In the background of Mita’s argument, the decline of student activism and the rise of a post-Fordist order loom large. Like many others, the sociologist identifies 1973 as a turning point in this narrative: The 1973 oil crisis is framed in his and many other accounts as the end of the Japanese economic “miracle,” and the beginning of its turn to a “soft” economy in which media and information play a central role. Although Mita does not address it directly, one could add to this narrative the 1972 Asama-Sansō incident, which many characterize as marking the implosion of 1960s student activism (see Chapter 4). Within many narratives of the era, it is this failure that ushered in a more apathetic generation, whose members were content with their roles as consumers of the “cute” and “clean” media surfaces of the new era.
In labeling the television era one of fiction, Mita’s argument bears resemblance to more general theories that characterize the era globally as one of the hyper-real. In loosely Marxist terms, Mita argues that the shallow, consumerist aesthetic of the 1970s onwards bespeaks a widespread desire to erase from the consumer object any trace of its production, by “‘deodoriz[ing]’ things that are real, things that are raw, and things that are ‘natural.’” The fiction of the era, for Mita, is a fiction of clean surfaces, wiped clear of the “dirty” labor involved in the production of the chic and the cute. While he stresses the continued existence and reality of the labor necessary for creating the fictional surface, his characterization of that surface bears echoes of Baudrillard’s definition of the postmodern simulacrum, as that which is characterized by “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality.” The fictions that Mita describes might not crowd out all else, but they have, in his telling, become pervasive enough to cover any hint of their origin, effectively creating a “precession of fictions” if not simulacra.

These points of resemblance are not coincidental, since postmodern theory, such as that of Baudrillard, provided during these years a template by which many in Japan analyzed the cultural shifts taking place. Notes that Japan shifted to a postmodern era—economically, socially and culturally—has in the years since assumed the status of established fact, even though many have since distanced themselves from the term itself. During the 1980s, scholars such as Kashiwagi Hiroshi and Teresa Morris-Suzuki, for example, argued that whereas the 1960s economic growth represented a form of “hard” industrial-based expansion, Japan from the 1970s had shifted towards a “soft” information and services based society. This framework’s echoes resonate echo still today in present scholarship on Japan and Japanese media culture in particular. In her 2010 study of Japanese dramas, Gabriella Lukács, for example, reiterates many of the same themes, describing a shift in Japanese media and society from the 1980s onward, in which individuals increasingly curate identities through affective relationships with television performers and commercial products—relationships which the television industry plays a central part in mediating. Whether through affect or information, television plays a central role in these narratives. It not only provides the easily consumed chic and clean fictions which Mita laments, it replaces a non-television reality with a ready-made, mediated and fictional one with few concrete and tangible antecedents.

While such accounts rightly emphasize the growing role television and other media have played from the 1970s onward in shaping contemporary perceptions of lived reality, they often overplay the significance of this role. As Jeffrey Sconce notes in his critique of Baudrillard-influenced strains of postmodernism, such treatments cede to television the power of “a mystery box somehow capable of exorcising human subjectivity and conjuring a hallucinatory realm that hovers above the referential rubble of contemporary culture.” Drawing a distinction with Baudrillard’s own polemic, Sconce argues that such theories are persuasive—at least in the North American case—because of an intertwinemment, dating back to the 19th Century and the early history of modern media, of theories of the occult and theories of media. This intertwine, according to Sconce, has continued to give shape to accounts both fictional and non-fictional of the “haunted” nature of electronic presence. Within this framework, Sconce emphasizes that claims that “television produces a separate and wholly sovereign ‘reality’” in fact predate the medium, and should be understood within this context.

A similar trend can be seen in the study of contemporary Japan, in which accounts both academic and popular have, since television’s early days, envisioned a blurring of the real and unreal. In their assumption of television’s unquestionable influence, studies such as the above, though not without merit, frequently replay in one form or another Baudrillard’s underlying
argument regarding the “dissolution of TV into life, [and] the dissolution of life into TV.” Such accounts overplay the power of television, as well as the gullibility of other viewers in believing its false reality. The cultural critic Yoshimoto Takaaki typifies this viewpoint, when he writes, for example, “While the space of televisions’ images is always a fiction, the viewer becomes immersed in the illusion that the real space of the room [in which they watch television] is contiguous with this other space.” In this vision of television’s mystical powers, the confusion of television and reality results not only from a reversal of lived reality and television’s fiction, but from a delirium in which the viewer forgets that the boundary of the screen separates the two. Progressively colonizing the world beyond the screen, there appears to be little hope for media’s retrenchment. Viewers, according to such thinking, have long forgotten the boundary between the two, and thus a possible return to a non-fiction “real” reality has long since been foreclosed.

Popular accounts of viewers’ own experiences of television and television laughter appear at first blush to verify the suspicions of those such as Yoshimoto. Many viewers of the popular comedy show Kin-chan no doko made yaru no! (How Far Will Kinchan Go!, 1976-86; see Chapter 2), for example, described at the time of its broadcasts feelings of being “pulled into the television” or of being caught up in the “warm” laughter that overflowed the boundaries of the television frame and poured into their own living rooms. Yet, the very fact that such viewers reflected upon this perceived experience suggests that their relationship to television’s reality was more nuanced and complex than a simple naïve belief in that reality or the “illusion” of contiguity between television and everyday life beyond the television frame. Instead, the notion of the “overflowing” television can be understood to figure as a discursive trope used to discuss the experience of the medium, rather than as an inherent quality of television medium. As a trope, it—and the laughter that gave vocal shape to it—played a significant role in shaping how viewers understood their own experience of viewing television. Yet, at the same time, such viewers did not fall prey to a psychotic belief that they lived in a television reality. They did believe, however, that television facilitated a mass public, and that laughter played a central role in mediating their relationship to that public.

Television did not banish the real, and in many ways depended upon it throughout the years covered by this study. Clearly delineating from its own artifice the notion of a real world that laid “out there,” the medium enjoyed a mutually constitutive relationship with an idea of the real. The supposedly raw and untouched exterior of the television studio served as a fertile horizon for the medium, continually offering something just outside the boundary of the camera lens, which television had yet to, but would some day in the near future, visualize. Television laughter often seemed to erupt from this beyond. Teasing, tickling and jeering, it certainly has been a chief beneficiary of the relationship between television’s artifice and the spectral real of the anti-television “real world.” Walking the line between the two, it served, in the language of Deleuze, both territorializing and de-territorializing roles, constantly performing a dance, in which it undulated to and fro between perceptions of television’s artifice, and fears that its artifice’s reach had become too pervasive to even be perceived. Its status within the public imagination wavered just as unpredictably. Framed on the one hand as an affective glue and authentic voice of television culture, it appeared to give auditory shape to television’s very claim to produce a hyper-reality capable of supplanting lived reality. Yet, on the other, it was such pretense that most frequently fell victim to its own mocking rhythms.

Continually upending the common sense of Japanese television, laughter seemed to constantly undermine its claim to the status quo. Theories of laughter have historically wavered over the question of whether the phenomenon serves an ordering or a disruptive function.
Bergson, for example, ascribed a territorializing function to laughter when he described it as a social “corrective,” which imposes order on society by “sing[ing] out and repres[ing]” rigidity and “absentmindedness” in its members.  

Bakhtin, on the other hand, explored its de-territorializing effects in his discussion of a carnivalesque laughter with an ability to level social distinctions between high and low. Considered in isolation, Japanese television laughter often proved disruptive in both its eruption and its circulation, as evidenced by the frequent controversies that accompanied each new boom and program. Yet, as will be seen in the chapters that follow, this laughter also gave shape to a rhythm, which efficiently integrated each hiccup and disruption, constantly incorporating new voices and tempos, and reconfiguring them into a new chorus of laughter. While it was through integrating such displacements that television as a medium and form continued to evolve, they were nonetheless displacements— spacings that contained in incipient form the potential for violent and unpredictable eruption.

This laughter—both as it exists within the television broadcast and within the written discourse that reflects upon it—offers an affectively rich landscape, within which to explore the rhythms and tensions that informed its eruptions throughout these years. It comprised what Eve Sedgwick has termed a “texture”—a surface that “includes repetition, but whose degree of organization hovers just below the level of shape or structure.” Such textures often obscure the histories that lay behind their formation, but their closer inspection can likewise reveal the history of erasures that lies behind their creations. The television laughter, which I explore here, had a short-term memory. As soon as it burst out, it quickly faded, carrying away with it the context of its eruption. The fact that it poured forth from the television medium only exacerbates this problem. Lowbrow, frivolous and fickle, it has too often slipped away without critical reflection, quickly forgotten with the approach of the next wave of laughter.

In the following chapters, I attempt to fill this lack of attention to its rhythms, by raising its eruptions to the surface once again and examining the overall texture created by their repetitions. Appraising that texture, I seek to perform what Sedgwick suggests as a “reparative” reading strategy, returning “again and again” to the sites of television laughter’s appearance. I do so not out of a desire to demystify the sources of that laughter, or to expose “what laughter really means.” I do so in order to follow the grooves left behind by the history of its repetition, and to appreciate how it came to overlay older voices of laughter, while laying the path for future bursts yet to come. The Japanese television laughter of these years was a stage, rather than a script. That is to say, it did not instruct viewers how to laugh or to feel, but merely provided them with the opportunity to laugh. This stage often worked in the manner that producers devised for it, channeling the right viewer feelings and sentiments back into the medium. Yet, it also created the opportunity for misfires. In what follows, I will explore both. Meditating upon guided eruptions alongside unplanned fits of laughter, I will tease out the space that exists inbetween, and reveal the possibility for displacement, which still exists therein.

From Rhythm to Document: Tracing Laughter’s Path

The present work traces the evolution of television laughter from the early 1970s to the early 1990s, by dividing these years into roughly two, overlapping phases. The first phase, covered in the first and second chapters, begins in the early 1970s and ends in the mid-1980s. It marks the rise of what I will term here a “laughing mass public,” in which television shows attempted to create a communally binding form of laughter that would join viewers in an extended television family. As will be seen in these chapters, producers’ attitudes towards
television laughter shifted radically during the early 1970s, as a new generation of producers came to view it not as an additive, but as something to be placed center stage for viewers to fully listen to and experience. In doing so, they brought to television laughter a more nuanced view of its potential social role, reflecting wider intellectual shifts of the era. Audience laughter, this new generation came to believe, could function not only to guide viewers in their decoding of the performance, but could also serve to reconfigure the affective distance between viewers and performers, ultimately cementing television’s position at the center of the new social and cultural order.

The first chapter, “The Rhythm of Laughter,” introduces the concept of a laughing mass public, and considers how producers of the comedy show Hachi ji da yo! Zen’in shūgō (It’s 8 O’clock! Everyone Gather ‘Round, 1969-1985) contrived to produce, on the show, a socially unifying form of comedy. A popular and long-running program hosted by the comic band The Drifters, Zen’in’s numerous bits and catchphrases delighted as many viewers as they scandalized, and served as both cultural locus and lightning rod for debate. In this chapter, I identify a rhythm of laughter that began with the show’s high-pace opening sequence, but also circulated beyond the show’s broadcast in the form of its bits and catchphrases. Following the rhythm’s circulation, I argue that it traced the outlines of a viewing public that exceeded the boundaries of the show’s discreet viewership. In doing so, I throw into relief commercial television’s growing clout in defining and controlling the new virtual public spaces of the television era. While many complained of the show’s lowbrow humor, this controversy served in itself as a means of focusing public discourse around its broadcasts, the voices of both its fans and its critics joining in the chorus of its laughter. I argue however that laughter folded into this mass public a texture of interior nuance and discord that, while often foreclosing the possibility of critical reflection, left open the possibility for displacements and eruptions.

The second chapter, “The Tone of Laughter,” focuses on the television career of comedian Hagimoto Kin’ichi and his hybrid drama-variety show Kinchan no doko made yaru no! (How Far Will Kinchan Go! 1976-1986). It explores laughter’s role—and that of gendered laughter in particular—in shaping intimate spaces through the television medium, complementing the first chapter’s focus on open, virtual public spaces. Featuring the comedian Hagimoto Kin’ichi as on-screen father, Kindoko won a loyal following of viewers and critics who praised the “warmth” of his parodic television family, describing it as affectively more real and compelling than depictions of the family in traditional dramatic portrayals. Through close readings of episodes from the show and the critical discourse surrounding it, I consider how the show created a consensus that its laughter was tonally warm, and thus well fit to the domestic space in which television would be viewed. The chapter argues that the show’s producers created this impression by inserting the show and Hagimoto’s public persona within contemporary discourses on laughter, domesticity, and normative femininity. This analysis of the show and its reception highlights the ascendant role commercial television played in shaping and harnessing these discourses, and re-assesses, through the lens of the affective experience of 1970s and 80s media culture, the cultural shifts taking place in Japan during these decades.

The final two chapters of the dissertation turn to the 1980s and early 1990s, and consider how television laughter shifted during these decades from an affectively binding rhythm to a signifier of the supposedly unmediated voice of viewers and the virtual community they formed. By the 1980s, this view of laughter had achieved the status of a social fact, and having moved from the periphery to the center, television laughter underwent an inversion. The question was no longer one of whether, but of what kind of laughter should play a prominent role in the television
broadcast. Where programs of the previous decade sought out a socially unifying form of laughter, shows of the 1980s increasingly sought to incorporate a more aggressive and thus supposedly more authentic laughter—a laughter more typically associated with youth audiences. In the eyes of producers (and of many television critics), the issue of mobilizing laughter to integrate viewers into a viewing public appeared to now be a moot one. Television had made Japan into a country that laughed around the clock, and against this backdrop, producers increasingly searched for the right kind of laughter that would meet the needs of their brand and audience. In the case of shows seeking to reach the sensibilities of the so-called television generation, their producers sought out a laughter that embodied the pulse and breath of that generation, while also assuaging the cynicism of that generation that television itself had produced a world of inauthentic fakes. Within this context, television laughter offered an imagined rupture of the real into the façade of the medium’s artifice.

The third chapter, “The Age of Laughter,” examines these shifts within the context of the 1980-81 manzai (duo standup comedy) revival, and investigates how the revival reconfigured participation in the laughing mass public, structuring it as a form of listening in on youth laughter. Within this context, it explores the material of revival comedians such as Kitano Takeshi who often flirted with restrictions on speech imposed by broadcast regulations, and argues that they did so not to liberalize those restrictions but as a means of endowing their television performances with an aura of authenticity. By gesturing toward the limits of the rules of broadcast, these comedians gestured towards the existence of a spectral, uncensored whole performance, which served as signifier of an absent reality imagined to exist beyond the boundaries of television. Within revival-era broadcasts, youth laughter functioned to fill in this absence and thus serve as a mark of the performance’s authenticity. Listening in on this laughter and the new manzai performances, viewers strained to hear in their rhythms the pulses of a youthful, media-centric culture. As such, it came to figure as what Raymond Williams terms a “structure of feeling.” Arising unpredictably, it appeared, to many, to contain within its rhythms the possibility for violent eruption that lay latent in the country’s youth and the media they consumed.

The fourth chapter, “Documenting Laughter,” extends this analysis of the seemingly explosive laughter of post-manzai revival Japanese television. In this chapter, I focus on the reality-show-style “documentary variety” genre that rose to prominence during the early 1990s, situating the genre within a wider context of Japanese television programming that has sought to “hit the streets” in search of novel and interesting material. Examining the genre’s frequent focus on urban spaces and crowds, I term its aesthetic as one of the “close-out,” as opposed to the close-up, in which the genre extracts these spaces from their historical and social contexts, and reframes them as spaces of laughter and play. Following the genre’s path as it diverged from traditional, more socially engaged forms of documentary, I seek to resuscitate the potential for disruption and change that nonetheless still inhabits the genre’s documents in the form of laughter. I return to this potential briefly in the dissertation’s conclusion, and consider how documentary variety and other forms of television comedy have influenced contemporary digital and social media.

While the dissertation attempts to be broad in its coverage of Japanese television comedy, it does not intend to be exhaustive. For example, I have chosen here to focus on examples exclusively from commercial television, while leaving unaddressed examples from the public broadcaster NHK. This decision was shaped by the scope of the argument: I am concerned here with the growing influence of private interests in the new virtual public spaces of television and
cognate media—a narrative that is more effectively framed from the perspective of commercial broadcasters. This is not however meant to discount the influence and appeal of comedy shows appearing on public television in Japan. Further, I have picked only a handful of comedy shows to represent the general evolution of Japanese television laughter I have charted above. Unfortunately, this has also meant excluding numerous shows, both significant for their broad viewership and place within the history of Japanese television comedy. The most notable absence in this regard is a sustained analysis of the rise of the entertainment juggernaut Yoshimoto Kōgyō and its “Kansai” brand. However, once again this is a limitation of scope: I focus here on Japan’s national media market, which is centered physically and culturally in Tokyo. I hope nonetheless to have hit the right notes in sketching a thematic history of Japanese television comedy and laughter, and outlined in the process their intertwinement with the medium’s place within the public imagination, as well as with their own historical moment.
Chapter 1
The Rhythm of Laughter: 
*Hachi ji da yo! Zen'in shūgō* and the Laughing Mass Public

In a 1975 letter to the *Asahi shinbun*, a reader expressed a sense of bored familiarity with the cycle of repetition on the Saturday evening comedy show *Hachi ji da yo! Zen'in shūgō* (*It’s 8 O’clock! Everyone Gather ‘Round*, 1969-1985; hereafter *Zen’in shūgō*).

Featuring slapstick sketches by the comic band The Drifters and musical performances by their celebrity guests, *Zen’in shūgō* had, by the mid-1970s, transformed from a runaway success into an established show synonymous in the public imagination with contemporary television itself. The *Asahi* reader complained, however, that the show’s sketches had become predictable, slipping into content that was repetitive and monotonous. His children had also noticed this slide, the reader noted, and they “watch while reading a book, looking up briefly to laugh only for an unusual gag.”

The reader’s feelings of tedium did not represent the complaints of a lone crank unable to get the joke. In a 1973 letter to the *Yomiuri shinbun*, an elementary school student wrote that she “had grown bored” with the show’s weekly reuse of familiar segments that “constantly repeat the same thing and only sometimes change guests.”

In a similar 1972 letter to the same paper, a young housewife complained that The Drifters appeared to have run out of material and relied simply on recycled filler segments.

Despite such complaints, the monotony of repetition failed to drive *Zen’in*’s viewers away: throughout its broadcast history, it commanded consistently high ratings (it averaged 27.5% over its sixteen-year run according to one account), and earned labels such as *obake bangumi* (zombie show) and *kaibutsu bangumi* (monster show) due to its outsized success.

In his 2001 memoire, *Zen’in* producer Izukuri Yoshimi would describe the show’s hour-long broadcast as sixty minutes of non-stop excitement, gushing that each week the show ended “before you knew it,” carried along by “a maelstrom of laughter [warai no uzu].”

The above viewer letters suggest, however, that this maelstrom of laughter spread across *Zen’in*’s audience in unexpected and uneven ways. Rather than being swept up by the show’s maelstrom, many viewers appeared to have returned to the show each week in the manner of the *Asahi* reader. “While I think the show is silly,” he admitted, “I end up watching it with my children, maybe because of the easy mood of Saturday nights.”

Such viewers laughed in spite of themselves, implicated within the show’s mass audience yet watching as if over another’s shoulders. They represented a peculiar position within the imagined space of *Zen’in*’s public—viewers who understood themselves as other than *Zen’in*’s ideal viewers, but nonetheless enveloped within the cacophony of its laughter.

Approaching *Zen’in* from the perspective of these third-person viewers—peering over the shoulders of its fans and its critics—I will examine in this chapter how the show and surrounding critical discourse articulated the show’s public as a laughing mass public. While recognizing the allure of *Zen’in*’s humor and laughter, I will employ this third person perspective in order to denaturalize widely accepted portraits of the show, which have, from its original broadcasts to the present, portrayed its public as a homogeneous mass audience. My analysis will focus on how the show and surrounding critical discourse addressed the show’s mass public and the laughter that defined it, and identify, in its comedy and circulation, an elastic and polyvocal rhythm of laughter that was capable of absorbing the disparate sounds of delighted chuckles, bored sighs and exasperated groans. In doing so, I will argue that *Zen’in*’s public reveals the outlines of the new mass publics taking shape in the 1970s: publics no longer given form within
physical spaces, but within media-centric virtual spaces, in which shared affective experiences, such as laughter, played a central and coordinating role.

Zen’in’s laughing mass public developed in the wake of commercial broadcasters’ rise to dominance in the Japanese media market, and as such, its status as a public space (or what some might characterize as a quasi-public space) must be understood against the backdrop of the debates that surrounded the advent and ascent of private television broadcasting in 1950s and 60s Japan. While the nationally run NHK dominated the nascent television landscape in the early 1950s, it was quick to perceive a threat in the arrival of commercial broadcasters during that decade.5 Such commercial entities, NHK argued at the time, were antithetical to the inherent “publicness” (kōkyōsei) of the broadcast medium, and commercial broadcasting’s spread, it warned, would lead to a “vulgarization” (teizokuka) of television content. As a publically held company, NHK was better positioned, they claimed, to fill the airwaves with content that would serve the public’s interests and welfare. Answering to such critiques, commercial broadcasters, for their part, countered that viewers, as representatives of the public, were best positioned to decide for themselves what was in their best interest.9

In a 1965 study, the media critic Uriu Tadao aptly noted that the debate over commercial television stemmed in large part from a weak definition of the term “publicness.” NHK’s defenders, in particular, frequently drew a false equivalence between state power and publicness, according to Uriu. NHK was not a public company, he stressed, but a ‘state-run’ (kan’ei) one. The airwaves were certainly a public resource, he argued, but it did not follow from this fact that NHK, as a state-run broadcaster, should hold a monopoly on that resource.10 The struggle between NHK and its commercial rivals, he implied, was not one between public and private interests, but one over a limited resource, between two different parties who claimed to operate in the public’s interest in word only.

Recasting the debate over the rise of commercial television as one between state-run and non-state-run interests, Uriu’s critique unsettles narratives, which frame the rise of commercial broadcasters as the privatization of a previously public resource. Considered in retrospect, however, the debate between NHK and its commercial rivals can be understood to turn on more than a simple failure to rigorously define the term “publicness.” As I will underscore in the latter half of this chapter, the debate reflected a wider struggle over the right to define the term itself—a right that would ultimately figure as one to define the virtual public spaces being formed and mediated by broadcast television. In his re-examination of the term ‘mass media,’ James Carey notes that the “the fundamental form of power” in an age of mass media “is the power to define, allocate and display [reality].”11 Indeed, the rise of mass publics such as that of Zen’in—a rise that coincided with the spread of mass media produced affective experiences, such as television-produced laughter—accompanying the increasing clout of commercial broadcasters in their bid to “define, allocate and display” both the reality of virtual public spaces and the specter of the mass audience that would fill that space. Although created and maintained by private commercial interests (in Zen’in’s case, the commercial broadcaster TBS), the mass publics, which shows such as Zen’in commanded, were public precisely because the shows and their broadcasters defined them as such. Falling within the genre of kōkai bangumi (shows open to the public), shows such as Zen’in displayed the laughter of their mass audiences literally “in the open,” inviting all to join in its rhythms and cadences.

Within this openness lay the keys to Zen’in’s success, as well as the allure of its laughing mass public. “Open to the public,” Zen’in’s comic material and its laughter circulated each week beyond the limits of its hour-long broadcast, spreading in the form of bits and pieces of gags and
one-liners, which jumped from mouth to mouth and page to page of newspapers and weeklies. The show was particular skilled at producing such *ryūkōgo*, or “catchphrases,” and proliferated numerous examples during its decade and a half broadcast.\(^{12}\) A viewer might perform a popular *Zen’in* bit for friends, and another might purchase a Drifters record that set a *Zen’in* catchphrase to song. Print media amplified this chorus, citing and re-citing its verses, as critics and viewers discussed, applauded and deplored the show’s jokes and catchphrases. This chorus of laughter sketched the outlines of a public that figured, to borrow the words of Michael Warner, as “a space of discourse organized by ... discourse itself” that “comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation.”\(^{13}\) As a “space of discourse,” *Zen’in*’s public represented one not limited to the finite circulation of its primary text (i.e., its broadcast). Circulating as bits and pieces of catchphrases and gags, the open text of *Zen’in* delineated the space of its public as one that encompassed anyone who had heard one of the gags or catchphrases retold or debated—a space of discourse so expansive that it might as well have included anyone who had watched television or read a magazine during the decade and a half of *Zen’in*’s broadcast.

Each critical account, each viewer letter and each retold joke formed a beat, and together those beats formed a rhythm—what I identify here as a “rhythm of laughter”—that held the show’s public together. This rhythm began every Saturday night at eight o’clock with the show’s high-paced opening sequence. If what came afterwards appeared tediously repetitive to some viewers, it was so by design—a further extension of its logic of rhythm. “If we did something different every week, our guests would get lost,” The Drifters leader Ikariya Chōsuke told the *Shūkan asahi* in a 1979 interview. “There are people waiting every Saturday night for our comedy. It’s become a habit [shūkan].”\(^{14}\) *Zen’in*’s repetitive content created in itself a rhythm that, reminiscent of Raymond Williams’s notion of broadcast flow, structured its viewers’ habits, bringing them back week after week.\(^{15}\) However, its rhythm of laughter pulsed beyond the boundaries of broadcast flow and individual habits. Just as it absorbed the individual guffaws, grimaces and sighs of viewers and non-viewers alike, it likewise assimilated the rhythms of non-televisual media, such as print, giving form to a virtual public space centered about but not restricted to the television broadcast.

Territorialized by the show’s rhythm of laughter, *Zen’in*’s public represents what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have termed an “assemblage.” The show’s titular imperative to “gather ‘round” (zen’in shūgō)—an imperative announced at the beginning of each broadcast by the Drifters and their live audience—was quite literally a command to assemble, or what Deleuze and Guattari would identify as a “mass media act.”\(^{16}\) The show’s rhythm of laughter reinforced this territorializing move, coordinating the movements of both its viewers and non-viewers into those of a coherent and laughing whole. Yet, at the same time, it never fully assimilated these discordant and otherwise autonomous voices (e.g., the sighs of boredom, and the grimaces of disgust) into a mechanistic totality. Instead, it drew them into a laughing mass public in which, as Michael DeLanda defines a Deleuzian assemblage, “the parts are [not] mutually constituted and fused into a seamless whole” but instead “may be detached from [the whole].”\(^{17}\) Indeed, the disparate voices of *Zen’in*’s mass public represented something other than “a seamless whole.” While they may have laughed together, they did so in fits and starts, and never in true unison.

In order to examine how *Zen’in*’s rhythm of laughter drew its members into a coherent mass public, I will begin where that rhythm started each week, analyzing in detail the structure of the show’s opening sequence and song. Through this analysis, I will demonstrate how the opening sequence set a pace of laughter that not only carried *Zen’in*’s hour-long broadcast, but also opened the boundaries of its laughing public at large, inviting the show’s viewers to
incorporate its rhythm into their daily lives. In the latter half of the chapter, I will then turn to the popular critical discourse surrounding Zen‘in, and examine the consensus, between both the show’s defenders and critics, that the rhythm of Zen‘in’s laughter exercised an unmediated and transparent influence akin to a “wavelength” which held Japan’s masses [taishū] in thrall. While tracing the discursive construction of this idea of a “wavelength” of laughter, I will seek to problematize the notion that the show’s laughter led to the creation of a truly seamless and homogeneous mass public. Stressing the spacing that remained between each beat of laughter, I will instead emphasize the internal variation and nuance that defined its rhythm as an often discordant and unwieldy one—a quality of television laughter that would come to define the comedy programming that arose in the show’s wake.

A World of Rhythm and Laughter

From the days of its earliest broadcast, the fortunes of Zen‘in were intricately entwined with those of show hosts The Drifters, as the success of The Drifters was likewise entwined with that of Zen‘in. Throughout the show’s sixteen-year history, the erstwhile comic band served as principle performers and as synecdoche for the show itself: In many accounts, the band’s nickname Dorifu functioned as an interchangeable referent to Zen‘in itself. Some Zen‘in producers even went as far as to compare The Drifters to “pronouns” for television itself—a phenomenon, they claimed, explained the tendency of critics to single out the group and their show in critiques of television’s corrupting influence on contemporary society. Even today, the melody of Zen‘in’s Drifters-performed opening and ending theme songs continue to circulate through television spots and advertisements, in which the tunes serve as readily recognized auditory referents to Zen‘in shūgō, as well as the merriment and sense of community that nostalgic accounts have subsequently attributed to the show.

Although The Drifters existed in name as a rockabilly band since the mid-1950s, the lineup that first appeared on Zen‘in did not take shape until 1964, when the band’s new leader Ikariya Chōsuke reconceived the band’s format and focus after the departure of several key members. Under Ikariya’s leadership, The Drifters transformed from a nightclub band into a sketch-based comic band in the vein of the then popular Crazy Cats. However, whereas the Crazy Cats, who belonged to the same Watanabe Productions talent agency, continued to emphasize their talents as musicians who performed comic roles on television and in film, The Drifters, with their rise to prominence on Zen‘in, focused their energies predominantly on the television medium and their on-screen comic personas. These personas in turn provided the basic building blocks for the largely formulaic construction of the typical Zen‘in sketch: While the portly Takagi Bū played the role of bumbling clod, Nakamoto Kōji and Arai Chū quietly subverted the will of Ikariya. As the group’s youngest and most popular members, Katō Cha and later Shimura Ken, who replaced Arai upon his 1974 departure, would antagonize the leader more openly, engaging the laughter of the show’s live audience with their schoolyard mischief. Benefiting from a family name partially homophonous with the word ikari (‘anger’), Ikariya kept these members in line with frequent and almost absurd outbursts.

As a program, Zen‘in belonged to the sub-genre of variety shows, which incorporated live audiences within their broadcast and were broadly known a kōkai bangumi, or literally, “shows open to the public.” Many of these programs had taken off during the late 1960s, seeking to inject a sense of spontaneity and unpredictability into television. Channeling this tradition, Zen‘in mobilized its live audience to many of the same ends, embellishing the program’s
energetic feel with frequent images of its primarily adolescent live audience members. Yet, the program was, at the same time, anything but unpredictable or spontaneous. In fact, Zen‘in followed a near-identical schedule throughout its decade and a half history: Each Saturday’s broadcast began with the show’s trademark opening song, followed by a “situational” comedy sketch by The Drifters, guest musical performances, and, finally, a shorter sketch such as the recurring “Young Men and Women’s Choir Brigade,” in which guest stars joined The Drifters in a staged choir practice. Furthermore, in a departure from the largely unscripted material of its immediate predecessors, Zen‘in’s broadcasts represented the result of a two-week writing and rehearsal process, in addition to a similar effort expended in building the extravagant sets designed specifically for each week’s sketches.

Rather than as a mark of its unpredictability, the live Zen‘in audience and broadcast served as document and proof of the temporal simultaneity of the show’s viewing public. Namely, it attested, through its visual presence, to the assumed fact that most, if not all, households across Japan were watching and laughing together. Frequent shots of Zen‘in’s live audience provided an representation of this public, and beamed onto television screens images of young children and their parents laughing at and delighting in The Drifters’ slapstick comedy. While this visual and auditory incorporation of audience laughter served to certify the “liveness” of the broadcast, it also performed the additional function of representing, to its viewers, the people who ideally composed its public. Advances in camera technologies and techniques aided Zen‘in in integrating these images more fluidly within the overall broadcast. Whereas early kōkai bangumi shows typically spliced momentary and frontal shots of the laughing audience into the main visual feed of the stage, Zen‘in employed a combination of blocking and mobile cameras to move in and out of perspectives that would most frequently portray the faces and silhouettes of the audience within the same frame as The Drifters. The resulting broadcast image represented a televisual space that joined performers, the live audience and ultimately television viewers into a coherent and familiar public, contrasting that of the earliest kōkai bangumi, in which audience and performers would appear to lie on opposite and incommensurable sides of the stage’s fourth wall.

Paralleling this visual erasure of the boundary between stage and audience, Zen‘in’s opening sequence and song established the rhythm of cheerful laughter that brought performers and audience together, setting the pace and tone of the hour-long show. From 1971 until Zen‘in’s final broadcast, the show’s opening sequence followed the same basic blueprint. Performed each week before a unique live audience, it inscribed within the broadcast’s audiovisual image the show’s titular imperative to join The Drifters in an hour of merriment and laughter: At eight o’clock, the broadcast began with a close-up of Ikariya Chōsuke occupying center stage. Looking directly into the camera, he announced, “It’s eight o’clock [hachi ji da yo].” The screen then switched to a shot of the four remaining Drifters members standing amongst the audience, and returning Ikariya’s call, they shouted alongside the audience: “Everyone gather ‘round [zen’in shūgō]!” As the onstage band played the opening song’s lead-in music, the four members ran down the aisle, touching the hands of audience members. The screen then switched to a wide shot of the evening’s guests joining the Drifters on stage. After each had assumed their position, Ikariya engaged one of the guest celebrities in a moment of small talk (e.g., “Are you ready?”). Finally pointing into the camera once again, he shouted, “Let’s go,” and the opening song would begin (see Figure 1).
Earlier 1960s era variety shows (kōkai bangumi and otherwise) featured similar invitations to viewers to join with performers, but as if awkwardly conscious of the television medium, these invitations embedded within their language and performance frequent gestures towards the television camera and screen—a gesture largely absent from Zen’in broadcasts. The Crazy Cats hosted music and comedy variety show Shabondama horidei (Bubble Holiday, 1961-1972) offers a typical example of this contrast. In an April 1964 broadcast, the Cat’s co-hosts, the twin singers the Peanuts, begin the show facing the camera, and invite their home viewers to join with them in song:

Good evening, everybody. Let’s take cheer and sing together: You on that side of the television, and us on this side of the television.27

Recorded in the absence of a live audience, such openings configured Shabondama as a duet between performers and home viewers. The Peanut’s invitation to “sing together” highlights the show’s communal pretenses, but in the same breath emphasizes the physicality of the television set as barrier between the performers “on this side,” and the viewers “on that side.” This conscious treatment of the tangibility of the television apparatus extended throughout the program: Frequently approaching the center camera as if to peer into the living rooms of their viewers and thus mirror their act of viewing, Shabondama’s cast performed throughout as if in a vacuum, from which the sound of audience laughter was conspicuously absent (see Figures 2, 3). Certainly, viewers laughed at the show (it would not have survived for over ten years otherwise), but they laughed “on that side of the television,” while the Crazy Cats and the Peanuts laughed “on this side of the television.”
In contrast, *Zen’in*’s opening sequence framed the show’s broadcast, as its title would suggest, as a “gathering” of cast members, guest celebrities, live audience and viewers. Conspicuously absent from the show’s titular imperative, however, was any mention of the physicality of the television set as meeting point. *Zen’in*’s call and response introduction invited viewers to gather at no place in particular. Although the English translation of the phrase *zen’in shūgō* used here (Everyone gather ‘round) may be read as a deictic gesture toward the gathering point of the television, the original Japanese—which could be more accurately, if less elegantly, translated as “everyone assemble”—is less specific in its implied gathering point. While ordering the performers to gather on stage, the phrase also addressed the show’s viewers, serving as an open call to assemble in the virtual, ungrounded space of the show’s televisual public.

*Zen’in*’s dynamic use of cameras during the opening sequence mirrored the spatial abstractness of the show’s hyper-real public as gathering point. Whereas *Shabondama*’s opening relied on a fixed center camera focused on the show’s performers, *Zen’in*’s cameras, as noted above, took advantage of mobile cameras to float freely through the space of the public hall during its opening, zooming in on individual guests only to quickly cut to wide shots that encompassed both stage and audience. Since they were not restricted to the use of a single camera angle as conduit between home viewer and performer, *Zen’in*’s production staff was at liberty to construct the space and time of its public free from the limited perspective of a fixed viewpoint. Notably, *Zen’in*’s performers rarely looked directly into the camera following Ikariya’s two opening addresses of the center camera. The omission of such deictic gestures towards camera and screen had a salient impact on the look and feel of *Zen’in*’s public as realized within the broadcast. Namely, it erased these objects’ presence as boundaries between viewers and performers, and freed producers to visually create a virtual public space joining, rather than separating, the two parties.

Moving fluidly throughout the space of the hall (the only tangible referent to the place of show’s public), *Zen’in*’s cameras constructed a representation of the space of the show’s public, in which the Drifters moved effortlessly between stage and audience, unencumbered by the machinery of broadcast television. In his discussion of 1980s U.S. television, the media scholar Jonathan Caldwell notes the rise of a “televisual” aesthetic that, through advances in broadcast equipment such as computerization and mobile cameras, created “an inherently omniscient point of view and subjectivize[d] it around a technological rather than human center.”

Although its first broadcasts began a decade earlier than the shows Caldwell most directly addresses, *Zen’in*’s visual aesthetic—particularly that used during the show’s opening sequence—reflect his notion of a televisual one in incipient form. Through extensive use of mobile cameras, the opening created sweeping “omniscient” views of the public halls from which the show broadcast each week. At such moments, the equipment (e.g., cameras, scaffolding and lights), which made these
perspectives possible, appeared, but it took the shape of stage props that lay scattered about the stage and hall. In the end, Zen’in’s audiovisual image generally downplayed the physicality of such representatives of the media apparatus, and freed itself of their ballast, creating a sense of weightlessness. Such weightlessness in turn underscored the abstractness of a television gathering (i.e., its public) that, while temporarily staged within the concrete space of the public hall, ultimately inhabited a virtual space that superseded the temporal limits of the broadcast, and the geographical confines of studio and home. Suspending its performers, live audience and viewers within this space, Zen’in created the impression that they laughed together as one cheery and seamless whole, unobstructed by the technological objects that mediated their union.

Adapted from a Hokkaido folk song, Zen’in’s opening song—sung after the show’s cast had gathered on stage—embellished the communal atmosphere of this de-hierarchized and weightless space, and injected into it the jocular and up-beat mood, which its playful lyrics and sugar pop melody embodied.

Chorus:
en’yaa kōrayatto Heave ho, hey-ya ho
dokkoi jan jan kōrya Hey hey, hey-ya heave ho

Verse 1:
ha~ dorifu mitasani Oh~! I saw The Drifters
(ha dōshita dōshita) (Oh! What’d you say? What’d you say?)
chan’neru korya mawashitara Flipping through channels hey-yeah
(ha sorekara dōshita) (Oh! So tell me more!)
kyō mo na~, kyō mo aeta yo kōrya Today, oh, today I met them once again
soresanā go’nin no iro’otoko hey-yeah
Those, oh, five charming men

[repeat chorus]

Verse 2:
ha~ bangumi meibutsu Oh! Our speciality
(ha dōshita dōshita) (Oh! What’d you say? What’d you say?)
sutekina kora gesuto yo That’d be our lovely guests hey-yeah
(ha sorekara dōshita) (Oh! So tell me more!)
uta mo na~, uta mo tanoshiya kōrya And our songs, oh! Our songs are really
soresanā mina de waiwai sawagō fun hey-yeah
So let’s make some merry noise

[repeat chorus]

Verse 3:
ha~ doyō hachiji wa Oh! Saturday eight o’clock
(ha dōshita dōshita) (Oh! What’d you say? What’d you say?)
minasan kora waratte chōdai ne Everybody please laugh hey-yeah
(ha sorekara dōshita) (Oh! So tell me more!)
heso de na~ heso de wakashita kōrya When we split our sides, hey-yeah
soresanā cha de kanpai da  And we’ll make a toast

[repeat chorus]³¹

The show’s opening song preserves the call-and-response chorus (en’ya korayatto) and basic melody of its source song, the festival folk song “Hokkai bon uta” (“Hokkaidō Obon Song”). However, it did so by transposing the original’s folk elements to a fast-paced pop rhythm, while replacing the verses with lyrics intended to be comical and lighthearted. Whereas the lyrics of a popular version of the original folk song performed by Mihashi Michiya, for example, include pastoral and romantic imagery, The Drifters’ version serves as a cheeky tribute to its own television public: It compares its guests to a “specialty,” and boasts of the “merry noise” produced by performers and guests as they join in the show’s “really fun” songs.³² With such lyrics, the Drifters song cited a folk aesthetic, but in the same manner in which it transposed the musical structure of “Hokkai bon uta,” it fixed these citations within a mosaic of similarly displaced cultural allusions (e.g., the opening’s pop rhythm and sensibilities, etc.). While it drew on the original song’s festive associations as a song performed during the Obon holiday (a holiday celebrated traditionally at the end of summer, when the spirits of the dead are thought to return to their earthly homes), it transplanted these associations to its virtual public, and in the process uprooted them from their original geographical and temporal context, reconfiguring them as the sounds and rhythms of a community joined in the “merry noise” of song and laughter.

The new song playfully imagines the rituals of this community, as ones in which its members “flip through the channels” in order to “meet again today ... five charming men.” The opening sequence’s sole reference to the physicality of the television, these first lines emphasize television’s role in facilitating the viewer’s meeting of the Drifters. In doing so, they emphasized the embodied and tactile act of interacting with the show by “tuning in” to its broadcast, rather than highlighting the television’s physical presence as mediating term. The object of this “meeting” between Zen’in performers and viewers was, of course, laughter—a point the third verse underscores. Inverting the Japanese idiom heso de cha o wakasu (figuratively, “to split one’s sides;” literally, “to boil tea on one’s stomach”), this final verse declares that viewers and performers will “make a toast” with “tea boiled on our bellies.” While lightheartedly reimagining the scene of shared laughter as a scene of social intimates sharing food and drink, this wordplay draws into relief Zen’in’s underlying assumptions regarding the social function of laughter. As treated by the show’s opening song, laughter, in the form the show impressed upon its viewers, was an essentially socially binding and intimate activity.

Given the frenetic pace at which the Drifters and their guest performers delivered the song’s lyrics, few viewers likely reflected, however, on their discrete meaning during Zen’in’s opening moments. Choreographed to intricate hand gestures, the song’s live performance focused more on its game-like aspects than on its lyrical content (see Figure 4). Watching singers and celebrities fumble the confusing and high-paced gestures, live audience members and television viewers could partake in the excitement of this game, while enjoying a sense of proximity to celebrities who, in other venues, normally delivered polished performances. Repeated throughout, the original folk en’ya korayatto chorus, which The Drifters’ song preserves, heightened this festive and playful atmosphere. A variation on the Japanese phrase en’ya korya—a phrase used to coordinate group movement during physical labor—the call-and-response structure of this chorus created an impression of joined effort between performers, guests, and live and television audience. In the context of Zen’in shūgō’s opening, however, the
call-and-response chorus did not coordinate physical labor. It coordinated instead the show’s opening dance and, more importantly, the affective rhythms of its viewers. Ultimately the object of the song’s coordinated “work” was, as the song lyrics stress, laughter and merriment. It created, within each broadcast, an atmosphere of anticipation and a promise of laughter, laying a base rhythm that would carry viewers through to the end of the show.

Employing a similar formula, the show’s ending song “Dorifu no biba non ondo” (“The Drifter’s Viva Non Melody,” 1973) would bring each week’s hour-long broadcast and its laughter to a close. Performed once again on stage by The Drifters and their guest celebrities, the ending song’s lyrics promised the return of the same rhythmic laughter the following week. Although accompanied by simpler choreography, this final song repeated the opening one’s high-speed pace, as well as its emphasis on laughter as an inherently social activity. In between its iconic chorus (the onomatopoetic phrase ban ban ban ban), the song’s lyrics reminded viewers of the laughter and song they shared with performers during the broadcast, while verbally presenting to viewers an image of their own laughter.

The song entreats viewers to maintain, until the next broadcast, the rhythms of laughter established throughout the show. Driving home the implication that these rhythms should animate viewers’ daily lives, Katō Cha would intersperse the song’s chorus with reminders to children to “brush their teeth” and to “take a bath.” In its invitation to “keep laughing merrily,” Zen ’in’s ending song beseched viewers to continue laughing not only for their own benefit, but also for the benefit of Zen ’in and its laughing mass public. Entreating them to maintain the rhythm of the show’s laughter as the rhythm of their daily lives, Zen ’in absorbed them as one more beat in the virtual landscape to which that rhythm gave shape. As I will argue in the remainder of this chapter, it also pulled in to the gravitational field of its mass public more disparate members, fixing within the show’s orbit the laughing voices of viewers and non-viewers alike.
Tuning Into One Wavelength

Throughout Zen’in’s broadcast history— from Katō Cha’s impromptu strip shows in the show’s early years, to an infamous 1981 sketch that featured a beheading of a Shimura Ken doll— its slapstick sketches and frequently scatological humor invited frequent public outcry. Yet, their own feelings aside, fans and critics alike agreed on at least one thing: Beyond the doors of their own homes, Japan’s masses were watching Zen’in, and they were laughing. A 1972 article in the Yomiuri shinbun put such assumptions to words succinctly.

Supporting the popularity of the Drifters are the masses [taishū] sitting in front of over 25 million television sets. Put simply, their comedy matches the wavelength of the masses’ laughter [taishū no warai no hachō].

The ideological work performed by this excerpt cannot easily be understated. Casually ascribing to Zen’in a viewership equal to the totality of nearly all Japanese viewers (contemporary estimates put total Japanese television ownership at around 25 million units total nationwide), it erases from that viewership any expression of boredom or disgust. It is nothing less than a “wavelength” of laughter, the article suggests, with which the show fills the airwaves, transmitting it directly to its viewers immediately and without dissipation. Each and every one of Japan’s viewers were tuned into this frequency—or so the weekly would have it—gathered each Saturday night before televisions across the nation as a homogeneous mass audience, their nondescript faces chuckling in unison as they watched Zen’in shūgō.

Such assumptions regarding the overwhelming power of Zen’in’s “wavelength” of laughter fanned the concerns of civic groups and critics, who believed that the show’s lowbrow humor represented a contemporary vulgarization of Japanese society and culture. Zapped directly into the minds of its viewers, it seemed to them, that wavelength not only homogenized the individual differences separating viewers, it erased any sense of nuance, tradition and depth from Japanese culture. In comments to the weekly Shikan gendai, the rakugo (classical comic storytelling) critic Okitsu Kaname argued, for example, that Zen’in’s dominance represented the “decline of Japanese comic culture” in specific, and the “massification” (taishūka) of Japanese culture in general. The show’s comedy, he lamented, had no “reverberations,” and was filled with “gags without depth meant to appeal to the masses [taishū].”

Framed as such, Zen’in’s wavelength of laughter acted not simply in a unilateral direction. Spreading every which way, it was more like a contagion that was slowly infecting Japan’s culture, bringing it down to the level of fart jokes— the same coarse and unreflective level of the faceless taishū masses.

Other critiques of the show’s lowbrow humor followed a similar line. One viewer lamented, in a 1983 letter to the Yomiuri, that the show had defiled the tale “Tsuru no ongaeshi” (“The Crane Repays a Kindness”) through a parody entitled “Tsuru no unko” (“The Crane’s Poop”). “I feel truly sorry for today’s children,” she wrote, “since they must discover Japan’s beautifully sad tales in such a disrespectful form.” A preschool teacher, in a separate letter to the newspaper, expressed similar dismay when she discovered that it had become impossible for her to sing the children’s song “Zōsan” (“The Elephant”) since her students now only sang The Drifter’s parody of the song (which incidentally included lyrics “elephant elephant, your nose is long/that’s right, your wee wee is too”). As such concerns regarding Zen’in’s outsized influence on children intertwined with complaints about its lowbrow taishū sensibilities, the show’s critics voiced not simply a concern for the shows’ effects on individual children but for
the wider social and cultural effects it would cause through those children. Implicit in these critiques was an anxiety that the “massification” of Japanese culture was taking root through the country’s children, irreversibly distorting the transmission of Japanese culture to the younger generation.

Zen’in producers nonetheless welcomed such notoriety, noting that it only heightened the reputation of the show’s mass appeal. If critics accused Zen’ in of providing nothing more than “silly nonsense,” Zen’ in producer Izukuri Yoshimi told the Asahi shinbun, that was “quite okay ... since that’s what were aiming for.” It was this silly nonsense, he argued, that allowed it to reach a mass audience.\(^{41}\) In a separate interview, he furthermore suggested that the constant criticism of the show sprang from a vexed relationship between Japanese viewers and their own laughter. “Japanese are quite pretentious, really,” he contended, “even though they cackle when they’re watching TV, the minute they put that in words and print, it's a bouquet of criticisms like ‘noisy commotion,’ ‘coarse language,’ and ‘just hitting each other on the head.’”\(^{42}\) Zen’in’s critics, Izukuri seemed to imply, were the same viewers who roared before their television sets each week, but when they took to the more self-reflective medium of print, they became estranged from their own laughter.

Animating Izukuri’s comments was of course the same assumption, shared by his critics and articulated by the above-cited Yomiuri article, that Zen’in had discovered a wavelength of laughter that affected its viewers immediately and transparently. Izukuri and his fellow producers likely cared little whether their show’s comedy lacked “depth” and “reverberations,” as Okitsu accused, since it was these very superficial and unintellectual qualities that invited the laughter of a mass audience. As they saw it, the show’s noisy commotion and nonsensical laughter were the auditory manifestation of a pre-intellectual and affective frequency that preceded linguistic articulation. Broadcasting Zen’in every Saturday night onto the screens of “over 25 million television sets,” they tuned the masses into this frequency, training their laughter into one seamless cadence of laughter. In the eyes of the show’s producers, its reputation as one popular first-and-foremost amongst adolescent audiences only proved the point. Zen’in’s slapstick comedy might be most prominently informed by the laughter of young children, Izukuri’s co-producer Furuya Akitsuna conceded in one interview, but this was simply because “children, more than adults, are sensitive to comedy, sounds and rhythms.”\(^{43}\) Still untouched by the socializing effects of language and culture, adolescent audiences simply functioned, according to such thinking, as a gatekeeper for Zen’in’s wavelength of laughter, ensuring that it remained at its most pure, untainted by reflective and critical thought.

The notion that there existed a commonly held, plebian rhythm of laughter that certain performers were particularly skilled at plucking was hardly novel to critical discourse on Zen’in and The Drifters. Reviews of The Drifters’ predecessors the Crazy Cats, for example, often ascribed a music-like quality to the earlier group’s comedy, drawing a connection between their comic performances and their roots as a musical band. However, in marked contrast to discussions of The Drifters and Zen’in’s “noisy commotion,” the earlier band’s comical rhythm was most typically described as a slick, adult one that dripped with an openly satirical sensibility. In comments to the Asahi shinbun, the songwriter Akutagawa Yasushi noted, for example, that the group’s “strong point is in their rhythm” and that “it's as if there's a musicality and 'crazy rhythm' in what they do and make.”\(^{44}\) In similar comments, the music critic Abe Yasushi told the weekly Shūkan asahi, “What’s unique about the Crazy Cats’ comedy is that it has a satirical edge set to a jazz rhythm.” This jazz-like satire was popular with a taishū audience, Abe concluded. “[B]ecause a rhythmic sensibility permeates the masses [taishū],” he argued, “the power [of the
Crazy Cat’s satire] to persuade is strong.”

Abe’s comments reflect certain contemporary notions about the shape and form of the masses that shared the Cats’ “rhythmic sensibility”—notions which starkly contrast those which would inform descriptions of Zen’in’s mass public and its relationship to the show’s laughter. Naturally, accounts, such as Abe’s, take their cue from the Crazy Cats’ sustained focus on musical performance throughout their careers, and address, in part, actual musical devices in the Cats’ routines, which often featured the group on stage alongside their musical instruments. However, when Abe ascribed to the taishū masses a hunger for jazz and satire, he likely had a different taishū in mind than the infantilized masses, which critics would attribute to The Drifters in the 1970s and 80s. Rather than the picture of a child-like and impressionable mass public caught in the glare of 25 million television screens, accounts of the Crazy Cats sketch the image of an adult and reflective public, peopled largely by white-collar workers. Representatives of a more sophisticated taishū, such individuals were hungry for a comedy, which would help them, according to the Yomiuri shinbun, “forget, at least when they watch TV, the hardships of their day to day lives.”

The Cats’ mass public, as such critical accounts depicted it, worked and toiled within the machinery of the 1960s Japanese “economic miracle,” and as cogs within this machine, they sought out the Cats’ laughter in order to ease the stresses associated with that role. This laughter was a “lubricant,” as the cultural critic Tsukasaki Susumu told the Shukan asahi, that greased the wheels of society, and gave voice to the concerns of a common man plagued by “smog, nightmarishly deadly traffic, gridlocked urban governance, and psychological pressures from above and below.” As a “lubricant,” the Cats’ laughter served a secondary role within the already extant public of Japan’s middle-class, urban workers. Just as the opening scene of the Crazy Cats’ Shabondama framed the show as a duet between the performers and home viewers, the rhythm of the Cats’ comedy simply amplified the “rhythmic sensibility” Abe claimed “permeated the masses,” serving as a safety valve for an overworked public.

Zen’in wavelength of laughter, as discursive object, functioned on a fundamentally different level than such earlier notions of a rhythm of laughter. It figured not as a supplement to a public that existed outside the world of the show. That is, it was not understood to act as a momentary safety valve to a society that operated by an industrial logic, which lay outside the studio walls. As both the critical and favorable accounts discussed above suggest, the discourse surrounding Zen’in framed its laughter and comedy as a fundamental frequency and protocol, which organized and coordinated, around the object of the show, a public of viewers.

Rather than a contribution made to a society-at-large, Zen’in’s wavelength of laughter represented, by this logic, a frequency to which viewers were obliged to tune in, if they hoped to gain access to the mass public of Japan. As if to underscore this point, the Shukan TV gaido (Weekly TV Guide), for example, informed its readers in a 1980 article, “The Drifters’ gags are a ‘first step’ in communication” for children born in the age of television, and the child who knows and uses this repertoire “gets along with everybody [min’na to naka yoshi ni nari].” Those who are too serious, it warned, are “excluded from the group [nakama hazure].” If such accounts were to be believed, the show was steadily adding to the list of imperatives it broadcast each week alongside Katō Cha’s reminders to his young viewers to brush their teeth (see above). Not only did they need to mind their personal hygiene, they needed to remember to keep up with the show’s latest jokes, and most importantly, not forget to laugh, laugh, laugh.

However, it was not only children who were compelled—or being characterized as compelled—to join in Zen’in’s laughter. Accounts such as the above Shukan TV gaido article
painted a picture, in which in order to “get along” with the show’s mass public, it was increasingly necessary for a wide range of individuals to “get” the show’s jokes. The circulation of Zen’in’s laughter, such accounts suggested, described a “chorus” of voices—both positive and critical—each of which were driven by a desire to be “in” on its jokes. “[A]ll of Japan, from politicians to children,” the weekly reported, “is now joined in one giant chorus of kaaraasu”—a reference to Shimura Ken’s popular parody of Nanatsu no ko (Seven Baby Crows) and his screeching intonation of the song’s karasu (‘crow’) refrain (a refrain that functioned as yet one more example of Zen’in’s numerous ryūkōgo catchphrases). Leading up to the elections that year, the Japan Socialist Party chairman Asukata Ichio could be heard repeating the refrain in a speech, the weekly noted, when he inveighed against the corrupt politics that had “pushed the youth into a hole where songs are popular like ‘Why does the crow cry? That’s the crow’s beeswax.’” Joining Asukata in this chorus, one member of the Tōkyō kodama no kai (Tokyo Kodama Club)—a housewives group that had placed Zen’in at the top of its “worst” shows list—complained to the weekly, “‘That’s the crow’s beeswax’ just complements the current ‘whatever’ zeitgeist of the youth, right?” Even middle-aged men, who “at home in front of their children (or rather, in front of mom?) knit their eyebrows and complain ‘what a stupid show,’” joined in the chorus at night, “making a giant ruckus” in bars across the country, eager to show that they were current with the latest trends.

In describing each of these “chorus” voices—both positive and critical—the Shūkan TV gaido paints the picture of an all-encompassing Japanese public, each of whose members were a party to Zen’in’s jokes. To not be so was to be left out and left behind—“excluded from the group” that was Zen’in’s mass public. This emphasis on the imperative to join in on Zen’in’s laughter mirrored a more generalized elevation, within Japan, of the status of laughter and its social function. Producers such as Izukuri frequently lamented that comedy shows such as theirs lacked “civil rights” (shiminken), but in fact, a growing consensus on laughter’s social importance had begun to gain traction.

Laughter, according to such thinking, was an essential ingredient for the health of both society and the individuals who peopled it. In one such example, the journalist and television personality Torigoe Shuntarō took issue, in an essay on Zen’in, with the notion that the show’s humor had a corrupting influence. Reflecting on his own child, he argued that would rather raise him as a “human who can laugh when he finds something funny” since “the ability to laugh from the bottom of one’s belly is a terribly happy thing.” By teaching children how to laugh, his essay suggested, Zen’in was in fact a positive influence in both their lives and the society, of which they would become members as adults. Zen’in’s producers appeared to largely agree. By avoiding comedy that was overly critical or reflective, and by sticking to a viscerally affective wavelength of laughter, they gave shape, their own comments suggested, to a mass public and society centered exclusively on the delight and enjoyment of healthy and happy laughter. The show, it would seem, had taken upon itself the selfless labor of reconciling the Japanese masses to their own laughter. Armed with nothing more than its ability to provoke that “terribly happy thing,” Zen’in had set itself to the task of giving life to a Japanese public that would relish rather than decry, as Izukuri had lamented, the laughter it voiced before the haze of 25 million television sets each Saturday night.

A Happy Object

The weightlessness of Zen’in’s virtual public space was not without its own potential
drawbacks. By not anchoring its viewers in physical space, Zen'in risked leaving them with a sense of vertigo, or what Hannah Arendt identified as the “weirdness” of mass societies. Such weirdness, Arendt suggested in a discussion of mass media, accompanies their spread, because they deteriorate the status of the public realm to act as an in-between “world of things” with the “power to gather [people] together, to relate and to separate them.” In the place of this world, Arendt writes, mass media provide a situation akin to “a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible.”

By all appearances, Zen’in’s laughing mass public embodies the “séance” that Arendt describes. Constructed as an assembly in the hyper-real space of the television broadcast, Zen’in worked its magic trick every week, making the table of the television apparatus disappear before the eyes of its viewers. However, the lack of complaints from viewers vis-à-vis this trick speaks to its success: While some may have voiced boredom and displeasure with its humor, none expressed a perception of “weirdness” vis-à-vis the weightlessness of the show’s visual aesthetic and the public space it represented. Writing in the late 1950s, Arendt could of course not have foreseen the success of shows, such as Zen’in, in constructing coherent mass publics. However, Arendt’s metaphor of the séance table aptly highlights the contrast between post-1960s mass media publics and the ones, which preceded them. No longer a “world of things” which mediated human interactions, the post-1960s media publics, such as that of Zen’in, became what one might term a “world of affects” that relate members of those publics to one another. Zen’in’s rhythm of laughter was one part of this world of affects, a counterweight it provided as antidote to the medium and show’s weightlessness.

The single frequency holding this mass public together, the “terribly happy thing” that was Zen’in’s laughter resembled what the social theorist Sara Ahmed has termed a “happy object.” Ahmed writes, promise happiness, acting as “pointers” through the expectation that “to follow their point would be to find happiness.” Circulated discursively, these objects become points of group cohesion as members coordinate their decisions to “treat[s] some things and not others as the cause of delight.” In describing Zen’in’s laughter (as well as the silly nonsense that caused it) as a “terribly happy thing,” accounts, such as Torigoe’s, raise that laughter to the status of an abstract social good. The value of this social good lay in its ability to “point” towards and promise happiness, and thus to lay the foundation for a future mass public peopled by individuals who possess “the ability to laugh from the bottom of one’s belly.” The chorus of voices—both critical and favorable—which aided in the circulation of Zen’in’s laughter in print and beyond, aided in the circulation of this social good. It focused attention on its echoes, giving shape to a cohesive mass public centered on the happy object of its laughter.

However, unlike Ahmed’s happy object, Zen’in’s laughter did not need uniform public recognition as a “terribly happy thing” in order to circulate as a point of cohesion for the show’s public. Despite what both its critics and defenders maintained, its mass public was not an undifferentiated and amorphous mass, and the rhythm of its laughter convulsed with the myriad voices of its fans, its detractors, and everyone in between. It did not matter whether any one fan or critic agreed that the show’s laughter represented an object of happiness and delight, because, as the Shûkan TV gaido astutely observed, each member of that public—whether they be the classroom wag, the bar-rat father, the PTA critic or the tediously bored viewer—joined in the chorus of Zen’in’s laughter. They guffawed, cackled, grimaced and sighed, but as the discursive space of Zen’in’s public took on a life of its own, each of their voices added just one
more beat to the saturating rhythm of the show’s laughter. Rather than points of stoppage, they acted as conduits, ensuring the continued, laughing flow of Zen’in’s bits, gags, and catchphrases. Individually, they might have expressed delight, dismay, or both, but together, they were collectively in on the joke of Zen’in’s laughing mass public. Bored, entertained or outraged, each of them was laughing in spite of themselves, seeking but never quite finding the voice of their own laughter.

Yet, it was in this very same way that the circulation of Zen’in’s laughter can be said to describe a rhythm, rather than a wavelength. Few might have sought to assume the necessary distance from its laughter to reflect on the show that produced it or the claims it laid to a mass public, and as the reach of its rhythm continued to expand, it crowded out the potential for the satirical, more critical forms of comedy that had preceded it. However, a form of spacing nonetheless remained between each beat in its chorus. While each eruption of laughter seemed to repeat the last, it added a slight variation on the previous one, inflecting it with tones of boredom, delight, exasperation or dismay. Laughing together, but not always in unison, these disparate voices continued cracking up, revealing fissures in the harmony of that chorus.

In the final two chapters, I will return to the disruptive possibilities of this internal discord, and explore the deterritorializing potential that inhabited television laughter’s overwhelmingly territorializing tendencies. However, I will first turn in the next chapter to a separate analysis of laughter’s circulation within television and television discourse as a “terribly happy thing,” and examine how such laughter precipitated, during the same time period as Zen’in, shows that sought to create similar communities of viewers, but did through what their producers imagined to be a cozier, more intimate form of laughter.
Chapter 2
The Tone of Laughter:
The Strangely Warm Comedy of Hagimoto Kin’ichi

In a 1983 issue of the weekly Shūkan hōseki, a brief article drew attention to the cozy tone that seemed to inhabit the comedy and laughter of the comedian Hagimoto Kin’ichi’s variety show, Kinchan no doko made yaru no! (How far will Kinchan go!, 1976-86; hereafter, Kindoko).¹ Why, it asked an unnamed producer, had the show recently skipped ahead eight years, relocating Hagimoto and his television family to the countryside? “Given that our motto is to produce a laughter with warmth [attakami no aru warai],” the producer replied, “we wanted to be able to focus the show on just Hagimoto and his family.”² By replacing the family’s adolescent children with junior high and high school aged actors, he was implying, the show had effectively restructured its layout, doing away with many of the show’s extra segments and concentrating solely on the cha no ma konto, or “living room sketches,” which had served as the show’s organizing principle from its earliest broadcasts.

The producer’s suggestion that the show aimed, through such a move, to produce a “laughter with warmth” might strike the disinterested observer as somewhat odd. Notwithstanding the possible objection that laughter in itself is anything but warm, Kindoko’s comedy itself would appear at first blush to have been rather cold. Originally envisioned by Hagimoto (a.k.a. Kinchan) as a hybrid drama and variety show, Kindoko got its start as a parody of the cozy domestic scenes that filled the broadcasts of its so-called “home drama” competitors. Within the three flimsy walls of a blatantly fake television home, Hagimoto and the actress Maya Junko would perform sketches, host celebrity guests, and introduce variety-style segments through the portal of their on-set television—always in character as television husband and wife (see figure 1). Their four children would appear to be even further devoid of warmth: introduced to television audiences first as dolls, they primarily played the role of stunt dummies in the show’s early broadcasts.

Yet, the show’s claim to produce a warm laughter was more than simply one-sided self-promotion. In editorials and essays, viewers and critics frequently repeated this line, noting the impression, when watching the show, of being enveloped by feelings of warmth and intimacy that seemed to pour out from the television screen alongside its laughter. The singer and occasional show guest Tanaka Yoshiko, for example, described her experience of watching the
show as one of feeling “drawn into the television by the easy intimacy [shitashimi yasui] of Kinchan’s family.” Others concurred, and most typically ascribed this sensation to the show’s “domestic” (kateiteki) brand of comedy. Although visibly a fake, the parodic family seemed to capture, for these viewers, the “feel” of home life, encapsulating it in a sense of humor that was light-hearted and caring.

In this chapter, I will examine how Kindoko came to enjoy a reputation for a tonally intimate and warm form of laughter. Extending my analysis in the previous chapter of Zen’in’s rhythm of laughter, I will approach Kindoko’s laughter here as a discursive object, and argue that its apparent tone was the product of how it was treated and framed both within the broadcast image, and within popular discourse on the program. Kindoko’s motto of a “laughter with warmth” gained traction with its viewers, because it cited pre-existing discursive associations that connected the domestic sphere and warmth, while successfully harnessing changing perceptions of the role of laughter within the television broadcast. While it seemed to parody the home drama, it also borrowed heavily from the same ideological assumptions that shaped the genre. In fact, it was likely the dramatic genre, which provided Kindoko with the blueprint for its “laughter with warmth.” Warmth, producers from television’s earliest years had assumed, was the feeling of the ideal home, and if they were to gain entrance into the domestic spaces, in which viewers watched the medium, they would need to mirror that feeling. With their cozy scenes of domestic bliss, home dramas were central to this strategy, and when Kindoko ported the genre to the comic variety format, it was only natural that it bring this, the former’s warm tone, along with it. Laughter—both as an abstract idea and as an audible component of the broadcast—played a key role in this grafting. Constantly present but always in the background, it gave vocal form to that tone, beckoning to viewers to tune in and laugh alongside the television family.

In his 2002 Shakai wa warau (Society Laughs), Ōta Shōichi highlights the role Hagimoto and his variety shows played in the growing centrality of comedy and laughter in Japanese television during the 1970s and 80s. Tracing the evolution of Japanese television comedy from Hagimoto’s 1970s variety shows onward, Ōta argues that the genre played a central part in reconfiguring laughter’s social role in Japan. Laughter, he contends, has become the cornerstone of a new communication style, in which a desire to “get laughs” (warai o toru) informs viewers’ everyday social relations in Japan both on-screen and off. Analyzing Hagimoto’s variety show Kinchan no don to yatte miyō! (Kinchan’s Let’s Do It!, 1975-80; hereafter, Kindon)—a television spin-off of his similarly titled radio series Kinchan no don to itte miyō! (Kinchan’s Let’s Say It!, 1972-1979)—Ōta places Hagimoto at the starting point of this new culture of laughter. According to Ōta, the show’s formula, in which Hagimoto would rate viewer-written sketches alongside his live audience, allowed viewers to take on the perspective of the comedian, and decide which skits “get laughs” and which do not (rather than simply laughing at the jokes). In a turn reminiscent of Foucault’s analysis of Bentham’s panopticon, Ōta further argues that Japanese viewers began to integrate this perspective into their everyday lives, seeking to “get laughs” as if they were constantly performing for an ever-present television camera. This overall trend, he concludes, has subsequently come to color Japan from the 1970s onward as a “society that laughs” (warau shakai). Ōta’s analysis injects a welcome dose of historical and media-based specificity into the study of Japanese comedy, but it leaves unaddressed the role gender played in the rise of laughter’s profile alongside the television medium. As I will argue below, shows from the 1970s onward largely framed the activity of “getting laughs” as one of getting female laughter. Namely,
while it was predominantly male comedians and producers who decided what and who got
laughs, it was live, largely female audiences that provided that laughter. *Kindoko* was no
different in this regard, and its typical broadcast would feature the laughing voices of a live
audience conspicuously dominated by middle-aged female members. (Kindon, for its part,
featured young female co-hosts, whose primary role was to provide laughter, seated prominently
alongside Hagimoto.) This gender dynamic was by no means coincidental. By the time of
*Kindoko*, television producers had become skilled at managing the composition of their studio
audiences, often stacking them with so-called waraiya—paid “laughers” who were most
typically female—in order to ensure that the right amount of laughter greeted the performers at
the right time. Employed by Hagimoto and *Kindoko*’s producers, the practice allowed them to
coop female laughter and bring it within the secure and intimate boundaries of *Kindoko*’s
virtual home, where it would function as vocal cognate of its advertised “laughter with warmth.”

In what follows, I will examine how *Kindoko* mobilized female laughter—as well as the
discursive assumptions attached to that laughter—to figuratively “warm up” the show and its
laughter. In doing so, I lean upon the work of Sara Ahmed who, in her discussion of affect,
provides a socio-linguistic framework, through which one can appraise how a notion of warmth
came to attach itself to both the show and discourse on the show. “[T]he work of emotion,”
Ahmed writes, “involves the ‘sticking’ of signs to bodies [and objects]”—a process which takes
place through the act of naming affects. Repeated naming, Ahmed argues, allows affects to
“stick” to the discursive objects, which they qualify, and subsequently informs how subjects
orient themselves towards those objects.8 To borrow the definition of tone provided by Sianne
Ngai—a scholar whose work intersects and overlaps with Ahmed’s—*Kindoko*’s warm tone
functioned as an “organizing affect” that framed both viewers attitudes toward the show, as well
as the show’s own “bearing” towards that audience.9 However, this tone took shape not simply
within the “text” of the program, but as a function of how that text circulated beyond the
temporal boundaries of its weekly broadcast. As viewers and critics discussed and rehearsed the
show’s supposed warmth within the pages of Japan’s newspapers and weeklies, those feelings of
warmth (identified by terms such as atatakai, honobono, and so forth) came to “stick” to the
show and its gendered laughter, providing a context within which other viewers might frame
their own viewing experience of and attitude towards it.

In order to trace this circulation, I will first investigate how *Kindoko*’s use of gendered
laughter worked through a citation of changing perceptions of the role of laughter within the
television broadcast. Early television producers perceived live audience laughter in general and
female laughter in particular to be potentially disruptive and distracting, and thus sought to
carefully manage and compartmentalize them. In actively courting and foregrounding female
laughter, *Kindoko* rode a wave of changing attitudes, which increasingly looked to laughter to
structure feelings of community and intimacy on the part of the viewer. I will then turn to an
analysis of changing perceptions of Hagimoto. Originally considered a brash and aggressive
iconoclast when he debuted in the late 1960s, the comedian himself underwent a similar process
of “warming up.” I will argue that he consciously courted such changing perceptions by actively
seeking to feminize his on-screen persona, and thus establish himself as a seemingly natural
“getter” of female laughter. In conclusion, I will consider the part, which the show’s warm tone
played in shaping viewers’ belief that the show portrayed an affectively real dimension of family
life, and reflect upon what this belief reveals about Japanese television culture of the 1970s and
early 80s. While the rhythmic laughter studied in the previous chapter revealed spaces for
displacement and disruption, the warm tone of *Kindoko* highlights another side of the laughter.
that saturated Japan’s airwaves during this period. Holding its viewers close, the show produced a comedy that succeeded in tightly shaping viewers’ attitude towards it, but it was this same tight embrace, which would fail to adapt to the changes taking place in the television landscape of the early 1980s.

A Laughter To Get Along

In a 1975 discussion of the Kindon franchise, Hagimoto noted the contrast he sought to draw between the explosive laughter, which he had incited in his earliest days as the sidekick of Sakagami Jirō in the comedy duo Conto 55 (Konto 55 gō), and the laughter, which he now sought to create on his self-produced variety shows such as Kindon.

What me and Jirō did as Conto 55 … was to stir up laughter by moving our bodies as much as possible. This was probably popular then, since we were still in the middle of the “economic miracle” and everybody was working themselves to their bones just to get our GNP to whatever level. However, things are different now. Now we have to think about what we can do to build a society that is easy to live in—in order for everybody to get along [naka yoku suru]. [With Kindon] I’m trying to offer a preparatory first step in that direction with sketches that can draw out laughter close to everyday life.10

The shift from a laughter of the moving body to a laughter “close to everyday life,” Hagimoto suggests in this interview excerpt, was motivated by wider changes within Japanese society. Whereas Japan was at the peak of high-paced economic expansion when he debuted in the late 1960s, Japan had now moved into a period of slowing down and turning inward.11 In the place of this era now coming to an end, Hagimoto offered his new, more quiet form of laughter as a salve to heal the scars that it had left behind. A first step to laying the foundations for a new post-industrial society that would be “easy to live in,” it would offer his viewers the opportunity to rebuild bridges and “get along” with one another by sharing in its rhythms.

While just slightly bombastic, Hagimoto’s comments reveal the changes, which had occurred since his debut, in how he presented himself to viewers, and how viewers in turn perceived him and the laughter he invited. When Hagimoto first appeared on Japanese television in the late 1960s, critics and viewers alike greeted him and his partner Sakagami as radical iconoclasts, lauding their high-speed and ad-lib routines as a breath of new life within the world of television.12 Hagimoto’s physically and verbally aggressive antics played a large role in establishing this reputation, but they likewise established an aura about the comedian as a purveyor of abrasive form of comedy and laughter that, while popular, was potentially disruptive and culturally corrosive. The television programs, on which the duo appeared, largely played up to this image: Shows, such as the notorious Konto 55 gō no urabangumi o buttobase! (Conte 55’s Let’s Blow Away the Competition! 1969-70; hereafter Uraban), in fact sought to entice viewers with the specter of the duo’s explosive laughter. In one advertisement for the show, for example, text beside a picture of the pair invites viewers to “Please laugh big” (see Figure 2). Such “big laughter,” the advertisement suggests, would provide the force that would not only “blow away the competition,” as the show’s title implies, but also blow away the strictures and artifice of television itself.13
By the mid-1970s, in contrast, many critics would come to praise Hagimoto as a much-loved comedian who could be trusted to get “healthy,” family-friendly laughs without resorting to lowbrow fare, even though he had been associated with the same only a decade earlier. Key to this image was the perception—courted by the comedian himself—that he was exceptionally talented at getting female laughter, and thus by extension talented at gaining access to the living room televisions, whose audiences were understood to be first-and-foremost female. “In television, you have to make everybody from children to adults laugh,” Hagimoto himself noted in a 1977 interview with the *Asahi shinbun*. “My present philosophy is as follows: first, can mom laugh? Then, can the children understand? And finally, can father sneak a peek and say, ‘well, okay’?” The small cartoon accompanying this interview illustrates how this new approach had changed perceptions of the comedian over the approximately ten years since his first television debut: a friendly faced Hagimoto is shown stepping out of the frame of the family television, as a mother and her child face him smiling and a father peeks up from his newspaper quietly bemused (see Figure 3). In contrast to the brash young man who threatened the order of living rooms across the country, Hagimoto had become, by the late 1970s, an ostensibly welcome presence in the domestic space.

In seeking to create a “laughter with warmth,” *Kindoko* would leverage this image of
Hagimoto as a natural getter of female laughter. At its core a parody of the home drama genre, the show in fact borrowed heavily from the older genre, and adapted many of its tropes to the “living room sketches,” which the comedian’s television family performed each week. However, in porting the home drama formula to its variety show format, Kindoko departed from the former in a key way. Namely, where examples of the dramatic format largely cast the figure of the mother as their lead role, Kindoko placed Hagimoto firmly in its center as father figure.\textsuperscript{18} As Tomiko Yoda notes in her discussion of the home drama genre, the maternal figure most typically served as its affective “hub,” managing its “emphasis ... on the generalized, warm, and snuggly emotional unity among family members.”\textsuperscript{19} Female laughter arguably filled in the gaps left behind by Kindoko’s adaptation of this logic of the home drama to the male-centric comic variety show, replacing the “hub” provided by the maternal figure in the earlier genre with a “maternal” voice. As will be seen below, Hagimoto met the home drama genre’s emphasis on strong mother figure halfway, performing the father role as an emasculated and feminized one. However, he did so to invite female laughter. Seated at the show’s center, he managed and coordinated this laughter, but it was those gendered voices, to which he and his fellow producers appeared to have turned to give substance to the “laughter with warmth” that they sought out.

Such sustained focus on female laughter was relatively new at the time of Kindoko. While variety programs had, from at least the 1960s, employed volunteer and paid female guests, to provide laughter in their audiences, producer comments from the period reveal that many tended to regard female audiences with marked suspicion. A 1968 Shūkan TV gaido article reported, for example, that a crewmember from an unnamed Conte 55 show complained of the young female audience members who followed the duo. He and his fellow producers were concerned, that “Conte 55’s lines might not reach viewers’ living rooms,” drowned out as they were by the ruckus caused by these fans.\textsuperscript{20} While such shows promised “big laughter,” that laughter was to be created and enjoyed in the viewer’s home. In-studio laughter, on the other hand, needed to be managed and compartmentalized, where it would serve as a supplement to the comedy performance, indicating to the home viewer where and when to laugh. The crewmember’s complaints highlight how female laughter and other forms of audience reaction—and young females ones in particular—were objects of especial disdain in this regard. Erupting with out cause or reason, they lay outside the control of the television producer, threatening to upend the rhythm and flow of the comedian’s performance.

Even as their direct engagement with female laughter increased through the use of audience extras, producers frequently claimed to employ the practice more out of practical reasons than anything else. A 1969 article in the Asahi shinbun on the practice reported, for example, that producers frequently relied on the extras as a counterweight to the adolescent fans, who would flock to tapings of Conte 55 shows. Producers would welcome the presence of either gender, but female recruits from housewives’ associations and sponsors’ factories were more available, the newspaper implies, and ready to take part in a taping, for free or minimal monetary compensation. The women had nonetheless become the show’s “valued guests,” the article concedes, since they are skilled at creating a lively atmosphere in the performance hall. However, even here, the article’s tone reveals how certain assumptions regarding the “irrationality” of female laughter underlay its newfound esteem. The female guests, the article suggests, are well positioned to create atmosphere through laughter, since they laugh “at the drop of a chopstick.”\textsuperscript{21} Employing here an idiom used to describe the imagined temperament of young women—hashi ga korondemo okasii toshigoro, or, “the age at which even a dropped chopstick is funny”—the article demonstrates a perception of female laughter little different from the above-cited
crewmember who complained of Conte 55’s young female fans. While the latter treated female laughter as a distracting noise where the former frames it as valued and atmospheric voice, both essentially regard it as meaningless, arising from somewhere outside rather than from within the comic performance.

While such attitudes towards female laughter appear to have changed little by the time of Kindoko, it was likely the perceived “atmospheric” quality of female laughter, which motivated Hagimoto and his fellow producers’ apparent reliance on it. As the following summary of Hagimoto’s production philosophy on the show attests, notions of tone and of laughter’s ability to invoke it were essential to that philosophy.

The center camera is placed behind the audience, because when it is placed in front of the audience, they cannot see and, consequently, will not laugh. The height of the camera is best at a level where the audience’s heads enter the screen just a little. ... By following these steps, the screen becomes pleasantly warm [honwaka atatakaku naru].

Audience laughter, the comedian’s abridged comments reveal, was at the center of the show’s aim of producing a “pleasantly warm” screen. The visual broadcast image—and the studio layout that lay behind the production of that image—of course played an important part in this process. Kindoko typically featured low and close camera shots that, including the silhouettes of the audience within the broadcast frame, transmitted to the viewer the perspective of a fellow audience member. With audience seats that closely abutted the stage, Hagimoto and Maya’s cha no ma (living room) set would lay just above audience members’ heads, seemingly within reach. This contrasted shows such as Uraban, as well as later shows such as The Drifters’ Hachiji dayo! Zen’in shūgō (It’s 8 O’clock! Everyone Gather ‘Round, 1969-85, TBS), whose broadcast images were most frequently composed of wide pans, shot from a birds-eye perspective, of the performance halls and audience. Kindoko’s low angles, on the other hand, created for the viewer the impression of being seated ‘virtually’ behind the live audience in a cramped, yet cozy studio (see Figures 1, 4).

As the above passage makes clear, however, laughter was at the center of this visual aesthetic. The low-angles, the positioning of the cameras, and the cramped studio were designed to make a space that was both as conducive as possible to audience laughter, as well as best
positioned to deliver that laughter to viewers. Even the inclusion of audience silhouettes played a role in this regard. As Hagimoto has noted elsewhere, he and his fellow producers employed the technique to create so-called sasoi warai, or “inviting laughter,” that would visually infect viewers with the audience laughter and thus allow them to feel “in” on the show’s jokes. Reaching the viewer both audibly and visibly, this audience laughter created the “pleasantly warm” screen that Hagimoto and his fellow producers hoped would beckon to viewers, and convince them to stay as guests of the virtual family. Even before the era of the remote control, this strategy reflected an awareness of viewers’ fickle habits: As the Asahi graph article notes, when ratings lagged, Hagimoto and the show’s producers would amplify audience voices to a level that drowned out those of the cast, seeking to entice viewers “to stop the dial” on Kindoko.

Female laughter represented the unspoken but essential ingredient of this strategy. In later comments, Hagimoto has appeared to distance himself from the reliance on female laughter, which his 1970s and 80s television programs exhibited. Discussing for example the 1970s Conte 55 sketch show, Konto 55 gō no nande sō naru no? (Conte 55’s Why does it always turn out this way?, NTV, 1973-6; hereafter, Nande), Hagimoto stressed the role male laughter played in the production of the show’s material. Using various methods, the show’s producer Saitō Takao, Hagimoto notes, sought to increase male attendance while reducing that of children and women. The purpose here, Hagimoto argues, was to heighten the comic appeal of the duo’s performances: “Because [the male audience] would not laugh, we worked that much harder to make them laugh, and as a result, we made pretty good comedy.”

The available broadcasts of Kindoko and other Hagimoto-produced variety shows from the era, however, tell a different story. (Hagimoto had little directorial influence on Nande, and it can largely be regarded as separate from his self-produced shows.) The audiences of Kindoko, first and foremost amongst his self-produced work, were crowded with the outlines of female members (see for example the lateral shot of the audience if Figure 4). It is hard to imagine that this was the result of happenstance, given the attention paid to audience composition and management by programs of the era (a focus that continues to the present). One producer in fact admitted to the weekly Josei jishin that the audience of a typical broadcast was comprised of 70% “regulars.” Always present but never explicitly recognized, these predominantly female regulars were increasingly being called upon to perform an explicitly ideological function on shows such as Kindoko. While still not recognized as arising from the comic performance proper, they were nonetheless being conscripted in the service of the heady goals of such shows. They were to create, through their laughter, the warm tone of the show, and by extension the backbone of Hagimoto’s sought-after comedy of social healing and “getting along.” If Hagimoto made a few yen in the process, what was the harm?

Warming Up The Male Comedian

Before Hagimoto could fit into such a cozy setting and receive recognition as the natural “getter” of its equally warm laughter, he first had to warm up himself. While perceptions of the comedian had begun to shift with the beginning of his solo career in the early 1970s, many viewers continued to conceive of him as an abrasive and aggressive personality. With the turn of the decade, Conte 55’s popularity had slowly declined, and Hagimoto begun to appear more frequently without Sakagami as the host of musical variety shows such as Stā tanjō! (A Star is Born!, 1971-83) and Ōrusutā kazoku taiko uta gassen (All Star Family Song Battle, 1972-86).
Although a common phenomenon on contemporary Japanese television, the casting of a comedian as host on such programming was relatively unusual at the time. Whereas hosts of the era typically fulfilled a relatively muted role, briefly introducing guests and new segments, Hagimoto assumed a more noticeable presence on-screen, joking with and, in the case of Ōrustā, prodding his amateur guests. The success of these shows and his long tenure as their host speaks to the widespread appeal of his work there. Yet, the very aspects that endeared him to one segment of viewers grated on the sensibilities of a vocal segment of viewers who lamented the casting of a comedian in the role.

In particular, Hagimoto’s speaking style served as a lightning rod for controversy, and many viewers debated its suitability to the music variety format. In a 1971 letter to the Yomiuri shinbun, for example, one reader criticized his repeated address of the show’s amateur performers with words such as *omee* (a coarser version of the already considerably casual second person pronoun *omae*) and *konoyarō* (another casual address, meaning “this guy,” considered rude depending on context). The reader argued that on such shows, it behooves the host to “pull out the amateur performer’s talents to the greatest extent,” and that “it’s a problem when the host pushes himself to the front and goes on talking noisily.” The inconsistency of viewer opinions, however, reveals that perceptions of Hagimoto (as well as viewer tastes) were already in flux during the early years of the comedian’s solo career: In a letter two weeks later in the same Yomiuri column, a second viewer disagreed with the first viewer’s criticism, arguing that “it’s more important for the host to help relax the performers than for him to address them in the stiff language typical to this type of show.”

Such disputes continued to follow the comedian even after he had established himself as a regular presence on variety programming, and begun producing his own shows. Echoing earlier complaints about his speaking style on Sütā tanjō, a reader letter to the Yomiuri complained that it was “outrageous” that Hagimoto reads the names of viewer contributors on the television version of Kindon without an honorific -san or -kun attached to their names. A second reader responded to this complaint, arguing that this casual address reflected the show’s “special flavor” that depended on the rapport between Hagimoto and his viewer contributors, who were mostly youth that looked up to him as an “older brother” (*aniki*) figure. These discussions of the comedian reflect that the debate, at its core, was one focused on the pragmatic issue of how he would address his guests and viewers, and how that mode of address would configure his position within the context of the television medium. In the view of his critics, a performer in his position should assume a neutral form of address, since it was best suited to a mass medium such as television. Hagimoto’s defenders, on the other hand, intuited a more family-like structure to be taking shape around his television programs—a structure requiring a more intimate form of address, such as that which the above reader suggests a brother would adopt when speaking to his younger siblings.

Given the focus on Hagimoto’s speaking style, it is not surprising that he would attempt to adapt this aspect of his performance in pursuit of a more family-friendly image. However, in pursuit of a mass audience, he did not revert to the more neutral and polite speaking style favored by his critics, but instead feminized his performance and adopted so-called “women’s language” (*on’na kotoba*). The same Asahi shinbun article noted this shift, pointing to the conspicuous increase in the comedian’s speech on Kindoko and other programs of phrases such as *dame yo* (meaning, variously ‘no,’ ‘stop that,’ ‘that’s no good,’ etc.), where in the past he would have instead used lines such as *dame da zo* and *bakayarō* (“no, you idiot,” etc.). Whereas the phrase attributed to his earlier years (*dame da zo*) employs the putatively masculine emphatic particle *zo*
alongside the declaratively strong *da* copula, the phrase that the article attributes to his later years (*dame yo*) drops the copula *da* while employing the particle *yo*, a construction (noun + *yo*) associated in Japanese discourse on language with supposed ‘women’s language.’ The article furthermore prints the *yo* particle in the *katakana* phonetic script, rather than the *hiragana* more generally used, and thus embellishes the implication of a feminized voice and thus underscoring the suggested evolution from a more declarative and aggressive (i.e., normatively masculine) style to a more emphatic and soft (i.e., normatively feminine) style. As such flourishes suggest, Hagimoto’s strategy of feminization functioned not simply as a means of addressing a female viewership; it also worked to transform his public image, as it was codified and reflected upon in discussions of the comedian.\(^{36}\)

Although Hagimoto never completely shifted to a feminine speaking style (his on-screen speech became more a mixture of both masculine and feminine voices depending on situation), surviving broadcasts from his television career reveal a generalized shift in the direction of a less abrasive speaking style. A 1968 Conte 55 performance on NHK’s long-running New Year’s Eve show *NHK Köhaku uta gassen* (*NHK Red And White Song Battle*, NHK, 1951 - present), for example, highlights Hagimoto’s performance, in his early years, of an aggressive masculinity consistent with his rendition during this period of the *tsukkomi* (‘straight man’) role. Castigating Sakagami for cheering the show’s female red rather than male white team, Hagimoto’s performance of masculinity in this scene contrasts Sakagami’s of a feminized *boke* funnyman.\(^{37}\)

\begin{tabular}{ll}
Hagimoto: *anata wa docchi o ōen shiterun da yo?* & Hagimoto: Which side are you cheering?
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
Sakagami: *mochiron aka.* & Sakagami: Red, of course.
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
H: *kore wa shirogumi o ōen ni dete kitan da yo!* & H: (yelling and slapping palm with fan)
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
We’re here to support the red team! & S: ...
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
H: *anata wa otoko deshō?* & H: (cuts off Sakagami and imitates his
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
‘feminine’ tone) Are you a man or aren’t you? & S: ...
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
S: *otoko yo.* & S: I’m a man, honey.
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
H: *otoko de dōshite ‘yo’?* & H: What’s a man doing saying
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
‘honey’? & ‘honey’?
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
(S: *ii janai?* & (more laughter)
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
S: What do you want me to say, darling?\(^{38}\) & S: What do you want me to say, darling?
\end{tabular}

In addition to his appearance in a woman’s kimono, Sakagami here performs femininity through his frequent, parodic use of normative female language, such as when he insists on his masculinity with the phrase *otoko yo*—a phrase that assumes a putatively feminine tone through the same strategy as the above-cited *dame yo*. In contrast, Hagimoto asserts his masculinity both through his use of supposedly male language (e.g., the putatively more “masculine” voicing of the emphatic *yo* following a declarative *da* in the phrase *anata wa docchi o ōen shiterun da yo*), as well as his aggressive tone and use of his fan as small weapon. Namely, he performs masculinity by both verbally and physically beating back the approach of Sakagami’s assumed femininity, which threatens to queer both the masculine *otoko* (man) by modifying it with a feminine *yo*, and the general “straightness” of *Köhaku*’s female versus male team logic.
In the following decade, Hagimoto began to more frequently employ normatively feminine language, using it alongside his tsukkomi-style language in order to blunt its more aggressive edge. This marked shift is apparent, for example, in the following sketch from a 1984 Kindoko broadcast, in which Junko poses for him as he draws her picture.

The underlined segments in the above Japanese original indicate portions where Hagimoto employs either putatively feminine language or intonation. Although he would sometimes employ feminine language in his early performances with Sakagami, he would employ it through embedded citation, as he does, in the Kōhaku exchange, when he imitates Sakagami’s use of the particle yo (otoko de dōshite “yo”). In contrast, his comically weak attempt to reprove his wife in the Kindoko sketch offers a pale reflection of the cutting tsukkomi language of his earlier years. He would continue to reprove his fellow cast with tsukkomi-style phrases such as the above “ugoiccha dame yo,” but this phrase itself demonstrates how he peppered such remonstrations with normatively feminine language in order to not only soften them, but also frame them as laughably transparent performances of masculinity within a household where his fellow cast member constantly subvert his authority as father of the Kindoko family.

Such attempts to transform his public persona, both on-screen and off, proved generally successful, and by the 1980s, he would be widely known as an approachable comedian, who possessed an unusual yet palpable sense of warmth. Opinions that Hagimoto was a “people’s” comedian had accompanied the comedian since his early years, but they gained momentum through the 1970s. A 1975 editorial in the Yomiuri on his role as host of Sutā tanjō argued, for example, that he represented one of a small number of television personalities that exhibited the “warmth” necessary in interacting with the show’s amateur guests, “at times teasing them, but most importantly giving them strength.” Likewise, his warmth and related “plebian nature” (shominsei), according to his fans, allowed him to melt into crowds. One reader of the Yomiuri went as far to compare him to a “fish in water” when “amongst the masses” (taishū no naka de). Similarly, a 1976 article in the Yomiuri attributes his ability to attract ratings to his shominsei, while a later 1982 article in the Asahi shinbun would praise one of his television specials, concluding that “the warm, plebian emotions [honobono to shita shomin no kanjō], which the show oozes, are the very flavor of Kinchan’s own life.” Propelled by his numerous appearances on radio and television charity events, his new reputation as a “good person” (ii hito) came to overshadow his earlier notoriety, lending an air of credibility to his claims to seek out a laughter that might precipitate a “getting along.”

Buttressed by the female laughter he was understood to receive, these changing perceptions furthermore played a key role in the success of the “laughter with warmth” strategy at the heart of Kindoko and other Hagimoto programs. As the above excerpt from the Asahi shinbun suggests, while “warm, plebian emotions” seemed to ooze from the very person of the comedian, they also came to adhere to both the content and laughter of the shows that he hosted.

Junko: Are you finished yet?  
Hagimoto: Do... Don’t move! I’m almost finished!  
J: What are you up to, trying to doodle my picture and all?  
H: Doodle your picture... I’m putting this in an exhibit, and all the people in the village are going to come and see it!  

Junko: ne anata, mada?  
Hagimoto: da... ugoiccha dame yo! mō sugu de dekiagaru kara, hora!  
J: ne. dōshita no anata, watashi no nigao e nanka kaichatte?  
H: nigao e tte... kore tenrankai ni dasu no, ne! soshitara, mura no hito ga min’na kuru yo!
and produced. He was unusually gifted, a 1977 interview in the magazine Ushio suggested, at producing a “quiet laughter.” Paraphrasing Hagimoto’s own ideas on television comedy, the article concluded that through such laughter, “warm feelings of love and empathy flower” between performers and viewers, and “a sense of unity [rentaikan]” continues to flow forth from his shows “even after the television switch has been turned off.”

Seeping into the laughter he incited, the supposed warmth of his very being not only oozed into the broadcast, coloring the “pleasantly warm” screen. It came to color, according to such thinking, a mysterious warmth that seemed to linger even after the television had gone quiet.

Gleaned from Hagimoto’s own comments, Ushio’s discussion of the supposed power of his shows’ “quiet laughter” naturally served thinly disguised promotional aims. However, such characterizations nonetheless found currency within similar accounts of Kindoko and other Hagimoto programs. In a 1979 essay in the Asahi shinbun, for example, the singer Shimada Yuko described in glowing terms her love for Kindoko and its “tender and warm” feel. When she watches the show, she wrote, “the quality of [Hagimoto’s] character comes through, and it’s strange, but as I laugh, I feel my heart being slowly put at ease.” She feels safe to laugh, she claimed, since, in her words, “[t]he show’s humor arises naturally from the kind interaction of the show’s cast and staff, rather than from someone tricking or hurting others.” The show reminds her, she continued, of “the important things I forget in everyday life,” as well as “the joy of living a life day by day that, although unremarkable, is peaceful and quiet.” Echoing the language of the Ushio article, Shimada concluded that “[e]ven after the program ends, its reverberations remain in our home, the room now quiet with the children asleep and my husband and I sipping coffee together.”

Seeming to flow into their own homes, the “reverberations” of Kindoko’s laughter came to color, for viewers such as Shimada, a belief that the show’s parodic family both mirrored and extended their own. Pouring from the supposedly warm screen, this laughter offered not only a brief respite at the end of a long day; it offered a tone which viewers such as herself could allow to seep into their daily lives and there add, with its quiet rhythms, the quotidian peacefulness imagined to typify the ideal home. Figuratively welcoming it into their homes, such viewers joined in on Kindoko’s laughter as members of its television family. At the head of that family sat Hagimoto the apparently emasculated patriarch. The “quality of his character” seeming to ooze in to the broadcast, he sat in the center of their homes, framed within the family television set, from which he carefully managed the laughter and concomitant warm feelings that joined them with television performers and studio.

Indeed, as a getter of laughs, and a manager of “getting laughs,” Hagimoto in fact never abdicated his position as patriarch of the larger family comprised of his fellow cast members, as well as viewers and disciples. While Hagimoto explored a feminization of his persona on-screen, he remained behind the scenes an unabashedly male producer, known affectionately amongst a coterie of younger comedians and writers as taishō, or “the general.” Perhaps most indicative of the two sides of Hagimoto’s on-screen feminization was the pen name Aki Fusashi (秋房子), which he used for his production work on Kindoko. Written in Chinese characters, the name reads as a woman’s—an effect the comedian desired, since he sought, or so he claims, to give the credits and the show a feminine air that would break the monotony of male names that would otherwise “follow one after the other.” Reading as a male name, the phonetic glossing of the first name (“Fusashi”) reveals, however, the superficiality of such moves to assume a feminine façade. Just as he and his fellow producers co-opted female laughter in the service of creating “laughter with warmth,” he assumed, with the penname, a feminized alter ego in appearance only.
Behind this façade, he and his mostly male co-producers continued to exercise a high degree of control over the show’s extended virtual family, which the show’s warm feelings structured and informed.

The Television Family Comes Home

In June 1983, the weekly tabloid FOCUS published a photograph of Takabe Tomoko, the sixteen-year-old actress who portrayed one of Hagimoto’s triplet daughters, posed naked in bed (see Figure 5). Parodying a verse from the triplet’s well known “lullaby” song on Kindoko, the caption euphemistically described the scene as “a smoke in bed after a friendly bit of nyan’nyan [meow meow] for two,” and lent the subsequent media scandal its widely used name (nyan’nyan jiken, or, ‘Nyan’nyan Scandal’). By the time of the scandal, viewers had become intimately familiar with Takabe’s Nozomi character and her two triplet sisters both on screen and off, and with Hagimoto’s assistance, the three actresses had released several best selling singles under the group name Warabe. Derived from the term warabe uta (children’s song), the unit name both cited the threesomes’ roots on the show, as well as underscored the naïve and infantilized image that was at the core of their public image. The three figured not just as Hagimoto’s children, but as the children of the show’s virtual family of viewers, who would fawn over their adorability and innocence both on-screen and off.

The FOCUS photograph threatened to sully this image, by bringing it—and, by proxy, the peaceful and domestic image of the Kindoko family—into direct contact with a radically different image of Takabe as a sexually experienced young woman. A grainy and seemingly unrehearsed work of photojournalism, it appeared to expose a reality that existed behind the show’s façade, or rather, one that was seeping into that façade: In a wood-frame bed, the young Takabe lays in an adult posture next to a “cute” stuffed animal embroidered with her name, while holding a cigarette. Yet, while Hagimoto and his fellow producers put Takabe on indefinite leave, they nonetheless embraced the controversy, staging on the show a scene of family forgiveness in which the cast telephoned the young actress. The girl in the photograph, the television family assured its viewers, was not the same one who had until then appeared alongside them as their daughter and sister. The latter one—the one now on the telephone with them—was the real one, they seemed to suggest, because she acted in a way that felt like real daughter should in her desire to apologize, just as they acted in a way that felt like a real family in their desire to forgive.
Many viewers appeared to agree. One wrote in the *Asahi Shinbun* (8 July 1983, p. 8), for example, that watching the episode she “was drawn in by [Hagimoto’s] character as if I were watching a real family.” Striking a similar tone, an article in the weekly *Josei jishin* described two family meetings: one in which Takabe’s real father angrily told his daughter that he did not want to see her face, and one in which Hagimoto and his fellow cast members, preceding the live broadcast, expressed their hope to forgive their virtual daughter and sister and once again welcome her into the *Kindoko* family. Dryly noting the absence of Takabe’s real father from her life in general, the *Josei jishin* article implicitly depicted Hagimoto’s reaction as more father-like, subtly underscoring the contrast between the affectively rich on-screen family and its impoverished off-screen equivalent. As such accounts attest, far from shattering the image of innocence and bliss that had come to adhere to *Kindoko* and its television family, the scandal and its aftermath in many ways reinforced it. *Kindoko* was in the end a parody with which viewers had always knowingly played along, and appearances mattered little. What mattered, to such viewers, were the warm familial feelings the show’s performers had expressed for one another. The reality of these feelings, Hagimoto and his fellow performers assured their audience, was still intact, undisturbed by the rival reality represented by the photograph.

Such “felt” realities hung, however, by a taut string, and while the show overcame the scandal, greater threats lay on the horizon. A belief in the show’s warm laughter had been necessary to breathe life into the perceived tangibility of its intimate, familial feel, and such laughter’s days were numbered. Major shifts had already begun to take shape in the Japanese television industry, destabilizing both Hagimoto’s position in that landscape, as well as the affective draw that his shows exercised. Following on the heels of the 1980-1 *manzai* (duo standup comedy) revival, younger, edgier shows such as *Oretachi hyōkin zoku* (*We the Clan of the Droll*, 1981-9) had begun to overshadow *Kindoko* and other formerly popular comedy shows such as *8 ji da yo! Zen’in shūgō!* (see Chapter 1). Echoing these shifts, comedians such as Beat Takeshi (Kitano Takeshi) and Akashiya Sanma had, by the mid-1980s, unseated Hagimoto from his long-running position at the top of polls ranking Japan’s most-liked celebrities. With their more aggressive and sexually explicit humor, these younger comedians seemed to echo the tone of the Takabe photograph, and give voice to fault lines that lay underneath *Kindoko*’s placid surface, fissures that were out of tune with the show’s warm tone.

In a retrospective article on Hagimoto’s career following his decision to retire from television in 1987, the *Asahi shinbun* noted this shift, contending that in response to “the domestic mood that [Hagimoto] emphasized,” one increasingly heard the complaint from young
viewers that “its warm atmosphere is strange and kind of creepy.” Despite the *Asahi’s* pretense of simply giving voice to the sensibilities of a new generation, the role played by the paper and other print media in framing and circulating such sensibilities loomed large. The tone, which Hagimoto and his fellow producers sought to produce on *Kindoko* and other variety shows, had not changed; that is, the manner in which *Kindoko* addressed and oriented itself towards viewers remained the same. What had changed was the manner in which discourse—a discourse in which print media such as the *Asahi shinbun* played a part in constructing—oriented viewers towards that tone. Whether or not a new generation of viewers had in fact ushered in these changes, by characterizing them as the sensibilities of a younger demographic, the newspaper delineated what should feel real and authentic (the taboo-breaking comedy of Takeshi and Sanma) from what should feel creepy and unreal. Absent from a new epoch of television, the strangely warm laughter of Hagimoto Kin’ichi would now ring hollow.

*Kindoko*’s signature “laughter with warmth” nonetheless proved effective while the show’s popularity lasted. By the 1970s, cracks had already begun to appear in the idyllic façade of the postwar nuclear family model upon which the *Kindoko* family was based, and dramatic portrayals of the family such as *Kishibe no arubamu* (Albums By The River, 1977) had even begun to explore those cracks through the same television medium. *Kindoko* did not cover over these cracks, so much as it extended the earlier “cozy” model of family life and its mores along a new, more affective dimension supported by laughter.

At the heart of this focus on audience laughter was a shift in focus, in the television of the 1970s and onwards, to the use of affect in mediating, about the television medium, a quasi-familial community of viewers, which, while centered on television, reached beyond the boundaries of the television frame. Perhaps no program more effectively represents this emergent television-mediated world than NTV’s yearly 24 hour charity fundraising show *Nijūyō jikan terebi: ai wa chikyū o sukū* (24 Hour Television: Love Will Save the Earth, NTV, 1978 – present), a show whose original broadcast Hagimoto co-hosted. In a telling article in the *Yomiuri shinbun* on its pilot 1978 broadcast, a contributor to the paper praised the show’s cast and staff for employing the medium of television to “awaken the ‘selfless spirit’ that all-too-often lies dormant in people’s hearts.” Noting that some may criticize the telethon as replacing functions more effectively delivered by state-run social welfare institutions, the author argued that there is nonetheless a difference between the “good-willed one and ten yen coins” collected through the telethon and the welfare functions performed by the government through taxes. Asserting that “a good-willed donation is that much more heartfelt,” the author concluded that such charity programs create “the fertile soil” that will encourage the people of this country to rise up” and address its social ills.

Within such visions of a brave new television world, broadcasts such as *Nijūyō jikan terebi* had stepped into the shoes that the welfare state until recently filled, and where the latter wore such shoes only awkwardly, the show and the commercial network that broadcast it slipped into them comfortably. They did so, or so those such as the above author would claim, because they operated in a world of feelings rather than numbers, and as such, they were better positioned to ensure that the viewer donations they collected were “more heartfelt.” Viewers’ feelings and the perceived ability of television to manage them were at the center of this calculus. Just as the warm tone of *Kindoko* worked to secure the impression that Hagimoto the television father felt like a real one, *Nijūyō jikan terebi* channeled the same affective investments into viewer donations, injecting into them the impression, to which the above author attests, that they were more genuine and thus more effective than the taxes collected and redistributed by the welfare
The focus on viewers’ role within this calculus furthermore highlights the manner in which that role had come to figure as a form of affective labor, through which viewers themselves supported the television medium and its apparent influence. As Michael Hardt has noted, a generalized shift towards such immaterial forms of labor has been widespread throughout industrialized nations since the 1970s, and through this shift, “communicative action, human relations and culture have been instrumentalized, reified, and ‘degraded’ to the level of economic interactions.” Hardt ultimately discerns a silver lining within this “degradation,” concluding that there exists “enormous potential in affective labor” for new forms of collective subjectivity, as well as power “from below” on the part of those who perform the labor. However, the affective labor performed by viewers of both *Nijūyo jikan terebi* and *Kindoko* suggests the limits that have consistently circumscribed the realization of such potential. With its female laughter—the product of its viewers’ affective labor—*Kindoko* in particular preserved gender imbalances that have historically characterized affective labor. The very lack of recognition afforded, within Japanese discourse on television, to this gendered laughter underscores the fact that the labor that produces it is one marked by obfuscation and alienation. Once recorded, the show’s laughter became something other than the voice of the female audience members that provided it. It was a disembodied voice, attached as a free radical to the show and its public image, where it was no longer their laughter but an abstract “laughter with warmth.”

Such casual, “background” use of female laughter would furthermore set a precedent for future television programming in Japan—programming which I will turn to in the following chapters. While these later shows turned away from *Kindoko*’s “warm” domestic format, they nonetheless still depended on audience laughter to set their tone and thus influence viewers’ orientations towards them. Female laughter remained at the center of this strategy: Although often younger, conspicuously female-majority in-studio audiences would persist after Hagimoto’s heyday and continue to this day. Recorded, edited and broadcast to achieve just the right tone, the laughter of these audiences continues to serve many of the same “getting along” purposes, which Hagimoto had earlier envisioned. With it, television producers seek to pull viewers in and bind them within their shows’ affective embrace. However, as was eventually the case with *Kindoko*, that laughter sometimes pulls too tightly, and what appears to be warm and intimate in one moment, quickly becomes haunting and uncanny in the next.
Chapter 3
The Age of Laughter:
The 1980-1 Manzai Revival and the Performance of the Real

More and more people are coming to see manzai, and there are a few traits most of these people share. ... The guys are stupid, and the girls are ugly. ... Now, if a guy is ugly, that's one thing, but if a girl's ugly, she's screwed. ... They should make a law that it's okay to kill a chick if she's ugly. ... Or that ugly girls can't walk outdoors. ... “Ugly girls shall not use the crosswalks,” or, “All ugly girls shall wear an ugly girl badge.” ... If you kill an ugly girl, they won't arrest you, or if you kill more than twelve, you get a free trip to Hawaii.

-Kitano Takeshi, a.k.a. Beat Takeshi
Performing on THE MANZAI, July 1980

Within popular accounts of Japanese television comedy, the 1980-1 manzai (duo standup comedy) “boom” frequently marks a turning point in the history of both the genre and of Japanese television itself. Riding on the coattails of a handful of standup performance shows such as THE MANZAI (1980-82), the revival introduced a style, often branded “new wave,” which departed significantly from established ones within the form.1 Whereas the manzai of previous generations generally functioned through a balanced exchange between the tsukkomi (straight man) and boke (funnyman) roles, the tsukkomi of the new form performed an almost negligible and assistive role to the larger-than-life performances of boke such as Kitano Takeshi and Shimada Shinsuke. To the laughter of stylishly dressed teen and twenty-something audiences, these equally “young” performers would rattle off high-speed, acerbic observations, such as the above Kitano bit, on topics both personal and general. The boom would have a lasting effect on the Japanese television landscape: It created an opening for the rise of the comedy talent agency and entertainment juggernaut Yoshimoto Kogyō, and introduced viewers to comedians who, like Kitano and Shimada, would become permanent fixtures in the television landscape over the following decades. Raising comedians to the status of idols, it furthermore put to rest complaints, seen in Chapter 1, that comedy and comedians had no “civil rights” in the entertainment and cultural spheres, and established once and for all on Japanese television an age of laughter.2

Pivoting from my analysis in the previous two chapters of binding and intimate forms of television laughter, I will explore in this chapter the eruption, with the early 1980s manzai boom, of a more disruptive and ambivalent form of laughter. The revival not only introduced a new age of television laughter; it inflected and changed the tone and quality of laughter on Japanese television, raising to prominence a young, tonally edgy form of laughter targeted at teen and twenty-something audiences. A salient presence in 1960s variety shows such as those of Hagimoto’s Konto 55 gō, this brand of youth laughter had been, broadly speaking, crowded out of primetime programming during the 1970s, replaced by both the adolescent laughter of shows such as Hachi ji da yo! Zen’in shūgō (It’s 8 O’clock! Everyone Gather ‘Round, 1969-86; see Chapter 1) and the adult, often female laughter of shows such as Kinchan no doko made yaru no! (How far will Kinchan go! 1976-86; see Chapter 2).3 Encouraged by the success of shows at the center of the boom such as THE MANZAI, networks subsequently filled their schedules from daytime to primetime with manzai and similar performance comedy fare, immersing viewers in a laughter that was no longer the communal and warm laughter characteristic of much 1970s
comedy. Viewers both young and old nonetheless listened in, haunted and fascinated at the same time by its seemingly uncanny rhythms, many imagining to hear the pulse of a youthful, media-centric culture. For these viewers, the new manzai’s laughter became a microcosm of this culture, a distilled voice that both encapsulated and obscured the raw and often violent energy thought to animate it.

As the Kitano Takeshi bit provided in the epigraph to this chapter attests, the boom’s young laughter was more often than not a cruel one, aimed at the weak and the outcast. A form of symbolic violence, such jokes appear tailor-made to fit Freud’s analysis of jokes as a means of circumventing, through the cathartic upheaval of laughter, the social rules that prohibit “hostility by deeds.” Indeed, in a vein that often unwittingly parroted Freud’s own, many of the new form’s defenders argued that its cruel jokes were as much targeted at the weak as they were at the social rules that made such jokes taboo. The jokes and the young laughter they provoked, many contended, were expressions of hon’ne, “true thoughts and feelings” otherwise obscured by the oppressive mask of tatemae (“social façade”). Drawn from then-favored nihonjinron (theories of Japaneseess) analyses of Japanese culture, the hon’ne/tatemae binary offered a convenient one in popular analyses of the new form and its social impact. Branded hon’ne manzai, the performances of Kitano Takeshi and others were framed as “young” not only because of the voice they were thought to give to the youth, but in their role in breaking down the aging edifice of Japanese tatemae society and ushering in a new era of media-centric liberality by forcefully injecting the private and the personal into the open, quasi-public space of the airwaves.

Yet, the boom-era manzai performers never truly destroyed the mask of tatemae, nor did this appear to even be their aim. Skirting the lines of propriety drawn by social codes (as well as the broadcast rules that enforced them), their cruel jokes were designed to bring audiences to the edge of those lines without crossing them. Constantly mocking and even parroting social façade, they manifested an obsession with masks and facades, which closely resembled what Slavoj Žižek has termed a passion for semblance. The obverse of a Alain Badiou’s notion of a “passion for the Real,” Žižek’s passion for semblance begins with a passion for surfaces that ultimately lead to violent attempts to uncover what lays beyond—a violence he locates in the figure of the cutter who takes a blade to her own skin in order to fight a feeling of unreality, and ground herself in an experience of the real figured in the sight of “the warm red blood flowing out of the self-inflicted wound.” Similarly, the symbolic violence of the new manzai’s cruel jokes functioned to draw blood from the mask of social façade rather than destroy it. They sought to provoke laughter that might assuage the feelings of unreality created by both the bulwark of social façade and the apparent artifice of television and its rules, while at the same preserving that surface as the material for future jokes yet to come.

The youth laughter that the new manzai provoked was the blood that flowed up from the surface wounds its jokes inflicted. It situated the performance and broadcast within a performed authenticity of hon’ne, branding the performance as an expression of true thoughts and feelings while relieving the performer of the necessity of putting those thoughts and feelings into words. It rescued the performer from any possible suspicion that they had sold out or that, like the generations of performers who had preceded them, they were merely putting on an act, repeating scripted lines and tossing out canned jokes. Youth laughter met the performer halfway, affording them the appearance of having gone as far as possible without ever having to go too far. As with the laughter examined in previous chapters, this co-optation of youth laughter served commercial aims: it separated that laughter as an audio artifact from the youth who gave voice to
it, and abstracted it as a symbol of “authentic youth” and “youth authenticity,” harnessing it in order to draw viewers in to the spectacle of the manzai performance.

In what follows, I will examine how the performers and shows at the center of the boom worked to tame this laughter and contain it within the broadcast as a marker for the authentic and immediate. I will argue that performers incorporated this sense of hon’ne authenticity in the form of posture and performance, gesturing towards the act of “going too far” while never fully doing so. By gesturing towards the act of going too far, boom-era manzai performers such as Kitano conjured for viewers what would lie beyond the limits set by broadcast rules. This possibility of a manzai performance—or part of the manzai performance—lying beyond those limits served as an absent signifier within the broadcast, indicating the censored remainder of the spectral, authentic whole. Youth laughter, I will argue, served to fill this absence, sounding out its erasure, while serving, within the broadcast, as a haunting but tantalizing voice of the excised remainder of the whole performance. While the co-optation of youth laughter territorialized it within the limits of the broadcast, it brought within those limits a form of laughter that, through its very ambivalence, displaced the broadcast from the inside out.

I will first investigate how manzai laughter was imagined as young laughter, and how the popular press encouraged its readers to listen in on the manzai boom’s laughter, in order to discern the authentic and raw voice of the nation’s youth. While some commentators framed this in glib terms, emphasizing that laughter’s exuberance and trendiness, others pointed to the pent-up feelings of an oppressed and coddled generation, to which they imagined it gave expression. I will treat these divergent views of the boom’s young laughter as two sides of the same coin, and consider how both suggest an underlying view of it as listless, inscrutable and unpredictable. I will then turn to an analysis of the so-called hon’ne manzai of the duos Shimada-Ryūsuke (comprised of Shimada Shinsuke and Matsumoto Ryūsuke; commonly known as Shin-Ryū) and Two Beat (comprised of Kitano Takeshi, a.k.a. Beat Takeshi, and Kaneko Kirō, a.k.a. Beat Kiyoshi), in order to examine how they courted young laughter through their performance of hon’ne authenticity, approaching the line of impropriety while never crossing it. I will then consider how this form of skirting boundaries framed young laughter as an ambivalent form of laughter, reflecting upon the role such laughter played in inflecting Japanese television comedy from the 1980s onward.

**Listening In On Young Laughter**

In a January 1981 spread, the weekly Shūkan asahi recommended to its readers that they check for headphones the next time they spy a young passenger “sniickering to themselves on the train.” He or she, it suggested, was likely listening to manzai on “the ‘Walkman’ trending amongst the young.” A fictive scene made possible by the intersection of the manzai boom and the then two-year-old Walkman, the image evoked by the weekly distills the terms, in which it and many other sources treated the boom. While Japan’s youth were lining up to see a comic form deemed until recently moribund, its adults had been left “scratching their heads,” according to the weekly. As if to make matters worse, the performances were only more impenetrable, delivered as they were at breakneck speeds that rendered the patter and wordplay of the performers—the traditional emphasis of manzai—incomprehensible. However, as the scene of the Walkman on the train suggests, the weekly and others like it deemed the laughter and the mysterious patter at its source to be something worthy of listening in on. Inscrutable and defying explanation, the new manzai’s laughter might not be something that one could join in on (its
source was after all contained within the headphones of the young listener), but it was nonetheless a laughter that could be examined, turned over and probed as a supposedly raw voice of the youth from which it erupted.

The Shūkan asahi likely imagined it had good reason to listen in on this laughter: The turn of the decade marked an uptick in concerns regarding Japan’s youth, and numerous media reports at the time reflected upon a perceived explosion of problems afflicting the youth, not least of which was the increased competition and pressure surrounding college entrance exams. Mirroring these concerns, various contemporary youth “movements”—such as the junior high and high school aged takenoko zoku (“bamboo shoot tribes”) who flooded the streets of Harajuku wearing Gypsy-style clothing and dancing in trance-like circles around portable stereos—drew a mix of adult consternation and voyeuristic interest. Recycling themes of generations past while updating them for a new age of commercialism and mass culture, voices both progressive and conservative expressed dismay that television and cognate media had produced a generation of coddled, apathetic youth, more concerned with consumption and leisure, than with reflecting upon their responsibilities to family and society.

The youth laughter of the new manzai erupted as a voice of this generation coming of age in the early 1980s, perceived to be as listless and inscrutable as that generation itself. The new manzai and its practitioners, many critics and producers argued, spoke on a fundamental level to the sensibilities of Japan’s youth, because they occupied and shared the same ground. Borrowing the words of THE MANZAI producer Yokozawa Takeshi, the weekly Terebi gaido explained, for example, that the new manzai succeeded, since it sprang from a “perfect fit” between “the sensibilities of today’s young” and a new generation of comedians who “energetically fire off gags filled with gekiga [manga] references.” Producers such as Yokozawa of course carefully managed this image of a “perfect fit” between the new manzai and young laughter. Just as Hagimoto and his fellow producers stacked Kindoko’s studio audiences with middle-age women, stylishly appointed young (often female) guests filled the most visible seats near the performers’ stage on THE MANZAI and other boom-era programs (see Figure 1). Seated closest to stage, these youth audiences and their proximity gave apparent shape to the imagined “fit” between the performers and themselves, and thus visually certified the supposed authenticity of the performances as a true voice of the youth.

By their own admission, the new manzai performers were anything but authentic. Many frequently scoffed at the longstanding traditions of the form, and noted their desire to abandon
*manzai* should they tire of it. It was however such poses of rebellion and disregard that defined the brand of authenticity to which they sought to lay claim. Theirs was an authenticity not of form, but of being—a way of being that was, it seemed, closest to their young audiences, where they lived and breathed the same air and thus were best positioned to give vent to the thoughts and feelings of that generation. Some even went as far as to compare the boom-era performers, as the manga artist Yamafuji Shōji did, to creative musicians in their ability to connect with youth audiences through their “thinking and lifestyle rather than the skill of their artistic expression.”

The comparison to popular music was of course not coincidental, and it reveals the extent to which public perceptions of the new *manzai* artists’ authenticity was the result of conscious performance on the part of those performers and their handlers. The boom-era performers in fact actively courted a “rock star” image, many favoring T-shirts, leather jackets and boots over the traditional suit and tie that had typified *manzai* performers of earlier generations (see Figure 2). Some performers, such as Shimada Shinsuke of the duo Shinsuke-Ryūsuke, even started their own bands, using them as platforms from which to polish their bad-boy images. Rather than speculate on the skin-deep nature of such performances of authenticity, however, popular accounts such as Yamafuji’s in most cases dutifully cited them as symbols of their authenticity. Within such thinking, the street-wear and other accouterments they brandished figured not as façade, but as morphemes within a wider affective language they shared with young viewers.

![Figure 2. Old versus new on THE MANZAI. Left, “old” duo Yasushi-Kiyoshi apologizes for looking like “seniors” in suit and tie (traditional *manzai* wear). Right, “young” duo B&B show off custom-made T-shirts.](image)

Taking the form of laughter, this language was an inarticulate and opaque one to the ears of adult listeners. While many sought to listen in on it, they did not pretend to or imagine they could ever understand it—both because of the perceived generation gap, but also because of the speed of the performances that provoked this laughter. Some were of course explicit in their disdain for such impenetrability: The cultural critic Dōmeki Kyōzaburō, for example, described as “uncanny” the experience of hearing young voices roar with laughter for popular duos that spoke in a “fast-paced Kansai dialect that those such as myself cannot understand.” Yamafuji (the above-cited *manga* artist) struck a similar though less critical tone, noting that “guests catch only 70% of the words that are pelted at them from stage at a frighteningly high tempo.” It was a “physiologically difficult task” to understand the entire bit, he noted, since audiences “are impeded by the sound of their own laughter as they strain to hear the next gag.” Spit out at a speed impossible for the human ear to decode, these accounts suggested, the words of the new *manzai* performers not only mingled with the sounds of laughter over which they struggled to be heard, they became one and the same with that laughter: a pure form of the human voice, unarticulated by the form of language and thus operating on a base and affective level.
Although such laughter marked a departure from the supposedly intimate laughter prominent on many 1970s comedy programming, it nonetheless carried forward, in both its production and its reception, many of the same notions of gender, which had inflected characterizations of the earlier laughter’s putative warmth and domesticity. In fact, many accounts of the boom took it as a given that the young laughter that greeted the new manzai artists was most often young female laughter. However, where accounts of comedy programming of a decade past detected in those shows’ laughter a cozy and familial tone, those of the manzai boom found in its laughter only a high-pitched and incomprehensible cadence, which mirrored the apparent mystery of the boom itself. Noting, for example, that the boom had given birth to “phenomena unthinkable on the manzai shows of the past,” the Shūkan asahi described scenes in which “girls flock where popular duos go to get their signature, and shrill voices swirl around television recording halls.”19 The existence of young female comedy fans was in fact not new, despite the magazine’s claims to the contrary. When Hagimoto had debuted in the late 1960s, he commanded a large audience among young women—many of whom formed the ranks of the youth audiences that had become a source of anxiety for producers of the era.20

Yet, accounts of the young female laughter that the manzai boom had unleashed belied as much a sense of fascination as one of befuddlement. This laughter was not simply an instrument that established the manzai broadcast’s tone; it was a language to be apprehended and decoded. The women’s magazine Josei jishin reported that the studio audience of the popular duo B&B, in which “young OL [office lady] and housewife guests stood out,” exhibited “an extraordinary reaction, laughing without stop.” Peppered amongst this laughter were “shrii voices shouting wa and kyaa [which] flew back in answer to every word spoken by B&B.”21 The weekly Shūkan gendai added to this list of female audience responses with exclamations such as kawaii (cute) and yadaa (eww), and identified in them an “affective language [kankakugo] of today’s young women,” which they use to “cover the feelings of joy, anger, sadness and pleasure.”22 The young female laughter of the boom became, within these accounts, something to be heard and understood on its own terms. Intermingling with the high-speed bits of the new manzai performers, it might have obscured their words and furthered the new form’s degradation of manzai’s traditional emphasis on linguistic sense and wordplay, but it also offered a new object to which audiences could turn their attention through a language to be both felt and interpreted.

While some who listened to that laughter imagined to discern in it the vibrant and exuberant rhythms and pulses of contemporary popular culture, others imagined to hear in it and the cruel humor, which drew it out, darker and more troubling notes. Writing in the Asahi shinbun, the media scholar Nakano Shōzō argued that the popularity of the manzai boom was “intimately tied” to the growing competition surrounding college entrance examinations. The expanded ranks of students devoting their after-school hours to test preparation, Nakano wrote, created a situation unique to the current generation. On the one hand they enjoyed a high degree of indulgence from their parents, he contended, and yet on the other, they were largely powerless to deviate from a pre-determined path. Drawing from an essay written on the boom by one of his own students, he wrote that this situation had planted dark feelings, and the leftover of an “incomplete combustion” of their desires for self-determination and self-expression. Within this matrix, according to Nakano, the new manzai offered a space within which to explore their desires. “Young people,” he wrote, “feel a connection with the patter of Shinsuke-Ryūsuke and others who shoot down the façade of tatemae, speaking from hon‘ne without regard to a script.” This connection and upheaval afforded by the new manzai, Nakano implied, nonetheless remained within the realm of the symbolic. As a media phenomenon, the boom had already
proven short-lived. Noting the ephemerality of the boom—by the time of his essay, a year had passed since the first broadcast of THE MANZAI, and viewers’ hunger for the fare was already waned—Nakano concluded that the desires to which the boom presumed to give voice would likely remain unquenched. While the boom would recede, the pressures upon Japan’s youth would inevitably remain.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will argue that the impression that the new manzai performers “shoot down the façade of tatemae” and speak “from hon’ne” was largely the product of conscious performance. However, Nakano’s notion of “incomplete combustion” is an apt one. While the boom might have failed to quench the youth of Japan’s desire for self-expression, it did so not because such problems stemmed from social issues much larger than the scope of one media phenomenon. It failed as expression of youth anxiety, because it was never intended as such. The television programs at the center of the boom—in particular THE MANZAI—appropriated youth laughter for their own aims. They abstracted this voice and its affective language from the young bodies, which gave it shape, and it inserted it within the broadcast where it functioned much like the remainder of “incomplete combustion,” which Nakano describes. However, it served there a markedly different role from the one for which he hoped. Never fully extinguished and constantly replenished, it worked not to quench the desires of youthful self-expression, but the desires of all viewers to experience a laughter that was perpetually young, and constantly tore away at the façades of society and the media, while leaving just enough intact for the production and broadcast of the next television spectacle.

Absent Voices

While the boom introduced a range of duos and styles, the comedians Kitano Takeshi (a.k.a. Beat Takeshi) and Shimada Shinsuke arguably represented two of the most recognizable faces of the so-called hon’ne style, which, foremost amongst others during the boom, attracted both attention and controversy. Both comedians and their respective partners had been performing both on and off television over the previous decade, but it would be shows such as THE MANZAI that would first introduce them to mainstream, primetime audiences. Alongside his tsukkomi (straight-man partner) Kaneko Kiō (a.k.a. Beat Kiyoshi) as the two-man unit Two Beat, Kitano became known, via the programs, as a boke (funnyman) adept at quick-fire gags that skewered the popular media, the mores of a do-gooder society, and, most prominently, the triumvirate of busu (ugly girls), gaki (little brats) and babā (grannies). Shimada and his tsukkomi partner Matsumoto Ryūsuke recycled many of the same tropes, but the brought to them a distinctly Kansai flavor and bad-boy image, which Shimada embellished with frequent references to his days as a member of a motorcycle gang.

Similar to comedians such as George Carlin in the U.S., Kitano appealed to viewers with bits that, within the very space of television, challenged its rules. (The comparison is limited though, since Carlin appeared primarily on cable where he had more leeway than Kitano who appeared mostly on network television due to the historic weakness of cable in Japan.) Kitano, in particular, demonstrated from his early days a mix of fascination and disdain for the television industry that would undergird his subsequent success as a television personality, as well as film actor and director—a mix that can be seen in the following bit from a December 1980 broadcast of THE MANZAI, in which he mocks, among other programs, the long-running historical drama Tōyama no Kinsan (Kinsan of Tōyama Mountain, 1970-86).
Kitano: Television’s always been garbage [kudaranai], but lately there’s some real garbage on.
Kiyoshi: Well, TV... It is the age of TV, after all.
Kitano: Especially the commercials.
Kiyoshi: Commercials, right.
Kitano: Garbage. So fake they’re obvious [wazato rashii]. Like the Rama commercials.²⁵
[Kitano discusses several commercials and television shows]
Kitano: Tōyama no Kinsan’s no different.
Kiyoshi: That show’s a popular one.
Kitano: Whatever’s going down, Kinsan’s always there.
Kiyoshi: Right.
Kitano: If he’s at the scene of the crime, you’d think he’d arrest them in the act. But no! He goes out of his way not to let the bad guys know who he is.
Kiyoshi: Ah! You’ve got a point there.
Kitano: Instead, he asks them if they’ve ever heard of dandy named Kinsan, or something like that. And then they say, “huh?” And you’d think they’d recognize his face, but they tell him they don’t. So, he asks them, “Well, how about this?” (gestures pulling down collar to show tattoo on shoulder [see explanation below])
Kiyoshi: Right, the tattoo.
Kitano: Hey, idiot. If they didn’t recognize your face, do you think they’re going to recognize your tattoo?
Kiyoshi: You’ve really thought this through.
Kitano: Since they always recognize the tattoo, everything works out in the end, but think about what’d happen if they didn’t. After that there’s not much more to show. What’s he going to do, drop his shorts (gestures taking off his pants)?²⁶

Complaining tongue-in-cheek of television’s inherently “fake” (wazato rashii) nature, Kitano pokes fun at Tōyama’s well-known formula. A drama based on the historical Edo-era magistrate Tōyama Kagemoto (a.k.a. Kinsan), the show is based on popular lore surrounding the official’s fabled adventures, in which he would come, in disguise, to the aid of commoners. The television adaptation featured, in each broadcast, a familiar pattern in which Kagemoto would reveal himself at the conclusion to each episode’s villains, by first asking them if they recognized his face and then the tattoo on his shoulder (which the villain inevitably recognizes with a look of terror). Kitano’s bit lampoons the ludicrous artifice of the formula, wondering how many people would recognize an official’s tattoo over his face. If the villain did not recognize the tattoo, the comedian quips, there would not be much more for Kagemoto to show, short of dropping his pants.

While Kitano’s joke demonstrates a love and fluency for the language of television and media culture, it foregrounds an attempt to push that language to its edge. The comedian gestures both verbally and manually towards his genitalia—the foremost amongst objects whose visualization within the broadcast are forbade by television’s rules—but he does so without naming them directly, much less mentioning exposing them for the camera. He suggests their disguised presence in the studio, insinuating that he might discard the clothing that obscures them. Still hidden, they assume, because of their irreconcilable obscenity, the status of the ultimately real object. Within Kitano’s lowbrow joke, they furthermore function to expose the
ludicrous nature of the conventional formulas, which television programs such as Tōyama employ. They push that formula’s conceit to its most absurd ends, peeling back the imaginary clothing of the performer not only to reveal his true identity, but also to reveal that which lays right beyond the frame of the television screen and camera. Kitano’s joke, however, figures more as a more polite form of striptease. It gestures towards what lies below his clothing—and thus what lies beyond the limits of the televisable—only to lay that clothing quickly back on. Never directly touching upon what lays beneath, it directs his audience’s laughter at the clothing that obscures it, namely, at the rules and artifice of television, which prevent either his genitalia or their verbal referent from appearing within the broadcast.

Both Kitano and Shimada shared this love for skirting broadcast’s, as well as society’s rules, and it was this dance they performed at the boundary of propriety which largely informed their public persona as edgy, anti-establishment comedians who gave expression to the repressed hon’ne of both the youth and society at large. However, as can be seen in the following Shin-Ryū bit from the same December 1980 broadcast of THE MANZAI, these jokes brought their audience to the edge of boundaries—in this case the boundaries that separate everyday experience from real violence and death—without ever truly crossing over them.

Shinsuke: A while back, I went out... For real. This is a real story... This is really nonfiction [nonfuikushon]. (stumbles over word) I mean, nonfiction. No, I mean... No, I mean the one that means a true story. (laughter)

[...]

S: And so, I really went out and the wind really was blowing hard. ... And this grannie—she was blown off by the wind. This really happens, these kinds of things.

Ryūsuke: What are you talking about?

S: No really. I’m talking about something that really happened.

R: To an old woman?

S: I’m not making this up. This is real—I was standing there, waiting at a red light.

R: Waiting at a red light.

S: And the wind... I was holding my bag over my head. This is real. This grannie comes limping up, and I’m just standing there. Then, the wind goes swoosh, and the grannie runs out halfway into the intersection.

[...]

R: You realize she wasn’t just walking out into the intersection, right?

S: No, no. You’re missing the point. She came up real slow to the intersection, and then just all the sudden dashed off. Then, she came staggering back, her face real pale.

[...]

S: It was too bad, really. Just a little more, and she would have been run over.

R: You can’t be serious.

S: Huh?

R: Why didn’t you stop her? What if something happened?

S: What’re you, an idiot? We’re talking about whether, before you die, you’ll ever have the chance to see that moment where a person gets run over by a car.27

In this bit, Shinsuke brings the elderly woman to the edge of a horrific death, but never pushes
her over. His joke, like the woman, approaches the line of going too far, but it ends with a punch line rooted in the desire to see death, rather than in the realization of that desire. Against this backdrop, the possibility of the old woman’s death becomes as ridiculous and unreal as his repeated assurances that it “really happened.”

The specter of horrible death functions here in the same manner as the invisible presence of the genitalia does in Kitano’s joke; both suggest what lies beyond the scope of the televisible without ever truly exposing it. In Shimada’s joke, it is the rules of social propriety (and bad luck if the comedian is to be believed) that obscures this final exposure, while his constant bumbling over the linguistic division between fiction and nonfiction works to cast those barriers to be as artificial as the broadcast rules that obscure the genitalia in Kitano’s joke. Using the English loanwords here for the terms “fiction” and “nonfiction,” Shimada embellishes his performance of unaffected authenticity, while also establishing the premise that this is a joke whose laughter arises from a tongue-in-cheek desire to experience a real form of violence, which social boundaries obscures in our daily lives (and which broadcast rules subsequently prevent from appearing on the television screen). His lack of confidence in his use of the word “nonfiction” presages the bit’s conclusion, which leaves the woman’s death unrealized and incomplete.

Ryūsuke’s common-sense insistence that Shimada stop the woman—as well as the implausible wind, and the woman’s last minute recovery in the middle of the street—becomes a joke and a seeming fiction. It serves as a flimsy, almost unreal barrier, which would prevent Shimada, as well as his audience, from coming into contact with the specter of real death that looms beyond as an absent presence.

The young laughter, which Kitano’s and Shimada’s bits provoked, arose from their flirtation with such boundaries, but it also arose from the boundaries themselves. Focused on the façades that the comedians’ jokes skewered, it appeared on its surface to mock those façades. If television was not as artificial as the historical drama Kitano ravages, such jokes seemed to suggest, we would be watching uncut images of the comedian underscoring his lowbrow joke with a full exposure. Furthermore, if the rules of propriety and broadcast did not prevent it, we might actually be able to catch images of death during a primetime broadcast. However, as it appeared within the broadcast—appropriated in the form of a faceless recording of the laughter of young audiences—it functioned in the end as a laughter that arose from the mask of television’s artifice and façade. Rather than exposing the spectral presences whose absence the comedian’s jokes underscored, young laughter served as one more layer and surface obscuring that presence.

This underlying characteristic of the manzai boom and its young laughter was true even when its comedians’ bits achieved moments of outright satire, and in fact inflected that satire as a form, which was decidedly more ambivalent than its predecessors. Kitano, in particular, was known for his one-liner parodies of the public safety announcements (PSA) proliferated in Japan by government agencies, the police, as well as civic groups. However, even here, the comedian walked a thin line between outright satire of the institutions that produced the real PSAs, and a less easily discernible send-up of the contemporary mores that motivated them.

Red light! Cross together, and it’s not so scary. [Parody of traffic PSA]

Before you go to bed, make sure to twist them tight: your parents’ necks. [Parody of anti-theft PSA reminding residents to ‘twist’ their locks before bed]

Watch out! Somewhere an ugly girl is waiting for an unsuspecting pervert.

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In what at first blush appears to be nothing more than juvenile cracks, Kitano’s one-liners shined an uncomfortable light on the benevolent tone, which typically animated (and still animates) the PSAs of the era. While they ostensibly took aim at the weak and the outcast, their true aim was ultimately to invert the performance of benevolence—a form of benevolence arguably unique to modern liberal societies—to which the PSAs gave form. They assume the voice of the caring welfare state and its corollary institutions, in order to expose the potential for violence that courses below its surface. Just as Nakano (the scholar who discussed the “incomplete combustions” of manzai’s young fans) suggested that the new manzai gave expression to the voice of a youth stifled by their parents’ attention, Kitano’s one-liner’s suggested a society of infantilized citizens, suffocated by the close embrace of a paternalistic state.

Circulated within the institutional space of establishment media, however, natural limits circumscribed this mode of satire—a point that was not lost on contemporary critics. In a review of a popular joke book, which Two Beat published in the wake of the boom, the weekly Shūkan bunshū noted that their jokes “vented the bitterness the weak held towards the strong,” and afforded viewers “a type of catharsis by exposing the hon’ne that exists on the other side of the pretense [tatemae] of humanism.” However, comparing Two Beat to the political satire of older manzai duos, it concluded that while the jokes of Two Beat might skewer contemporary society’s humanist façade, it ultimately failed as satire, leaving those “who profess humanism neither hurt nor even itchy.” Writing in the magazine Ushio, the writer Yoshioka Shinobu was more pointed in his criticism. “I feel that their gags, in parodying traffic PSAs, succeed in exposing the underside of society’s façade,” he wrote, “but make no mistake, it gives voice to nothing more than authoritarian evil.” For these critics of Two Beat, the duo’s parody of the voice of power came too close to replicating the mask, which that power donned. Rather than placing a critical distance between the laughing and the laughed at, it gave expression to a more ambivalent form of laughter that seemed to erupt as much from the mask itself, as from those who laughed alongside Two Beat.

Perhaps the duo’s jokes’ greatest success lay in their ability to make “itchy” those who demanded moral clarity, since the jokes drew no lines between winners and losers, between the oppressed and the oppressor. They gave birth to a form of laughter that erupted from the ambiguity of the line that separated the two, and pointed at the uncomfortable equivalency that joined either side. As haunting and listless as the youth audiences it was thought to come from, this laughter danced between either side of such lines, constantly exposing the seemingly weak as the strong, and the seemingly strong as the weak. Yet, while it is important to note the unsettling effect the ambivalent laughter of Two Beat and others had on viewers and contemporary society in general, it is also important to stress the commercial ends, which this laughter and the opaque brand of satire that provoke it served. Japanese television networks courted the potentially explosive humor of Kitano Takeshi and his compatriots out of self-interest, rather than political or social interest. The excitement and interest generated by the boom-era performers drew viewers, and as such, they were allowed to flirt with certain boundaries—specifically the boundaries inscribed by industry-established broadcast rules. However, as the broadcasts themselves reveal, this flirtation with breaking the rules always remained, much as Shimano’s joke about the woman’s near death experience, an approach to
rather than crossing of those boundaries.

Laughter In Process

In a 1986 essay, Kitano himself voiced doubts (and likely continues to do so) that the modern television comedian could or would cross social or institutional lines.

There’s always people who are going to say that we comedians are anti-establishment. But they’ve got it all wrong, you see. In the end, comedy is about prostituting yourself. You gotta be good at working hand-in-hand with the establishment. Especially, with the way Japan is now, it’d be impossible for an anti-establishment comedian to exist.

... In other countries, there are lots of places you can do live shows, and people will come. But in Japan, the only thing that’s left is TV.32

As Kitano’s comments in this 1986 essay reveal, his jokes knowingly skirted the line of the permissible out of necessity. By the 1980s, the Japanese television industry had become so expansive as to encompass the entirety of the entertainment business. If he or his compatriots crossed the line, there would literally remain no other place for them to go, no other medium or venue where they could gain the ear of audiences. Skirting the lines established by television—and even at points revealing their ambiguity as Two Beat did—figured as what de Certeau would term a tactic rather than a strategy. They represent a “making do” with the possibilities at hand, while not fundamentally altering the rules that structure those possibilities.33 However, it goes without saying that the pair—and Kitano especially—would do quite well for themselves, and that theirs was a very profitable “making do.”

The Japanese television industry of the 1980s had in fact become quite proficient at incorporating such tactics within its wider strategy. It embraced Kitano’s and others’ flirtations with the boundaries inscribed by its own rules, embedding them within the broadcast as badges of its authenticity. Under this strategy, the excised, censored remainder of the comedy performance functioned not as a sign of television’s heavy hand, but as a mark that it did its utmost to bring to the viewer the performance—as well as its underlying hon’ne—in its most raw and uncut form. Fawning over the apparent edginess of Kitano and his compatriots, viewers and critics were willing collaborators. One Yomiuri staff writer gushed, for example, that “whenever Two Beat comes on the tube,” he is “overcome with a sense of suspense” since he has “no idea what they’ll say.” The thrill of the duo’s unpredictability was only multiplied when seen live, he continued, since “considering that they pretty much say whatever they want on television where they already self-censor, seeing them on stage is even more terrific.” Ironically, such feelings of giddiness and expectation vis-à-vis Two Beat’s television performances was fueled by the specter of the live, off-screen performances, which Kitano laments had in fact become a negligible presence in the Japanese entertainment world.34 Colonized and nearly wiped out by television, these live performances served alongside the censored ‘whole’ performance as an absent signifier for the authenticity of the broadcast. Like Shimada and the old woman, they brought viewers to the edge, suggesting to them what lay beyond by constantly gesturing at the violence done to the whole by such boundaries.

The boom’s young laughter filled the void left behind by that absence. The promise of an uncensored whole—as well as the unrevealed presence of the phallus and the un-experienced
reality of death—serves, within the broadcast as an absent signifier of yet another absence. Filling the gap left behind by these successive absences, the laughter of their young audiences seeped in, suggesting these absences’ spectral presence through a recorded and disembodied voice that was as fleeting as those absences. It gestured to what had been excised from the whole, and thus to the even more brutal feelings (and jokes) that lay beyond the limits delineated by broadcast’s rules. It served as a constantly dissipating marker, within the symbolic order of the television broadcast, of a possibly real and uncut experience. Disembodied and haunting, it rose and fell, suggesting the contours of this experience to be as inscrutable as the shrill voices that gave it form.

This laughter was as listless as the image of the youth that gave it voice. While it may have erupted in moments of intense violence, it often appeared ambivalent and apathetic. With increasing efficiency, Japanese television from the 1980s onward co-opted this laughter, creating around its broadcasts a sense of excitement and unpredictability while fueling notions of feckless, mediatized youth. Even though the manzai boom would quickly recede after little more than a year and a half, its most lasting contribution to the television of the following decades was perhaps this laughter. Standing at the beginning of the 1980s, it marked the starting point of an increased focus within the television industry on the teen and twenty-something demographic, as well as an explosion of programs catering to it with comic and semi-comic fare. Such programs spanned a wide variety of time slots and genres, including the Saturday night sketch comedy show Oretachi hyōkinzoku (We, The Clan of the Drôle, 1981-9), the early evening idol variety show Yūyake nyan ‘nyan (An Evening Meow, 1985-7, station), and the Kitano Takeshi hosted “information” variety show Tensai Takeshi no genki ga deru terebi (Genius Takeshi’s TV To Make You Happy, 1985-96). Each of these programs featured young laughter prominently, whether that be in the laughter of its youth audiences or the antics of the young comedians that served as their hosts. Furthermore, as opposed to the innocent portrayal of youth in programs such as Hagimoto’s Kindoko, the edgy, more explosive laughter of these new shows framed an image of youth that was increasingly sexualized and culturally savvy.

This was the nature of the seemingly formless yet explosive laughter that the boom had unleashed. On the one hand, it might be the giddy and playful voice of the latest trend or cultural trope, but on the other hand, it might be the jaded one of a listless youth. Swinging back and forth between these extremes, it gave audible shape to something akin to what Raymond Williams terms a “structure of feeling”—a “social experience which is still in process,” occupying a spot on the horizon of the social imaginary where it remains “in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been precipitated and are more evidently and more immediately available.” If the young laughter of the boom-era manzai appeared to quickly change shape, escaping easy definition, it was perhaps so because, in the minds of those who attempted to describe it, it was as immature and thus inarticulate as the generation that gave voice to it was imagined to be. It was still “in process,” shifting violently and rapidly from one moment to the next. The television broadcast held this process in suspension, circumscribing it within the limits of the televisable while allowing it to fester there, where it constantly remained on the edge, always seeming to go too far but never far enough.
Chapter 4
Documenting Laughter:
Japanese Reality Programming and the Art of the Close-Out

A genre similar to reality television in the U.S., Japanese documentary variety came into its own during the 1990s with shows such as the late night Susume! Denpa shōnen (Forward! Radio Youth, 1992-8; hereafter, Denpa)\(^1\) A hodge-podge category that mixed quiz show type material with a cinéma vérité aesthetic, it featured, in its earliest days, short and easy to produce segments, which “documented” comedians and other television personalities as they completed comic and often absurd challenges and tasks taped on-location. As the shows grew in popularity, they also grew in extravagance, and by the end of the decade, they would become known for producing highly viewed, serial projects that frequently mixed the comical with the sentimental.

In this chapter, I will consider the documentary variety genre within the context of its historical development, and explore the idea of “documenting laughter” that lies at its roots. While I will treat the notion as one of documenting the unfolding of laughter’s expression, I will argue that the genre locates this expression not within the individual face, but instead produces a form of expression, which stretches across the entire television frame—moments which I will term those of the close-out, as opposed to the close-up, in which individual faces and the space they occupy function as mere raw material to be actualized within the resultant laughing screen. Further, I will consider how the close-out often works to depoliticize public spaces, while at the same time leaving open the possibility for disruption and change within those spaces. Television is often identified for its role in the decline of activism and engagement, and the rise of political apathy from the 1970s onwards, and rightly so: Documentary variety shows and their predecessors, for example, would often “hit the streets” to tape their material, but they did so in order to frame those streets as spaces of laughter and play, rather than as sites of potential collective action and change, as activists and artists had envisioned them during the 1960s. While I will not argue against this portrayal of television or documentary variety, I will trace here how these shows came to use urban and other spaces as a source of material for their documents, in order to reflect upon the potential for eruption still contained within their expressions of laughter.

Capturing both the laughter and tears of performers, documentary variety shows have frequently been lauded for their supposed ability to capture the performers’ “true faces,” even though it is widely recognized that they are, in many aspects, staged. A 2013 Yomiuri shinbun article, for example, opines that, although “it is not certain where the boundary between real happenings and directorial manipulation [enshutsu] lies on any of these shows,” they nonetheless succeed in capturing “the earnest expressions [shiken na hyōjō] of their performers.”\(^2\) In his analysis of Japanese television comedy, the sociologist Ōta Shōichi likewise reiterates many of these same assumptions, albeit from a position of critical distance. He argues that both the presence of the television camera and the performers’ awareness of it are inconsequential to the shows’ composition. “What is important ... is the shared assumption of both producers and ‘viewers’ that they are (or suppose they are) peeking in on the unexpected, raw expression [of the individual being taped].”\(^3\) According to Ōta, this focus on raw expression corresponds to the genre’s frequent pivots from the comic to the sentimental, as emotion and tears often come to replace laughter as the expected conclusion of the shows’ various segments.

The Japanese term Ōta uses here for “raw,” namely su, is important, as it gestures towards the conceptual framework that has historically motivated the production and reception of documentary variety. Often an unspoken or implied term within discussions of the genre, su
occupies, within television discourse, the territory of a not fully articulated ground that lies outside the boundaries of gei—a term meaning at its most rudimentary level “art,” but encompassing also a sense of the rehearsed, the practiced and the professional. Whether staged or accidental, the unrehearsed moments of documentary variety and its like are often understood to reveal the opposite of gei, exposing what the scripted and the rehearsed otherwise obscure: that is, the performers’ su, or their natural and unassuming way of being that precedes the framing effect of the camera. Either catching them off guard or putting them at ease, these moments and the shows in general are understood to lift the mask of artifice and deliver to us, their viewers, the face of su—or in Japanese, the sugao or “true face”—that lies underneath.4

Whether or not they represent the true faces of the performers, emotive moments certainly have an effect on framing viewers’ understanding of documentary variety programming. Few viewers of Denpa shōnen, for example, would fail to recognize the final scene of the show’s highly rated hitchhike series, in which a young comedy duo backpacked from Hong Kong to London (see Figure 1). However, such moments do not necessarily represent the sole or even dominant type of scenes that filled the show’s broadcasts. Taped most typically with portable cameras, Denpa and its early 1990s peers did not always lend itself to capturing the facial close-ups best suited to communicating such moments of emotional impact. In fact, in many of the shows’ scenes, faces often remained obscured or hidden behind other faces, barely transparent windows, and opaque walls (see Figure 2). Such scenes do not capture the expression of any performer, let alone their “true” expression, and yet they are full of expression. Framed by a “close-out” rather than a close-up, these scenes are those where the camera zooms out to a wider view of surfaces and crowds in which the individual face becomes one pixel within a wider mosaic. It is these moments in documentary variety, when the screen as a whole cracks up and begins to laugh.

Figure 1. The comedy duo Saruganeki arrives in London on Denpa shōnen INTERNATIONAL.5

Figure 2. Closed out behind boundaries, barricades and windows (from Susume! Denpa shōnen).6
Although I define the close-out here in terms of its oppositional relationship to the close-up, the two are parallel techniques in many ways. Just as the close-up distills the affective dimension of a scene through what Deleuze identifies as the face’s “intensive expressive movements,” the close-out faceifies windows, gates and walls, and renders them expressive by bringing to their impassive surfaces small movements: the barely perceptible movement of a body on the inside, the muffled sounds of voices, and text that scrolls playfully across the screen. Further, just as the close-up excises the face from its temporal and spatial surroundings, the close-out not only obscures individual faces, it separates the closed-out surfaces from their historical and social context. Namely, it takes military bases, government offices, and urban crowds, and empties them of their significance as sites of power, contestation and upheaval, turning them instead into scenes of mischief and merriment.

Arising on Japanese television at roughly the same moment in which Fredric Jameson locates the “waning of affect” within contemporary culture, the close-out offers a means of critically appraising the feelings of “euphoria” which he identifies as proliferating in postmodernism’s wake. Jameson’s analysis of Warhol works such as *Diamond Dust Shoes*—which he juxtaposes to works such Van Gogh’s *A Pair of Shoes* and Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*—parallels in broad terms what I am terming here the close-out. In Jameson’s reading, the peasant shoes in the Van Gogh and the screaming figure in the Munch serve as expressive anchors. The former exudes, for Jameson, the history of “agricultural misery, of stark rural poverty, and the whole rudimentary human world of backbreaking peasant toil;” the latter distills the “canonical expression of the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude and social fragmentation and isolation.” Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes*, in contrast, feature “a random collection of dead objects, hanging together on the canvas like so many turnips,” closing out their potential for individual expression. At issue in Jameson’s readings of these works is postmodernism’s “decentering” of the individual subject: With the decline of the subject, expressive affect loses its anchor, leading to the dispersal of “intensities” such as euphoria that, like the glitter on Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes*, circulate as “free-floating and impersonal” qualities.

The close-out in Japanese documentary variety similarly decenters both the viewer and the expression of the screen itself. Excluding the expressive potential of the individual face, it distributes that potential across the entire screen, enveloping the viewer in a general yet unspecified feeling of laughter and excitement. However, it is perhaps here that the greatest potential of the close-out lies, for while it extracts spaces and scenes from their own politically and historically fraught contexts, it converts these tensions into those of laughter, a disruptive and unpredictable force in itself. As I will argue, those tensions remained in suspension on early documentary variety shows such as *Denpa*. While these tensions would never truly erupt in a politically or socially disruptive form on the show—much like the manzai of Kitano Takeshi and other early 1980s performers (see Chapter 3), the show would constantly walk but never cross the line established by the rules of broadcast—these tensions still inhabited the surface of the show’s decentered, screen-wide expressions of laughter. Framing these expressions as those of the close-out and returning them to their historical and social context, it still remains possible to resuscitate these tensions, as well as the transformative and deterritorializing potential of laughter.

In what follows, I will return to a closer analysis of variety documentary’s screen-wide expressions of laughter, but I will first turn to a short discussion of the 1970s show *Kinchan no don to yatte miyô!* (*Kinchan’s Let’s Do It!*, 1974-80; hereafter, *Kindon*). I will use this analysis
of *Kindon*, an oft-cited forerunner of documentary variety, in order to situate the later 1990s genre within the context of its historical development. The notion of a hybrid documentary and comedy form predates *Denpa* to at least the 1970s, if not earlier. More of an incipient idea than a fully articulated form in its early days, it took shape against the backdrop of television’s rise, and the decline of 1960s political activism. Through a discussion of *Kindon*, I will look briefly at how the show’s producers characterized their method as one of “documenting laughter,” in which they would leave behind the walls of the studio, and step out onto the streets of Japan in order to trace there the process of laughter’s unfolding. I will then return to scenes of the close-out within the documentary variety show *Denpa shōnen*, in order to examine how the show brought this same focus on process and “stepping out” to its own documents. Following this, I will conclude by considering the fate of the close-out within the context of more recent developments in Japanese television.

The Process of Documenting Laughter

In a 1978 essay on her role in the development of the Hagimoto Kin’ichi produced *Kinchan no don to yatte miyō*, the Fuji television producer Tokita Kuniko reflected on the role stepping out of the studio played in the creation of the show and of what she notes one might term a “documentary of laughter.” An adaptation of the similarly titled radio program *Kinchan no don to itte miyō* (*Kinchan’s Let’s Say It!* 1972-79), the television version of *Kindon*, like its radio predecessor, was structured primarily around viewer-written “two-line sketches” sent to the station via postcard. As Tokita notes, in porting this formula to television, Hagimoto and his fellow producers needed to expand and develop it, in order to fill the new show’s ninety-minute time slot, as well as take advantage of the visual aspects of the television medium. Whereas in the radio version Hagimoto read the sketches seated alongside his co-hosts, doing so in the television version would not, as Tokita put it, “create a ‘picture.’”

... [T]here was only one remaining option. “We’ll take the [sketches] and hit the streets,” was the conclusion. We decided to tape the entire process, including the laughter created by the sketches.

... The camera and microphone were hidden. Because the show had yet to air, Hagimoto’s listeners would stand there stunned, not knowing what was going on. Naturally, their reaction to the sketches came out in its raw form.

... In retrospect, one might say that the show turned out to be a “documentary of laughter (warai no dokyumentarī),” although we did not set out to do anything so pretentious. The idea that “hitting the streets” would create something “raw” and new was of course not unique to *Kindon*, and finds itself recycled with each new, supposedly path-breaking program. Hagimoto’s own television career has from its earliest days to the present been consistently portrayed in terms of his ability to cross boundaries, both abstract and concrete. Early accounts of his television debut alongside Sakagami Jirō characterized the duo’s high-speed antics as “breaking” the frame of both the television and the everyday. Similarly, a recent 2010 biopic of the comedian described his influence on broadcast television as that of a destroyer, or *kowashiya*—a notion the program underscored with images of a wrecking ball crashing down on
an abandoned building. While such portrayals may appear, at first blush, to be at odds with the family-friendly image of the comedian discussed in Chapter 2, they fit within a larger narrative which frames the comedian as a performer gifted at effortlessly crossing boundaries, whether those be the established rules of television or the lines separating television studio from home.

At the heart of this fascination with boundary crossing within television discourse lays the distinction, I addressed earlier, between gei and su. Stepping out of the studio has typically been characterized throughout the medium’s history as an act of breaking free from the strictures of scripted and rehearsed gei, in order to discover the raw su that supposedly lay beyond the studio walls. Raw and unpolished, amateurs and unscripted material would, according to producers’ thinking, breathe into shows what gei could not: a sense of “liveness,” or as Yuriko Furuhata puts it in her discussion of television documentary proper, a “sense of actuality” imagined to be predicated by the medium’s “immediacy, presentness, and simultaneous mass receptivity.”

In the case of Kindon, this element of su actuality was the “raw” reactions Tokita attributes to Hagimoto’s listeners, and these reactions were in turn the raw material of its “documentaries of laughter.” As she notes, this segment of the program was known as much for the skits themselves, as they were for the often befuddled response of the street-side audiences. Taking Hagimoto and the sketches into “the streets,” the show captured reactions of both laughter and confusion, due in large part to the age gap between the young viewers who typically penned the sketches and the older individuals Hagimoto would frequently select as his audience. Tokita’s “documentaries of laughter” were as much documentaries of these uncomprehending reactions as they were of the knowing and laughing ones (see Figure 3). They were documents of the process of laughter and its myriad possibilities—the process of telling the joke and of either getting laughs or falling flat—just as they were documents of the face as it held these possibilities within its numerous expressions.

As Hagimoto’s own comments reveal, this notion of “documenting laughter” contained, in incipient form, a glimpse of the close-out—of an equivalency between the expressive potential of the stunned human face and immobile surfaces. In addition to the confused faces of his street-side listeners, Hagimoto also cast as his in-studio comic foil the singer Maekawa Kiyoshi—an idea the comedian claims he came upon in the aftermath of the 1972 Asama-Sansō incident. Revolving around a hostage crisis that pitted the United Red Army against the police in a siege of the mountain villa into which they had retreated, the incident remains one of the most highly viewed events in the history of Japanese television. Remarking on the event in one interview, Hagimoto argued that the high ratings of the coverage essentially proved viewers could be drawn to watch content-less images, since they had “continuously watched the unchanging Asama-Sansō lodge for three or four days on end.” Thinking of how he could use this realization in his
own programs, Hagimoto hit upon the idea of using Maekawa, whose face, according to the comedian, resembled the lodge’s façade in its impassivity (see Figures 4, 5). Hagimoto told the weekly Shūkan yomiuri, “‘For example, if he’s asked in an interview, ‘What do you do on your days off,’ Maekawa answers ‘I take the day off’ looking completely unfazed.’”

A concrete façade and a human face, the lodge and Maekawa could not be more different, but as Hagimoto treats them, they are both faces of the same type. Both are immobile surfaces made expressive by the addition of slight movement—or more accurately, the expectation of viewers that some movement might take place.

Figure 4. “Unfazed.” Maekawa (left) with Hagimoto (right) on Kindon.17

Figure 5. The lodge at the center of the Asama-Sansō hostage crisis (as rebroadcast on 2010 Hagimoto biopic).18

Hagimoto’s treatment of Maekawa’s face already in a sense closed it out, extracting it from its individual context and rendering it into a raw material to be shaped into a form of expression that superseded the singer’s own. In the end, the singer’s impassive face, as well as those of the comedian’s street-side listeners, were merely possible points along the path of laughter’s eruption and unfolding. That laughter took root not in the actual expression of one face, but on the surface of the television screen, echoed through the voices of Hagimoto’s studio audience.

Notably, the Asama-Sansō hostage crisis and the lodge itself play a similar role within Hagimoto’s comments. Not only a highly watched media event, the incident figures as a pivotal moment in narratives of the period, as well as a symbol of the failure and subsequent decline of the student activism that had flourished during the 1960s.19 However, Hagimoto’s account of the event divorces it from this context, and addresses its significance only in terms of its ability to draw viewers. His comments empty the lodge facade of the violence and tension that lie beyond, and close out the incident’s historical context and possibilities. As will be seen in what follows, the 1990s documentary variety show Denpa shōnen similarly closed out both individual faces
and spaces, and extracted them from their political and historical contexts. However, in its focus on the surface of buildings, gates and boundaries, the show distilled, rather than erased, the historical and social tensions that inhabited those surfaces, and converted them into the bursts of laughter it would document.

At The Boundary, But Never Crossing

First airing in 1992, Denpa shōnen rose to prominence in its early years with so-called aponashi, or “no appointment,” segments, which loosely parodied the on-location interviews of Japan’s news magazine programs.\(^{20}\) With no advance warning, show hosts Matsumoto Akiko and Matsumura Kunihiro would visit celebrities, politicians and foreign dignitaries, and ask them to entertain requests both mundane and absurd. In one segment, Matsumura claimed to be bothered by the long eyebrows of a well-known politician, and shadowed him over several episodes, finally convincing him to allow him to clip the protruding hairs. In another project, Matsumoto talked her way into the Palestinian diplomatic mission and Israeli embassy to show their diplomats clips from the show, thinking that Denpa could bring peace to the Middle East. In some cases, the pair would meet with success in interviewing their targets; in many others, they would find themselves turned away at a door or a gate, snubbed by a voice on an intercom or ejected by an officious security guard. In short burst segments, Denpa would show both the hosts’ successes and failures, and chart their adventures through shaky handy-cam footage that would be smartly cut and edited to maximize the humor of the often awkward encounters.

Show producer Tsuchiya Toshio has noted that it was in fact immaterial to him and his production team whether the aponashi projects succeeded or failed, since the focus of the show was upon the documentation of the path that led up to the interviews.

Television has this sort of convention where everything has to be tied up in the end, a sort of pre-established harmony. If you go to meet someone, they better be there. In that regard, Denpa Shōnen was different. We didn’t make any appointments, and we figured it was okay if we didn’t actually meet them. The process of going to meet them was what was interesting.\(^{21}\)

With its emphasis on process, Tsuchiya’s description of the show’s aponashi formula echoes Tokita’s characterization of Kindon’s documentary of “the entire process” of laughter. This is of course no coincidence. Tsuchiya frequently cites Hagimoto as one of his influences, and even served as director on one of his shows.\(^{22}\) Where Kindon documented the process of laughter’s expression, following the numerous and often aborted paths it could take, Denpa brought this attention to process to its parody of the afternoon news format. Underneath the façade of such programming’s mundane content, Denpa seemed to imply, lay the possibility for multiple failures, but also for laughter, whether that be in the fumbling of the show’s hosts or the stiffness of their interlocutors.

This focus on process and its comic possibilities can be seen in a segment from a 1994 episode, in which Matsumura attempts to visit a pair of U.S. military bases in order to complain, on the behalf of local residents, about the noise from the bases’ jets. Making his way to Yokota Air Force Base, Matsumura approaches the guard station, as the narrator speculates tongue-in-cheek whether the comedian will be able to communicate in English, playing on a running joke on the program. Speaking with the guard, he stumbles over the English word for “noise,” but the
guard soon stops him. Oversized, colorful text emphasizes his mistakes, while the overheard voices of the unseen in-studio hosts can be heard to laugh at his mistakes. As both the narrator and the on-screen text inform the viewer, the guard is in fact Japanese. Phoning his superiors, the guard tells the comedian that he cannot handle complaints and that he will need to go to a separate location. The scene then shifts to Matsumura’s visit to the Atsugi Naval Base, where he finally finds himself confronted with American soldiers. Once again, the comedian attempts to communicate in broken English, and the on-screen text in turn embellishes those mistakes (see Figure 6). This time, the guards lead Matsumura into a side room, and following a conversation heard by audio alone, he returns to his camera crew positioned across the street. The segment ends on a playful note, as he asks a local resident about the noise only to find out that she is not bothered by it—a punch line which the onscreen text and narrator emphasize.23

Figure 6. At the boundary. Matsumura approaches Atsugi Naval Base, where he is led into room adjacent to the checkpoint. In-screen text transcribes voices of soldiers, narrators, and guards.24

With each stop on his quest, Matsumura finds himself literally closed out. Rebuffed at both checkpoints, he fails to gain entrance to either base and accomplish his goal. The screen image tracks with this process of exclusion. As Matsumura approaches the bases’ boundaries, his face becomes dark and indistinguishable, one more image amongst many. In the final scene, he becomes lost in the in-between space of the checkpoint when a soldier guides him into a side
building. Here the camera closes out, framing a wider shot of the structure into which he has disappeared. Opaque and impassive, the wall of this building functions much like the stunned and confused faces of Hagimoto’s street-side listeners on Kindon. It signals the failure of the project, but it also contains within it the still latent possibility for laughter. In order to document this incipient laughter, the segment draws it out and renders it into a fully realized expression, by carefully cutting the footage to shape the right narrative, emphasizing a punch line, and adding playful on-screen text.

Known in Japan as “telop,” such on-screen text played a key role in shaping Denpa’s screen-wide expressions of laughter. An abbreviation of the term “television opaque projector,” the technology originally used in its production, telop usage grew dramatically during the 1990s, and has become ubiquitous on contemporary Japanese television. Widely recognized as pioneers of its expanded use, Denpa and other early 1990s documentary variety shows liberally employed the in-screen text in an increasingly flamboyant manner. While such telop are frequently analyzed in terms of the assistive role they play in clarifying difficult to understand speech, it is also important to note their expressive function. Changing in size, color and shape, and at points moving across the screen, the superimposed text brings focused movement to otherwise impervious or inscrutable surfaces and renders them expressive. They not only indicate to viewers when to laugh, they allow otherwise unremarkable surfaces to become sites of merriment, mischief and play.

The overheard voices of narrator and in-studio hosts redouble the telop’s framing effect, while accentuating its decentering effect. Repeating and embellishing the in-screen text, the voice of the narrator serves to re-iterate many of the expressive functions of the telop. It draws out the humor of the scene through sardonic observation, but it also adds color and texture of an auditory form to otherwise dull footage through its tone and rhythm. Alongside the giddy and laughing voices of the unseen in-studio hosts, it furthermore multiplies the number of voices enveloping the viewer. These voices—those of the closed-out Matsumura, of the on-screen text, the narrator, and the in-studio hosts—tug and pull at the viewer, carrying her along on a giddy wave of laughter and general feelings of excitement. This laughter and these feelings seem to come from nowhere but everywhere on the screen, as the screen itself cracks up into an expression of laughter, winking, grinning and chuckling at the viewer.

Shaped through heavy postproduction, such screen-wide expressions of laughter treat individual faces, buildings and urban streets as a form of raw material little different than the camera footage that captures them. Alongside other faces, those of Matsumura, Matsumoto and other cast members become one element within a wider canvas of the close-out, one point within the process and topography of the laughing screen as it unfolds. Yet, while this action of the close-out faceifies the boundary surface and screen, it does not render it into the unguarded sugao or true face frequently attributed to Denpa and its documentary variety peers. Denpa used individual faces and other surfaces as a raw material, but it denatured that “rawness” in shaping it into its own particular expression. Framed within the television screen, the phantom-like su—the raw and unformed something imagined to exist beyond the limits of the television camera—transforms from ground to figure, becoming something other than itself.

As a show that frequently featured the close-out, Denpa was by definition a show that simply approached boundaries, without ever truly crossing them, just as the early 1980s manzai artists discussed in the previous chapter frequently gestured towards breaking the rules of broadcast without actually doing so. The “process” of meeting, which structured the aponashi projects, also structured this fundamental rule of the show. Footage of gates, building facades,
and front doors literally dominated the segments, and with good reason: They were the most obvious locations in which to set and document the process of the interview, of waiting to see if the show’s hosts would succeed in meeting their desired interviewee. Even when Matsumura or Matsumoto would succeed in gaining entrance to the building, home or complex in which their target resided, it was never a true border crossing, or at least it was never the final one. Even when the television cameras uncovered what lay beyond those boundaries, there still remained yet other spaces to uncover.

In the above scene, Matsumura approaches the boundary of the two U.S. bases, but he never enters them, just as he never crosses over to a direct confrontation with the political tensions, both international and local, of which the bases are symbolic. Seats of American military power, such bases are a source of perennial controversy due to their environmental and social impact on surrounding areas, and it is of course the attention to locals’ complaints that serves as the premise of the comedian’s tongue-in-cheek visit. However, through its close-out of both the comedian and the base, the scene ultimately separates the checkpoint and building façade from this wider context. The segment flirts with the controversy surrounding the bases, just as it does with the distance that seems to separate widespread media attention and locals’ actual concerns. However, it does not truly satirize these issues or their causes. Its laughter arises from the approach to the boundary—from the comedian’s inability to speak English and from his interlocutors’ failure to “get the joke.” Yet, on the other hand, the scene is not motivated by what one might call an “apologist” sense of humor. It does not seek to make a joke of the base and the surrounding controversy as a means for viewers to “let off steam” and thus submit to a complacent acceptance of the U.S. military presence. Instead, it converts the underlying tensions, which the base symbolizes, and fixes them within a document and expression of laughter. Held in suspension, these tensions always remain just below the surface, waiting to erupt.

Closed Out

Over the past decade, documentary variety has experienced a decline from its peak in the 1990s. Although representatives of the category still exist, and although its influence can be seen across genres, newer shows shy away from the more ostentatious projects of the 1990s while repeating many of the same tried-and-true patterns—patterns which are likely familiar to any who have turned on a television in Japan: In one such formula, a young idol finds herself isolated in a cheap rental and must learn to survive for the first time on a shoe-string budget, cooking meals for herself with ingredients that might cost under a hundred yen. In another familiar routine, a celebrity is sent to live with a down-and-out family for a week, helping a single mother make ends meet while growing close to the children. Perhaps most remarkable about these now recycled and all too recognizable segments is the fact that they take place, for the most part, within walls, avoiding the forays into the streets which earlier documentary variety programming embraced.

Even when the programs feature segments in open spaces, they set them overseas, closing out these international spaces’ historical and geopolitical contexts in the same manner the earlier Denpa did domestic ones. Denpa in fact foreshadowed this pivot abroad, as it shifted its emphasis to overseas projects, as well as its spin-off Denpa shōnen INTERNATIONAL series (1994–98), on which the above-mentioned back-packing series got its start. Such series transform foreign and potentially hostile spaces into relatively inert ones, in which their interior surfaces and inhabitants function as intermediary points in the larger closed-out canvas of the
protagonists adventures. The segments emphasize this wider angle by frequently splicing, in between footage, images of maps charting their progress (Figure 7). Within these international close-outs, boundaries become internalized, and the protagonists’ travels are configured as a series of border crossings spread throughout the closed-out space. As the drama of their approach to the next national border continues indefinitely, it overshadows the older, less comfortable narratives of conflict that the travels of a Japanese citizen through a country such as China would seem to suggest.

![Figure 7. On-screen map charts progress of backpacking comedy duo (Saruganseki) across Southeast Asia (from Denpa shōnen INTERNATIONAL).]

Perhaps most relevant to the discussion of what I have identified here as the genre’s tendency to close-out, the use of so-called mozaiku (or, mosaic) on Japanese television has steadily risen in the past two decades, fundamentally changing the nature of material shot in public and semi-public spaces in Japan. Now a common feature on variety programming, this digital blurring effect frequently accompanies television footage of public spaces, obscuring faces, bodies and other sensitive or private information. Originally used only to blot out the most sensitive images, Japanese networks, in response to viewer complaints, often now stipulate them for any situation in which a bystander’s face is captured on camera and where their permission has not been received. Notably, in the above scene from Denpa, the security guard is blurred out while those of others are not (see Figure 8). However, as can be seen in a scene from a 2014 broadcast of a show, which follows the adventures of foreigners in Japan, only the face of the foreigner is not blurred (see Figure 9).

![Figure 8. In scene from Denpa, security guard’s face is blurred out, while Matsumura and bystander’s face remain un-blurred.]

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Such requirements appear, at first glance, to offer the individual a default option to opt-out, to exclude themselves from the images captured within the television screen and thus protect their privacy. However, considered from the perspective of the close-out, the move to blur out reads as just one more step in this gesture’s historical exclusion of the individual legibility of the face. Even after one face has been obscured, there still remain other ways to manipulate those of others, to treat them as a raw material, and alienate them from the bodies to which they are anchored. This fact can be seen in a documentary-style scene from a recent broadcast of the program Mecha-mecha iketeru (We’re So Cool, 1996 - present), in which the disguised comedian Yabe Hiroyuki shares a booth with the AKB48 idol Ōshima Yūko at a meet-and-greet event for fans (see figure 10). The fans’ faces are blurred and the comedian wears a face-mask, leaving only the idol’s face exposed, her calm and smiling face captured by the supposedly hidden high definition cameras. As the fans stream through, one stands out, beginning to rap for the idol. Her face remains unchanged, and she even begins to dance good-naturedly with him. While the segment avoids the ostentatious cheekiness seen in Denpa’s segments, it nonetheless winks subtly to the viewer, acknowledging the oddity of the fan’s actions with telop text that questions, “A sudden rap?”

Pairing the obscured faces of the fan and incognito comedian with that of the overexposed idol, this scene reveals the gulf that lies between those, who for varying reasons retain the right or ability to obscure their faces, and those whose livelihood revolves around the affective labor involved in maintaining a supposedly “natural” yet kind expression. Framing this expression within the lens of a high definition camera, it also suggests a return to an idealization of the individual sugao, while also hinting at a correlation between this development and the recent so-called idol boom. The idol is after all the very performance of the sugao, the supposedly unassuming futsū no ko, or “normal girl” from down the street. Even though her
face is framed within the close-up, one can nonetheless discern the work of the close-out at work. Never angry or annoyed, the face of the idol offers in its own way a mask of impassivity.

As the intrusion of the overly eager fan demonstrates, this mask still has a potential part to play in the unfolding of laughter’s expression. However, this laughter does not arise from beneath the mask, but from everywhere outside it. Closed-out from its original owner, it is simply one step in a greater process in the eruption of laughter, one point in its document. Perhaps, it is better that we not opt-out of such documents, but rather consider how we might opt back in, and take responsibility for their creation.
Conclusion
The Texture of Digital Laughter

On September 2nd, 2008, a video entitled “Fukuda’s ‘I’m different than you’ Race” (“Fukuda no anata to ha chigau rēsu”; hereafter, “Fukuda Race”) appeared on the Japanese social video site Nico Nico Douga (www.nicovideo.jp; hereafter, Nico Douga). One day earlier, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Prime Minister, Fukuda Yasuo, had announced his resignation at a hastily organized evening press conference, following weeks of turmoil within his ruling coalition. In a phrase that soon went viral, the Prime Minister snapped at a reporter who queried him about his cool demeanor, informing him “I’m different than you... I have the ability to look at myself objectively.” An example of the Japanese mash-up genre known as MAD videos, the Nico Douga video remixed the Fukuda press conference and the viral phrase to music and scenes from the 1990s video game Kirby Super Star. To a high-paced, up-beat melody, the former Prime Minister repeated his now famous comeback, the words spliced and interspersed with other footage from the press conference, giving the entire scene (and the Prime Minister) a mechanic and comic feel.

At first blush, “Fukuda Race” would seem to give a visible face to the feelings of euphoria, which Fredric Jameson argues have proliferated in the “waning of affect” within cultural forms from the late 20th century onward. Driven by the electronic sugar-pop aesthetic of the video game that provides its source, the Nico Douga video has a giddy and excited feeling. Made mechanical and lifeless by the digital remixed process, the Prime Minister’s repetitive and jerky movements feel almost cute; and the political stagnation his resignation manifests, amusing but insignificant. The video laughs at the viewer, as much as it laughs at the perennial dysfunction that plague Japanese politics. Set to a video game, these problems become a sort of game in themselves, unfolding along a predetermined and repetitive path, with an ending that signals the eminent return, rather than resolution, of the next crisis as game. Against this backdrop, the viewer becomes a player, free to repeat the cycle but powerless to change its underlying algorithm.

The aesthetic of Nico Douga’s interface reinforces this remove. Repeating the window-in-window layout of many similar sites around the globe, the typical Nico Douga video acts as one more stream in a constantly changing montage of parallel feeds of information, from links to other videos to statistics on other users and producers. Within its visualization, Nico furthermore provides a feature, in which user's comments can be laid over video playback (see Figure 1). Creating an additional stream of information, this feature further aggravates the general de-centering effect the site has on the user. It floods the visual field with countless laughing voices, from acerbic remarks to long, repeated chains of the w’s. Taken from the first letter of the Romanized spelling of warai (“laughter”), the chains serve on Japanese sites as a textual version of voiced laughter—a role roughly equivalent to the “lol” acronym popular on Anglophone sites. Interspersed amongst other comments on videos such as “Fukuda Race,” they scroll across the screen in an endless volley, and give a visual equivalent of the audience laughter important to television comedy and analyzed throughout this dissertation. However, in contrast to that audible laughter, this visual laughter approaches the viewer as a proposition rather than an invitation, a textualized voice that denotes to the user that someone, somewhere else found this amusing.
Beneath its giddy and euphoric veneer, “Fukuda Race” hides, however, a sophisticated and nuanced political critique. On the one hand, its database aesthetic seems to reflect what the media and cultural critic Azuma Hiroki has identified as the growing “animalization” of Japanese contemporary culture. While the video’s parody of the press conference hints at the loss of hope in overarching narratives of political and social progress, the users’ gleeful comments appear to be those of the very same “database animals,” which Azuma argues traverse an unending flood of information, reassembling it into ad-hoc and transient mini-narratives in order to satisfy their need for temporary stimulation. Yet, despite the video and the apparent shallowness of its viewers’ comments, neither are as ephemeral as they appear, rooted as they are in a knowledge and historical awareness of the database from which the video gleans its source material.

Keeping with a prevalent MAD movie aesthetic—one that may be characterized as a cut-and-paste one—“Fukuda Race” in fact offers a mix of composite and montage techniques, suggesting an awareness on the part of the video’s anonymous producer of contemporary digital video production’s place within the larger arc of its development. As Lev Manovich notes in his discussion of new media, digital compositing has largely replaced earlier, film-based montage techniques in production studios, leading to the dominance of a style that eschews montage’s emphasis of the cuts and boundaries between constituent images. Digital compositing, in contrast, favors a style that combines various elements into a seamless whole. “Fukuda Race” inverts this logic. Although the video’s composition employs digital compositing techniques, it foregrounds a decidedly montage aesthetic, exposing rather than disguising the seams between the individual images that comprise it. As with many other mash-up videos, images overlay other images, and scenes cut jarringly into yet other scenes—all with no pretense to smooth over or disguise the borders that separate them.

Far from being a temporary and superficial narrative assembled from a cultural database of media clips, “Fukuda Race” deploys its material in a tightly edited piece that draws into relief the artificiality of “grand” narratives of social and political progress. Rather than signaling a failure of this critique, the jarring borders revealed by its cut-and-paste aesthetic throw into relief the artificiality of such narratives, reinforcing the sardonic tone that underlies the video as a whole.

Each of its constituent parts assemble a satire of the events that led to Fukuda’s departure, many gesturing towards the break, which precipitated his resignation, between the LDP and its New Komeitō Party (NKP) coalition partners. In one segment, for example, the video splices a portion of Fukuda’s comments from the press conference (“In my eyes, as I look ahead to what comes next, [the course forward for the coalition government] is not necessarily smooth.”) with...
images from an advertisement of the religious group Sōka Gakkai, an organization often rumored to run the NKP (see Figure 2). As Fukuda intones the words, the mashup zooms in on his left eye, which has been cut out to reveal a frame from the Sōka Gakkai advertisement. A male voice from the same advertisement cuts Fukuda’s words short, saying, “The future of our hopes spreads before us.” Consequently, Fukuda’s clipped and edited comments becomes the obverse of its original: “In my eyes, as I look ahead, the future of our hopes spreads before us.” Images of the Sōka logo then float across the screen to a modulated audio clip of female voices intoning “Sōka Gakkai”—a segment finally punctuated by the arrival on the screen of a cutout image of the comedian and Sōka spokesman Hisamoto Masami.

Through such segments, the video suggests in itself the recycled and rehearsed nature of narratives of social progress encapsulated in saccharine phrases such as Sōka’s “future of our hopes” slogan. Although conspiratorial in tone, the references to Sōka Gakkai do not expose an alternative narrative of an underlying and coordinated political conspiracy on the part of Sōka Gakkai or the New Komeitō Party. In clipping and montaging from the database of images that surrounds Fukuda’s resignation and its context, it raises these citations to the level of one more surface within a mosaic across which it navigates. The crisis of political stagnation, it suggests, is in itself a cut-and-paste problem, a familiar story with a predictable ending, cobbled together from a recycled list of actors and issues. Considered against this backdrop, “Fukuda Race” presents not a shallow, ad-hoc cultural artifact, but instead a measured exposure of history as database. Not simply a temporary stimulus, the affectively ebullient and laughing tone of “Fukuda Race” and similar MAD movies offer a lens through which to understand this mosaic—the mosaic of Japan’s contemporary political crisis—in a manner not possible through traditional narratives of progress or regress.

Nico Douga’s visual interface furthermore reveals the role users play in this navigation. Floating across the video in a variety of shapes size and colors, the inline comments resemble the playful telop of documentary variety (see Chapter 4). Users in fact appear highly conscious of this resemblance, and play up the similarities, timing the comments’ appearance and placement within the playback frame to coincide with specific moments in the site’s videos. In the case of
“Fukuda Race,” one continually reappearing comment, for example, reinterprets the Prime Minister’s “anata to wa chigaundesu” (“I’m different than you”) as the phonetically approximate, “atakku chansu” (“attack chance”), a widely known phrase from the long-running game show Panel Quiz Attack 25 (1975-present). Other caption-style comments highlight the satirical Sōka Gakkai sequence described above while playing on the video game origins of the video, by labeling the sequence alternatively “Super Sōka Time” or “Super Komei Time.” Others embellish the comicality created by the cutting and looping of the Prime Minister’s speech, subtitling his repeated stutters as well as nonsensical audio artifacts throughout the video (see Figure 3). Whereas the telop of Denpa served to distill the political tensions underlying its images in seemingly apolitical laughter, these comments distill it within bursts that, while seemingly playful and benign on their surface, throw into full relief the frustrations of their authors.

It would be a mistake, of course, to read too much into any one of these user provided comments. Most likely do not represent the fully articulated, satirical voice of a considered reflection on Japan’s current circumstances. The users who contribute them do so from a stance of limited power. After all, Nico’s interface carefully choreographs and circumscribes their interactions with any given video, just as the telop-like satirical voice many assume is largely shaped and contained within the pre-existing paradigm offered by documentary variety and broadcast television. Their comments are furthermore fleeting, pushed aside by newer comments since the site’s algorithm only allows for the visualization of a limited number of comments at any one time.

However, considered en masse, the comments reveal a pattern of laughter that returns again and again. While one comment disappears, another one takes its place, often riffing on or adapting an older one. The “Fukuda Race” video itself repeated this pattern: following the success of this mashup, others would rise in its place to remix and rehash the series of political failures and resignations that followed Fukuda’s own.7 Taken alone, each one of these eruptions of laughter are fleeting and inconsequential, but taken together, they reveal a cycle—an entry point left open by the last comment or video, through which new eruptions of laughter might appear. They maintain throughout each eruption an overall texture of laughter, to which each subsequent user and ad-hoc producer returns in a movement akin to the strategy of “reparative reading” suggested by Eve Sedgwick and discussed in the introduction to this dissertation. They repeatedly “hel[p] themselves again and again” to the larger text inscribed within the media database, lavishing it again and again with ambivalent laughter.8 While each burst of laughter might prove effervescent, laughter always returns. It always waits just below the surface, ready to erupt at any moment.
References

Notes to Introduction

3 The students comments resonate with those of Yanagita Kunio, who wrote in his essay Warai no bungaku no kigen (The Origins of Comic Literature, 1928) that “the Japanese are a people who know the value of laughter,” but who “do not have much to laugh about in their real lives.” Though writing in a different period under a different context, Yanagita strikes many of the same chords, depicting laughter as something from which Japanese have become estranged. In Yanagita’s analysis, however, it is modernity, which appears singularly to blame for this estrangement. Noting the frequent question from foreigners as to whether humor exists in Japan, Yanagita identifies such accusations as outright “rude,” and simply an artifact of poor translations into Western languages. Yanagita Kunio, “Warai no bungaku no kigen,” Fukō naru geijutsu, Warai no hongan (Tokyo: Iwanami Bunko, 2008) 12.
9 Television ownership is estimated to have reached 75.9% of households by 1963, and over 90% by 1969. Similarly, by the end of the decade, over 90% of individuals were estimated to have had at least some contact with television on any given day. See Iyoda Yasuhiro et al, Terebi shi hando bukku (Tokyo: Jiyū Kokumin Sha, 1996) 186-7; Aida Toshihiko, “Fuyu no terebi, rajio chōshi jōkyō: 44 nen 11 gatsu zenkoku chōshiritsu chōsa no kekka kara,” Bunken geppō (Mar. 1970): 13.


14 For a discussion of Fuji’s “fun TV” strategy and its impact on 1980s media, see Hara Hiroyuki, Baburu bunka ron: <Posuto sengo> toshite no sen kyūhyaku hachijū nendai (Tokyo: Keiyō University Press, 2006) 191-212.

15 For further discussion of the debate over the “public” airwaves, lowbrow culture and massification, see Chapter 1.


17 This is, of course, an old critique of the sender/receiver model within cultural studies, and it is not clear why Ōta decides not to address the issue.

18 Ōta, Shakai, 33-4.

19 One such talent agency, Applause, makes the process efficient and easy, and features on its website online forms to register for both paid and unpaid opportunities to participate on variety shows as an audience member. For example.... cite web page. Terebi kanran, bangumi kanra, ekiutoranon apurozu he yōkosu, web, accessed 9 May 2014, http://www.applausetv.jp/. The Japanese blog site Daily Portal Z featured an tongue-in-cheek interview with one such waraiya in a 2006 post. After she jokingly refers to the “age limit” she faces on certain shows, the interviewer asks her to demonstrate her laughing skills for a excerpt from a cooking program (video included on site). Sumi Masanori, “Nani o mitemo waraeru waraiya san,” Daily Portal Z, web, accessed 10 May 2014, http://portal.nifty.com/2006/12/14/a/. For further discussion of the use of paid audience members, see Chapter 2.


22 For a more nuanced treatment of the role of the 1973 oil crisis in Japan’s post-1960s industrial slowdown, see Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Beyond Computopia: Information, automation and democracy in Japan (London: Kegan Paul, 1988) 42-69. Morris Suzuki argues that the oil crisis certainly had a role in structural and economic changes in Japan during the decade, but that it was one piece in a larger puzzle of shifting population demographics, social movements, and government policies.

23 For discussions of the Asama Sansō incident and its relationship to both media culture and student activism, see Yoshimi Shunya, Posuto sengo shakai (Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho, 2011) 2-13.

24 Mita, Gendai, 31-2.


26 The sociologist Yoshimi Shunya, for example, works from Baudrillard’s discussion of Disneyland’s relationship to the postmodern hyper-real in his reading of Tokyo Disneyland as a
symbol of contemporary Tokyo’s topography of fiction (a reading, from which Mita draws in his
discussion of the “era of fiction”). Yoshimi Shunya, “Shimyūrākuru no rakuen—Toshi toshite no
Dizunii Rando,” in Zero no shūjīgaku: Rekishi no genzai, ed. Ikui Eikō et al (Tokyo: Liburo Pōto,

27 Morris-Suzuki frames this transition as one towards “information capitalism,” where
Kashiwagi frames it within his discussion of Tokyo’s transition to a “soft” media city from the
1970s onward. Morris-Suzuki, Beyond, 70-86; Kashiwagi Hiroshi, Dōgu to media no seijigaku

28 Gabriella Lukács, Scripted Affects, Branded Selves: Television, subjectivity, and capitalism in

29 Jeffrey Sconce, Haunted Media: Electronic presence from telegraphy to television (Durham,
30 Sconce, Haunted, 171.
31 Jean Baudrillard, Simulations (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983) 55.
32 Yoshimoto Takaaki, “Eizō kari ma kaitai suru toki,” in Jūsōteki na hi kettei e (Tokyo:
Daiwa Shobō, 1985) 229. Such notions that television was blurring the boundary between the
world of the home and an abstract, media-based world accompanied the medium from its earliest
days in various forms. In a 1960 essay entitled “Terebi to ningen” (“Television and the Human”),
for example, the social psychologist Minami Hiroshi argued that television was poised to distort
the normative development of subsequent generations of children, by disrupting the affective and
communicative networks within the home. According to Minami, children, who came of age
before television, created an affective connection between linguistic symbols such as the word
‘breast’ and the warmth of their mothers because of their mother’s use of it when breast-feeding.
Television, according to Minami, undid this determinate connection, transmitting into the home
impersonal and indeterminate (futokutei) symbols and stimuli. Minami Hiroshi, “Terebi to
Rothwell (Rockville, Maryland: Arc Manor, 2008) 46. Samuel Weber has noted the irony of
Bergson’s claim, noting the philosopher’s own admission that the problem of laughter has
confounded thinkers since Aristotle, “always elud[ing] their efforts, slip[ping] away, only to
reappear, as an impertinent challenge hurled at philosophical speculation.” Drawing from
Freud’s writings on humor and laughter, Weber identifies in laughter an “explosiveness” which
displaces and undermines economies of representation and meaning making. Samuel Weber,
34 Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington and
36 Sedgwick borrows here the phrase “helps himself again and again” from Proust. Sedgwick,
Touching, 150.

Notes to Chapter 1


5 The show exceeded 40% household viewership within a year of its first broadcast, and recorded ratings in excess of 50%. Source: Hikita Soya, Zenkiroku terebi shichōritsu 50 nen sensō: Sono toki ichiokunin ga kando shita (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2004) 123-4.


7 “Hagaki,” Asahi shinbun, 24.


12 Underscoring the currency of the show’s ryūkōgo, the cover of Izukuri’s Zen’in memoire proudly displays several of the show’s better known examples. Izukuri, 8 ji da yo!, cover.


14 “Man’neri ga sasaeta ‘Zen’in shūgō’ no jūnen,” Shōkan asahi, 9 Nov. 1979, 42.

15 The notion that television as a medium operates through flows and rhythms dates to the earliest days of television studies. Raymond Williams prescribed the need to focus on television’s flow—its interweaving of programming segments and advertisements—in understanding the cultural practice of watching television, in which viewers tune in and out of programming rather than focusing on a specific show or ‘text.’ Throughout 1970s and 80s, subsequent television research extended Williams notion of flow in discussing how programming sequence organizes the daily rhythms of its viewers. Addressing the intersection of programming flow and viewers’ daily routines, David Morley argued that broadcast flow informed daily domestic rhythms and vice versa, noting that widely recognized domestic rhythms among viewers influenced programming decisions and these decisions, in turn, played a

16 Gille Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 81. Strictly speaking, the word *shūgō* is a compound noun meaning ‘gathering’ or ‘assembly,’ but within this context, the term is used as a shortening of the verb construction *shūgō shite*.


18 In one 1979 incident, news reports claimed a connection between a *Zen’in* scene and a murder of a young girl by another. According to sources, the girl received her inspiration from a *Zen’in* scene where one Drifters member pretended to hang another. Show producer Izukuri Yoshimi disputed this account, however. Izukuri contended *Zen’in* had never broadcast such a skit, and argued that the suspect girl was simply using the name *Dorifu* as a “pronoun” for television itself, which he suggests was a widespread usage amongst children. See “Terebi o maneta,” *Asahi shinbun*, 13 Oct. 1979, Tokyo evening edition, 11, *Asahi Kikazo II*, web, 17 Oct. 2012.

19 In addition to adopting the show title as its own, an advertisement for a 2012 Suntory promotional campaign, for example, adapts the melody of the opening song, as well as the choreography of the opening sequence. “Ii yu da yo! Zen’in shūgō,” video, *YouTube*, web, 23 Apr. 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfcL8F2vJhM.


23 For an example of an earlier live audience show, see the early NHK quiz show *Watashi no himitsu* (My Secret, 1956-1967).

24 These changes can also be understood to reflect evolving attitudes, on the part of producers, regarding audience laughter’s place in the television broadcast. For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Chapter 2.


The phrase *zen'in shūgō* in fact predates the program, as was a signature catchphrase of the group. Ikariya began using it in their early days performing in music clubs, barking it at the band’s unruly members as a call to order. The dual meaning of the phrase stems from it having been transplanted to television. For Ikariya’s discussion of the phrases history, see Ikariya, *Dame*, 106.


For Mihashi version, see Mihashi Michiya, “Hokkai bon uta,” *Mihashi Michiya: min'yō besuto hyakusen*, vol. 1 (King Record, 2012) CD.


“Hōsōtō: Dorifu ni nozomu shinchōsa,” *Yomiuri shinbun*, 10 Apr. 1980, Tokyo morning
Taking issue with the characterization of Zen’in as amateurish slapstick, Izukuri argued, “no one will laugh if you just make a meaningless commotion.” However, if the show were to engage with more sophisticated forms of comedy such as social or political satire “in an open way,” he told the newspaper, since Zen’in’s comedy would become unfunny if the show were to “make those viewing feel” it were satire. “Terebinin goroku: Izukuri Yoshimi,” Asahi shinbun, 1 July 1977, Tokyo morning edition, 24, Asahi Kikuzo II, web, 17 Oct. 2012.


“Shirīzu terebi chōju bangumi no himitsu o saguru: 8 ji da yo! Zen’in shūgō,” Josei jishin, 13 Mar. 1980, 82. Because children were understood to have ‘channel rights’ (chan’neru ken) in Japanese households during the Saturday eight o’clock time slots, contemporary accounts often attributed the show’s consistently high ratings to its popularity among this age group. For an example reference to chan’neru ken, see, for example, “Matamata henshinmono: ‘Datō dorifu’ ni NET no 2 hon,” Yomiuri shinbun, 14 June 1972, Tokyo morning edition, 23, Yomidas rekishikan, web, 11 Oct. 2012.


In the Yomiuri article cited here, the author reflects upon the relationship between the Cats-hosted Shabondama horidei’s rising popularity and the contemporary economic slowdown. He speculates that comedy shows such as the Cats’ Shabondama horidei had risen in profile over the past year because “of the masses’ [taishū] desire to forget, at least when they watch TV, the hardships of their day to day lives during this downturn.” In a similar vein unrelated to the 1964 slowdown, a January 1962 article in the Asahi shinbun claims that the Crazy Cat’s comedy in general put a face on “the urban salaryman’s life of laughter and tears.” “Cha no ma seki: Terebi ni mita ko no ichinen,” Yomiuri shinbun, 23 Dec. 1964, Tokyo morning edition, 10, Yomidas rekishikan, web, 14 June 2012; “Sudara bushi: ninki no himitsu,” Asahi shinbun, 28 Jan. 1962, Tokyo morning edition, 19, Asahi Kikuzo II, web, 24 Sept. 2012.

Takizawa, “63 nen Nippon,” 130-1.


Ibid. 36.

Ibid. 36.

Ibid. 38.


In fact, it was like the same fear of “weirdness” which motivated producers and performers of earlier shows such as Shabondama to continually gesture towards the physicality of the television apparatus during broadcasts.

One might argue here that other mass media forms, such as the newspaper, served a similar function in mediating abstract mass publics, much as Benedict Anderson notes in his discussion of imagined national communities. However, it should be noted that, even in Anderson’s treatment, the physicality of the newspaper as thing plays a central, mediating role. In discussing
the newspaper, Anderson notes, for example, “the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbors, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life.” The distinction I wish to draw here is between an earlier emphasis on the physicality of media objects, and the disappearance of that emphasis in post-1960s shows such as Zen’in. Cf. Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities (New York: Verso, 1991) 35-6.


57 Notably, Ahmed would terms such figures as the PTA mother as individuals which the discourse on happy would identify as a killjoy, who are portrayed as blocking the circulation of the happy object. Here, I argue that the killjoy in fact aids in the circulation of laughter as happy object. Cf. Ahmed, “Happy,” 39.

Notes to Chapter 2

3 Image from Kinchan no doko made yaru no!, disc 1, (Tokyo: TV Asahi, 2006), DVD.
5 “Home drama” is a Japanese neologism first developed to describe family dramas in movies and later in television. For a discussion of its transposition to television, as well as producers motivations in doing so, see Sakamoto Kazue, ‘Kazoku’ imeeji no tanjō: nihon eiga ni miru ‘hōmu dorama’ (Tokyo: Shinyosha, 1997), 177.
7 Ōta’s term warau shakai is itself a play on the late 1960s show, Konto 55 gō no sekai wa warau (Conte 55’s The World Laughs, 1968-1970), which Hagimoto hosted alongside his then partner Sakagami Jirō. Ōta Shōichi, Shakai wa warau: boke to tsukkomi no ningen kankei (Tokyo: Seikyūsha, 2002) 7-10, 14-16, 30-1, 38-41, 69-84.
11 In narratives of the era, this pivot is widely credited to the 1973 oil crisis. See dissertation introduction for further discussion of this topic.
“Kōto 55 gō ga shutsuen suru to terebi kameraman ga masumasu naku no ha naze ka?,” *Shūkan TV gaido*, 26 Sept. 1969, 32-5.


17 Image from “Kāten kōru,” *Asahi shinbun*, 4. Caption refers to a discussion of Hagimoto’s professional and home life. In 1976, Hagimoto revealed that he had a wife and young child, whom he had hidden from the media for some time.

18 While Hagimoto was joined on stage by Maya Junko as his on-screen wife, the actress played a largely supporting role.


25 For a discussion of *sasoi warai* in Hagimoto’s own words, see “Terebikai ni shōgeki ga hashiru! Kinchan shōgeki no tishidensetsu supesharu!!,” *Nakai Masahiro no ayashii uwasa no atsumaru toshokan*, EX, 3 Jan. 2012, television.


27 As quoted in Saitō Takao, *Direkutā ni zūmu in!!* (Tokyo: Nihon Terebi, 2000) 277. Hagimoto claims that Saitō achieved this gender imbalance by interspersing the performances with stip shows, which would later be edited out of the broadcast.


In her work on women’s language, Miyako Inoue argues that perceptions of differences in male and female speech in Japanese reflect hegemonic language ideology rather than absolute differences between the two sex’s actual language use. Inoue contends that such suppositions on speech differences establish, as language ideology, what “are all said to be ‘exclusive’ features of women’s language and to be used exclusively by women, whose pragmatic effects are tautologically explained as sounding ‘soft,’ ‘nonassertive,’ ‘gentle,’ and so on.” Rather than representing natural or traditional differences in speech patterns, language ideology, which informs the perception of linguistic gender difference, has a relatively recent history. As Inoue has demonstrated through a comparison of Shikitei Samba’s 1809-1810 Ukiyoburo and Natume Sōseki’s 1908 Sanshirō, supposedly female speech patterns such as the above cited noun+yo pattern were in fact employed for both male and female speech in Ukiyoburo, and while such linguistic distinctions are present in the more recent Sanshirō, they represent in that Meiji-era work relatively new means of textually distinguishing male from female speech. Miyako Inoue, Vicarious Language: Gender and Linguistic Modernity in Japan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 14; Miyako Inoue, “Gender, Language, Modernity: Toward an Effective History of ‘Japanese Women’s Language’,” Japanese Language, Gender, and Ideology: Cultural Models and Real People, ed. S. Okamoto and J.S.S. Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 63-66. In performing the feminization of his television persona, Hagimoto cited these linguistic gender norms—as did the Asahi Shinbun article that drew its readers’ attention to his conversion—in order to develop a perception among viewers that both his personal style and his shows would be appropriate to the domestic settings where his shows would be watched. In her early work on women’s language, the linguist Jugaku Akiko noted that the linguistic category is not simply imputed on women speakers in Japanese language ideology, it also informs the language through which various media address women—a fact which she illustrates through an analysis of the language used in magazines marketed to women. Similarly, one might frame Hagimoto’s adoption of women’s language as a manner of addressing a female audience rather than outright performing femininity; however, several facts complicate a reading of Hagimoto’s ‘feminization’ as simply a means of addressing female audiences alone. First, Hagimoto had already enjoyed popularity with female audiences from his early days with Conte 55, garnering a regular following of female fans, and it is unlikely that he needed to expand his appeal with this demographic. Furthermore, 1970s television was a radically different medium than the magazines Jugaku analyzed, television of the era most often being viewed by two or more viewers rather than read by a single individual. Consequently, television shows, such as Kindoko, needed to appeal to a wider audience than just female homemakers, and Hagimoto, in fact, appeared to recognize this in his comments cited above regarding the need to appeal to female viewers. In suggesting that he targeted “mom,” Hagimoto implies that he does so as a key to a wider family audience. In other words, the feminization and ‘warming up’ of Hagimoto’s persona were means that would allow him to melt into a domestic space characterized, within discourse, as likewise feminine and warm. Jugaku Akiko, Nihongo to on’na (Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho, 1970), 25-33.

Omoide no kōhaku uta gassen: Shōwa 43 nen (dai 19 kai), NHK BS2, 19 Dec. 2003, television; originally broadcast as Dai 19 kai NHK kōhaku uta gassen, NHK, 31 Dec. 1968, television. With translations of comic sketches in this chapter, I have in certain places favored English translations that, while departing slightly from the original, communicate the comic intent of the original.


Image from “Terebikai ni shōgeki ga hashiru!,” Nakai Masahiro ...; originally broadcast in Kinchan no doko made yaru no!, EX, 22 June 1983, television.


For data on Hagimoto’s falling rank in NHK’s “most liked talent” poll, see Saitō Kenji, “Shichōsha wa donna tarento o kononideku ka,” Hōsō kenkyū to chōsa (Apr.1986): 50-1.
Notes to Chapter 3


4 While lauded at the time as revolutionary, the phenomenon in many ways simply re-introduced young laughter to mainstream television, carrying over to primetime a lineup of comedians and a style of “young” manzai that had been familiar to late-night audiences (and Kansai audiences, in particular) for several years through programs such as the Kansai-produced Young Ō! Ō! (Young Oh! Oh!, 1968-82).


6 For a typical example of a discussion from the era of the hon ’ne/tatemae binary, see Doi Takeo, Omote to ura (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1985).

7 By “clearly labeling a grannie a grannie, and an ugly girl an ugly girl,” the TV Asahi anchor Chikushi Tetsuya told Shūkan gendai for example, the new manzai “brings sunlight to the gloomy feelings of the tatemae society.” “Shinsuke-Ryūsuke hoka ‘manzai’ no TV de wa wakaranai zen uchimaku,” Shūkan gendai, 22 Jan. 1981, 178. In this sense, it made the public space of the broadcast a realm for the expression of private thoughts, extending the privatization of the public resource of the airwaves discussed in the previous two chapters. However, the privatized public space afforded by hon ’ne manzai’s laughter was far from intimate: Unlike the warm laughter of Hagimoto’s family-friendly comedies, the laughter of the boom was explosive, aggressive and alienating; and unlike the rhythmic laughter of Zen’in shūgō, it was a young and
edgy laughter to be listened in on rather than taken part in. For further discussion, see Chapters 1 and 2.


9 The performance of hon ‘ne authenticity functioned in many ways similar to that described by Philip Auslander in his discussion of the role of live performance within the U.S. music industry. Auslander ascribes to live performance a secondary role in the contemporary, mediatized industry, in which it serves to function as a sign of the performer’s authenticity. As will be seen below, many boom-era manzai artists’ claim to hon ‘ne-based authenticity—and the claim to authenticity subsequently put forward by the shows that featured them—was closely intertwined with the specter of live, off-television performances, in which the artists would give voice to an even more full-throated evocation of hon ‘ne not fit for the broadcast. See Philip Auslander, Liveness: Performance in a mediatized culture (New York: Routledge, 2005) 61-111.


11 For a contemporary documentary on the takenoko zoku phenomenon, see “Harajuku nijūjūjikan,” Wakai hiroba, NHK, 29 June 1980, television. Such movements were of course not new, and were largely prefigured by those of earlier generations such as the so-called taiyō zoku (“sun tribes”) of the 1950s. However, the cultural amnesia that inevitably attaches itself to such phenomena seems to mirror the “youth” of the movements themselves.

12 “Kyakkawai!!,” Shūkan TV gaido, 37


15 A 1980 article in the Shūkan TV gaido, for example, discusses Shimada’s “Shinsuke Band” alongside a picture of their performance. It also describes his past, in which he claims to have been involved in gang fights, as well as arrested for sniffing paint thinner. See “Manzai shinjidai: Dotto būmu no hiirō no 8 gumi,” Shūkan TV gaido, 4 July 1980, 188. A separate article in Shūkan asahi also mentions the band, as well as a reported incident in which Shinsuke attacked a member of the audience at a live performance. See “Warai no gerira: Manzai shi tachi no mi o kezuru hon’ne shōbu,” Shūkan asahi, 22 Aug. 1980, 28.

16 Image from THE MANZAI, CX, 1 July 1980, television.


18 Yamafuji, “Yamafuji no ...,” 5.

19 “Ureko,” Shūkan asahi, 44. Striking a similar tone in a discussion of the popular boom-era duo B&B, the Asahi shinbun characterized their manzai and their fan’s young laughter as senseless: “When transcribed, the material is more striking for its silliness than its wit, but in the recording hall filled mostly with young women, explosions of laughter follow one after the other.” “Naze ka warai warai ga ō uke,” Asahi shinbun, 13 May 1980, 14, Asahi Kikuzo II, web, 11 Feb. 2013.

20 See Chapter 2.

21 “B&B ga senpai Azuma Kyōji-Keita to gakuya de ō genka....! Baka uke de mochi jikan ōbā


23 For an in depth discussion of the relationship between Kitano’s television and film careers, see Aaron Gerow, *Kitano Takeshi (World Directors Series)* (London: British Film Institute, 2007) 1-14.

24 See note 15.

25 Kitano here discusses a long-running series of commercial for the margarine brand Rama, in which young women are “surprised” by a camera crew and reporter who ask them to sample the spread.


27 Ibid.


29 In tongue-in-cheek comments, Kitano himself noted the tightrope the duo walked in their jokes on the supposedly weak. The reason their jokes attack “brats” and “grannies,” he suggested was because “... brats are being over-protected by PTA moms. And because we want to cheer up grannies. Of course, we hate do-gooder types like volunteers. ... We never say anything about the truly weak, though. Take the emperor for example, we think he’s pretty pitiful, and we never make any jokes about him.” “Rajio Terebi Saizensen: Konshū no shuyaku: Tsū bīto,” *Sandei mainichi*, 8 June 1980, 79.


34 See note 9.


36 In many ways, this can be understood as a return of the more explosive laughter promised by late 1960s shows, such as *Konto 55 gō no urabangumi o buttobase* (Conte 55’s Let’s Blow Away The Competition, 1969-70; see Chapter 2).


Notes to Chapter 4

1 “Kari tsugu terebi 60 nen: Warai no dokyumentarī,” Yomiuri shinbun, 1 Aug. 2013, Tokyo evening edition, 11, Yomidas rekishikan, web, 14 Jan. 2014. The issue of enshutsu [directorial manipulation] versus yarase [misleading manipulation] lies at the heart of many discussions of documentary variety and similar fare. Critics assail such television programming for purposely misleading viewers, through yarase, while directors defend their practices as a form of artistic expression, given shape by enshutsu. Writing on the subject, the documentary variety producer Itō Takayuki argues, for example, that what he does on his shows is not yarase since “it is not as if we are having [the participants] act out a script.” Yarase, according to Itō, is a “lie” that “bends the truth” and makes it appear that “something happened even though it really did not.” In contrast enshutsu, which he of course employs, “jazzes up the truth and shows it in an interesting manner.” As his comments and the above-cited Yomiuri article reveal, many of such discussions revolve around an issue of semantics—an issue that is frequently sidestepped by discussions, such as that of the Yomiuri article, which point to a supposed higher truth of the performer’s “true expression.” Either way, neither critics nor defenders of the genre dispute that the material is staged in some shape or form. Furthermore, early examples such as Denpa appeared to embrace yarase image, since this was part of their parody of the daytime journalistic format (see discussion later in chapter). Itō Takayuki, Itō P no moya moya shigoto jutsu (Tokyo: Shūeisha Shinsho, 2011) 218-9.

2 Ōta Shōichi, Shakai wa warau: boke to tsukkomi no ningen kankei (Tokyo: Seikyūsha, 2002) 120.

3 The connection between unscripted material and a desire to reveal such so-called sugao moments can be seen early on in discussion of the use of “happenings” (happuningu) ad-lib moments on variety programs. In a 1969 article on the spread of happening-based content, the Asahi shinbun opined that a younger generation of viewers raised on television had grown impatient with the careful blocking of many programs, sensing falsity and artifice in what would have previously been recognized as proof of the “director’s skill.” Quoting one producer, it noted that “this is no longer an age when you can satisfy viewers by showcasing the star’s beauty or gei.” By catching the performer off guard, the happening offered, according to this producer, a way to “transmit to the cha no ma [the star’s] humanness” by “draw[ing] out their sugao (素顔, unadorned or unaffected face).” The producer’s emphasis on the object of the sugao—a compound of su and kao (face)—reveals the interconnection between the television happening as device and an unspoken notion of su, as well as the fact that unscripted moments such as happening were seen as means of creating not only physical but also affective immediacy. The happening, according to this producer’s definition, was a way of removing the practiced mask, and televise the face that lie behind. It would at the same time produce and capture the tears, nervous sighs and laughter of the celebrity in an unguarded moment. More importantly, it would make that expression not only visible but also affectively palpable to the home viewer. The medium of television was well positioned in this regard, according to its practitioners. “Because of radio’s influence, it used to be normal to cut out the part where guests were silent,” a second producer quoted in the same article argued. Implying that the use of happenings was changing these old habits, he concluded, “there is something communicated to the viewer in moments of
5 Image from Denpa shōnen BEST OF BEST raiden mo ne! (Tokyo: Bappu, 2010) DVD.
8 Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism," Studies 29 (1984): 58, 60-1, 64.
13 Unscripted, on-location material long predates Kindon, and accompanied the first years of broadcast television in Japan. The quiz show 1953-9 Nandemo yarimashō (The Do Anything Show) would often feature participant challenges taped on-location. Furthermore, such claims to cross boundaries and revolutionize television would continue after Kindon. For example, in discussing the 1985-96 Tensai takeshi no genki ga deru terebi (Genius Takeshi’s TV to Make You Happy)—an oft-noted forerunner of documentary variety—show director Terry Itō, for example commented that he and his fellow producers decided to focus on on-location material rather than on “gei [talent, or performance] that had been tightened and further tightened in the studio.” Although Itō does not directly address su, it can be understood to underlie his distinction between rehearsed gei, interior to the studio, and what lay beyond. “Terebi no genba: Shin shichōsha zō (6): Bangumi sanka sha atsume senmon no kaisha mo,” Yomiuri shinbun, 25 Feb. 1989, Tokyo evening edition, 6, Yomidas rekishikan, web, 15 Jan. 2014. For a discussion of Nandemo yarimashō, see Jayson Makoto Chun, “A Nation of a Hundred Million Idiots”? A social history of Japanese television, 1953-1973 (New York: Routledge, 2007) 3-4.
15 Image from “Warui no wa min’na ...”
17 Image from “Warui no wa min’na ...”
18 Ibid. In this 2010 biopic, Hagimoto reiterates the same connection between the Asama-Sansō lodge and Maekawa.
19 See, for example, Yoshimi Shunya, Posuto sengo shakai (Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsyo, 2011) 2-13.
20 Show producer Tsuchiya Toshio has noted that he came upon the idea of Denpa during a brief stint working on an afternoon “wide” show. See “Katari tsugu terebi,” Yomiuri shinbun, 11.
21 “Katari tsugu terebi,” Yomiuri shinbun, 11.
22 Tsuchiya worked on the short-lived Hagimoto 1988 NTV program Kin kira rin 530!!


25 For an example of a discussion of telop’s semantic function, see Aaron Gerow, “Kind Participation: postmodern consumption and capital with Japan’s telop TV,” in *Television, Japan, and Globalization*, ed. Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto et al (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2010) 117-50. Building on Ōta Shōichi’s argument that such telop play the role of the tsukkomi (straightman) to the prototypical boke (funnyman) amateur of the genre, Gerow argues that the superimposed telop provides a “kind” form of assistance to the viewer.

26 As Ōta notes, it is rumored that this move abroad was necessitated, in *Denpa*’s case, by its growing profile amongst domestic audiences, and the difficulty this notoriety caused in continuing its *aponashi* projects. Ōta, *Shakai*, 134.

27 *Denpa shōnen INTERNATIONAL*, NTV, 27 Aug. 1994 – 29 Mar. 1998, television. The above-mentioned series started with the April 8, 1996 broadcast of INTERNATIONAL, and ended with a October 22 broadcast in the same year. In between the two broadcasts, updates of the pair’s progress was included in regular broadcasts of *Susume! Denpa shōnen*.

28 Image from *Denpa shōnen BEST OF BEST raiden mo ne!* (Tokyo: Bappu, 2010) DVD.


30 Image from *YOU wa nani shi ni Nippon e*, TX, 14 Apr. 2014, television.


33 The idea that idols should represent a “normal girl,” or futsū no ko, date back at least to 1980s with the AKB48 predecessor O’nyanko kurabu (O’nyanko Club). See, for example, “Gensō gēmu: Jo kōsei wa ‘hōka go geinō jin’,” *Asahi shinbun*, 7 Jan. 1986, 22, *Asahi Kikuzo II*, web, 15 Oct. 2012.

Notes to Conclusion


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Takizawa, Kiyohiko. “‘63 nen Nippon no warai no kōzō.” Shūkan asahi, 11 Jan. 1963, 126-34.


YOU wa nani shi ni Nippon e. TX. 14 Apr. 2014. Television.
Appendix I: Japanese station names and abbreviations

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<thead>
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<th>Code</th>
<th>Network Name</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CX</td>
<td>Fuji Television Network</td>
<td>Fuji Terebijon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EX</td>
<td>TV Asahi Corporation</td>
<td>Terebi Asahi; before 1977, NET TV, or, NET Terebi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBS</td>
<td>Mainichi Broadcasting System</td>
<td>Mainichi Terebi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NHK</td>
<td>Japanese Broadcasting Corporation</td>
<td>Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRN</td>
<td>Nippon Broadcasting Systems</td>
<td>Nippon Hōsō; radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTV</td>
<td>Nippon Television Network</td>
<td>Nippon Terebijon Hōsōmō; commonly known as Nihon Terebi, or, Nittere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TBS</td>
<td>Tokyo Broadcasting System Television</td>
<td>TBS Terebi</td>
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<tr>
<td>TX</td>
<td>TV TOKYO</td>
<td>Terebi Tōkyō</td>
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Appendix II: Frequently cited weeklies and magazines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Magazine</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Asahi Graph</td>
<td>Illustrated magazine of <em>Asahi shinbun</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>FOCUS</td>
<td>Photographic tabloid published by Shinchōsha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josei jishin</td>
<td>Women’s weekly published by Kōbunsha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandei mainichi</td>
<td>Weekly of <em>Mainichi shinbun</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shūkan asahi</td>
<td>Weekly of <em>Asahi shinbun</em></td>
</tr>
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<td>Shūkan bunshun</td>
<td>Weekly published by <em>Bungei shunjū</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Shūkan gendai</td>
<td>A weekly published by Kōdansha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shūkan hōseki</td>
<td>A weekly published by Kōbunsha</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shūkan TV gaido</td>
<td>Japanese TV guide</td>
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<td>Shūkan yomiuri</td>
<td>Weekly of <em>Yomiuri shinbun</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ushio</td>
<td>Monthly published by publishing unit of the Buddhist Sōka Gakkai</td>
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