JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE

Edited by
Matthew Allen and Rumi Sakamoto

CRITICAL CONCEPTS IN
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Critical Concepts in Asian Studies

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INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME II: VISUALISING JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

This volume opens with a section on *otaku* subculture and aesthetics (Part 1.1), which have been a focus of much recent interest in Japanese popular culture outside Japan. The four Japanese writers we have selected represent influential voices in Japanese discourse on *otaku*.

Otsuka is a prolific cultural commentator who has written on wide-ranging topics, including popular/sub culture, consumer society and postwar democracy. The piece included here (Chapter 30) is one of his earlier works (originally published in 1989) that examines 1980s Japan as a high consumer (and really a 'postmodern') society. It suggests that consumers were no longer consuming products purely for their 'use value'; rather, they were consuming and producing their own narratives that they created around products. This argument – that with economic maturity Japanese consumers were turning into 'producers' – predicted the twenty-first-century development of *otaku* fan subculture, where fan activities and engagement became integral parts of *otaku* subculture as seen in cosplay, *dōjinshi* and *yaoi* comics. Azuma's piece offers a useful introduction to his now-familiar concept of 'animalisation' (roughly meaning satisfying bodily desire via consumption without human or social interaction/engagement). Developing Otsuka's idea of 'narrative consumption', Azuma suggests (Chapter 31) that Japanese *otaku* subculture is not so much about the author and narrative but more about 'data base' consumption of character and *moe*, around which *otaku* are creating a new kind of sociality. Azuma's writings on 'data-base consumption' and 'animalisation' started the so-called 'subculture boom' in Japanese studies. Saito, another prominent writer on *otaku* subculture, is a psychiatrist who has written on Lacan, *hikikomori* and subculture, amongst other things. In this piece (Chapter 32) he develops a psychoanalytically informed theory of *otaku* sexuality, characterising it in terms of its estrangement from everyday life. In contrast to the approaches above, Murakami Takashi presents *otaku* aesthetics in a more culture-bound manner (Chapter 33). Murakami is a contemporary artist whose work has been influenced by flat-surface 2D art like *manga* and *anime*. In that Murakami recognises the source of Superflat

art in its 'Japaneseness' – that is, it comes from Edo *ukiyo-e* and contemporary *anime* and *manga* – to promote his art overseas, Superflat can be seen as a self-conscious and strategic cultural essentialism.

These four works provide a good sense of Japanese scholarship on *otaku*. The next article complements them. Nobuoka turns to Akihabara, the *otaku* mecca of Tokyo, from the perspective of economic geography (Chapter 34). He traces the global competitiveness of Japanese popular culture to this specific district, arguing that Akihabara's cutting-edge innovations are driven by consumers.

The rest of the volume looks at four major genres of visual popular culture: cinema, TV, *anime*, and *manga*. In contrast to *otaku* culture's emphasis on fan activities and creativity, the essays here largely deal with 'mass' or 'mainstream' visual culture and the cultural production itself, rather than 'sub'-culture and its fans. In the 'Cinema' section (Part 1.2), the first two essays examine two of Japan's well-known directors, each with a distinctive style: Kore-eda Hirokazu's simple and contemplative style, and Miike Takashi's challenging and often controversial style. Sørensen (Chapter 35) examines the fiction–non-fiction link in the works of veteran director Kore-eda, who started his career as a TV documentary producer. Using three of Kore-eda's most successful films, he shows how Kore-eda's films often draw their inspiration from earlier documentaries he produced, and that through the poetics of representation he transforms factual events into fiction. Gerow's essay (Chapter 36) looks at the 'homelessness of style' of Miike, whose work is known for transnationality, homelessness and liminality of content. Gerow links homelessness of content with the homelessness of style, but without turning homelessness into Miike's 'home', suggesting that Miike's films always remain in the in-between space. In the next essay (Chapter 37), Wada-Marciano draws our attention to the relatively new phenomenon of the cinema–new media interface by examining new media's impact on Japanese horror cinema. He argues that new digital media were a key factor behind the post-1990s popularity of J-horror overseas. Until J-horror, Japanese cinema (with the exception of *anime*) had not achieved a 'global' status, but J-horror finally challenged the centrality of Hollywood, owing to its digitised format and affinity with digital technologies.

The next section (Part 1.3) concerns TV. Japanese TV programming has little foreign content (at about 5 per cent since the 1980s) and in many ways it is a perfect window to examine popular domestic perspectives – how Japanese see the world, for example. All essays here engage the issue of 'outside', 'race' or 'nationalism' through content analysis, though the genres examined vary from comedy to travel documentary to variety shows. Powell (Chapter 38) analyses popular travel documentaries to reveal their ethnocentric and racist tendencies, especially towards the peoples and cultures in the Third World, who are often portrayed as a version of primitive natives. Hambleton looks at non-Japanese residents – *gaijin tarento* (Japanese-speaking foreigners)

and *haahu* (interracial entertainers) on Japanese TV (Chapter 39) – and argues that they attest to the persistence of cultural nationalism in Japanese TV, despite the increasing number of non-Japanese on TV and the increasing number of foreign residents in Japan in the twenty-first century. Perkins (Chapter 40) analyses the use of the self/other framework in a popular TV comedy, examining the representations of non-Japanese characters and the image of idealised Europe.

The *anime* section which follows (Part 1.4) includes two essays on Miyazaki Hayao, Japan's best-known *anime* director. As there are already substantial book-length works available on Miyazaki's *anime* (McCarthy 1999; Lenburg 2012; Cavallaro 2006), in this volume we have deliberately chosen pieces that take different approaches from those taken in such accounts. Both are written by those outside Japanese studies or *anime* studies, which attests to the maturity of *anime* study in the English language. In recent years *anime* have attracted substantial scholarly interest, including from scholars from wider disciplines such as the ones here. Thomas approaches Miyazaki's films from a religious studies perspective (Chapter 41), while Rustin and Rustin (Chapter 42) utilise psychoanalysis, introducing fresh insights into study of Miyazaki *anime*. The next two pieces both offer readings of *anime* texts in their historical and social context. Mizuno represents one strand of *anime/manga* studies (Chapter 43) (e.g. M. Penney, Rosenbaum, etc.) – its intersection with war and history. She locates and reads *Space Battle Ship Yamato* and *Silent Service* in the context of the Cold War, historicising the fantasy and desire in *anime*. Redmond, on the other hand, reads *Evangelion* as a vision of East Asian micro-politics, for instance, as a 'stylized version of an autonomous, post-American subjectivity—an East Asia which can think and act for itself, without following orders from Washington' (Chapter 44: 272). In the final piece in this section (Chapter 45), Okeda and Koike examine an important, yet rarely examined aspect of Japanese *anime*, that is, the material conditions in which *anime* is produced. They reveal the high reliance on outsourcing as well as the harsh working conditions of the animators. Exposing the reality of the actual production of *anime* challenges the optimistic discourse of Japan's new soft power.

The last three articles address another major popular medium, *manga* (Part 1.5). Reflecting the strongly gendered nature of *manga* subgenres themselves (e.g. *shōjo manga*, *shōnen manga*, etc.), these essays engage gender and sexuality in *manga*. The gap between Japan as a society with relatively rigid gender norms, on the one hand, and some exploratory, ambiguous or open depictions of gender and sexuality in *manga*'s fantasy world has attracted much scholarly attention. Can such *manga* be seen as resistance to and subversion of the norm, or are they mere fantasy that has little to do with real society? Ogi (Chapter 46) looks at a relatively new genre of *manga*, ladies comics (and young ladies comics), which became popular among Japanese adult women in the 1980s. Through this specific genre, which

thematises women's sexuality (so much so that it is often considered as a form of female pornography), Ogi considers Japanese women's sense of subjectivity. She argues that ladies comics' explicit exploration of sexuality and women's desire can be seen as a part of women's consciousness-raising at a time when the Equal Employment Opportunity Law was passed in the Diet, but also points out that it was limited in that it reworked the normative concept of gender to cater for adult women who no longer read *shojo manga*. Madeley (Chapter 47) looks at the gendered narratives of bodily transformations in *shojo manga*, in particular that of gender-switching. The unexpected and uncontrolled bodily transformations that take place in some *manga*, she argues, offer ambivalent gender images that can both support and challenge existing gender norms that are characterised by hierarchy. Different readings are possible depending on what the readers may bring into their reading. Canadian and US readers may find such *manga* useful in order to assess their own society and gender inequality.

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