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The Banality of Boundaries: Performance of the Nation in a Japanese Television Comedy

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Abstract:

Through the framework provided by what Billig (1995) terms 'banal nationalism', this paper analyses performance of national identity in the Japanese media. The specific target for analysis is an episode of nodame cantabile, first broadcast on the Fuji Television Network in 2006. After a review of literature on Japanese nationalism a number of bordering processes are identified, in particular: the presentation of a Japan-The West dichotomy; the re-presentation of social relationships and semiotic markers of Japanese-ness; narrative devices that promote confidence in the Japanese mode of social organisation; and the role of 'trickster' played by a 'foreign' conductor. The significance of these processes becomes clear when placed within the context of what, in the literature, has been termed the emergence of a diverse and multicultural 'New Japan'. Although the observations contained in this paper do not refute this thesis, they do add a cautionary note. As will be shown, the representation of Otherness found in this episode, and the way in which 'Japanese-ness' is placed in relationships with the Other, highlights difference and instrumentalizes foreigners in a way that reinforces ideas of national and cultural boundedness. In order for a 'New Japan' to emerge it is argued that alternative forms of representation are needed; however the possibility of this or any kind of neutral representation is called into question. The paper concludes by considering avenues for further research, as well as the limits and potential of this type of interpretive research.

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[1] All translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own. Japanese names are presented according to the surname, forename convention.

Introduction

This paper will focus on what Billig (1995) terms 'banal nationalism', or the 'ideological habits which enable the established nations…to be reproduced' (ibid: 6). In particular it analyses how these 'habits of the nation' are reproduced in the Japanese media: specifically an episode of the comedy series *nodame cantabile*, first broadcast on the Fuji Television Network in 2006. The goals of this paper are as follows. Firstly it will be argued that the nation be best conceptualised as a processes, and that nationalism as *ontology* manifests across many spheres and is reproduced through its constant enactment. Second, through the particular example afforded by *nodame*, it will discuss some of the ways in which 'the national' is constituted, reconstituted, articulated and naturalised as an ontological category. Finally, the observations contained in this paper will be used to offer a critique of nationalism as something necessarily violent and oppressive, something contrasted with a more prosaic, positive patriotism. Instead, it is maintained that national thinking as an endemic way of being in and experiencing the world. This will lead to a consideration of the importance of representation in the emergence of a 'new Japan' (Graburn and Ertl, 2008). The conclusion builds on these observations to consider further avenues for research, as well as greater theoretical and methodological challenges such work would entail.

Although the study of nationalism in everyday life does not call for research into a specific type of text, it has been selected for the following reasons. Along with the importance of visuality in modern culture (Richie, 2003: 17), television is a multisensory experience directed at a broad audience (Hogan, 1999: 749) and as such it is argued here that TV is still, despite the continuing challenge of new media products, a central medium of mass entertainment. This particular television series is representative of Japanese comedy and is also relatively recent. Selecting a comedy may at first seem contrary, a news programme for example may appear more relevant, but as Andrew Painter (1993: 295) observes, although Japanese television can at first seem silly and irrelevant – *nodame cantabile* being no exception – television is central to contemporary Japanese culture. Furthermore, TV continues to play an important role in the structuring of national consciousness in Japan (as elsewhere), being tied up in the production and reproduction of a national sense of both time and space (Yoshimi, 2003). Also, this paper represents a small step towards addressing the lack of scholarly work on the media in Japan (Gatzen, 2001).

But while the importance of television in the structuring and imagining of the nation is accepted, selecting a specific text for discussion from the multitude of Japanese television products is not an easy thing. Why should *nodame* be singled out? Firstly, if Billig's thesis is correct then it should be possible to identify the functioning of national thinking across a variety of media, and as such there is no reason not to choose *nodame*. However it is argued here that recognition of the importance of the internal-external relationship nations have with the greater international community they belong to makes *nodame* a particularly interesting case study. For, as Billig (1995: 83) puts it:

…if "our" nation is to be imagined in all its particularity, it must be imagined as a nation amongst other nations. The consciousness of national identity normally assumes and international context, which itself needs to be imagined every bit as much as does the national community…

Therefore, as a text that deals overtly with issues such as leaving Japan, the power relationships of classical music as a 'universal' phenomenon, concepts of 'East' and 'West'[2] and group belonging and confidence, *nodame* becomes particularly relevant. Indeed, through the proxy of classical music *nodame* grapples with issues of universality and particularity quite openly, and as such can be seen as an on screen example of the negotiation of the particular and the universal, the national and the global.

The last reason for choosing *nodame* is one of convenience: the series was widely watched and as such was easily sourced. In taking these points together (except for the last), this article will add to a number of literatures including media studies, nationalism studies and Japanese studies. Due to the limits of this format, only the first episode of the series has been selected, although reference to other episodes will be made when necessary. This paper will proceed as follows. First a selection of academic texts that look at banal nationalism will be reviewed. The second section will apply theories and themes derived from the preceding discussion in the analysis of an episode of *nodame cantabile*. A number of processes will be identified through this analysis, in particular: the presentation of a Japan-The West dichotomy; the presentation of social relationships; narrative devices that promote confidence in the Japanese mode of social organisation; and the role of 'trickster' played by a 'foreign' conductor.

Further significance of these processes becomes clear when placed within the context of what Graburn and Ertl (2008) have tantalisingly labelled the emergence of a 'New Japan'. This thesis suggests Japan is becoming more diverse and multicultural, and although the observations contained in this paper do not refute this, they do however add a cautionary note. As it will be shown, the representation of Otherness found in this episode, and the way in which 'Japanese-ness' is placed in relationships with the Other, highlights difference and instrumentalizes foreigners in a way that reinforces ideas of national and cultural boundedness. Japan continues to struggle with the impact of greater immigration, an aging population and the demands of internationalisation and globalism. But, in order for any 'New Japan' to emerge the 'Old Japan' of cultural uniqueness and homogeneity needs to be challenged. As television is a prime disseminator of 'language carried' (see Schutz, 1967a; 1967b; also Heritage, 1984) images and concepts of the nation it is argued that alternative, probing and questioning, forms of representation are needed. The possibility of this or indeed any kind of neutral representation is, however, called into question. The paper will conclude by reflecting upon some of the shortcomings of this research and suggesting routes for further study.

The habit of re-presenting and re-producing national identity

As Chris Burgess (2008) has recently pointed out, studies of Japanese nationalism have tended to focus on rebuffing the arguments of *Nihonjinron* texts on empirical and theoretical grounds (e.g. Lie, 2001; Mouer and Sugimoto 1995; Oguma, 1995; Weiner, 1997). It was hoped that by showing the ideological foundations of Japaneseness, cultural uniqueness and homogeneity, to be factually and theoretically unsound, they would somehow crumble away. However, this has not been the case, echoing Irwin Deutscher's (2002: 31) observation that: "as we know scientific

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[2] The use of scare quotes denotes the constructedness of these categories.

evidence and rational arguments are not the defining characteristics of the contemporary world". The reason for this may be that, as Walker Connor (1994) has argued, it is not enough to approach national forms of identification as a rational process with a determined end, as doing so ignores its emotional pull. Certainly, the extent to which nationalism can be considered rational is debatable (see Kecmanovic, 2005). However, a trend in the literature has been identified that takes Japanese cultural nationalism, and with it the *Nihonjinron,* at face value as a phenomenon. This trend attempts to document and explain how this phenomenon is collectively maintained and manifests in different facets of public life (e.g. Clammer, 2001; Hogan, 1999; Goldstein-Gidoni, 2001; McVeigh, 2000, 2004; Nagatani and Tanaka, 1998; Takeda, 2008; Tsuruta, 1998). The current argument is situated within this trend.

Takeda Hiroko notes that 20th century nationalism in Japan was demonstrated in a markedly "innocent and everyday manner" making reference to the term coined by Kayaka Rika 'petit nationalism' (*puti nashonarizumu*), defined as an expression of love for Japan (Takeda, 2008: 8). This can be seen as essentially analogous to Michael Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism, which asserts that national identity is 'flagged' or 'indicated in the lives of its citizenry (ibid: 6) in a multitude of settings, reaffirming a particular national cultural identity as part of a wider world of nations. The concept of banal nationalism sensitises us to the often-ignored ways in which the nation is re-constituted in daily life. Instead of treating nationalism as an extreme form of identity expression, or as something that is necessarily mobilised in a cynical fashion towards some stated (or tacit) goal, nationalism is treated as a form of ontology, or pre-requisite for being in the world. However, this ontology is by no means a given; instead it is maintained through its representation and reproduction in everyday life. National thinking, then, is propagated by its mobilisation in making sense of the world that communities of people's find themselves in. It is both descriptive and prescriptive, performing ordering functions and explicating casual relationships that provide a sense of what Giddens (1991) terms 'ontological security' (see also Perkins, forthcoming). As such 'nationalism, far from being an intermittent mood in established nations, is the endemic condition' (Billig, 1995: 6).

For example, Takeda (2008: 24-25) focuses on food nationalism in Japan, suggesting that food discourses contribute towards the reproduction of 'Japanese' minds and bodies, and arguing that food discourses draw upon well-known stereotypical Japanese foods (sushi, rice, *edamame*), which further fix their semiotic relationships to a cultural 'Japaneseness' (see also Goldstein-Gidoni, 2001; McVeigh, 2004). In fact, it is the nature of the production of television as both a material process and a textual construction that leads to the category of the nation to be reproduced. For the most part programmes draw upon established social categories – the nation being one - in their construction in order to make them intelligible to their audiences. A similar observation has been made concerning 'methodological nationalism' in academic work that unreflexively reproduces the division of the world into particular nations as a natural state and as such maintains the salience of that world view (Wimmer and Schiller, 2002).

The reproduction of the 'thin' category of the nation, and how that category is 'thickened out' are two different processes: the presentation of a universal category, and its historically and socially contingent particularity (for more on thick and thin categories see Walzer, 1994). For example, print media and *manga* comics are also

sites where discourses of the Japanese nation are produced and Armour (2000) has explored, through a reading of a series of texts and the *manga Doraemon,* how *manga* plays a role in constructing the world-view of Japanese children. He finds that authors encode aspects of their own cultural upbringing, thus reinforcing rules for good behaviour and re-articulating a model for children. Tsuruta (1998) has explored the ways in which foreign characters are constructed in Japanese novels, concluding that foreigners are bestial or god-like, therefore nonhuman and representing a psychological discontinuity with the Japanese. Foreigners are also seen as a catalyst for personal development, rather than being people with which to create relationships. Turning to television, Painter (1992: 296), has suggested that commercial television creates electronic *uchi* (inside) groups that often emphasise "themes related to unity (national, local, cultural, or racial) and unanimity (consensus, common sense) in order to create an intimate and comfortably familiar atmosphere" (ibid: 297). These *uchi* groups also function to exclude those that do not qualify: socially stigmatised groups and anyone who may threaten the tone of programming (ibid: 324). What is not said, or represented, is also of significance.

Television has also played a crucial role in the creation of a shared national space and time, by both splitting the day into certain national viewing times and highlighting certain national narratives over others to create a shared sense of purpose (Yoshimi, 2003: 475 – 481). TV as an instrument of national unification continues today in the policing of programme tone to create material that is in line with audience expectation. National television stations are careful not to alienate potential viewers, seeking to put out programming that is comfortable and familiar:

Programs that challenge viewer's preconceptions and attempt in the course of an hour or half an hour to convince people to think differently have been marginalized…Broadcasters say, 'we always provide programs in accordance with the viewers' wishes'. As a result, programs reflecting and underwriting the majority's received notions have increased in this TV as the 'national medium.' (ibid: 484)

Yoshimi cites the case of a NHK documentary programme that attempted to document a trial of Korean women who were used as 'comfort women', in WWII from a perspective sensitive to international feminist concerns. He writes that at the last hour the production was heavily edited by studio executives, with material that placed this episode in Japanese history in a bad light being systematically revised out (ibid: 461).

Two points can be taken from this example. The first is that it is evident that studio executives in Japan are still keen to present programming that is easy to watch: *i.e.* it does not challenge the preconceptions of viewers in any significant way as I explain below. The second point is that by predicting and presenting TV material that is easy to watch, the programme makers show that they do not stand above society and feed it information; instead it can be asserted that they are embroiled in the performative aspects of national identity constitution over time. The same dynamic of individual interaction documented by Goffman (1959) can be applied to the extended performances that television programming constitutes: a 'bad' performance*, i.e.* one that transgresses the perceived norms of social organization that make interaction predictable and reduce exposure to trauma, is subject to the same kind of psychological pre-emption (this performance will not be accepted so must therefore be avoided) that happens in face to face interaction, as actual putative reactions, such as public outcry or low ratings, are avoided. The performance then goes on to solidify the salience of the socially held representations that 'this is the right way to talk about

x' or 'this is how x happened', both through what is said and what is omitted. This is not to suggest that it is unavoidable that this type of policing does happen, only that there is a pragmatic urge to avoid situations that call into question the assumed knowledge needed to belong to the nation. As such TV narratives play an important part in the perpetuation of national identity over time by publicly performing, and therefore re-presenting, socially held norms: norms that in themselves flag the 'national' mode of social organization.

Before moving on, it is useful to give some indication of what it is that can be looked for when looking for 'little nationalisms'. Yoshimi's (2003) analysis places the television at the centre of the creation of the national consciousness of time and space, as well as suggesting that producers try their best to give the audience what (they think) they want, avoiding challenging programming, and therefore naturalising the status-quo.   In addition, Palmer (1998) has suggested that banal nationalism is manifest in representations of the body, food and landscape, all of which reveal:

…diverse ways in which identity can be constructed, maintained and communicated at the level of the ordinary, the everyday…How we use our bodies, in the foods we consume and in our relationships with the landscape there is a continual reminder of who we are and what we believe in (ibid: 195).

National identity is seen as a process of constant and consistent doing, performing and becoming over time and is embodied in everyday actions, and flagged through performance that assumes the nation: even a weather report that shows the fronts moving into the political borders of the nation naturalizes the nation as *the* mode of social organization (Nuckolls, 2006: 817). These actions and representations are familiar, safe and predictable, they tend to be associated with positive emotions and are bound up in the everyday work required to belong and to acknowledge the belonging of others. But the flagging of 'what we have' and 'what we are' also brings with it stereotypical assumptions about 'what they do not have' and 'what they cannot be', the infrahumanization (Leyens *et al.,* 2000: 705) of the Other and the assumption of social relationships cast in stone. In fact, the representation of social relationships, not just those between Self and Other, but also gender relationships gender roles and characteristics attributed to other members within the in-group represent and reinforce that particular mode of social organization. The next section will further this argument through an analysis of an altogether different form of TV programming to that looked at by Yoshimi (2003) and argue that the themes, present and omitted, still contribute to the maintenance of national boundaries.

Nodame

Nodame Cantabile follows a group of misfit music students in Japan who are thrown into an alternative orchestra by a mysterious German conductor. The original *manga* by Ninomiya Tomoko, the *anime* and the television series, which is the subject of this particular paper, have been a big hit in Japan, playing a large part in a recent classical music boom. It is hard to overstate the popularity of the franchise: the *manga alone,* which runs to 21 volumes, has sold over 29, 000, 000 individual copies (Asahi Shimbun, 2009) and the television series has won numerous awards. The two main characters are Chiaki and Nodame, who are played in the drama by Tamaki Hiroshi and Ueno Juri respectively. They are presented as polar opposites: Chiaki is a sophisticated, disciplined musician who spent time in Europe and aspires to be a conductor; Nodame is a slovenly girl from the countryside who, while an exceptionally talented pianist, plays music in a haphazard manner and has no

aspirations other than becoming a kindergarten teacher. While there are numerous side plots and a large ensemble cast, the narrative focuses on the unlikely relationship that develops between Chiaki and Nodame. As remarked upon earlier, like many Japanese comedies the series seems on first watching to be irrelevant and silly - it is based on an earlier *manga* (comic book) and employs many of the conventions found in *manga* and *anime* (Japanese animations, for more see Schodt, 1996) such as exaggerated sound effects, over the top mannerisms, onscreen thought bubbles and other CG (computer graphics) effects. However cultural norms, ideological and political values underpin any text (Gillespie and Toynbee, 2006: 2) and in looking at how television is crafted in order to attract and retain viewers' attention the procession of these themes can be slowed down and 'unpacked'. This will now be attempted below by looking at the methods employed in constructing a Japan – West dichotomy, the use of narrative to solidify this distinction, and the instrumentalisation of representations of foreigners.

The first episode spends the introductory section establishing Chiaki's past. He is seen as a little boy in Prague and it is revealed via narration from Chiaki, that he spent a proportion of his childhood following his father around Europe. He was introduced to classical music, and in particular to a conductor who becomes his mentor. However, when his father and mother separate, Chiaki is forced to return to Japan. This trip home turns out to be permanent as a crash landing, as well as unexplained boat related trauma, means that Chiaki is afraid of all intercontinental travel.

The opening section takes pains to set up an explicit east-west dichotomy. A number of western stereotypes are presented, which according to play an important role in providing a comfortable inflexibility, and through the continuity of representation overtime reinforce the 'conviction that existing relations of power are necessary and fixed' (Pickering, 2001:3). An 'occidentalised' (Carrier, 1995) Europe is presented: images of an old, cultured Europe, evocative of the quasi-Europe imagined by popular *anime* director Hayao Miyazaki, fill the screen before bleeding into a young Chiaki watching in awe as an orchestra conducted by his hero Sebastian Viera performs on a grand stage. We then see Chiaki, now university age, in a dark room, a close shot giving the impression of tight space, as he asks himself, "Why do I have to be here?" (*naze boku wa koko ni inakerebanaranai desho ka*). The next section introduces more stereotypes. Young Chiaki happily runs through Prague wearing an idealized 'European' school uniform; we see more picture perfect shots of cobbled streets; he enters a theatre and speaks in English to the doormen. English is used throughout this section as a default foreign language – an example of the tendency identified by Tajfel for in-groups to claim that 'they' are all the same. The language choice flattens out the linguistic differences of Europe and furthers a general foreign Otherness.

We see Chiaki meeting Viera (also speaking English), over their shared love of a small Japanese toy called a *Tamagochi*, which was an international commercial hit, then Chiaki taking piano lessons from the master, and finally a tearful farewell, with Viera wearing a particularly outlandish, coat and hat. Overall, the European setting is drenched with seriousness and professionalism: it is represented as grand place at the heart of classical music. Chiaki's personal narrative is full of nothing but respect and awe for Europe. Powerful classical music plays throughout.

Noticeable throughout this opening section is the sense of space that is presented in Prague. A common refrain heard in Japan is that it is a small (*semai*) country. This

socially held convention has some factual basis as, due to mountainous internal terrain, Japan's population is concentrated along the east coast where most major metropolitan areas lay, and housing, retail and light industry tend to be densely packed together. And, although national population density is 343 per sqkm, population density in Tokyo (where all the major TV stations are based) is 5, 751 per sqkm, and the cities are a warren of closely packed streets. As Palmer (1998) suggests, landscape and place are way national identity is flagged, however in this case the wide-open streets of Europe, certainly a selective representation, are used to signify Chiaki's sense of not belonging in Japan. In the early scenes young Chiaki is almost swallowed up by grand open spaces, be they concert halls, old corridors, bridges over wide rivers or river banks. This sense of space is juxtaposed with the tight camera angles in Chiaki's small flat, and later the small crowded university campus.

Social Relationships

We then see Chiaki walking through a university campus in Japan. The music has changed – still classical but now more upbeat and cheerful with a pop inflection. All around him people are practicing their instruments, in what seems to the untrained ear a competent fashion, but Chiaki dismisses them all as terrible (*minna hetakkuso!*). The other students at the university look on as Chiaki strides through the campus, all of them remarking on Chiaki's skill and arrogance. He is immediately singled out as a cut above the rest of the 'normal' students; his seriousness and professionalism is contrasted with the Japanese characters. Finally, Nodame herself is introduced, although only the back of her is seen as she steals another girls' *bento* (lunch) box.

A number of gender roles and relationships are established here. Apart from one exception, Chiaki's presence causes the girls around him to either scream or fawn, while Chiaki himself ignores them or dismisses them, reinforcing a gender stereotype relationship that places women as deferential to men, as well as marking him out as different from the other men on campus, who display bemused interested or outward contempt. One outwardly gay character, Masumi, is also introduced who conforms to the media portrayals observed by McLelland (2000: 3) that: "homosexual men [are] simultaneously funny and sympathetic and dangerous and despicable". The 'funny and sympathetic' aspect is emphasized, although throughout his actions are extravagant and unpredictable. Language is used to further define this character in relationship to the bulk of the in-group: Masumi is addressed as Masumi-*chan*, the *chan* suffix used when talking to young children and sometimes young women.

This in-group constitutes an *uchi* group, such as discussed by Painter (1992) in his analysis of morning variety shows. *Uchi* (inside) along with its pair *soto* (outside) are particularly important in Japanese socialisation. From a young age *uchi* groups are positively associated with cleanliness, safety and comfort, while *soto* groups are negatively associated with dirtiness, danger and discomfort (Hendry, 1995: 43-44). It is the in-group that the viewer is invited to join, and the in-group/out-group theme, in this case Chiaki vs. the general university populous (and in particular the later members of the alternative orchestra) is played on time and again throughout the series. For example, Chiaki, in keeping with semiotic markers of a 'cultured Europeanism', is seen drinking Champagne in a western-style bar, where he suggests:

Maybe I should quit music. No matter how much I try here, if I can't perform in Europe there's no point.

Food is also played upon as a marker of difference. As well as the traditional *bento* box that Nodame steals earlier in the programme and the prominent Champagne and whiskey bottles in the western-style bar, a later meeting area for the orchestra outside of university is a traditional *ramen* noodle bar; and when Nodame serves Chiaki a burnt fish (*aji*), Chiaki prepares an Italian pasta dish; later when Nodame and the conductor Holstein appear for dinner it is revealed that Chiaki has made 'traditional French food' and supplied red wine, instead of the traditional beer or *o-sake*. Other conventional semiotic markers of Japanese-ness are played upon: Chiaki's apartment is sparse and his furniture all in a 'western' style, whereas Nodame's room is more haphazard and cluttered. Clothing is also used to delimit a boundary between Chiaki and the rest of the students of the university: while most of the students are dressed in casual clothes, Chiaki wears shirts, smart trousers and leather shoes, a further marker of his occidentalized Europeanism. Chiaki's attitude and expectations serve to separate him from the *uchi* group of the university and, as Chiaki's character is seen as formed by his experiences abroad, a Japan (*uchi*) – Europe (*soto*) boundary is effectively produced.

Chiaki, Japan and confidence

For the vast majority of the first episode, Japan is portrayed as silly, irreverent and, at least according to Chiaki, globally insignificant. However, a narrative theme is Chiaki's realization that Japan has something to offer that is particular to Japan. Like all narratives, there is a casual chain of events that has a distinct beginning and end (Gillespie, 2006: 81); we have seen that the beginning for Chiaki is love and reverence for Europe coupled with scorn for Japan, whereas the end is the realization that Japan has its own merits. The narrative positions Chiaki as an outsider on the university campus – both above and beyond the other students – and Chiaki's motivations for continuing music are to be the best and to play in the best places in the world: *i.e.* they are bigger and better than the rest of the university. However, Chiaki is made to play a piano duet with Nodame, and while he thinks he is teaching her how to play properly, it is revealed that the exercise was a lesson for him with the goal of making him enjoy music for music's sake.

Although touched by the experience, Chiaki points out to Nodame that their performance would not succeed in the rigorous world of music competitions. Nodame replies that she does not want to be in competitions. There is then the following exchange:

Chiaki: Then why did you enter the music department and why do you practice everyday?

Nodame: I want to be a kindergarten teacher.

Chiaki: That's your dream?

Nodame: Yes! (Walks away)

Chiaki (internal monologue, classical music): Dear Viera-sensei. It looks as if there are some amazing people in Japan after all. There are more things I can do here [Japan].

This moment of revelation, where Chiaki comes to understand that there is more to classical music than Europe and glory in competition, brings him back into the fold;

although he continues to vacillate throughout the series. But why this particular change of attitude? Firstly, once established as a major character there is a need for a narrative device to keep him in the story, Chiaki deciding to stay clearly fulfils this need. Secondly, throughout the episode Japanese musicians and the university have been portrayed negatively, and Chiaki's recognition of Nodame's particular talent gives the audience a ray of hope. A third explanation for this narrative device is that it functions in response to a perceived lack of confidence in traditional ordering and institutions of Japanese society. The economic crash in the late 1980s and the subsequent 'lost decade' of the 1990s ended the collective national goal of economic pre-eminence, and ever since there has been endemic national concern over the state and direction of the collective Japanese nation. On this reading, the story is a confidence building exercise – a narrative of causal events leading up to Chiaki's rehabilitation into Japanese society and recognition that Japan has something to offer. This function is also extended to another character in the series, which will now be discussed.

Foreigner Conductors

Although Chiaki takes on the ambiguous position of quasi-European, halfway through the episode a major 'foreign' character is introduced: the German Milch Holstein (later revealed as the great composer Franz Strezemann). It has been argued that foreigners in Japanese fiction tend to pull towards one of two extremes: un-qualified abhorrence or unequivocal admiration (Tsuruta, 1998: 49). Also, it was argued that the Westerner in Japanese fiction has tended to represent 'the ultimate other', which reflects the inner anxieties and aspirations of authors (ibid: 76). Milch at once falls into both categories – although never on the continuum in between, and his character also acts as this 'ultimate Other' by challenging the prevailing social order as well as the character's assumptions about themselves and their situation.

Milch/Strezemann is played by the Japanese comedian Takenaka Naoto. Further stereotypes that have been employed to delineate this character as 'western' rather than Japanese and as such this character presents an illustrative example of the functionality of socially held concepts (common sense knowledge) as a way of signalling to others with the same social and cultural resources what is being done and why in an implicit but understandable way. In order for Takenaka to pass for a German conductor, which is of course impossible for such a well-known actor, he draws upon a set of corresponding stereotypes and a collection of signs and performs them in a way that mark him out. Most striking of these is the use of a large prosthetic nose. When foreigners first came to Japan one of the first physical characteristics remarked upon was the size of their noses, and the socially held, idealized image of a westerner has a big nose, and this is said in Japanese in a set way – literally foreigners have 'high noses' (*gaijin wa hana ga takai*). As can be seen from this example, Milch/Strezemann's Otherness is further heightened by his long grey/gold hair and outlandish dress sense.

Non-visual signs are also used. Although Takenaka can of course speak fluent Japanese, and the character speaks fluently throughout, he affects a 'western' accent. Pronunciation in Japanese tends to be flat, with little variation in pitch. For this character, Takenaka accentuates vowel sounds and uses an undulating intonation that places stress on the 'wrong' syllables. Takenaka also employs a high proportion of foreign loan words and distinctly non-Japanese utterances. Although his use of

Japanese is idiomatic throughout, at one point (after speaking fluently to Nodame) Milch/Strezemann apologizes for his Japanese, making a mistake in his word choice in the process. As with the visual signs identified above, this deliberate linguistic device serves to mark the character out as not Japanese. However the practical employment of this device also works to reinforce the pre-existing commonsense assumption that only the Japanese can speak their language fluently (uniqueness of the language a common theme in *nihonjinron* texts). Creighton (1991) has documented how introducing evidence that contradicts this 'truth' provokes anxiety in onlookers and Painter (1993) and Yoshimi (2003) have suggested that TV producers attempt to create safe and relaxing *uchi* groups for their viewers to join. In the competitive Japanese media sector it is unlikely that producers would wish to provoke anxiety in their audiences and as such expected representations are recycled.

Furthermore, later in the series there is further evidence that the producers take great care to make their programmes an easy and relaxing experience for viewers. In a special episode two more foreign characters are introduced (again played by Japanese) and for roughly 10 minutes they are subtitled. Then a message is displayed on the screen apologises for all the subtitles and recognizes the strain all the reading must be on the viewers. After this, with the two new characters suitably established as foreign, they speak in Japanese. Finally, Milch/Strezemann is depicted as a dirty old man (*tsukebe jiji*). He tries on numerous occasions to get Nodame back to his hotel room and later on in the episode he accidentally produces a set of Polaroid 'up skirt' (*appusukato*) photographs. This again resonates with Tsuruta's (1998) reading of Japanese fiction, where he observes Western characters as being overtly sexual in contrast to the more reserved Japanese.

However Milch/Strezemann also plays an important role as an outside instigator of crisis and change. At the end of the first episode, when he reveals himself as the famous conductor Strezemann, he uses his position of respect to demand the instigation of a new orchestra, one that is populated by a group of misfits in the university. It is through this orchestra that a wider group of characters develop confidence, understand the importance of working together, and regain their love of music. It is significant that the move to start this new orchestra comes from an outsider, and throughout the rest of the series, Strezemann pulls strings in the background in order to further the development of the characters. Here, Strezemann is playing the role of *trickster*, a character that "moves in to breach norms, violate taboos, turns everything upside down" (Conquergood, 2007: 38). By creating the alternative orchestra, Strezemann shakes up the traditional order of the university that places priority on the A orchestra and the elite students that populate it. Strezemann's selection of the less obviously talented students is seen as a direct condemnation of the way in which the university is being run, as a respected Austrian composer he is given deference by the professors and is as such obeyed. This being said, it is not immediately apparent whether this action is an open challenge to the prevailing highly structured and hierarchical order endemic to Japanese universities –and by relation the highly structured nature of Japanese society - or just a temporary release from the workaday responsibilities of everyday life that "opens up a privileged space of sheer deconstruction and reconstruction" (ibid).

Conclusion

This article has argued that assumptions about the naturalness of the nation lie in the background of everyday life, and these can be seen in mass cultural products. Working on this assumption, the concept of banal nationalism has been introduced and applied to a Japanese comedy drama series. In doing so it has become apparent that by looking at Japanese media, including seemingly trivial television, the everyday methods by which maintenance of national boundaries is done can be documented and analyzed. In the case of *nodame,* it has been argued that a national in-group is presented and represented through semiotic flagging of an Occidentalized Europe and an idealized Japanese nation, while a major theme of the narrative of the male protagonist concerns his relationship with a reified Japanese in-group.

Three re-presentational processes have been identified. First, a sharp Japan – The West dichotomy is realized through constant juxtaposition of semiotic markers of difference. These include audio (between classical and pop music), spatial (size and place), and visual (place, clothing, food) cues. Similarities between the two worlds presented are entirely omitted, and the attitude of the male protagonist Chiaki suggests that straddling the boundary is impossible. The second narrative process concerns the destabilization and restabalization of positive images of Japanese society. This process is illustrated by Chiaki's oscillation between negative and positive attitudes towards Japan, as well Strezemann, who has been argued a trickster character whose job is to poke fun at order and institutions and create a playful space for construction and deconstruction of realities. Whether this space is actually challenging to social relationships is unclear: does opening up a space for a deconstruction of reality suggest to viewers that social relationships are open to negotiation? Or does it work in the opposite fashion, the trickster reinforcing social realities by remaining in a space of pure play, or going away after reality has been destabilized enough?

These questions have important implications for the roles foreigners play in the performative constitution and reconstitution of the mode of social organization that bares nationalism. The first point to make is mundane but worth reiterating: it is obvious that bringing the outside in does not necessarily break down cultural barriers. The preceding discussion of *nodame* gives and example of how the concept of the nation and its articulation with certain ideas about foreignness, when represented, play a role in the greater scheme of national social organization through the reinforcement of difference. It has been shown how, rather than being fixed lines on a page, boundaries are carried with the people they demarcate. And as long as TV producers shy away from presenting material that openly challenges social stereotypes and expectations it may be argued that representations of foreigners will continue in this vein. A corollary of this observation is another question: can there be a non-biased form of representation? Is there such a thing as difference for difference's sake and do all representations serve a purpose, intentional or otherwise? These questions beg answers from proponents of the 'new multicultural Japan' as the micro projects they take as evidence of change are likely to remain bounded to their localities if they do not find 'effective' representation in national media. From a normative cosmopolitan or multicultural perspective, the on screen processes analysed here suggest that belonging to the nation (and thus who does not belong) is flagged continuously, and the maintenance of boundaries that confirm belonging, through the demarcation of difference, is equally ubiquitous and pervasive.

These observations lead to further questioning of the wider boom in classical music popularity that followed in the wake of *nodame*. Did *nodame* really bring the universal idea of classical music to Japan in any lasting way, or was it a boom with an implicated and eventual bust at the apex of consumption? What is the nature of the interaction between particular, local forms of classical music and the 'western greats' as represented in the programme? Furthermore, how did the classical boom interact and modify imaginings of Japan's relationship with the rest of the world? As Iwabuchi (2002) has argued, booms in the popularity of Asian goods have popularised Asian cultural products in Japan, but the nostalgia displayed for a somehow simpler Asia shows 'Japan's refusal to accept that it shares the same temporality as other Asian nations.' (ibid: 159). Cultural consumption never occurs in a power vacuum.

Linked to tensions between the universal and the particular, the third process concerns maintaining confidence, pride, and other positive proto-emotions attached by those who belong to the national mode of social organisation. It has been argued elsewhere that the 1990s economic crisis left Japan in a state of concern over the direction of the nation and two discourses were identified that attempted to address this confidence problem (see Yoda, 2006). One is a neo-national political discourse that attempts to re-couple the nation to a set of myths, traits and a specific national narrative. The other is a liberal discourse that re-centres the individual and personal narratives. It was also argued that TV producers try their best to give their viewers what they think they need (Painter, 1993; Yoshimi, 2003). In this particular example, Chiaki's narrative can be read as a confidence building exercise. Japan is initially posited as insignificant on the global stage, but through interaction with characters – in particular Nodame, who is a concentrated signifier of Japaneseness – Japan's own special nature is hinted at and throughout the series a number of '*puti* nationalisms' and narrative devices are employed to reaffirm the validity of Japan as a mode of social organization. That TV producers see this type of narrative as 'what their viewers want', suggests emphasis on maintaining Japaneseness is not just a political elite prerogative.

This paper represents the first steps of what is necessarily a much larger project, and as such has its limitations. Although it was mentioned that the original source material for *nodame* was a popular *manga* (comic book), there has been no attempt at cross-medium analysis. There are two reasons for this. First, only one episode of *nodame* was chosen for considerations of space, and it is felt that the format would not allow for the sustained attention the *manga* source material deserves. Second, as this paper has focused on the methods of reproduction of the nation, and not the *impact* of a particular 'nationalist' message, paying additional attention to the *manga* is unlikely to add anything substantive to the argument presented here. Indeed, a simple causal media effects paradigm is rejected, for as has been argued producers and writers are unlikely to be engaged in inculcating a sense of nationalism, and furthermore any messages coded into the programme are unlikely to be decoded in the manner intended. Instead it is the recursive act of drawing upon the nation, and its articulated concepts as backdrop and context for events, what Bourdieu (1977) terms 'habitus', that presents it as something natural and pre-reflexive that has been emphasised: not influencing action and attitudes but instead providing the conditions for their potential. If the framework for analysis used here was applied to the *manga*, then, it would look at how the nation is depicted and articulated in much the same way as has been done in this paper. Further research might look at how this particular *manga*, and the format more generally, deals with and is received by audiences in

Asia, and how relationships between nations and national peoples are imagined and represented. Work of this kind has started (see again Iwabuchi, 2002), but more is certainly called for.

Following on from this last point is another issue – namely the lack of audience data. If, as has been argued, texts such as *nodame* propagate national thinking through the reproduction of the national on screen, the ways in which these categories are understood, negotiated, reflected upon and contested is of great interest. However, study of the (re)production of national thinking as an ontology presents the researcher with immediate challenges. The very banality of what is going on in the context of the programme, its pre-reflexive nature necessitate a research strategy that can tease out reactions while avoiding the imposition of the researcher's categories. The problem arises because of the differences in attitude between the researcher and the audience member. When approaching a television programme as an object of research it is possible to question the very basic assumptions implicit in the text. However, as a piece of entertainment embedded in everyday social processes, audience members in the natural attitude of everyday life may take what is presented for granted as a given representation of social reality, rather than a factor in the maintenance of national thinking.

So, if as Billig (1995: 8) argues 'the metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is a flag hanging unnoticed on the public building', what would a more empirical strategy that probes these peripheral, unnoticed factors look like? A parallel methodological problematic can be found in studies of power and domination, as well as Marxist conceptions of ideology as false consciousness, (see for example Lukes, 2005; Mitchell, 1990). Unfortunately, this is a question that studies on power, ideology and interpretive social science in general have yet to answer convincingly. In their discussion of banal nationalism in the Turkish press, Yumul and Özkirimli (2000: 802) ask: 'Nationalism being an eponymous word after which our contemporary common sense has been shaped, how can we escape its main tenets?' It may be the case that, at least for the foreseeable future, we cannot. But if we cannot wish away the nation as a conceptual category, we can at least engage with its imagining. We should not give up on the task of probing and laying bare the nation as a *process through time*, the flux of its ideological configuration and attempts at fixing, as the ways in which it is reproduced and imagined have profound implications for a politics of diversity and recognition, as well as grander projects such as multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism and the furthering of humanitarianism as a universal ideal.

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