I just want to be thought of as special, says a mildly intoxicated woman in her late 20s as she is tapped for an NTV special on Tokyo’s host clubs. Her face fluzzed out for privacy, she leans toward her male host and looks at him, perhaps with shy, yet impish, eyes. The host returns her gaze with an ambiguous smile. Maybe he likes her....

To perform as seductive men, hosts stylize their appearance in Shihoro’s (2005) words “Subtle yet calculated ways. These unrealistic performances not only draw women’s attention to his hands, but also render the entire scene phantasmic.” The hosts’ seductive performance is effectively played out in subtle yet highly calculated ways.

Let me now invite the reader to a host club scene. Amid the alcohol-fueled revelry, the dim and lively atmosphere in the host club shortens the distance between a 25-year-old host, Koji, and his client, a 31-year-old mother and part-time work-er, Megumi. Koji and Megumi, who have known each other for three months, are trying to have a conversation and alternately whisper in each other’s ear to cut through the noise of the club. Every whisper causes a burst of laughter between them. Their intimate interaction excludes all other people, including ‘helper’ hosts at the table, and creates their own inti- mate world. The moment, however, is ephemeral, and Koji leaves the table once the brief conversation is over. Megumi waits for Koji to return, and in the long and awful wait, Koji’s seductiveness is greatly amplified.

Megumi unconsciously looks around, even though other hosts try to entertain her. Seeing Koji, she shyness asks, “Why does- n’t he come back?” A helper host replies, “Well, the woman over there opened a new bottle.” Megumi says, “Why don’t I order champagnes?” She knows that ordering a more expen-sive beverage will bring Koji back. Indeed, he returns and gives her almost excessive attention. He cheerfully says, “So, you feel like drinking tonight, don’t you? Let’s enjoy ourselves!” Megumi maintains a glum silence and gives a sulky look. Koji looks at her and says innocently, “Oh no! The sulky look ruins your beautiful face!” He gently grabs her cheeks and pulls them outward. “See, this is my favorite smiling face of Megumi,” he says to everyone at the table. “Isn’t she pretty?” “You didn’t have to say it!” Megumi says with a smile. “Oh, are you jealous?” and then seriously adds, “You are so- much younger and prettier! Look at these juicy thighs!” Megu-mi finally makes a bashful smile when Koji says, “To drink with Megumi is after all the best (shokaihan)!” Megumi’s seemingly self-contradictory attitude – attempting to draw Koji’s attention but not quite accepting it – has the effect of intensifying Koji’s attention. The seemingly random burst of the desire to attain money and attention, as Koji and Sachiko exemplify, metonymically orients itself to the cre- ation of the ‘capable’ and/or ‘attractive’ self in a very gendered way. The dialectical process enables two individuals who have different social backgrounds and desires to collaborate and fulfill each other as long as mutual satisfaction – even if it is asymmetric – is maintained.

Thus, seduction in the host club is not just about seducing the other but also about the presentation of the seductive and there- fore valuable self. Such ambivalence is rooted in the mirror image that seduction reflects: one simultaneously seduces, and is also seduced by the other. This reflex allows both host and client to use seduction to feel good about the self and at the same time enjoy the intoxication of being seduced. The ambivalence is, I argue, the beauty of seduction that potenc- ially evokes sensuous, affective, and visceral pleasure, while leav- ing room for multiple interpretations, all with a pleasant after-taste.

Note: All names, including that of the host club, are pseudonyms.

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