

UNIVERSIDADE DE LISBOA  
FACULDADE DE BELAS-ARTES



## **CUTENCYCLOPEDIA**

**A theoretical-practical investigation on the *kawaii* as an  
aesthetic category in art and pop culture**

Ana Matilde Diogo de Sousa

Orientador(es): Prof. Doutor Carlos Vidal Tenes Oliveira Caseiro  
Profa. Doutora Marilyn Jeanette Ivy

Tese especialmente elaborada para a obtenção do grau de Doutor em  
Belas-Artes, na especialidade de Pintura

2020



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Eu, Ana Matilde Diogo de Sousa, declaro que a tese de doutoramento intitulada “CUTENCYCLOPEDIA. A theoretical-practical investigation on the *kawaii* as an aesthetic category in art and pop culture” é o resultado da minha investigação pessoal e independente. O conteúdo é original e todas as fontes consultadas estão devidamente mencionadas na bibliografia ou outras listagens de fontes documentais, tal como todas as citações diretas ou indiretas têm devida indicação ao longo do trabalho segundo as normas académicas.

A Candidata

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ana Matilde Sousa', written in a cursive style.

Ana Matilde Sousa

Lisboa, 15 de novembro de 2020

## RESUMO

A estética *cute* (“adorável,” “fofinho”) é uma característica central dos meios mediáticos do século XXI, estendendo-se desde a estratosfera das belas-artes contemporâneas até ao submundo da cultura de massas e ao “lado errado” da Internet. Esta tese de doutoramento mergulha no buraco do coelho do *cute* japonês – o *kawaii* – enquanto expressão mais extrema dos mundos estranhos, problemáticos, difíceis, complexos e caóticos que se revelam quando examinamos a relação entre o *cute* e a negatividade. Ao mesmo tempo, enquanto dissertação no campo das Belas-Artes, constitui um projeto de arte em si mesmo, criando uma “enciclopédia” de ensaios sobre a *cuteness* negativa. Além da dissertação na sua forma física, em papel, a “enciclopédia” destina-se a ser visualizada on-line, no site [www.heta.moe](http://www.heta.moe). Deste modo, busca-se uma articulação entre teoria e prática artística, na qual uma não ilustra a outra e vice-versa, mas ambas as produções (obras de arte e ensaios) constroem lado a lado um universo autoral.

Assim, apresenta-se um conjunto de ensaios onde se investiga a fenómeno-poética do *kawaii*. A tese divide-se em três partes: “Parte I - Enciclopédia”, “Parte 2 - Três Artigos” e “Parte III - Declaração de Artista.” A Parte I consiste em vinte e duas entradas curtas de 2500 a 4000 palavras. Entradas como “Absolute Boyfriend”, “Fairies” ou “END, THE”, concentram-se num único trabalho – respectivamente, um mangá de Watase Yū, a série de animé *Jinrui wa Suitai Shimashita* e uma vídeo-ópera de Shibuya Keiichiro – investigando a sua substância temática, conceptual e estética. Outras entradas, como “Gesamtpcutewerk”, “Pastel Turn” ou “Zombieflat”, carecem de um objeto central, tecendo uma análise de vários artefactos culturais unidos por um motivo subjacente, por exemplo, a “obra de arte total”, “cores pastel” ou “mortos-vivos”. Esta abordagem “caso a caso”, baseada na leitura atenta de uma ampla gama de objetos, incluindo artefactos pop-culturais como mangá, animé ou videogames, mas também pintura, escultura, videoarte, ou performance, facilita transições temporais e geográficas. Ademais, permite explorar o *cute* através das estruturas teóricas de uma série de campos do conhecimento, incluindo estudos de arte, teoria crítica, estudos japoneses, estudos de animé e mangá, estudos de banda desenhada, estudos de *media*, estudos *queer*, estudos de género, teoria feminista, ou novo materialismo.

Na dissertação, as entradas são ordenadas alfabeticamente. Porém, espera-se que os leitores encontrem seu próprio caminho, remapeando a dissertação. Para facilitar esse “remapeamento” ou “reencaminhamento”, no final de cada entrada, existem sugestões sobre entradas relacionadas, na forma de “Ver também” (*See also*). Além disso, inclui um Glossário

de termos japoneses e de *fandom* que aparecem ao longo da dissertação – por exemplo, “mangá”, “animé”, “otaku” ou “moé” – cujo significado e história são importantes para melhor compreender a enciclopédia.

A Parte II segue o formato de tese doutoral em “três artigos.” Ao contrário das entradas da enciclopédia na Parte I, estes artigos têm cerca de 8000 palavras e seguem o formato típico de um trabalho de pesquisa acadêmica nas humanidades, com resumo, introdução, discussão e menos figuras. Os três artigos apresentados nesta parte são “*Gaijin Mangaka*. The boundary-violating impulse of Japanized ‘art comics’” (“*Gaijin Mangaka*: o impulso transgressor dos *art comics* japonizados”), “Nothing that’s really there: Hatsune Miku’s challenge to anthropocentric materiality” (“Nada que realmente existe. O desafio de Hatsune Miku à materialidade antropocêntrica”) e “She’s not your *waiifu*; she’s an eldritch abomination. *Saya no Uta* and queer antisociality in Japanese visual novels” (“Ela não é a tua *waiifu*; é o Cthulhu. *Saya no Uta* e a *queerness* antissocial nas *visual novels* japonesas”). O primeiro artigo foca-se na *#! #25 ‘Gaijin Mangaka’*, uma edição especial da célebre antologia de bolso de banda desenhada alternativa da editora kuš!, em que participei, abordando a questão da arte contemporânea japonizada por artistas ocidentais. O segundo investiga a ídolo virtual japonesa Hatsune Miku enquanto hiperobjeto (conceito do filósofo Timothy Morton), a partir de uma perspectiva novo materialista e feminista. Finalmente, o terceiro artigo investiga *Saya no Uta* (“Balada de Saya”), uma *visual novel* para adultos com temas Lovecraftianos e Cronenbergianos, examinando-os à luz dos Queer Game Studies e da teoria *queer* antissocial. Embora, no *website*, não se apresente as Partes I e II em secções distintas, agregando-se todos os ensaios numa única enciclopédia, estes três artigos atestam a capacidade de navegar diferentes quadros teóricos e escrever de acordo com o formato padrão das revistas académicas. Em particular, “*Gaijin Mangaka*” relaciona-se diretamente com a “tribo” onde se insere o trabalho artístico apresentado no portfólio, ou seja, artistas não japoneses que usam referências pop-culturais japonesas nas suas obras, prestando-se, portanto, a uma análise mais longa.

A parte III consiste numa declaração de artista (*artist statement*) de uma página, uma versão curta da mesma (*short statement*) e uma biografia de artista. A declaração de artista, produzida para se integrar numa prática artística profissional, aborda os fundamentos das obras produzidas durante o doutoramento. A parte III deve ser complementada pelo Apêndice II – Portfólio e pela exposição final do doutoramento no dia da defesa da tese.

Na Introdução, detalham-se alguns aspetos metodológicos, como o formato “enciclopédico” da dissertação. Este, por um lado, insere-se na linhagem ensaística de obras

como o *Dictionnaire Critique* de Georges Bataille (1929-30) e *Formless: A User's Guide* (1997) de Rosalind Krauss e Yve-Alain Bois. Por outro, entrecruza-se com outros modos de colecionar, nomeadamente, o gabinete de curiosidades, cujos princípios operativos são particularmente relevantes para a tese, refletindo o caleidoscópio da *cuteness* contemporânea. Oferece-se, também, uma breve revisão da área dos Cute Studies, e faz-se uma introdução à relação entre *cute* e conceitos “negativos” recorrentes nas Partes I e II, como o objecto, o informe, o *unheimlich*, o sinistro, o estranho, o obsceno, o grotesco, e o nojento. Depois, contextualiza-se o *kawaii* etimológica, histórica e culturalmente, destacando-se a relação entre o *kawaii* e o mangá (banda desenhada japonesa). Finalmente, encerra-se com algumas considerações finais sob a forma de uma Coda, sugerindo pontas soltas que poderão ser exploradas em futuras investidas sobre o *cute* e a negatividade.

O *kawaii* é definido em termos relativos, com base nos elementos disponíveis em cada entrada. Esse indeterminismo alinha-se não só com a produção académica recente sobre o *cute* (e.g., Joshua Dale) como reflete a convicção de que esta tese não deve ser lida como um texto prescritivo ou conclusivo, mas como uma constelação de referências que devem ser apropriadas por cada leitor, construindo o seu próprio mapa de navegação. Mais do que “capítulos”, cada entrada na enciclopédia incorpora um processo, que culminou na sua inclusão na dissertação final, mas em certa medida existe paralela ou independentemente desta. Cada olhar aprofundado sobre muitos dos artefactos na enciclopédia é uma jornada com sua própria história, moldada ao longo de anos de reflexões, contaminações, desvios e encontros casuais. Porque a sua influência transborda para a vida, os leitores podem desbloquear muitos dos temas recorrentes que impulsionam a prática artística apresentada na componente prática do projecto doutoral.

A enciclopédia mapeia o emaranhamento da estética *kawaii* com o sujo e o repugnante, resultante de poluições nos meios físico e mediático; com a alteridade tornada *cute*, incluindo instâncias que envolvem pessoas tradicionalmente sujeitas à “abjeção” (mulheres, LGBT+), entidades “abhumanas” (sobrenaturais, alienígenas, monstruosas) e não-humanas (animais, robôs); os limites colapsantes do político, do legal, do institucional ou do estilístico, isto é, a percepção de que a *cuteness* é contagiante ou mesmo miasmática. Ademais, a *cuteness* dá forma e, muitas vezes, perturba, o Todo, encetando uma “cuteificação” formal e compositiva das configurações artísticas e culturais. O *kawaii* pode ser usado como uma ferramenta analítica privilegiada para explorar estas *liaisons dangereuses* na sociedade contemporânea em geral, pois estas não são exclusivamente japonesas. Pelo contrário, os territórios compartilhados entre a arte (e as sociedades) japonesa e ocidental no

atual mundo globalizado tornam-se num território comum fluído, que continuamente molda a cosmovisão contemporânea.

Palavras-Chave:

*kawaii*; cultura popular japonesa; japonização, cute studies; artes visuais

## ABSTRACT

Cute aesthetics have become a central feature of twenty-first century mediatic milieus, reaching from the heights of contemporary fine arts to the netherworld of mass culture and the “wrong side” of the Internet. This doctoral thesis dives down the rabbit hole of the Japanese cute—the *kawaii*—as the utmost expression of the strange, problematic, complicated, complex, and chaotic worlds unfolding from the relationship between cuteness and negativity. At the same time, as a dissertation in the field of Fine Arts, it constitutes an art project in and of itself, crafting an “encyclopedia” of essays on negative cute. In addition to its physical form as a dissertation, the “encyclopedia” is intended to be viewed online, on the website [www.heta.moe](http://www.heta.moe). In this way, an articulation is sought between theory and art practice, in which the former does not illustrate the latter and vice versa, but both productions (artworks and essays) world-build an authorial universe alongside each other.

The thesis begins by offering an overview of cuteness and negativity, as well as a contextual and historical background on cuteness in Japanese art and pop culture. The core of the work consists of an “encyclopedia” of twenty-three short entries of 2500 to 4000 words, each focusing on an artifact or set of artifacts in which the *kawaii* is entangled with negative concepts like the abject, formless, uncanny, eerie, weird, obscene, grotesque, or disgusting. The artifacts covered in this section include Japanese and Japanized works of art and pop culture, ranging from the fine arts (painting, sculpture, video art, performance, installations) to pop culture (comics, animation, merchandise, fashion, pop singers) to “found objects” such as computer virus or Tumblr posts. This is followed by three academic papers, of up to 8000 words, developing their topics more in-depth and in more conventional terms: “Gaijin Mangaka,” about “Japanized art comics”; “Nothing That’s Really There,” about the Japanese cyber idol Hatsune Miku; and “She’s Not Your Waifu; She’s an Eldritch Abomination,” about the visual novel *Saya no Uta*.

Finally, I present a one-page artist's statement addressing the fundamentals of my artworks, to be complemented by the portfolio of works produced during the duration of the Ph.D.

Keywords:

*kawaii*; Japanese pop culture; Japanization, cute studies, visual arts



In loving memory of my grandmother Ivone,  
who always encouraged me in my studies.

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This thesis would not be the same without all the dear friends who cheered me on during this process with their conversations and patience. I look forward to making up for all the “rainchecks” and lost time. I particularly want to express my gratitude to the members of Clube do Inferno for their direct and vital contributions to my work: André Pereira, Hugo Almeida, João Machado, and Hugo Soares. I also thank Renata Lins for her helping hand in

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Nobody has been more important to the completion of this project than my parents, to whom I owe my deepest gratitude. I thank my father, who cultivated my intellect and love of painting from a young age and inspired me to pursue the arts. I would not be an artist today if it were not for his precious teachings, honest critiques, and (lengthy) discussions about art. I thank my mother for her formidable and tireless support in reviewing my texts throughout the years. Her contagious joy and enthusiasm not only encourage me in all aspects of my life but have provided me with an exceptional role model of an intelligent and successful woman and academic.

Finally, I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation of Ivo, who has been extraordinarily tolerant and supportive. I have greatly benefited, in my work and in my life, from his love and intellect, his many suggestions, insights and provocations, his humor and encouragement, without which I would not have made it through the arduous final stages of this Ph.D.

Thank you.

Ana Matilde Sousa

Lisboa, August 2019

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# INTRODUCTION

## A cuter Ph.D.

*Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a Man,*

*And he is only Man when he is playing.*

— Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794)

*Eeeeeeeh?!*

— Annaka Haruna, *Nichijō* (Kyoto Animation, 2011)

This thesis is an “encyclopedia” of essays exploring the links between cuteness and negativity in the contemporary milieu, with a focus on the Japanese cute, known as the *kawaii*. I present this encyclopedia both on paper, in the form of a Ph.D. dissertation, and online, in the form of the website <https://www.heta.moe/>, where it comes to its full potential as an interactive, nonlinear work—thus, I suggest “using” the encyclopedia as available online. Because my creative juices as an artist and an academic are fundamentally the same, I regard this encyclopedia as an (ongoing) art project in and of itself. Therefore, my research question is not articulated in the terms traditionally found in Ph.D. dissertations, i.e., there is no overarching problem to be dissected, no cutting its internal parts, believing that totality exists even if it is unattainable. Instead, it is an exercise in hermeneutics, applying a quasi-Talmudic method of study that takes a core prompt or statement (“*kawaii* and negativity”) and explores its declensions of content, form, expression, and association. Each entry in the encyclopedia comes with its own set of hypothesis and deductions, weaving an intricate meaning-making fabric in which, ideally, each piece sheds light on the others.

Apart from my artist statement in Part III, this thesis does not take a descriptive or explanatory approach to my artworks but seeks to develop their aesthetic principles and thought processes (e.g., *kawaii* or anime and manga, the assemblage) through the medium of writing. The choice of form, structure, and themes captures the central idea that my artworks and writings world-build an authorial universe *together with* or *alongside* each other. If there is an overarching question, then, it should be: what can a Ph.D. dissertation *do*, what and how can it

*perform*, to reflect my artistic identity? That is, idiosyncratic and constantly changing, sometimes obscure—hopefully—capable of the unexpected; a bit skittish, nervy. The answer, or one possible answer, or the answer I came up with, is that it can serve as a stimulus to encourage the creative exploration of everyday objects, to engage with that which enters my mind and my eyes, now and in the future. A reason to focus my attention (for a short time), and to play with ideas as one does with a ball of string, twisting and untangling. Here, the cute is on my side: as “a dumb aesthetic”<sup>1</sup> indexing everything that academic discourse (traditionally) is not, cuteness can conduct certain “acts of sabotage against the academic world and the spirit of system.”<sup>2</sup> Tackling the cute as an aesthetic category suggests, even demands, a deviation from traditional dissertation models, valuing attributes opposed to forms of phallogocentrism, e.g., the childish, the small, the playful, the fragmented, the sentimental, or the feminine.

In other words, I want my Ph.D. dissertation to be like a playing partner. Instead of a single question and a single text, I present a cluster of short entries relating to *kawaii* phenomeno-poetics, i.e., one’s experience of the affective, imaginative, and aesthetic meanings exuding from cute objects. I have divided this document into three parts: “Part I – Encyclopedia,” “Part 2 – Three Papers,” and “Part III – Artist’s Statement.” **Part I** consists of twenty-two shorter entries of 2500 to 4000 words. In entries such as “Absolute Boyfriend,” “Fairies,” or “END, THE” I focus on a single work—respectively, a manga by Watase Yū, the animated television series *Jinrui wa Suitai Shimashita*, and Shibuya Keiichiro’s video opera *THE END*—by delving into their thematic, conceptual, and aesthetic substance. Other entries, like “Gesamtpcutewerk,” “Pastel Turn,” or “Zombieflat” lack a central object, instead weaving an analysis of various cultural artifacts, connected by an underlying motif, e.g., the “total work of art,” “pastel colors,” and “undeadness.” All the entries in Part I have in common a freer, more speculative discourse, considering a broad range of objects including pop-cultural artifacts like manga, anime, or videogames, but also painting, sculpture, video art, performance, and so on.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Legge, ‘When Awe Turns to Awww... Jeff Koon’s Balloon Dog and the Cute Sublime’, in *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, ed. Joshua Paul Dale et al. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 142.

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 16.

<sup>3</sup> On the website, the figures appear on the right side of each entry’s text, sequentially. However, in this document, I have opted to present all figures in **Appendix II – Figures** in separate sections corresponding to each entry, for practical and conceptual reasons. On the one hand, this keeps my text decluttered and avoids expanding the number of pages substantially. On the other, the act of collecting the pictures, GIFs, and videos à *propos* of each entry has been crucial in the making of this encyclopedia, for reasons which I will address shortly (namely, regarding the curiosity cabinet). As

**Part II** follows the “three papers” Ph.D. thesis format, a more recent alternative to the traditional dissertation, with a decentralized structure and shorter length. Contrary to the encyclopedia entries in Part I, these papers have about 8000 words and follow the proper format of a humanities research paper, with an abstract, introduction, discussion, and fewer pictures. The three papers presented in this part are “*Gaijin Mangaka*. The boundary-violating impulse of Japanized “art comics,” “Nothing That’s Really There: Hatsune Miku’s Challenge to Anthropocentric Materiality,” and “She’s Not Your *Waifu*; She’s an Eldritch Abomination: *Saya no Uta* and Queer Antisociality in Japanese Visual Novels.” The first paper focuses on *š!* #25 ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*,’ a special issue of the celebrated pocket-sized comic anthology *š!* in which I have participated, addressing the question of Japanized contemporary art by Western artists. The second investigates the Japanese virtual idol Hatsune Miku as hyperobject (a concept by philosopher Timothy Morton) from a feminist new materialist perspective. Finally, the third paper delves into *Saya no Uta* (“Song of Saya”), a Lovecraftian-Cronenbergian adult visual novel, examining it in light of Queer Game Studies and antisocial queer theory. Although on the website, I make no distinction between Part I and II—all entries belong to my imaginary collection of art and pop-cultural objects—these three papers attest to my capacity to navigate different theoretical frameworks and write according to the standard format of academic journals. At the time of this dissertation’s completion, I have submitted all three articles to international journals with blind peer review. Moreover, “*Gaijin Mangaka*” relates directly to my artistic “tribe,” i.e., non-Japanese artists using Japanese pop-cultural references in their works, and therefore is suited for a lengthier analysis in the context of this dissertation.

**Part III** consists of my artist’s one-page statement, a short statement, and bio. The artist statement, to be used in my professional practice as an artist, presents an overall vision of my work, situating it in contemporary art practice. Part III is to be complemented by the **Appendix III – Portfolio**, consisting of my portfolio of works produced during the duration of my Ph.D., and the final exhibition of my artworks, which will take place at my faculty on the day of the thesis defense.

In addition, I include a **Glossary (Appendix I)** of Japanese and fandom terms which appear throughout my dissertation—for instance, “manga,” “anime,” “*otaku*” or “*moé*”—whose meaning and history is of importance to better grasp many of the encyclopedia entries.

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such, in presenting them separately from the text, I wish to highlight how the figures are not simply illustrations or visual aids for the text but constitute a world—a form of thinking, a meaningful reflection—of their own.

Every time that a term in the glossary appears for the first time in each chapter, it is underlined. Still in the realm of specific words, I would like to stress that throughout this dissertation I use the term “animanga” to indicate the joint products and culture of anime (Japanese animation) and manga (Japanese comics), as well as directly related products that are often adapted and informed by them, such as light novels (novels with anime-style illustrations) and visual novels (anime-style videogames). I have also decided to present the names of people and characters originating from Japan in the Japanese order (e.g., Murakami Takashi, not Takashi Murakami), in which the surname comes before the given name (unless they manifest a preference otherwise). Moreover, while I maintain the Japanese titles of anime, manga, and videogames, I offer their official translated titles (or unofficial, in case of untranslated works) in English. On the other hand, in what concerns non-Japanese names or words used in titles of Japanese works under their Romanized form, I kept their original spelling (e.g., Ikeda Ryoko’s *Versailles no Bara*, or *The Rose of Versailles*, not *Berusaiyu no Bara*; Hagio Moto’s *Thomas no Shinzō*, or *The Heart of Thomas*, not *Tōma no Shinzō*).

In the remainder of this introduction, I will detail some aspects concerning my dissertation’s methodology, namely, its “encyclopedic” format. I offer a brief observation of the field of Cute Studies and make a general introduction to the question of cuteness and negativity, in which I pre-emptively tackle a set of “negative” concepts which will recur in Parts I and II (such as the abject, the formless, the uncanny, the eerie, the weird, the obscene, the grotesque, or the disgusting). After that, I turn my attention to this dissertation’s main topic, the Japanese cute or the *kawaii*, addressing its etymology, history, and culture. In the same vein, I present an overview of cuteness and manga—including the Interwar period, girls’ comics (*shōjo* manga) and boys’ comics (*shōnen* manga)—as their coevolution is especially relevant not only to grasp the aesthetics of the *kawaii* but as a primer to various encyclopedia entries. Finally, I close this introduction with a few concluding remarks (“Coda: Feeling Cute, Might Delete Later”), suggestive of loose ends and future prompts to be explored about cuteness and negativity.

While the dictionary and the encyclopedia are at odds with the Ph.D. dissertation in many ways—the adjective “encyclopedic” can be used to negatively pass judgment on a thesis, highlighting a propensity for quantity over quality or an excess of the content itself—they are all, at heart, teleological formations. The dissertation culminates in a thesis, in which all parts (literature review, methodology, results) converge towards a theory to be proved, aiming for the specialization of students in one field of knowledge. Even when opening new lines of



inquiry in “future work” sections, it entails a sense of conclusion of a research phase with everything else lying beyond its scope, and Ph.D. students, often suffering from academic fatigue, fantasize about writing the last word in their dissertation. In turn, dictionaries and encyclopedias seek to collect the entirety of knowledge or branch of knowledge. Their alphabetical order is a strategy to organize that which has no inherent ordering, as no word or entry is more important than the other. So too, in my dissertation, the entries are ordered alphabetically, and therefore “randomly,” evading a logical chain in favor of non-sequentiality.

Although, while compiling the final dissertation document, the pieces seemed to fall into place. In particular, the last entry, “Zombieflat,” wraps things up almost as a concluding remark. Still, one is in no way obligated to read my encyclopedia in alphabetical order. If anything, I urge the readers to dive in and find their way down the rabbit hole, to pursue whatever catches their attention. Or, like a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book (or even a Japanese visual novel), to make choices and build different “routes” or “branches” as they go. To make this remapping or rerouting on the part of the reader easier, I offer, at the end of each entry, a few suggestions on what entries to read next, in the form of “**See also.**”

In the making of this dissertation, I wish to continue a lineage— whose roots one can be traced back as far as Michel de Montaigne’s *Essais* (1580)—initiated by heterodox (or even, *heterological*) “dictionaries” like George Bataille’s *Dictionnaire Critique* in the *Documents* (1929-30) magazine and continued by Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois in *L’Informe: mode d’emploi* (Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1996). [**Figures 1 & 2**] The latter, resulting from the homonymous exhibition that the pair curated at the Centre Georges Pompidou from May 22 to August 26, 1996, was translated to English in 1997 as *Formless: A User’s Guide* (1997). Both subvert the dictionary as a tool that objectively describes the meaning of words, mocking its aspirations to totality, replaced by a collection of short, idiosyncratic essays. Indeed, Bataille’s dictionary “is not much of one.” As Krauss and Bois put it:

It is incomplete, not because Bataille stopped editing the magazine at the end of the 1930s, but because it was never thought of as a possible totality (moreover, the articles do not appear in alphabetical order); it is written in several voices (there are three different entries under ‘Eye’ and under ‘Metamorphosis,’ for example); it does not rule out redundancy.<sup>4</sup>

In *Formless*, the book’s division clashes with its alphabetical order: because all 28 entries are organized from A to Z, the book’s four parts (“Base Materialism,” “Horizontal,”

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<sup>4</sup> Krauss and Bois, *Formless*, 16.

“Pulse,” “Entropy”) seem subject to chance or, at least, conditional to the dictionary’s deterministic order. Like Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), Krauss and Bois also write their book using four hands—indeed, as the former state, “since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd.”<sup>5</sup>

My encyclopedia, which is also “not much of one” and “crowded” with heterogeneous characters and contents, uses Bataille’s dictionaries and *Formless* as models for the dissertation, not just in structure and length, but in their engagement with what Ernest Boyer calls a “scholarship of integration” or “connectedness.”<sup>6</sup> As Boyer writes, “By integration, we mean making connections across disciplines, placing the specialties in larger context, illuminating data in a revealing way, often educating nonspecialists, too.” And continues: “In calling for a scholarship of integration, we do not suggest returning to the ‘gentleman scholar’ of earlier time, nor do we have in mind the dilettante. Rather, what we mean is serious, disciplined work that seeks to interpret, draw together, and bring new insight to bear original research.”<sup>7</sup> To Krauss and Bois, this connectedness is a way “not only to map certain trajectories, or slippages, but in some small way to ‘perform’ them.”<sup>8</sup> In my case, these “trajectories” and “slippages” draw together Western and Japanese objects and frameworks. Indeed, I was first interested in the Japanese cute, the *kawaii*, because of the way that Japanese comics, animation, and videogames reflect many topics present in Western art and theory in fresh, unexpected ways.

Another crucial feature of dictionaries and encyclopedias is their provisional nature, as language and knowledge are continually shifting and evolving. Ironically, encyclopedias like the online *Wikipedia*, that incorporate provisionality and open-endedness, are often scorned by the gatekeepers of knowledge and referencing them remains, for the most part, an academic no-no. In my encyclopedia, I deliberately insist on the interplay of “high” and “low” sources of information, using books, monographs and papers alongside *Tumblr* posts and collaborative websites like *KnowYourMeme*, *TvTropes* and fan wikis. In doing so, I seek to reflect my experience as a trained scholar and artist who is also a product of the Internet revolution, marked by the rise of user-generated content and social media. Indeed, my interest in the *kawaii*

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<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ernest L. Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (Princeton, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 19.

<sup>7</sup> Boyer, 18–19.

<sup>8</sup> Krauss and Bois, *Formless*, 18–21.

itself would not have been possible without the unprecedented circulation and accessibility of Japanese popular culture in the 2000s. After all, the millennials were the first generation to be brought up *en masse* on Japanese cartoons like *Dragon Ball*, *Sailor Moon*, *Evangelion*, or *Pokémon*, thanks to globalization and the World Wide Web. In the spirit of provisionality, an essential aspect of my encyclopedia is that it will remain, on my website, as an open-ended collection of entries, subject to growth and change. Hence, the dissertation submitted to my school administrative services is but a momentary crystallization. After the conclusion of my Ph.D., I will continue to add new entries, and existing entries may be changed or removed, in a continual editing process of which I will keep track in the Blog section of the website.

My encyclopedia also employs the archetype of the cabinet of curiosities or wonder-room as an organizing principle, insofar as, like the curiosity cabinet, mine is also a compendium of artifacts. Renaissance wonder-rooms were collections of unusual objects organized in idiosyncratic categories, according to flexible guidelines and the collector's imagination.<sup>9</sup> [Figure 3] As historian Stephanie Bowry puts it, "Far from being chaotic, cabinets attempted not only to represent, but to actively *perform* the entangled nature of objects through their selection and categorization of material, and to experiment with the limits of representation by creating new kinds of objects."<sup>10</sup> The curiosity cabinet exists at the intersection of the encyclopedic and the "weird materialities"<sup>11</sup> of culture, bringing out the entanglement of theory and practice as products of the same world-building drive. What interests me in this model is that, like the dictionary and the encyclopedia, the curiosity cabinet is an open-ended collection subject to growth and change, negating the closure expected from Ph.D. dissertations. However, compared to the dictionary and encyclopedia, which tend towards abstraction (i.e., concepts, words, events), the cabinet of curiosities is endowed with an objectual nature. I identify with it more because each of my entries originates from "deep looking" (to borrow Pauline Olivero's "deep listening") at an object, artwork, or character, and mapping its connections to other artifacts and concepts. The artifacts in my dissertation range from the "fine arts" (painting, sculpture, video art, performance, installations, etc.) to pop and mass culture (comics, animation, merchandise, fashion, pop singers) to "*objets trouvés*" ("found objects") such as computer viruses or posts on *Tumblr*. This diversity seeks to reflect

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<sup>9</sup> Stephanie Bowry, "Before Museums: The Curiosity Cabinet as Metamorphe," *Museological Review* 18 (January 1, 2014): 36–37.

<sup>10</sup> Bowry, 39.

<sup>11</sup> Jussi Parikka, "New Materialism as Media Theory: Medianatures and Dirty Matter," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1 (March 2012): 96.

the *kawaii*'s kaleidoscopic sprawling into every corner of contemporary art and culture. In a sense, in building my encyclopedia, I, too, am a collector of sorts, adding my treasures to an imaginary (virtual) room.

The cute and the curious share some common ground as aesthetic categories. On the one hand, the curious bears a suggestion of smallness, as it is often not surprising or impressive enough to be “astonishing” or “amazing,” thus hinting at a passing interest in things sufficiently tiny to fit into a cabinet. On the other, despite its strong influence in contemporary culture, cuteness remains, for the most part, a “curiosity” in aesthetic criticism, resisting the solemnity of established categories like the beautiful or sublime.<sup>12</sup> Exotic Japan has also been a cabinetizable curiosity in the eyes of the West, reduced to the decorative motif of Japonaiserie,<sup>13</sup> i.e., the porcelain, lacquerware, and screens eagerly sought after by seventeenth-century collectors and onward—although this cabinetization was not a one-way road, as the Japanese shops exhibiting curiosities from foreign countries at the height of the country's isolationist foreign policy show.<sup>14</sup> Even today, *kawaii* culture fits neatly into the discourse of “wacky orientalism,”<sup>15</sup> with lists of Japan's most disturbing prefecture mascots (*yuru kyara*) amusing the Internet alongside news of Hello Kitty dildos and insane street fashion like *gyaru* or *decora*. [Figure 4] For better or worse, these stereotypical associations of “Japaneseness” hold a poetic significance in their transgression of the boundaries of nature and artifice, reality and fantasy, encouraging the formulation of playful connections between objects, concepts, and affects.

Moreover, while the portfolio and the encyclopedia exist separately on my website, the homepage is a section in which writings and artworks are mixed in with each other: the **GRL KABINETT**. Here, each entry (of the encyclopedia and portfolio) is represented by an AI-generated anime girl created with <https://make.girls.moe>, a website which uses generative adversarial networks (GANs) to create characters; and curated from a pool of several hundreds of automatically generated girls to best fit each entry. In the spirit of *moé gijinka* (or *moé*

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<sup>12</sup> Sianne Ngai, “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde,” *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 4 (2005): 816.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Mitchell, “Japonisme, Japonaiserie and Chinoiserie,” *The Art Blog by Mark Mitchell*, February 27, 2014, <https://www.markmitchellpaintings.com/blog/japonisme-japonaiserie-and-chinoiserie/>.

<sup>14</sup> Maria Paula Diogo and Dirk van Laak, *Europeans Globalizing: Mapping, Exploiting, Exchanging*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 193.

<sup>15</sup> Wester Wagenaar, “Wacky Japan: A New Face of Orientalism,” *Asia in Focus: A Nordic Journal on Asia by Early Career Researchers*, no. 3 (2016): 46–54.

anthropomorphism), i.e., concepts or things converted into cute anime characters,<sup>16</sup> and Japanese *bishōjo* games, readers choose a girl and click the image to access her contents, then go back and choose another, and so on. Because the girls are unlabelled, accessing the entries from the GRL KABINETT also encourages visitors to engage playfully with the contents of the website. It not only intensifies the unpredictability (and memory) factor at play but transforms the reader's affective inclinations towards one girl or another in a mediating element between them and the textual materials in the encyclopedia or artworks in the portfolio.

The choice to represent the curiosities in this virtual cabinet through *moé* anthropomorphism, instead of icons retaining a mimetic relationship to their content, hints at the contradictions of cute aesthetics in contemporary culture, namely, at cuteness's permanent tension between reinforcing and subverting the existing social order, sometimes, in the same gesture. Indeed, as scholar Thomas Lamarre puts it, “unless you’ve mastered easy flight to other planets, you’ve surely run up against signs of increasing anxiety about the effects of capitalism in today’s world... Regardless of what you think about capitalism, it’s hard to escape a sense of disparity between the creativity of consumer activity today... and the contemporary crisis of capitalism.”<sup>17</sup> I find this contrast both funny and unsettling in ways that reflect, quite efficiently, the contradictions in my own writings and artworks. After all, what does it mean to thread so intimately among the products of consumer culture? Regardless of analytical depth, in the end, what will my wonder-room look like? Perhaps not so much like a cabinet of curiosities, but like the figurine-encasing displays in the rooms of an *otaku*? [Figure 5]

In embracing the relational quality of the cabinet of curiosities, I do not rely on a hard definition of cuteness. Instead, my premise is that “cuteness itself is defined in relative terms, based on the available elements in each story,”<sup>18</sup> each chapter, each entry. This indeterminism aligns with the belief that, as scholar Joshua Dale argues, cuteness is “a potential... response

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<sup>16</sup> In the animanga fandom, *moé* anthropomorphism is “a form of anthropomorphism in anime and manga where *moé* qualities are given to non-human beings, objects, concepts, or phenomena... Part of the humor of this personification comes from the personality ascribed to the character (often satirical) and the sheer arbitrariness of characterizing a variety of machines, objects, and even physical places as cute.” “Moe Anthropomorphism,” in *Wikipedia*, April 17, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Moe\\_anthropomorphism&oldid=836931650](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Moe_anthropomorphism&oldid=836931650).

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Lamarre, ‘Introduction’, in *Mechademia 6: User Enhanced*, ed. Frenchy Lunning (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), ix–x..

<sup>18</sup> Kanako Shiokawa, ‘Cute but Deadly: Women and Violence in Japanese Comics’, in *Themes and Issues in Asian Cartooning: Cute, Cheap, Mad, and Sexy*, ed. John A. Lent (Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press 1, 1999), 120.

to a definable (albeit not completely defined) set of stimuli,”<sup>19</sup> and therefore an overarching, ossified definition would cut against the methodological grain of my encyclopedia. This “case by case” approach, based on close reading and close looking, facilitates the temporal and geographical transitions arising throughout my encyclopedia, as I impose no time or space restrictions on the analyzed objects. But also, it allows me to explore cuteness in terms of content and representation through different theoretical frameworks, drawing from an array of knowledge fields including art studies, critical theory, Japanese studies, anime and manga studies, comics studies, media studies, queer studies, gender studies, feminist theory, new materialism, and so on. In the Talmudic spirit, I also assume a stance in which no object is undeserving of detailed attention, assuming that (consciously or unconsciously) its ideas and forms are meaningful, regardless of their smallness. In fact, in my experience and art practice alike, it is often from details and the more fleeting sensations that words and images are fleshed out, rather than from totalizing thought systems.

Finally, in examining the relationship between cuteness and negativity, I have made a deliberate effort to include art and pop culture that is not only Japanese but also Japanized—what scholar Casey Brienza has called Japanese pop culture “without Japan,”<sup>20</sup> meaning “products of a sometimes globalized, sometimes transnational, sometimes hyperlocal world... produced without any direct creative input at all from Japan”<sup>21</sup> but which nevertheless retain symbolic and stylistic markers associated with manga, anime, Japanese videogames, and so on. In *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture* (2011), scholars Alisa Freedman and Toby Slade endorse a similar view (with which I concur), writing that,

At the heart of any definition of Japanese popular culture are a number of contradictions. First, we believe that the use of a nation-state, such as Japan, as an organizing principle for the categorization of culture, especially contemporary popular culture, is ultimately untenable. We see Japanese popular culture as a study of information flows associated with Japan rather than anything “essentially” or “authentically” Japanese. In the case of Japan, this is sometimes less arbitrary because of the barriers of geography and language. Thus we demonstrate that the designation “Japanese” in Japanese popular

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<sup>19</sup> ‘The Appeal of the Cute Object: Desire, Domestication, and Agency’, in *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, ed. Joshua Paul Dale et al. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 35.

<sup>20</sup> Casey Brienza, “Manga without Japan?,” in *Global Manga: “Japanese” Comics without Japan?*, ed. Casey Brienza, 2015, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Brienza, 4.

culture is more an associative starting point than a marker of exclusivity or locus of origin for what are indeed a globalized set of phenomena.<sup>22</sup>

By expanding the objects of analysis to outside the boundaries of Japan's territory (a particularly enclosed one, considering its insular position), I wish to emphasize that these essays are meant to reach a broader crowd beyond the niche of animanga fans and fellow weeaboos ("wapanese" or "wannabe Japanese," obsessive Western fans of anime and manga). That is to say, the phenomenon of Japanization in the twenty-first century—and, increasingly, also of Koreanization, with the worldwide success of K-pop and K-drama—reflects the broader *zeitgeist* of postmodernity in art and beyond. In this sense, Yoda Tomiko has argued that the handle "J-" often accompanying the products of Japanese pop culture (e.g., J-pop) is useful precisely because of its degree of separableness from the national. As a part-object, "J-" embodies the contractions and contradictions of "Japan" (or any country, really) in globalized capitalism. As she puts it, "Rather than assuming that the Japanese popular culture today ultimately refers to some form of larger national frame, we may understand the prefix *J-* as inscribing the subculturation of the national."<sup>23</sup> As such, the phenomenon of Japanization transcends my integration into a cultural group with the same interest in manga, anime, videogames, and so on. Instead, in its subculturized form, "Japan without Japan" becomes a kind of topographical McGuffin, i.e., a device that sets the "plot" (in this case, one's imagination and desires) in motion, indexing the aporia of in-betweenness and impossibility, surplus and lack.

Presently, Japanese popular culture is an unavoidable "soft power," which seeps into our everyday lives, and whose influence makes itself more and more visible in non-Japanese art schools and contemporary art. For instance, as the encyclopedia entry and paper "Gaijin Mangaka" addresses, in the 2020s, the realm of experimental graphic narratives, called "art comics," has experienced a wave of non-Japanese authors openly influenced by manga. Likewise, references to Japanese popular culture, particularly comics and animation, have become a not uncommon occurrence in Western contemporary art, especially in the work of artists currently in their twenties and thirties. Sometimes, these can cause educators and students to clash and struggle, either to understand and accommodate these trends within their

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<sup>22</sup> Alisa Freedman and Toby Slade, 'Introducing Japanese Culture: Serious Approaches to Playful Delights', in *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture*, ed. Alisa Freedman and Toby Slade (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), 347.

<sup>23</sup> Tomiko Yoda, "A Roadmap to Millennial Japan," in *Japan After Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990s to the Present*, ed. Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2006), 46.

viewpoints (in the former's case) or to present and navigate their preferences within a contemporary art world context (in the latter's). I hope that my encyclopedia contributes, at some level, to a better understanding that the *kawaii*, anime, and manga operate beyond the boundaries of subcultures or "Japan" as a closed cultural and geopolitical unit and can be productively used to engage with all kinds of art and aesthetic criticism, including in educational contexts.

Likewise, I would like this thesis to be read not as a prescriptive or conclusive text on specific topics (the *kawaii* and animanga culture), but as a constellation of references to be appropriated by each reader, who is free to build their navigating chart for the strange, problematic, complicated, complex, and chaotic worlds unfolding from Japanese pop culture. More than "chapters," each entry in the encyclopedia embodies a process, one which culminates in their inclusion in the final Ph.D. dissertation, but to some extent exists in parallel or independently from it. My "deep looking" at many of the artifacts is a journey in and of itself, with its history shaped over years of musings, contaminations, detours, and chance encounters. Their influence is not limited to these pages; it leaks into my life and my art practice. As such, in my encyclopedia, readers may unlock many of the recurring motifs that drive my artistic practice, forming a conceptual reservoir to be evoked when looking at and reading my artworks.

### **Cute Studies and negativity**

As an emerging academic field, Cute Studies or Cuteness Studies encompasses interdisciplinary scholarship from the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities.<sup>24</sup> The term was coined by scholar Joshua Dale, who has promoted its development and dissemination by launching the online resource Cute Studies Bibliography, co-editing *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, and editing the "Cute Studies" special edition of the *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, both in 2016. To date, other cute-centric academic publications include an issue on Internet cute by the *M/C Journal* (2014) and *The Retro-Futurism of Cuteness* (2017), edited by Jen Boyle and Wan-Chuan Kao. The study of cute aesthetics in Western scholarship was pioneered in the 1990s and 2000s by cultural theorists such as Daniel Harris (*Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism*, released in 2000) and Sianne Ngai (starting with "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde" in 2005),

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<sup>24</sup> Joshua Paul Dale, "Cute Studies: An Emerging Field," *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* 2, no. 1 (April 1, 2016): 5-13.



along with Sharon Kinsella, a sociologist specializing in the *kawaii*, and Garry Cross, who wrote the landmark history of American cute culture *The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children's Culture*, in 2004. Ngai's scholarship of cuteness culminated in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Cute, Zany, Interesting* (2012), [Figure 6] in which she argues that cuteness reveals "the surprisingly wide specter of feelings, ranging from tenderness to aggression, that we harbor toward ostensibly subordinate and unthreatening commodities."<sup>25</sup>

Ngai's integration of cuteness within her broader project of examining the "politically ambiguous work of... emotions"<sup>26</sup> contributed to establishing cute aesthetics as a valid topic of research. Ngai's "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde" (2005), her earliest article on cuteness later adapted into a chapter in *Our Aesthetic Categories*, focuses on Japanese contemporary artists like Murakami Takashi and Nara Yoshitomo as hallmarks of cuteness's dark side. In turn, Sharon Kinsella has published several essential books and articles on Japanese cuteness and girls' culture, including the 1995 article "Cuties in Japan"—which remains a reference in many texts on *kawaii* aesthetics—along with *Adult Manga: Culture and power in contemporary Japanese society* (2000), *Female Revolt in Male Cultural Imagination in Contemporary Japan* (2007), and *Schoolgirls, Money and Rebellion in Japan* (2013). Additionally, in 2010, anthropologist Marilyn Ivy penned "The Art of Cute Little Things: Nara Yoshitomo's Parapolitics," published in the fifth volume of the animanga-centric academic journal *Mechademia*, a key paper examining the political significance of Japanese artist Nara Yoshitomo in light of *kawaii* aesthetics. Since then, during the span of the 2010s, there has been a general increase in papers focusing on Japanese cuteness, hailing from various academic fields.

In the second half of the 2020s, a notable contribution to the field of Cute Studies was the edited volume *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, published by Routledge in 2016, edited by Dale, Joyce Goggin, Julia Leyda, Anthony McIntyre, and Diane Negra. [Figure 7] This collection of essays offers a comprehensive view on the "explosion of cute commodities, characters, foods, fashions, and fandoms, leading to an inevitable expansion and dispersal of meanings and connotations"<sup>27</sup> in the twenty-first century. The authors put forth an

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<sup>25</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (London; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>26</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>27</sup> Joshua Paul Dale et al., eds., *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 2.

understanding of cute affects, cultures, and aesthetics as “a repertoire that is made use of by a variety of constituencies and for a variety of purposes.”<sup>28</sup> The book breaks down the appeal of cute aesthetics in several elements: cuteness, coping, labour; cute consumption, nostalgia, and adulthood; cute communities and shifting gender configurations; cute compassion and communication; cute encounters: anthropomorphism and animals; spreadable cuteness: interspecies affect; political cuteness; cuteness and/as manipulation.<sup>29</sup> Dale, in particular, argues that cuteness is fundamentally “aimed at disarming aggression and promoting sociality,”<sup>30</sup> and that “antagonistic qualities such as violence, aggression, and sadism are not intrinsic to the concept of cuteness” but “are frequently *attached* to cute objects in the aesthetic realm.”<sup>31</sup> Although, for instance, Ngai’s analysis of the aggressive impulses aroused by the cute object is firmly rooted in psychoanalytic theory and ethnographic observation—and, therefore, contrary to what Dale’s argument may suggest, not a detached fabrication of the artistic sphere—Dale’s case nevertheless cautions us against the hasty association of cuteness with “darkness.”

Before advancing, one may raise the question: what is cuteness? Cuteness can be understood on two different, if necessarily interconnected, levels. On the one hand, from a psychophysiological point of view, cuteness is an “affective response—a feeling one may refer to as the ‘Aww’ factor”<sup>32</sup> serving as an evolutionarily advantageous trait. This “natural” cuteness, understood as a primal, protective instinct towards neonates, is also not exclusive to humans, intertwining with the broader evolution of animals on Earth. In the 1940s, Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz was the first to describe what he called *kinderschema*, or “baby schema,” a set of features and behaviors found in animals, including humans, indexing youthfulness and vulnerability, that trigger our nurturing instinct. **[Figure 8]** Lorenz’s *kinderschema* included big eyes positioned low in large heads with tall foreheads, a small mouth and nose, round ears, small chin, soft limbs and body, and a waddling gait. The Aww-factor can impact biological capacities; for instance, a recent study suggests that the millennial-long coevolution of dogs and humans has resulted in the latter developing a forehead muscle to produce the proverbial puppy dog eyes, i.e., a sad, imploring, juvenile expression.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Dale et al., 2.

<sup>29</sup> Dale et al., *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*.

<sup>30</sup> Dale, “The Appeal of the Cute Object: Desire, Domestication, and Agency,” 37.

<sup>31</sup> Dale, 36.

<sup>32</sup> Dale, “Cute Studies,” 5.

<sup>33</sup> Ian Sample, “How Canines Capture Your Heart: Scientists Explain Puppy Dog Eyes,” *The Guardian*, June 17, 2019, sec. Science, paras. 2-4,

Nevertheless, many scientists today argue that “instead of stemming solely from helplessness and dependence, cuteness is... intimately linked to companionship, cooperation, play, and emotional reactivity,”<sup>34</sup> suggesting it plays a role in motivating prosocial behavior, empathy, and disarming aggression.<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, cuteness exists as a socio-cultural concept and, by extension, as an aesthetic category. This “second nature” of cuteness is relatively recent in human history, relating to the word’s emergence at the dawn of the twentieth century—although its roots can be traced back further, for instance, to Rococo’s fascination with the small and playful against Baroque’s grandeur, encapsulated in works such as Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s *L’Escarpolette*, [Figure 9] or some Edo period paintings and prints in Japan.<sup>36</sup> According to historian Gary Cross,

Until the twentieth century, “cute” was merely a shortened form of “acute,” signifying “sharp, quick witted” and shrewd in an “underhanded manner.” In American slang of 1834, it came also to mean “attractive, pretty, charming” but was applied only to things. The original meaning of the “cute” person was interchangeable with “cunning,” a corruption of “can,” meaning clever or crafty. Significantly, both words shifted meaning by the 1900s (though only briefly for cunning), from the manipulative and devious adult to the lively charm of the willful child, suggesting anew tolerance for the headstrong, even manipulative youngster. Today, the little girl who bats her eyes to win favor or the little boy who gives his mother a long look of desire at the candy counter is called “cute.”<sup>37</sup>

Thus, as Sianne Ngai suggests, the word “*cute* exemplifies a situation in which making a word smaller, more compact, or more cute results in an uncanny reversal, changing its meaning into its exact opposite.”<sup>38</sup> The cute indexes various meanings, including that which is attractive by means of smallness prettiness, or quaintness. In this sense, cuteness evokes the “toy-like or pet-like,”<sup>39</sup> tameness aligned with the limiting of the physical, formal, and philosophical scope of objects. For instance, the small is that whose size is less than average, and this “less than” or “lack” evokes another set of features that Ngai lists as “compactness,

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<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2019/jun/17/how-dogs-capture-your-heart-evolution-puppy-dog-eyes>.

<sup>34</sup> Dale, “The Appeal of the Cute Object: Desire, Domestication, and Agency,” 50–51.

<sup>35</sup> Dale, 46–51.

<sup>36</sup> Dale et al., *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, 2.

<sup>37</sup> Gary Cross, *The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children’s Culture* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 43.

<sup>38</sup> Ngai, “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde,” 827.

<sup>39</sup> Legge, “When Awe Turns to Awww... Jeff Koon’s Balloon Dog and the Cute Sublime,” 142.

formal simplicity, softness or pliancy.”<sup>40</sup> [Figure 10] In fact, the *kinderschema* are, in and of themselves, a kind of “deformity” or “distortion” in relation to the “standard,” i.e., the adult, connoting immaturity, innocence, and dependence. On the other hand, the pretty is a “desintensification” or domestication of the beautiful, something which is appealing in a delicate and graceful way but removed from the solemnity of beauty as a central category in classical art—one could argue that the pretty is a cutification of the beautiful. In turn, the quaint “declaws” strangeness into that which is quirky, i.e., unusual or idiosyncratic in non-threatening, often adorable, sometimes, old-fashioned, ways.

Moreover, and albeit in an entirely different context (referring to sound), Brandon LaBelle’s account of weakness as, potentially, a euphoric and erotic (in the sense of a life-inducing impulse) condition, which “reveals us at our most vulnerable, a body without and in need,”<sup>41</sup> echoes Ngai’s definition of cuteness as “an aestheticization of powerlessness,”<sup>42</sup> i.e., as the depiction of “helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency”<sup>43</sup> as artistically or sensually pleasing, in ways that evoke our tender love and care. In this light, one can think of the cute as an intersection where the life instinct to nurture, protect, and love meets the minor, insignificant body and object. This structural disenfranchisement applies to the category of cuteness itself in relation to the Western art canon, as “a minor aesthetic concept that is fundamentally about minoriness.”<sup>44</sup>

Cross also suggests that cuteness can “weaponize” these features as charm contrived with a view to desired ends. In this case, the cute becomes entangled with sentimentality and the self-indulgent appeal to tenderness and nostalgia. The iconic *Crying Boys* painting series by Italian painter Giovanni Bragolin, an icon of kitsch mass-market art, epitomizes this relationship, but it could also refer to Margaret Keane’s paintings of big-eyed women and children, or the kitty and puppy calendars hanging in homes all over the world. [Figure 11a, b] These associations have put cute aesthetics squarely on the “dumb” side of what art and literary critic Andreas Huyssen famously called “the Great Divide”<sup>45</sup> between “high art” and lowly mass culture, a contested conceptual trope emerging in nineteenth-century Europe that

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<sup>40</sup> Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 2012, 64.

<sup>41</sup> Brandon LaBelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2018), 151.

<sup>42</sup> Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 2012, 64.

<sup>43</sup> Ngai, 65.

<sup>44</sup> Ngai, “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde,” 816.

<sup>45</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), viii.

has nevertheless proved to be amazingly resilient throughout the twentieth century.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Cross argues that cuteness is intimately related to the birth of consumer culture, as it became “a selling point (especially when associated with the child in ads) and an occasion for impulse spending”<sup>47</sup> in emerging child-oriented festivities like Christmas, Halloween, and birthday parties. These were the beginnings of the cute as a commodity form, which over the twentieth and twenty-first century grew to enormous proportions, to the point that it has been called a “cuteness-industrial complex.”<sup>48</sup> The idea that, as argued by Ngai, cuteness has become one of “capitalism’s most binding processes,”<sup>49</sup> and therefore is no longer “merely” an aesthetic but an authoritative economic interest and value system, allied with the consumer goods sector, is essential throughout my dissertation, especially in regards to the development of the *kawaii* in Japanese society. It is at the core of all sorts of negativity and ambiguities spiraling from the cute commodity.

Cuteness is also a fruit of the modern mind, in particular, of modern developmental psychology, with its roots in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (namely, *Émile, ou De l'éducation*, 1762) but emerging in the work of late-nineteenth-century psychologists, including Sigmund Freud. The fact that “children were no longer imagined as miniature adults or as naturally virtuous creatures”<sup>50</sup> resulted in a sociocultural shift in the public perceptions on childhood, replacing the passive Victorian child with mischievous rascal boys or cheeky coquette girls.<sup>51</sup> This shift meant that many emotions and behaviors which would be considered antisocial in adults—selfishness, jealousy, greed, manipulation, imitativeness, etc.—were not only tolerated but encouraged in the new “cute” kid.<sup>52</sup> [Figure 12] Cross illustrates this uncanny, dual constructive and destructive nature of cuteness with examples of late-nineteenth-century American trade cards, in which children using a sewing machine to stitch together the tails of cats and dogs, or getting hit in the face with a baseball ball,<sup>53</sup> are shown to be cute.

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<sup>46</sup> Andreas Huyssen, “High/Low in an Expanded Field,” *Modernism/Modernity* 9, no. 3 (September 1, 2002): 367.

<sup>47</sup> Cross, *The Cute and the Cool*, 44.

<sup>48</sup> David Ehrlich, “From Kewpies to Minions: A Brief History of Pop Culture Cuteness,” *Rolling Stone*, July 21, 2015, para. 2, <http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/from-kewpies-to-minions-a-brief-history-of-pop-culture-cuteness-20150721>.

<sup>49</sup> Sianne Ngai, “Our Aesthetic Categories,” *PMLA* 125, no. 4 (October 1, 2010): 948.

<sup>50</sup> Ngai, 817.

<sup>51</sup> Cross, *The Cute and the Cool*.

<sup>52</sup> Cross, 43.

<sup>53</sup> Cross, 47–48.

But one could just as easily fetch the example of literary heroines such as Charles Dickens's Dora Spewlow in *David Copperfield* (1850). David Copperfield's first wife, Dora, is described as "pretty," "little" ("little voice," "little laugh," "little ways"), "rather diminutive altogether," and "childish." She baby talks and throws tantrums, and is always accompanied by her spunky lapdog, Jip. **[Figure 13]** Although commonly understood as an "empty-headed child,"<sup>54</sup> Dora is self-aware and even tells David that he should think of her as his "child-wife" (e.g., "When you are going to be angry with me, say to yourself, 'it's only my child-wife!' When I am very disappointing, say, 'I knew, a long time ago, that she would make but a child-wife!'"). By acting childish and vulnerable, Dora—much like the practitioners of Japanese fashion and subcultures related to the *kawaii*—evades the responsibilities of married life and enfolds David in "a playful, unserious anarchic moment"<sup>55</sup> which is ultimately unsustainable in family literature (Dora, therefore, dies shortly into their marriage). Characters like Dora portray a budding admiration for the "slightly manipulative and self-centered girl"<sup>56</sup> in nineteenth-century urban society. Likewise, Little Nemo, Felix the Cat, Krazy Kat, Mickey Mouse, or Betty Boop, embody the moral and aesthetical ambiguity, even disruptiveness, of cuteness in early comics and cartoons, initially targeted not at children but an adult audience, imbued with a modern sensibility. In Dale's words, "when Mickey Mouse debuted in the animated cartoon *Steamboat Willie* (1928) he was mischievous to the point of cruelty."<sup>57</sup> **[Video 1]**

Disconnected from the biodeterminism of Konrad Lorenz's *kinderschema*, the "minority" of cuteness performs in ways which are fundamentally contingent and relational. This is not to say that everything is (or can be) cute—as I have discussed above, cuteness evokes a word cloud or arena in which "diminutive," "negative," or "formless" attributes combine with benign qualities: small, weak, helpless, pitiful, dumb, manipulative, young, pretty, quaint, playful, tame, adorable, and so on. But in the artistic and pop-cultural realm, cuteness often reflects the fact that "social and subcultural groups have their own (rather specific) criteria for what sorts of manners and attitudes constitute 'cute.'"<sup>58</sup> For instance, the character of Garrus from the video game series *Mass Effect*, who is an anthropomorphic alien with insectoid features, is a favorite among the female gamer community for his cute

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<sup>54</sup> Margaret Drabble, ed., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 261.

<sup>55</sup> Cross, *The Cute and the Cool*, 44.

<sup>56</sup> Cross, 51.

<sup>57</sup> Dale, "Cute Studies," 6.

<sup>58</sup> Shiokawa, "Cute but Deadly: Women and Violence in Japanese Comics," 120.

awkwardness and vulnerability.<sup>59</sup> [Figure 14] Likewise, while relying on an aesthetics of precarity and imperfection which is far from being “conventionally” cute (attractive, pretty, etc.), many artworks produced within the trend of provisional painting might be considered “cute” in defying the aesthetic grandeur traditionally expected from artworks. Even the ugly can be cute, to some extent: the World’s Ugliest Dog Contest is an example of such concoction of cuteness and ugliness, or the blobfish, voted the world’s ugliest animal in 2013 by the Ugly Animal Preservation Society,<sup>60</sup> [Figure 15] or even the cutification of disability in Internet celebrity cats like the late Grumpy Cat or Lil Bub.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, according to scholar Shiokawa Kanako, the non-descriptiveness of cuteness is central to cuteness’s contemporary acceptance.<sup>62</sup> In many respects, the *kawaii*, i.e., the Japanese cute, is particularly elastic, and a fertile ground for investigating the phenomeno-poetics of cuteness and negativity—what Joshua Dale calls the “dark side of cute.” As Dale puts it,

The rapid expansion of *kawaii* since the 1970s has resulted in repeated iterations and cycles that I argue make *kawaii* more complex and varied than other aesthetics of cuteness... This decade-long expansion has seen many antagonistic elements attached to *kawaii*, resulting in substantial trends in Japan for ugly-cute, grotesque-cute, and disgusting-cute, to name a few.<sup>63</sup>

In art and popular culture, cuteness is increasingly entangled in complex relationships with a variety of other aesthetic categories and concepts. For instance, Thorsten Botz-Bornstein and other scholars have noted that *kawaii* mascots often incorporate an aroma of coolness, associated with strength and independence (supposedly, in contradiction to cuteness’s weakness and dependence), fashioning a sort of “cool-*kawaii*” image common in global brands like Hello Kitty, Pokémon, or Nintendo and Sega’s videogame characters like Mario or Sonic.<sup>64</sup> Likewise, dress-up dolls like Barbie or the Japanese Licca-chan have become icons of glam-cute, in which cuteness merges with the elegant world of fashion and “bling.” Equally

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<sup>59</sup> Mark Serrels, “Why Women Want To Have Sex With Garrus,” *Kotaku*, March 27, 2017, <http://kotaku.com/why-women-want-to-have-sex-with-garrus-1793662351>.

<sup>60</sup> Colin Schultz, “In Defense of the Blobfish: Why the ‘World’s Ugliest Animal’ Isn’t as Ugly as You Think It Is,” *Smithsonian*, September 13, 2013, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/in-defense-of-the-blobfish-why-the-worlds-ugliest-animal-isnt-as-ugly-as-you-think-it-is-6676336/>.

<sup>61</sup> Elaine M. Laforteza, “Cute-Ifying Disability: Lil Bub, the Celebrity Cat,” *M/C Journal* 17, no. 2 (February 18, 2014), <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/784>.

<sup>62</sup> Shiokawa, “Cute but Deadly: Women and Violence in Japanese Comics,” 121.

<sup>63</sup> Dale, “The Appeal of the Cute Object: Desire, Domestication, and Agency,” 39.

<sup>64</sup> Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *The Cool-Kawaii: Afro-Japanese Aesthetics and New World Modernity* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010); Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, “Kawaii, Kenosis, Verwindung: A Reading of Kawaii through Vattimo’s Philosophy of ‘Weak Thought,’” *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* 2, no. 1 (April 1, 2016): 111–23.

important, and perhaps more familiar to Western readers (to the point that they are often erroneously equated with each other), is cuteness's intersection with the kitsch, "a highly visual aesthetics of saturation, artifice and melancholia."<sup>65</sup> Indeed, the kitsch often *employs* cuteness to heighten its sentimental garishness, e.g., in the work of painters Giovanni Bragolin and Margaret Keane, mentioned before. While both the kitsch and the cute are the product of modern consumer culture, the latter exists beyond the sphere of cultural aesthetics, as it is rooted in "natural" instincts and responses (the Aww-factor). Therefore, cuteness is not inherently in "poor taste," but becomes so when employed in kitsch contexts—explaining why identical cute characters like Dick Bruna's Miffy, inspired by the author's De Stijl sensibility, and Sanrio's "pretty pink princess" Hello Kitty, are miles away in terms of cultural and artistic legitimacy. As I will discuss shortly, sometimes the saturation of cuteness-kitsch may be such that it verges on the grotesque, as in the case of American businesswoman Lisa Frank's colorful illustrations.

In this dissertation, I am particularly interested in the entanglement of the cute with a plethora of aesthetics that share a "trajectory towards negation"<sup>66</sup> and alterity, such as the abject, the formless, the uncanny, the eerie, the weird, the obscene, the grotesque, or the disgusting. These have their own history and range, but their negativity aligns them more than separates them, prompting many overlaps. Abjection is a crucial concept in art theory, and one that underlines and manifests in many (if not all) of the encyclopedia entries and papers in this dissertation—albeit in radically different ways, from the eruption of cuteness in the dark web to the internalized foreignness of global manga, or the nonhumanity (the *otherness*) of cute characters and people. The word "abjection" comes from the Latin *abicio*, meaning "throw or hurl down or away, cast or push away or aside," "give up, abandon; expose; discard," or "humble, degrade, reduce, lower, cast down."<sup>67</sup> At its most fundamental, the abject signals "the otherness in us,"<sup>68</sup> permeating both our mental processes and the social-cultural order.<sup>69</sup> While Julia Kristeva's 1980 *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai Sur l'Abjection* (in English, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*) remains the definitive theory of abjection, there have been

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<sup>65</sup> Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience* (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 19.

<sup>66</sup> Rina Arya, *Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 125.

<sup>67</sup> "Abicio," in *Wiktionary*, accessed October 4, 2017, <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/abicio#Latin>.

<sup>68</sup> Arya, *Abjection and Representation*, 190.

<sup>69</sup> Arya, 2.



many significant contributions to its study, such as Hal Foster's essay "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," published in the art journal *October* in 1996.

Bodily waste like urine, feces, and other "excretions" (in the sense of substances excreted from our bodies) like blood, semen, or breast milk, are prototypically abject. But the concept also refers to marginalized persons or groups that deviate from the norms of a society at a given moment in space or time, based on their appearance (gender, age, race, ethnicity, disabilities) or living standards (sexual orientation, class, religion, legal status). The duality creates a tension between the "abject" as a noun and "to abject" as a verb. According to scholar Rina Arya, author of *Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature*, "While the operation (of abjection) seeks to stabilize, the condition (of the abject) is inherently disruptive, meaning that there is a constant tension of drives." And she continues: "The concept is both constructive (in the formation of identities and relationship to the world) and destructive (in what it does to the subject)."<sup>70</sup> The abject is therefore disruptive and unassimilable, threatening the stability of individual, social, and moral boundaries, as it undoes the distinction between the Self and Other.

Moreover, "the operation of abject-ing involves rituals of purity that bring about social stability,"<sup>71</sup> which apply not just to bodies or social groups but also art. For instance, "high culture" gatekeeps artistic purity by abjecting the "others" of taste and originality, like the kitsch or the plagiarized. Ngai argues that cuteness is abject in relation to the avant-garde, representing its greatest fear: powerlessness, "its smallness (of audience as well as membership), incompleteness (the gap between stated intentions and actual effects), and vulnerability (to institutional ossification)."<sup>72</sup> Still, according to her, the real power of both the cute object and of art itself ultimately resides in its powerlessness. In other words, the insistence on its radical uselessness is the *sine qua non* condition for the emergence of the avant-garde.

The extent to which the formless and the abject intersect has been the subject of debate. In 1994, the arts journal *October* published "The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the 'Informe' and the 'Abject'" by Hal Foster, Benjamin Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Denis Hollier, and Helen Molesworth,<sup>73</sup> a roundtable on the formless and the abject, discussing their differences and similarities. Krauss points out how the abject is often

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<sup>70</sup> Arya, 3–4.

<sup>71</sup> Arya, 3–4.

<sup>72</sup> "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," 838.

<sup>73</sup> Hal Foster et al., "The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the 'Informe' and the Abject," *October* 67 (1994): 3–21.

reified into “a thematics of essences and substances,”<sup>74</sup> while the formless resists reification and therefore cannot be signified. Arguably, this interpretation of abjection is reductionistic; for Kristeva, the abject draws us “toward the place where meaning collapses,”<sup>75</sup> which aligns with Bataille’s declaration that “What it [the *informe*] designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm.”<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, one may trace a distinction of emphasis between the abject and the formless; the former, drawing from Kristeva’s reading of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, emphasizes the shapeless in-betweenness of I and not-I, while the latter emphasizes the no-thing as itself kind of form(lessness), the “matter at the thresholds of its annihilation and disappearance”<sup>77</sup> inferred through its effects on outside observers. While the ties of cuteness to the formless are less obvious, I suggest it can be traced, for instance, in the “gleams and reflections”<sup>78</sup> of the big eyes of Japanese girls’ comics, whose wet and sparkly masses, enclosed by long lashes akin to a Bataillean spider, defunctionalize the eye as an organ of the visual system. [Figure 17]

There is a cluster of concepts that orbit the abject (or the other way around), namely, the *unheimlich*, as immortalized in Freud’s homonymous 1919 essay. Meaning “unhomely” in German, the *unheimlich* indexes an intimate alienation, which “can take the form of something familiar unexpectedly arising in a strange and unfamiliar context, or something strange and unfamiliar unexpectedly arising in a familiar context.”<sup>79</sup> The *unheimlich* connects with Lacan’s “extimacy” (*extimité*), i.e., “intimate exteriority,”<sup>80</sup> which is not contrary to intimacy but instead posits that “that the intimate is Other—like a foreign body, a parasite.”<sup>81</sup> In the posthumous *The Weird and the Eerie* (2017), Mark Fisher argues that, because “Freud’s *unheimlich* is about the strange within the familiar, the strangely familiar, the familiar as strange,”<sup>82</sup> it is unreconcilable with related concepts, such as the weird and the eerie, that rely

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<sup>74</sup> Krauss and Bois, *Formless*, 245.

<sup>75</sup> *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

<sup>76</sup> *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 31.

<sup>77</sup> Fred Botting, “Dark Materialism,” *Backdoor Broadcasting Company*, 2011, para. 1, <http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2011/01/dark-materialism/>.

<sup>78</sup> Krauss and Bois, *Formless*, 244.

<sup>79</sup> Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>80</sup> Luke Thurston, “Ineluctable Nodalities: On the Borromean Knot,” in *Key Concepts of Lacanian Theory*, ed. Dany Nobus (New York: Other Press, 1998).

<sup>81</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, “Extimité,” in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society*, ed. Mark Bracher (New York: NYU Press, 1997), 76.

<sup>82</sup> *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater, 2017), 10.

on that which “does not belong.”<sup>83</sup> Or, in the case of the eerie, that catches the human “in the rhythms, pulsions and patternings of non-human forces,”<sup>84</sup> an idea whose possible intersection with the cute I explore in the encyclopedia entry “Paradog.” [Figure 17]

The concept of *unheimlich* was famously used by Japanese robotics professor Mori Masahiro to describe the uncanny valley (*bukimi no tani*), a hypostasized “shift from empathy to revulsion” as a humanlike robot “approached, but failed to attain, a lifelike appearance.”<sup>85</sup> As Dale points out, domestication is a crucial element in cuteness, and therefore the cute is always, in one way or another, about the tame and familiar, even when artists negate or subvert these qualities to an “unhomely” effect. The realization that such unsettling feelings do not necessarily detract from the “Aww-factor” further complexifies the interplay of the cute and the uncanny. For instance, the Japanese therapeutic baby seal robot Paro, designed to calm patients and treat depression at hospitals and nursing homes,<sup>86</sup> is quintessentially cute but also carries unsettling qualities—both in the mechanical-automaticness of its movements and utterances, and the ethical implications of replacing “real” human or animal love with a robotic “illusion of a relationship.”<sup>87</sup> [Video 2]

Other concepts encapsulating a sense of wrongness, such as the disgusting, the obscene, or the grotesque, have been given various degrees of importance either individually, or within the context of abjection. In art and literature, the grotesque has come to be associated with the carnivalesque and the macabre, the excessive, and the metamorphosis. In Japan, the interwar art movement *ero guro nansensu* (sometimes shortened to *ero-guro*) that celebrated decadence, violence, parody, and perversion, has been highly influential throughout the twentieth century, including in manga and anime.<sup>88</sup> Many subtypes of alternative *kawaii* culture, like *guro-kawaii* (“grotesque-cute”), *kimo-kawaii* (“gross-cute”), *busu-kawaii* (“ugly-cute”), *yami-kawaii* (“sick-cute”), *itami-kawaii* (“pain-cute”), or the more recent *mukikawa*—a combination of *mukimuki* (“buff”) and *kawaii* headed by muscled idols like Saiki Reika<sup>89</sup> and Japan-based

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<sup>83</sup> Fisher, 10.

<sup>84</sup> Fisher, 11.

<sup>85</sup> M. Mori, K. F. MacDorman, and N. Kageki, “The Uncanny Valley [From the Field],” *IEEE Robotics Automation Magazine* 19, no. 2 (June 2012): “Editor’s Note.”

<sup>86</sup> “PARO Therapeutic Robot,” accessed April 24, 2019, <http://www.parorobots.com/>.

<sup>87</sup> Adam Piore, “Will Your Next Best Friend Be A Robot?,” *Popular Science*, November 18, 2014, para. 39, <https://www.popsci.com/article/technology/will-your-next-best-friend-be-robot>.

<sup>88</sup> Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 1–9.

<sup>89</sup> Casey Baseel, “Japan’s Unbelievably Buff Muscle Idol Shares Workout Videos, Performs Wicked Clothesline,” *SoraNews24*, May 9, 2019, para. 8, <https://soraneews24.com/2019/05/10/japans->

Australian singer Ladybeard [**Figure 18a, b**—draw from this tradition, combining cute aesthetics with violent, depressing, burlesque, or otherwise contradictory imagery.<sup>90</sup> There is, however, another way in which cuteness can become grotesque. The word “grotesque,” from the Italian “*grotto*” (cave), originated in the fifteenth century when excavations of Emperor Nero’s ancient Roman palace Domus Aurea revealed bizarre paintings fusing human, animal, vegetable, and mineral.<sup>91</sup> Cute aesthetics often enables that kind of grotesquery. Take, for instance, Lisa Frank’s colorful illustrations of puppies, unicorns, dolphins, stars, hearts, rainbows, patterns, and whatnot. In these pictures, rather than appearing to be “proper” characters, all these clichéd, ossified formations seem to be molded out of the same nondescript, rainbowy substance, regardless of their being animals or objects, background or foreground, filling the entire surface in innervating visual amalgamations. [**Figure 19**] The cute yet outlandish allure of her figures and environments may explain why, although her company mostly produces stationery and stickers, Frank was selected to represent the United States at the forthcoming 2021 Venice Biennale.<sup>92</sup>

In turn, the transgression of social prohibitions and taboo links more closely to the obscene. The obscene evokes moral outrage and offense, in the form of objectionable practices, sexual (like incest, pedophilia, and necrophilia) or otherwise (war, poverty, racism, murder, and so on).<sup>93</sup> According to scholar Kerstin Mey, author of *Art and obscenity* (2007), the “‘obscene’ has been linked to the Greek term *ob skene* (‘off stage’), as violent acts in Greek theatre were committed away from the eyes of the audience: offstage, behind the scenes,” and it has come “to describe expressions that deviate from prevalent norms especially of ‘sexual

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unbelievable-buff-muscle-idol-shares-workout-videos-performs-wicked-clothesline%e3%80%90videos%e3%80%91/.

<sup>90</sup> Brian Ashcraft, “This Isn’t Kawaii. It’s Disturbing.,” *Kotaku*, August 23, 2012, <http://kotaku.com/5937180/this-isnt-kawaii-its-disturbing>; Patrick St. Michel, “The Rise of Japan’s Creepy-Cute Craze,” *The Atlantic*, April 14, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/04/the-rise-of-japans-creepy-cute-craze/360479/>; Preston Phro, “Itami-Kawaii: Cute Gets Depressing, Inspires Japanese Twitter Users,” *SoraNews24*, February 24, 2015, <https://soranews24.com/2015/02/24/itami-kawaii-cute-gets-depressing-inspires-japanese-twitter-users/>; Omri Wallach, “Yamikawaii — Japan’s Darker and Cuter Version of Emo,” *Medium*, March 6, 2017, <https://medium.com/@omriwallach/yamikawaii-japans-darker-and-cuter-version-of-emo-d5c7a63af1f4>.

<sup>91</sup> John R. Clark, *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and Its Traditions* (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 18.

<sup>92</sup> Hrag Vartanian, ‘A Startling Choice, Lisa Frank Is Selected for the US Pavilion at the 2021 Venice Biennale’, *Hyperallergic*, 1 April 2019, para. 1, <https://hyperallergic.com/492709/lisa-frank-2021-venice-biennale/>.

<sup>93</sup> Kerstin Mey, *Art and Obscenity* (London; New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 5–6.

morality.”<sup>94</sup> It is important to note that the obscene is, among all these concepts, the one with a legal existence in the form of “obscenity laws that emerged during the mid-nineteenth century across Europe, followed by the USA towards the end of that century.”<sup>95</sup> Obscenity laws regulate and suppress materials such as images or speech that violate community standards of taste and decency. Their existence remains controversial, tackling with the limits of free speech, and bringing forth the question of who gatekeeps the “redeeming” value of obscene art.<sup>96</sup> Many artworks have been subjected to notorious obscenity trials, like William Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* in the 1960s, or Robert Mapplethorpe’s exhibition *The Perfect Moment* in 1990. The most notorious intersection of cuteness and the obscene are the many forms of “erotic cute” in Japan, ranging from *erocawa* (or *ero-kawaii*) women’s fashion<sup>97</sup> to *lolicon* (“Lolita complex”) comics. [Figures 20 & 21] Possession of this kind of drawn erotica or pornography, which depicts minors in animanga style, has originated several court cases and convictions in countries such as the United States and Canada. It has also resulted in the banning of anime series like *A Kite* (1998) in Norway, *Puni Puni Poemy* (a 2001 spin-off of the popular *Excel Saga*) in New Zealand, or *Fate/kaleid liner Prisma Illya* (2013) in Russia.

Finally, disgust is primarily an emotional response to aversive stimuli that “helps to ensure the safety of the organism by inhibiting contact with what is foul, toxic, and thereby.”<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, as Carolyn Korsmeyer and Barry Smith argue in their introduction to philosopher Aurel Kolnai’s 1927 *On Disgust (Der Ekel*, the first phenomenological treatise on this topic), disgust “is in fact a highly cognitive emotion, which provides information about features of the outer world not readily available by other means, and which also reveals something about the complexities and shadows of our inner psychic life.”<sup>99</sup> As such, disgust is not only a reaction to “decay and foulness in the sensory realm,” for instance, putrefaction or excessive vitality, “but also to moral decay and foulness of character.”<sup>100</sup> According to Kolnai’s view, disgust connects strongly to one’s ethical judgment, and, interestingly, one of his most distinctive

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<sup>94</sup> Mey, 6.

<sup>95</sup> Mey, 9.

<sup>96</sup> “What Is Obscenity Law? | Becoming an Obscenity Lawyer,” accessed April 21, 2019, <https://legalcareerpath.com/obscenity-law/>; “Art on Trial: Obscenity and Art: Nudity,” accessed April 21, 2019, <https://www.tjcenter.org/ArtOnTrial/obscenity.html>.

<sup>97</sup> Hiroshi Aoyagi and Shu Min Yuen, “When Erotic Meets Cute: Erokawa and the Public Expression of Female Sexuality in Contemporary Japan,” *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* 2, no. 1 (April 1, 2016), 99.

<sup>98</sup> Barry Smith and Carolyn Korsmeyer, eds., “Visceral Values: Aurel Kolnai on Disgust,” in *On Disgust* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 1.

<sup>99</sup> Smith and Korsmeyer, 2.

<sup>100</sup> Smith and Korsmeyer, 23.

object of disgust is “sentimentality, moral stupor, and even dull-witted gushing and reveling, the whole range of insolidity of the intellectual and moral life.”<sup>101</sup> This aspect is relevant to cuteness considering that, as Dale suggests, the surplus affect triggered by cuteness is redirected towards the beholder, who “takes pleasure in the intensity of this assault upon its sovereignty... in a form of linguistic or behavioral self-limitation”<sup>102</sup> manifesting as “cooing, squealing, exclamations of ‘Aww,’ and so on.”<sup>103</sup> Ngai also analyses the “deverbalizing effect” of the cute in terms of a quasi-retributive movement. She writes, “in soliciting a response along the line of a murmur or coo, the cute object shows its ability to infantilize the language of its infantilizer, dissolving syntactic divisions and reducing one’s lexicon to onomatopoeia.”<sup>104</sup>

Ngai points out that this “soft gushing type”<sup>105</sup> of language (as Kolnai puts it) opposes the firmness and constancy privileged in the Western, post-Enlightenment construction of knowledge and meaning, and therefore—although generally a source of warm and fuzzy feelings—may elicit the moral disgust from those whose appreciation of art and culture operates within a phallogocentric framework.<sup>106</sup> In this sense, the aww-factor of cuteness and the yuck-factor of disgust share a prelinguistic move, whose bodily, subsemiotic effect on audiences results in their often being associated with inferior cultural positions. In pop culture, “pure” disgust tends to be overridden by the scary, the grotesque, or the ugly, namely in the horror genre (e.g., in films like *Gremlins*, 1984, and *Child’s Play*, 1988, starring the Chucky doll). I find the newborn Alien of *Alien Resurrection* (1997) to be an excellent example of “purer” disgusting cute. The Newborn is a human/xenomorph hybrid in which the alien is cutified with *kinderschema*. Its big dewy eyes and snub nose add an aww-factor to the film’s emotional narrative, as Ripley 8 is forced to destroy a creature who recognizes her as their mother while maintaining the yuck-factor in full force. **[Figure 22a, b]** The visceral sequence of live birth from a xenomorphic womb and the fact that the Newborn had hermaphrodite genitalia (removed in post-production for being too shocking<sup>107</sup>) heightens the disgust attached to the baby alien.

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<sup>101</sup> *On Disgust*, ed. Barry Smith and Carolyn Korsmeyer (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 71.

<sup>102</sup> *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, 42.

<sup>103</sup> Dale, “The Appeal of the Cute Object: Desire, Domestication, and Agency,” 41.

<sup>104</sup> Ngai, “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde,” 827.

<sup>105</sup> *On Disgust*, 2004, 71.

<sup>106</sup> Ngai, “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde,” 827–28.

<sup>107</sup> *One Step Beyond: The Making of “Alien: Resurrection,”* accessed April 24, 2019, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0387469/>.

In the end, all these declinations of the categories of cuteness and negativity amount to unsettling or “bad encounters”<sup>108</sup> with works of art or pop culture in which the cute plays a significant role in shaping our thoughts, impressions, and feelings. As stated before, my encyclopedia focuses on the aesthetics of the *kawaii* because it offers the most advantageous site for exploring the dark and antagonistic qualities instilled in or aroused by cute objects. In part, this is a result of the *kawaii*, as an aesthetic of consumption or consumer aesthetics, being particularly entangled with Japan “as an improper nation-state.” As anthropologist Marilyn Ivy puts it, Japan’s “self-identification... with economic prosperity *alone* (and the identification by national others of Japan with that prosperity) is perhaps unprecedented,”<sup>109</sup> plunging the country into a state of (self-) abjection once it hit a wall of economic stagnation. Other aspects, such as gender roles and the strength of Japan’s comics and animation industry, likewise factor into the uniqueness of Japanese cute. For this reason, I will expand on the history of the *kawaii*, from its etymology to its roots in post-war and postmodern Japan.

### **The setting of the *kawaii*: etymology, history, culture**

The *kawaii* today is present in a broad range of cultural commodities, not just Japanese comics and animation. For instance, *aidoru* and *tarento* (Japanese singers and television entertainers), *purikura* (photos with cute filters and stamps), *kyaraben* (meals arranged to look like cute characters), high fashion and street fashion like lolita and *decora*, videogames from *Mario* and *Sonic the Hedgehog* to classic visual novels like *Clannad*, and even in the work of videogame music by composers like Nintendo’s Kondo Koji, known for the iconic *Super Mario Bros* theme. [Video 3] In this section, I will address the roots of the word *kawaii* in Japan and the historical events that shaped the emergence of Japanese cute culture in the postwar decades, as well as the context of Japanese postmodernism, the Superflat art movement, and Cool Japan in the 2000s.

Like the “cute,” the *kawaii* carries a similar etymological ambiguity. Despite the phonological resemblance to the Chinese word *kě'ài* (可愛, “lovable”), the adjective *kawaii* (かわいい) is a modern form of *kawayui* (かわゆい), which in turn derives from the archaic Japanese expression *kao hayushi* (顔映し) or *kawayushi*, meaning “red-faced,” in the sense of

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<sup>108</sup> Parikka, “Medianatures,” 99.

<sup>109</sup> “Revenge and Recapitulation in Recessionary Japan,” in *Japan After Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990s to the Present*, ed. Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2006), 95.

embarrassed or guilty of conscience.<sup>110</sup> The term first appeared in late Heian sources like *Konjaku Monogatari*, an anonymous anthology of Buddhist and secular tales collected in the early twelfth century, and early eleventh century *Genji Monogatari (Tale of Genji)* by Murasaki Shikibu. In these texts, the word is used to describe a sentiment of empathy and pity,<sup>111</sup> which is still observable today in the adjective *kawaisōna*, with the same root as *kawaii*, meaning “poor,” “pitiable,” “pathetic,” or “pitiful.”

During the Tokugawa period (1603-1867), the meaning of the *kawaii* shifted to describe “animals and persons of a lesser standing, with an emphasis on their helpless state,”<sup>112</sup> growing a gendered association with women who fit the neo-Confucian ideals of demureness and obedience.<sup>113</sup> The words *kawayuishi* and *kawayui* were printed in dictionaries from the Taishō period (1912-26) to the end of World War II,<sup>114</sup> but it was not until the 1970s that the *kawaii* gained its contemporary meaning. Shiokawa Kanako argues that this shift coincides with the transformation of the *kawaii* from a closed concept applicable to a small number of things, to an umbrella term that “soon... achieved today’s status of a very useful, pleasantly positive, but strangely nondescript expression.”<sup>115</sup> Today, other Japanese words whose meanings orbit around the *kawaii* include *sunao* (“obedient,” “meek,” “docile,” “honest,” “frank”), *enryogachi* (“shy,” “reserved”), *kodomoppoi* (“childish,” “childlike,” “immature,” “infantile”), *mujaki* (“innocence,” “simple-minded”), or *musenkinin* (“irresponsible”). On the contrary, terms such as *kibishii* (“severe,” “strict,” “rigid,” “harsh,” “though”), *kitsui* (“rigid,” “sharp”), or *nikui* (“hateful,” “poor-looking,” “detestable”) serve as antonyms of *kawaii*.

Scholars like Joshua Dale contest whether the word *kawaii*, today, retains any negativity beyond this “pleasantly positive” ring. Dale argues that while “The modern *kawaii* comes from the word for pitiable (*kawaisō*)... at present the word has no negative connotations.”<sup>116</sup> Still, Kinsella’s research on cute culture in the 1980s and 1990s Japan makes a strong case that the “cute and pitiful were often the same thing,” suggesting that “a sense of

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<sup>110</sup> “顔映し,” in Wiktionary, accessed August 30, 2017,

[https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%E9%A1%94%E6%98%A0%E3%81%97#cite\\_ref-KDJ\\_1-0](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%E9%A1%94%E6%98%A0%E3%81%97#cite_ref-KDJ_1-0).

<sup>111</sup> Shiokawa, ‘Cute but Deadly: Women and Violence in Japanese Comics’, 95; Adrian David Cheok, *Art and Technology of Entertainment Computing and Communication* (London ; New York: Springer, 2010), 225; Adrian David Cheok, ‘Kawaii: Cute Interactive Media’, in *Imagery in the 21st Century*, ed. Oliver Grau and Thomas Veigl (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2011), 247.

<sup>112</sup> Shiokawa, “Cute but Deadly: Women and Violence in Japanese Comics,” 95.

<sup>113</sup> Shiokawa, 95.

<sup>114</sup> Cheok, *Art and Technology of Entertainment Computing and Communication*, 225; Cheok, “Kawaii: Cute Interactive Media,” 247.

<sup>115</sup> “Cute but Deadly: Women and Violence in Japanese Comics,” 95.

<sup>116</sup> Dale, “The Appeal of the Cute Object: Desire, Domestication, and Agency,” 39.



weakness and disability—which is a part of childishness—was a very important constituent of the cute aesthetic.”<sup>117</sup> On a similar note, in the 2000s, Miura Jun, a cultural critic and illustrator who introduced the term *yuru kyara* for Japanese local mascots with unsophisticated designs, stated that these characters display “a sense of instability that makes them all the more lovable, and one’s heart feels healed just by looking at them.”<sup>118</sup> [Figure 23] For Miura, then, the mascots’ “internal instability,”<sup>119</sup> i.e., their weakness both in terms of artistry (of design) and the soundness of construction (of the 3D costumes), intensifies their cuteness. Additionally, the fact that, in everyday life, the *kawaii* is in the eye of the beholder, results in it being used to challenge the boundaries of the social (and antisocial), as in the case of Japanese high school students surprising their teacher by describing a drawing of a girl impaled on a merry-go-round as “cute.”<sup>120</sup> It seems that, at least in some instances, contemporary *kawaii* does maintain a nuance of pity, helplessness, and embarrassment, distinct from the manipulation in “cute,” and the term’s flexibility makes it is readily applicable to the aesthetics of negativity.

The pervasiveness of cute culture and aesthetics in Japan is often linked to the country’s “long postwar.”<sup>121</sup> In historian Harry Harootunian’s words, “what lasted a few years as military occupation became the trope of lasting experience Japanese have lived for a half-century.”<sup>122</sup> Artist Murakami Takashi, who masterminded the postmodern art movement Superflat, has advocated this discourse on the *kawaii* as a symptom of “cultural schizophrenia,”<sup>123</sup> the manifestation of repressed feelings of emasculation and infantilization resulting from Japan’s passage from colonizer to colonized at the end of World War II—including both “hard” and “soft” traumas ranging from physical devastation to the country’s “defanging” in the Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, which forbids the use of state belligerency. His 2005 manifesto book and exhibition, *Little Boy* (significantly, held at the Japanese Society in New York)

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<sup>117</sup> ‘Cuties in Japan’, in *Women, Media, and Consumption in Japan*, ed. Lise Skov and Brian Moeran, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 236.

<sup>118</sup> Debra Occhi, “Wobbly Aesthetics, Performance, and Message: Comparing Japanese Kyara with Their Anthropomorphic Forebears,” *Asian Ethnology* 71, no. 1 (2012): 113.

<sup>119</sup> Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 2012, 85–86.

<sup>120</sup> Wallach, “Yamikawaii — Japan’s Darker and Cuter Version of Emo,” para. 2.

<sup>121</sup> Harry Harootunian, “Japan’s Long Postwar: The Trick of Memory and the Ruse of History,” in *Japan After Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990s to the Present*, ed. Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2006), 97.

<sup>122</sup> Harootunian, 102.

<sup>123</sup> Daryush Shayegan, *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West* (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1997),

<http://repository.wellesley.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1110&context=scholarship>.

cemented this connection with a pun on the image of a child and the code name of the atomic bomb that hit Hiroshima.

While Portuguese missionaries were the first Europeans to arrive on Japanese shores in 1543, the country soon closed its frontiers to the outside world to resist both to the Chinese Celestial Empire ambitious imperialism and to the rise of European expansion. The 250 years of Sakoku (“closed country”) isolationism under the Tokugawa dynasty, based on a reinforced shogunate hierarchy, was a period of stability and prosperity, during which only Rangaku studies (Dutch/Western books and scientific and technical treaties) kept an effective channel of communication with Europe.<sup>124</sup> The re-opening of Japan to foreign trade and diplomatic relations (Treaty of Kanagawa) followed the arrival to the Edo bay of the American Black Ship flotilla led by Commodore Matthew Perry’s expeditions of 1852–53 and 1854.<sup>125</sup> The end of this policy of national isolation brought about vast political and social changes inspired by Western models during the Meiji period (1868–1912) and continued throughout the Taishō Democracy (1912–26), a period which spanned the time before and after World War I. In turn, Japan’s surrender aboard the USS Missouri on September 2, 1945, became the symbol of a historical moment in which, in the eyes of the Japanese, “the West—which essentially meant the United States—was extraordinarily rich and powerful, and Japan was incredibly weak and vulnerable.”<sup>126</sup> [Video 4] The 1951 congressional hearings of Douglas MacArthur, the American general who led Japan’s military occupation by the Allies from 1945 to 1952, crystallized this inferiority complex for posterity when he declared that Japan was “like a boy of twelve” who stumbled into war somewhat inadvertently.<sup>127</sup> As argued by historian John Dower,

Although the old soldier himself might fade away in Japanese conscience, more quickly and gracelessly than he had ever imagined possible, the issue he unwittingly brought so floridly to the fore would not and could not be dispelled. After all, the Japanese had routinely spoken of themselves as MacArthur’s children... The entire occupation had been premised on acquiescing in America’s overwhelming paternalistic authority; and even as sovereignty drew near, even as the nation was being rehabilitated as a Cold War partner, the Americans never had any real expectation that an equitable relationship would

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<sup>124</sup> Adam Clulow, *The Company and the Shogun: The Dutch Encounter with Tokugawa Japan* (Columbia University Press, 2016).

<sup>125</sup> Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present, 2nd Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 17.

<sup>126</sup> John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 43.

<sup>127</sup> Dower, 550.

be the result. The new military was a “little American army,” obviously destined to remain under U.S. control. The new economy was inordinately dependent on American support and indulgence. Much of the rest of the world—on both side of the Cold War divide—was, in fact, appalled and alarmed by the haste with which the democratization agenda had been abandoned, the old guard resurrected, and remilitarization promoted. In such circumstances, it was still difficult to imagine a sovereign Japan as anything other than dependent on and subordinate to the United States for the foreseeable future—a client in all but name.<sup>128</sup>

In the wake of World War II, Japan entered a period of *kyodatsu* (“exhaustion,” “despondency”), immortalized in Takahata Isao’s 1988 anti-war anime feature film *Hotaru no Haka* (*Grave of the Fireflies*), in which the task of physical survival was seemingly impossible. [Figure 24] This hurdle was overcome with distinction by the Japanese economic miracle from the post-war era to the end of the Cold War, in which the country achieved unprecedented levels of economic growth and material prosperity. The world fair held in Osaka in 1970, with the motto “Progress and Harmony for Mankind,” symbolized by Okamoto Tarō’s building-sculpture *Taiyō no Tō* (*Tower of the Sun*), encapsulated this period’s celebratory mood. [Figure 25] Nevertheless, a “politically depressed position”<sup>129</sup> gradually set in. The 1973 oil crisis and the recessions of the second half of the 1980s culminated in the Tokyo stock market crash in 1987, and the bubble burst in 1991. The “lost decade” (*ushinawareta jūnen*) of the 1990s exposed the hefty social and environmental costs of Japan’s economic growth: air and soil pollution, the *karōshi* (“death by overwork”) epidemic,<sup>130</sup> corruption and fraud, child prostitution, rising suicide rates, among others.<sup>131</sup> Over the second half of the 1990s, the Tokyo subway sarin attack by Aum Shinrikyo—a doomsday cult that was popular among university students for its use of anime and pop imagery [Figure 26a, b]—the Kobe earthquake in 1995, and the Tokaimura nuclear accidents of 1999 aggravated the atmosphere of precarity as Japan entered into the new millennium.

The postwar political depression can be traced back, for instance, to the sense of disappointment at the civil and student uprisings of the 1960s, which failed to block the United States-Japan Security Treaty, reform the universities or produce a lasting political

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<sup>128</sup> Dower, 551–52.

<sup>129</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2011), 227.

<sup>130</sup> In 1986, the average Japanese worker worked 2150 hours, against 1924 of the American worker and 1643 of the French worker; of the fifteen vacation days to which he was entitled, they used only seven. In a 1988 government survey, more than half of the respondents said they preferred more free time to a salary increase.

<sup>131</sup> Gregor Jansen et al., *The Japanese Experience: Inevitable*, ed. Margrit Brehm (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: New York, N.Y: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2003), 12.

movement.<sup>132</sup> [Figure 27] Instead, the riots strayed toward violent internal conflicts among the Japanese New Left (a period known as *uchi-geba*, “inner violence”), followed by a surge of left-wing terrorism in the late 1970s.<sup>133</sup> These groups’ radicalism and antisocial behavior prompted a general retreat from activism, as students became more concerned with grades and practical matters like impressing prospective employers.<sup>134</sup> In art, avant-garde collectives like Gutai, Kyushu-ha, Neo-Dada Organizers, Zero Jigen, Hi Red Center, or the Expo ’70 Destruction Co-struggle Group, that rebelled against the Japanese art establishment and traditional master-disciple relations, captured the Japanese public imagination. But their scandalous performances were interpreted more as a part of the eccentric lifestyle of new generations than *bona fide* artistic actions and failed to put down lasting roots in Japan—despite the considerable attention they have received from the Western art world and scholarship.<sup>135</sup> [Figure 28]

The 1970s *shirake sedai*, or “spoilt generation,” perceived to be apathetic about social issues, was followed by the *shinjinrui* (“new humanity”) in the 1980s, a cohort of young people “feted and feared for their misplaced, though voracious, consumer appetites.”<sup>136</sup> Of particular importance at this time was the generational epithet “moratorium people” (*moratorium ningen*), coined by Okonogi Keigo in 1978 to characterize these apathetic and consumerist youths who refused to grow up and enter the world of adults. [Figure 29] According to Kinsella, the moratorium people embodied the contradiction between the new ideas and sensibilities of post-war generations on love, sexuality, friendship, freedom, and happiness, and their lives still organized in terms of hierarchy, authority, and social obligation (in Japanese, *giri*).<sup>137</sup> This contradiction was especially pronounced for young women, relegated to secretarial duties and expected to become “professional wives” and mothers supporting their

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<sup>132</sup> Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present, 2nd Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 276; Eiji Oguma, ‘Japan’s 1968: A Collective Reaction to Rapid Economic Growth in an Age of Turmoil’, trans. Nick Kapur, Samuel Malissa, and Stephen Poland, *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 23 March 2015, <http://apjff.org/2015/13/11/Oguma-Eiji/4300.html>.

<sup>133</sup> Michiya Shimbori et al., “Japanese Student Activism in the 1970s,” *Higher Education* 9, no. 2 (March 1, 1980): 139.

<sup>134</sup> Shimbori et al., 140, 142.

<sup>135</sup> Takashi Murakami, *Superflat* (Tokyo: Madara Shuppan, 2000), 19; Takashi Murakami, “All my works are made up of special effects.,” interview by Philippe Dagen, book section of Philippe Dagen, Jill Gasparina, and Laurent Le Bon’s *Murakami Versailles*, 2011, 23.

<sup>136</sup> William W. Kelly, “Finding a Place in Metropolitan Japan: Ideologies, Institutions, and Everyday Life,” in *Postwar Japan as History*, ed. Andrew Gordon (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1993), 198.

<sup>137</sup> Kinsella, “Cuties in Japan,” 242–43, 251.

overworked husbands and children.<sup>138</sup> In this sense, the younger Japanese generations did not fully enjoy the civic rights acquired during the Occupation, translating into a mistrust felt by young adults in the face of society, beginning with the adoption of children's culture, like manga, by college students in the 1960s, as a rebellion against traditional Japanese values.<sup>139</sup> Even today, the idea that Japan's youth fails at "adulthood" underlines panics related to NEETs ("Not in Education, Employment, or Training"), hikikomori shut-ins, otaku nerds, enjo-kōsai schoolgirls into "compensated dating" (going on dates with older men in exchange for money and gifts), parasite singles (unmarried career women who live with their parents throughout their 30s and 40s), and herbivore men (with no active interest in pursuing sex or relationships), who often emerge as scapegoats for the country's demographic crises.

Ironically, while the Japanese society at large condemns the moratorium people, in the eyes of the world, Japan has become "one nation under cute."<sup>140</sup> From the 1970s onwards, *kawaii* culture rose to unprecedented heights, transforming into "a living entity that pervades everything"<sup>141</sup>; from the grassroots emergence of *maru-moji* ("round letters") cute handwriting among schoolgirls<sup>142</sup> to the booming "fancy goods" industry, epitomized by the launch of Sanrio's Hello Kitty in 1975<sup>143</sup> [Figure 30 & 31]; from the stratosphere of pop stars like Matsuda Seiko, the "eternal idol," or the likes of AKB48, Hatsune Miku, or Babymetal, to everyday consumer behavior, like eating ice cream and sweets, or the making of *kyaraben* lunch boxes, arranged to look like cute characters by dedicated homemakers. [Figures 32, 33 & 34 ] The *kawaii* is used by subcultures rebelling against the establishment [Figure 35], and by the establishment itself—the government, the police, the military, and all sorts of private and public institutions, which employ stylized animal mascots or cute anime girls as a tool for strategic communication with the public [Figure 36 & 37]. In the 2010s, even the "moratorium people" themselves have been cutified in a new wave of beloved characters from companies like Sanrio and the San-X, in *kawaii* mascots for the millennial generation like the lethargic,

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<sup>138</sup> Tomiko Yoda, "The Rise and Fall of Maternal Society: Gender, Labor, and Capital in Contemporary Japan," in *Japan After Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990s to the Present*, ed. Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2006), 247, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/30686>.

<sup>139</sup> "Cuties in Japan," 250–51; *Adult Manga: Culture and Power in Contemporary Japanese Society* (Richmond, Surrey: Routledge, 2000), 32.

<sup>140</sup> Ilya Garger, "Global Psyche: One Nation Under Cute," *Psychology Today*, March 1, 2017, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200703/global-psyche-one-nation-under-cute>.

<sup>141</sup> Takashi Murakami, *Little Boy: The Art of Japan's Exploding Subculture* (New York; New Haven: Japan Society, Inc. / Yale University Press, 2005), 100.

<sup>142</sup> Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan," 222.

<sup>143</sup> Kinsella, 225.

genderless egg yolk Gudetama (Sanrio, 2013) or the OL (“office lady”) red panda Aggressive Retsuko, an accountant in her mid-twenties who vents her deep-seated labor frustrations by singing death metal in karaoke at night (Sanrio, 2015). [Videos 5 & 6]

Ultimately, the dissemination of the *kawaii* reacts against the “tremendous tension”<sup>144</sup> of interpersonal relationships in Japan, resulting from the Confucian public sphere and collective capitalism where “relative status differences define nearly all social interactions.”<sup>145</sup> The Japanese language itself reflects this: verbal tenses, personal pronouns, nouns, and adjectives have specific endings applied according to superior/inferior relations, and the list of honorifics is long (*-san*, *-chan*, *-kun*, and *-sama* are some examples). According to Kinsella, “This underlying ideology is another reason why rebellion against society in Japanese youth culture has developed into a rebellion against adulthood”; it also explains why “intellectuals, ascetics and artistic outsiders from Japanese society have long carried the stigma of infantilism, and some have possibly even played up to the image of being childlike eccentrics”<sup>146</sup> (e.g., Murakami Takashi—more on this shortly). Contrary to the Western tradition where adulthood equals emancipation, in Japan “maturity is commonly considered as the ability to cooperate well in a group, to accept compromises, to fulfill obligations to parents, employers, and so on, and carry out social responsibilities.”<sup>147</sup> This aspect has shaped *kawaii* culture at large, as an “indolent little rebellion rather than a conscious, aggressive and sexually provocative rebellion of the sort that has been typical of western youth culture.”<sup>148</sup> Although Western countercultures have also incorporated what Bradon LaBelle calls “weak-strength”<sup>149</sup> in their protests, for instance, in Flower Power and other movements of passive resistance, *kawaii* culture rarely takes on the form of a counterculture *sensu stricto*, i.e., it may gnaw at prevailing social norms, but it is seldom formulated, openly, as anti-establishment.

Japanese “postmodernism” is a contested site, so much so that, according to Masao Miyoshi and Harry Harootunian, “to confuse Japan’s non-modernity with the West’s ‘postmodernism’ is perhaps a serious error.”<sup>150</sup> Japanese postmodernism entails not just the

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<sup>144</sup> Susan O. Long, ‘The Society and Its Environment’, in *Japan: A Country Study*, ed. Ronald E. Dolan and Robert L. Worden (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing, 1991), 95.

<sup>145</sup> Long, 96.

<sup>146</sup> Kinsella, “Cuties in Japan,” 243.

<sup>147</sup> Kinsella, 242–43.

<sup>148</sup> Kinsella, 143.

<sup>149</sup> LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 129.

<sup>150</sup> Masao Miyoshi and Harry Harootunian, “Introduction,” in *Postmodernism and Japan*, ed. Masao Miyoshi and Harry Harootunian (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1989), xi.

“local expressions of postmodern and global transformations of late capitalist society that have developed over decades”<sup>151</sup> but an historical and geographic displacement (e.g., the Middle and the Far East are only so in relation to Western countries), in which the West becomes the telos of non-Westerners, who can only ever be its imitator.<sup>152</sup> Ironically, even as the authenticity of Japan’s modernity and postmodernity came under scrutiny, Japan seemed to fulfill its destiny as the place where (Western) history came to an end.<sup>153</sup> For instance, in a footnote to *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (1968), philosopher Alexandre Kojève claimed that Japan is a “totally formalized” society whose encounter with the West will “lead not to a rebarbarization of the Japanese but to a ‘Japanization’ of the Westerners”<sup>154</sup>; while Roland Barthes famously called Japan *L’empire des signes* (*Empire of Signs*) in 1970. [Figure 38] The Japanese themselves have been complicit with the exoticization and commodification of Japaneseness,<sup>155</sup> not least *postmodern* Japaneseness, or the Japaneseness of the postmodern. Murakami Takashi taps into such portrayals of depthless Japan by Western philosophers in his artist’s books and manifestos, *Superflat* (2000) and *Little Boy* (2005); indeed, “The Super Flat Manifesto” opens with the promise-threat that “The world of the future might be like Japan is today—super flat.”<sup>156</sup> [Figure 39a, b] In such discourses, like in the techno-orientalist dystopias of sci-fi films such as *Blade Runner* (1984), Japan occupies, as Marilyn Ivy puts it, “an almost comforting figure of danger and promise,”<sup>157</sup> a thrilling menace to Western reason and individualism.

In 1980s Japan, “postmodernism” itself became a new kind of informational commodity, fueled by the boom of “new academicians” or “postacademicians” like Asada Akira, author of *Kōzō to Chikara: Kigōron o koete* (“Structure and Power: Beyond Semiotics,” 1983)—an elaborate investigation on European postmodern and post-structuralist philosophy which became an overnight bestseller in Japan.<sup>158</sup> [Figure 40] Postmodernism offered an

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<sup>151</sup> Yoda, “A Roadmap to Millennial Japan,” 33.

<sup>152</sup> Miyoshi and Harootunian, “Introduction,” viii–ix.

<sup>153</sup> Miyoshi and Harootunian, xii.

<sup>154</sup> *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), 162.

<sup>155</sup> Koichi Iwabuchi, “Complicit Exoticism: Japan and Its Other,” *Continuum* 8, no. 2 (January 1, 1994): 49–82.

<sup>156</sup> Murakami, *Superflat*, 5.

<sup>157</sup> Marilyn Ivy, “Critical Texts, Mass Artifacts: The Consumption of Knowledge in Postmodern Japan,” in *Postmodernism and Japan*, ed. Masao Miyoshi and Harry Harootunian (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1989), 21.

<sup>158</sup> Ivy, 26–33; W. David Marx, “Structure and Power (1983),” *Néojaponisme*, May 6, 2011, paras. 1–2, <https://neojaponisme.com/2011/05/06/structure-and-power-1983/>.

opportunity to celebrate Japan's "triumph over modernity and over history itself,"<sup>159</sup> intersecting with the discourses of *nihonjinron*, i.e., books written by Japanese authors for Japanese audiences on the uniqueness of Japanese identity. As Yoda Tomiko puts it,

Japan's establishment as an economic superpower, superseding the majority of Western nations in the contest of capital accumulation, therefore, unleashed a powerful sense that Japan had finally reached its ultimate national aspiration by not only completing but also going beyond modernization, becoming freed from the historical scenario of modernity that has consistently precluded it from a full-fledged subject position and historical agency.<sup>160</sup>

In the recessionary 1990s, the celebration of Japanese postmodernism deflated as new critics, like Miyadai Shinji, Ōtsuka Eiji, and Azuma Hiroki, author of *Dobutsuka suru Postmodern: Otaku kara mita nihon shakai* ("Animalizing Postmodern: Japan Society from the viewpoint of the *otaku*," translated to English as *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*), oft-cited in my encyclopedia, turned their attention to Japanese subcultures, like the *otaku*. [Figure 41] Asada and other new academicians criticized them for what, in their view, was a return to Japanese parochialism opposed to cosmopolitan postmodernity.<sup>161</sup> For Asada, "Alphabetized and contracted, J is Japan as a site of the trashy pop culture of *otaku*, video games and animations."<sup>162</sup> But as Murakami goes to great lengths to explain in his 2000 book *Superflat*, in late-modern Japan, there is a more fluid relationship between art and entertainment when compared to European and American concepts of "high culture."<sup>163</sup> Respected artists, like Okamoto Tarō or cult director Kitano Takeshi, have doubled as television entertainers—a path that Murakami also pursued with various appearances in game shows<sup>164</sup> and the clownish nature of his public presence, which is often consistent with the trope of the infantilized intellectual (mentioned in the previous section). [Figure 42] Likewise, in the 1980s press, Asada and other "new academicians" became part of a broader star system of young Japanese creatives, in which their hard-line theoretical work did not differ fundamentally from that of advertisers like Itoi Shigesato.<sup>165</sup> The fact that it is not uncommon for department stores like

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<sup>159</sup> Yoda, "A Roadmap to Millennial Japan," 34.

<sup>160</sup> Yoda, 34.

<sup>161</sup> Yoda, 36–37, 44–45, 47.

<sup>162</sup> Yoda, 44.

<sup>163</sup> Murakami, *Superflat*, 19–23.

<sup>164</sup> Adrian Favell, *Before and after Superflat: A Short History of Japanese Contemporary Art, 1990-2011* (Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2011), 68, <http://www.adrianfavell.com/BASF%20MS.pdf>.

<sup>165</sup> Ivy, "Critical Texts, Mass Artifacts: The Consumption of Knowledge in Postmodern Japan," 33, 36.



PARCO to host prestigious art shows further contributes to this blurring of art and mass culture in Japan<sup>166</sup>; in fact, the first *Superflat* exhibition was held at Parco Gallery in Tokyo, in 2000.<sup>167</sup>

In *Superflat*, Murakami also underlines that, in Japan, “art” and “craft” did not exist as discrete categories until the late ninetieth century. Therefore, the slippery definition of “art” dates back to the Meiji period and “the difficulties that were experienced in transplanting the (Western) concept of art into Japan, including the classification, training, and exhibition of art, without the European post-Romantic concept of individual subjectivity and the ideology of original expression.”<sup>168</sup> Because Japanese words like *geijutsu* (芸術, emphasizing “technique” or “craft”) or *bijutsu* (美術, emphasizing “beauty”) failed to account for the Western concept of avant-garde, this resulted, as Murakami puts it, in “the frustrating ‘non-art’ status that much of Japanese art bears, both within, and outside of the country.”<sup>169</sup> To be sure, not only did the “traditional” art world in Japan (art schools, galleries, art markets, museums) not compare to the country’s big, well-oiled entertainment industry,<sup>170</sup> but Japanese comics and animation proved capable of producing some of the most innovative and influential artworks, both domestically and on a global scale. Likewise, radical ideas continued to pop up in unlikely places, such as the subcultures of cuteness, girliness, amateurs, or pornography, that captured the interest and admiration of international audiences.

Moreover, the rise of Superflat in the contemporary art scene during the 2000s fueled and was fueled by Cool Japan, a governmental policy to promote Japan’s “indigenous” pop culture abroad, prompted by the 2002 article “Japan’s Gross National Cool” by American journalist Douglas McGray (even if Murakami himself has been critical of it).<sup>171</sup> Artists affiliated with Murakami’s Kaikai Kiki art production company, such Mr., Takano Aya, Aoshima Chiho, Ban Chinatsu, or Kunikata Mahomi, and those associated with the broader Neo-pop movement, like Nara Yoshitomo, Mori Mariko, Aida Makoto, Odani Motohiko, Kudo Makiko, Aoki Ryoko, Murata Yuko, Tabaimo, Yanobe Kenji, or Ando Hiro, among many others, put anime, manga, and the *kawaii* in the world’s most prestigious galleries and

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<sup>166</sup> Favell, *Before and after Superflat*, 65.

<sup>167</sup> Murakami, *Little Boy*, 153.

<sup>168</sup> Kristen Sharp, “Superflatworlds: A Topography of Takashi Murakami and the Cultures of Superflat Art,” 2006, 102, <https://researchbank.rmit.edu.au/view/rmit:9886>.

<sup>169</sup> Takashi Murakami, “A Message: Laying the Foundation for a Japanese Art Market,” *Kaikai Kiki*, accessed October 12, 2017, <http://english.kaikaikiki.co.jp/whatskaikaikiki/message/>.

<sup>170</sup> Favell, *Before and after Superflat*, 65.

<sup>171</sup> GARAGEMCA, *Transculturation, Cultural Inter-Nationalism and beyond. A Lecture by Koichi Iwabuchi at Garage*, YouTube video (Moscow: Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckebrWCgmeA>.

museums. [Figures 43 & 44] As sociologist Adrian Favell points out, Superflat practically became synonymous with Japanese postmodern art, muffling a variety of other styles, trends, and concepts of artists as Yanagi Yukinori, Nakamura Masato, and Sone Yukata, or those belonging to the Group 1965 (*Shōwa 40 nen kai*)—Ozawa Tsuyoshi, Matsukage Hiroyuki, Kinoshita Parco, Tosa Masamichi, or American-Brazilian Oscar Oiwa of Japanese descent.<sup>172</sup> Even pioneering Japanese pop artists, e.g., Ohtake Shinro, were to some extent overlooked, but have begun surfacing as Superflat’s popularity wears off in the Western art world, if not in the global art market.<sup>173</sup> Ohtake, for instance, was featured in the dOCUMENTA (13) in 2012 and the Venice Biennale in 2013. [Figure 47a, b]

In the 2000s, the *kawaii* became a vital cog in the Cool Japan machine, leading to what anthropologist Christine Yano has coined the term “pink globalization” to address the “spread of *kawaii* (cute) goods and related media from primarily Japan throughout much of the industrial world,”<sup>174</sup> for instance, cute icons like Hello Kitty or Sailor Moon. In 2009, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs even began to appoint *kawaii* ambassadors, tasked with publicizing Japan’s culture of cuteness around the world, such as lolita fashion model Aoki Misako or creepy-cute *aidoru* Kyary Pamyu Pamyu.<sup>175</sup> [Figure 48] While, in the 1990s, Japanization was mostly framed within a discourse of hybridism, indigenization, or domestication of foreign culture—one in which, as Ivy puts it, “The image of Japan as the great assimilator arises to explain away any epistemological snags or historical confusions”<sup>176</sup>—the Cool Japan trend signals a new project of cultural re-nationalization.<sup>177</sup> According to media theorist Iwabuchi Kōichi, then, the rise in the twenty-first century of manga, anime, Japanese videogames, and *kawaii* culture to the status of soft powers, capable of rivaling the hegemony

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<sup>172</sup> Adrian Favell, ‘Aida Makoto: Notes from an Apathetic Continent’, in *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture*, ed. Alisa Freedman and Toby Slade (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), loc. 9551; Favell, *Before and after Superflat*, 224.

<sup>173</sup> Jonathan Yee and Eileen Kinsella, “Why Collectors Love Takashi Murakami, Part 2,” artnet News, November 14, 2014, <https://news.artnet.com/market/art-market-analysis-why-collectors-love-takashi-murakami-part-2-162123>.

<sup>174</sup> Christine R. Yano, ‘Flipping Kitty: Transnational Transgressions of Japanese Cute’, in *Medi@sia: Global Media/Tion in and Out of Context*, ed. T. J. M. Holden and Timothy J. Scrase (London: Routledge, 2006), 2008.

<sup>175</sup> “The Kawaii Ambassadors (Ambassadors of Cuteness),” *Web Japan*, August 2009, [http://web-japan.org/trends/09\\_culture/pop090827.html](http://web-japan.org/trends/09_culture/pop090827.html).

<sup>176</sup> *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 1.

<sup>177</sup> GARAGEMCA, *Transculturation, Cultural Inter-Nationalism and beyond. A Lecture by Koichi Iwabuchi at Garage*, 41:55.

of American culture, aligns with the tenets of “glocalization” and an “inter-nationalist” (instead of genuinely international) cultural diplomacy.<sup>178</sup>

## Cuteness and manga

Cuteness in Japanese comics and animation has evolved across different demographics and in close relation—sometimes, opposition—to orbiting concepts such as *kirei* (“pretty”), *utsukushii* (“beautiful”), *jojō* (“lyricism”), *tanbi* (“aesthetics”), or even “undesirable” traits like creepy, ugly, and grotesque, among others. The *kawaii* permeates both lyrical girls’ comics and action-packed boys’ comics, it seeps into the realm of erotic and pornographic manga, like boys’ love and *lolicon*, and blends seamlessly with the imagery of horror and psychedelia. Beloved creepy-cute characters from the 1960s, like Mizuki Shigeru’s Kitarō or Umezu Kazuo’s Cat Eyed Boy, Hino Hideshi’s *Hell Baby (Gaki Jigoku, 1984)*, or girls’ manga like Mizuno Junko’s *Pure Trance (1996-98)*, [Figure 49] attest to the vitality of such encounters. In this section, I present an overview of the pivotal role of Japanese comics and animation in the creation, development, and dissemination of *kawaii* cultures and aesthetics, from its origins in the Interwar period throughout the 2000s.

While *kawaii* culture boomed in the 1970s, its emergence can be traced back much earlier, to the beginning of the twentieth century and the worldwide rise of children’s consumer culture and entertainment. *Norakuro (1931–81)*, *Bōken Dankichi (1933–39)*, or *Tank Tankurō (1934)*, were popular comic strips or episodic manga featuring human and non-human characters (a dog, a boy, and a robot, respectively) published in boys’ magazines like *Shōnen Club* during the interwar era. [Figure 50] Much like funny animals in Western children’s books (e.g., *The Wind in the Willows*), newspaper comic strips (e.g., *Krazy Kat*), and animated cartoons (e.g., *Silly Symphony*, *Talkartoons*, *Looney Tunes*, or *Merrie Melodies*), these relied on humor and cute aesthetics to entertain modern adults and children alike. In Japan, later works such as *Kasei Tanken* (“Expedition to Mars,” 1940)—whose whimsical visions of a Martian tomato society recall the Edo period paintings of anthropomorphized vegetables by Kuniyoshi Utagawa—employed cuteness in longer, more sophisticated narratives, reminiscent of Winsor McCay’s *Little Nemo*, [Figure 51] but for the most part, *manga* remained targeted at children until the 1950s. Matsumoto Katsuji, a late addition to the manga history canon whose work has been rediscovered in two important exhibitions at the Yayoi Museum in

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<sup>178</sup> GARAGEMCA, 41:55.

Tokyo, in 2006 and 2014,<sup>179</sup> was one of the essential *kawaii* pioneers. He published comics and illustrations in girls' magazines, including the ground-breaking *shōjo manga* *Nazo no Clover* ("Mysterious Clover," 1934) [Figure 52a, b], until he retired in 1955 to illustrate children's fiction, and founded a company specializing in baby goods, that created the widely popular *kawaii* characters Haamu and Monii.<sup>180</sup> [Figure 53]

Matsumoto's most popular manga, *Kurukuru Kurumi-chan*, serialized in the girl's magazine *Shōjo no Tomo* ("Girl's Friend") from 1938 to 1940, followed the domestic exploits of a spunky little girl called Kurumi ("walnut"). [Figure 54] Kurumi was influenced by the "cute kids"<sup>181</sup> popularized by American and British illustrators of children's and women's books, magazines, and ephemera in the early 1900s: Grace Drayton's Campbell Soup Kids and Dolly Dimples, Rose O'Neill's Kewpie [Figure 55]—which became widely counterfeited in Japan in the 1920s—and Mabel Lucie Attwell.<sup>182</sup> Kurumi's formal attributes changed drastically over the decades,<sup>183</sup> from a "roughly four heads tall" preadolescent girl in the manga's early episodes to "an extremely stylized character no more than two heads high, and of unknown age"<sup>184</sup> by the 1950s. [Figure 56] Alongside other artistic, social, and historical contexts underlying the shift, Kurumi's evolution may reflect the iconic, stylized, *kyara*-like look<sup>185</sup> that emerged after World War II, for instance, in characters like the popular Tetsuwan Atomu (or Astro Boy, in the English translation).

Matsumoto's comics impacted the development of Japanese cuteness, notably, when they diverged from the style of *jojō-ga* ("lyrical drawing") developed by prominent modern painters and designers like Takehisa Yumeji, [Figure 57] Nakahara Jun'ichi, [Figure 58] or Kashō Takabatake, that dominated Japanese girls' and women's magazine covers and

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<sup>179</sup> Ryan Holmberg, "Matsumoto Katsuji and the American Roots of Kawaii," *The Comics Journal*, April 7, 2014, para. 3, <http://www.tcj.com/matsumoto-katsuji-and-the-american-roots-of-kawaii/>.

<sup>180</sup> "Katsuji Matsumoto," *The Manga*, January 15, 2015, [http://ngembed-manga.blogspot.com/2015/01/katsuji-matsumoto\\_15.html](http://ngembed-manga.blogspot.com/2015/01/katsuji-matsumoto_15.html).

<sup>181</sup> Cross, *The Cute and the Cool*, 43–81.

<sup>182</sup> Holmberg, 'Matsumoto Katsuji and the American Roots of Kawaii', paras. 7, 15.

<sup>183</sup> Ryan Holmberg, 'Matsumoto Katsuji: Modern Tomboys and Early Shojo Manga', in *Women's Manga in Asia and Beyond: Uniting Different Cultures and Identities*, ed. Fusami Ogi et al. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 200.

<sup>184</sup> "Katsuji Matsumoto," in *Wikipedia*, August 14, 2018, "Kurukuru Kurumi-chan," [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Katsuji\\_Matsumoto&oldid=854885031](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Katsuji_Matsumoto&oldid=854885031).

<sup>185</sup> Marco Pellitteri, *The Dragon and the Dazzle: Models, Strategies, and Identities of Japanese Imagination: A European Perspective* (John Libbey Publishing, 2011), 79.

illustrations during the interwar era.<sup>186</sup> Unlike the lively characters in Matsumoto’s manga,<sup>187</sup> *jojō-ga* was lyrical and romantic, decadent and sentimental, with a taste for affluent beauties with big, melancholic eyes.<sup>188</sup> These “Yumeji beauties” (as they became known, after Takehisa Yumeji’s art) became the archetype for the slender heroines of post-war *shōjo manga*. In particular, Nakahara “depicted girls with big wet eyes and long eyelashes as opposed to the traditional *hikime-kagibana* concept of facial beauty,”<sup>189</sup> which featured slit eyes and hook noses (present, for instance, in Edo-period woodblock prints and paintings). As manga artist Hanamura Eiko puts it, Nakahara’s Westernized girl characters, resulting from a cocktail of influences from global and domestic sources including art deco, silent film-era Hollywood actresses, and the Japanese all-female musical theater troupe Takarazuka Revue, introduced cuteness to an element of “no-nationality... as it wasn’t clear which country they were from.”<sup>190</sup>

*Jojō-ga* artists also illustrated Class S literature, i.e., stories about romantic friendships between girls, like Yoshiya Nobuko’s *Hana Monogatari* (“Tales of Flowers,” 1916-1924) or Kawabata Yasunari and Nakazato Tsuneko’s *Otome no Minato* (“Port of Maidens,” 1938).<sup>191</sup> Takahashi Macoto continued the *jojō-ga* tradition in the post-war, mostly in illustrations and covers,<sup>192</sup> but also in *shōjo manga* like *Sakura Namiki* (“Rows of Cherry Trees,” 1957) and *Tokyo-Paris* (1959), which introduced innovative panel and page layouts oriented towards the expression of feelings and atmospheres.<sup>193</sup> [Figure 59] Takahashi’s drawings of starry-eyed foreign princesses were influential in the creation of lolita fashion,<sup>194</sup> and have enjoyed continued popularity among its practitioners.<sup>195</sup> [Figure 60] Takahashi, along with female

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<sup>186</sup> Barbara Hartley, “Performing the Nation: Magazine Images of Women and Girls in the Illustrations of Takabatake Kashō, 1925–1937,” *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*, no. 16 (March 2008), <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue16/hartley.htm>.

<sup>187</sup> Holmberg, “Matsumoto Katsuji and the American Roots of Kawaii”; Hartley, “Performing the Nation: Magazine Images of Women and Girls in the Illustrations of Takabatake Kashō, 1925–1937.”

<sup>188</sup> Eico Hanamura, Eico Hanamura, interview by Manami Okazaki and Geoff Johnson, book section of Manami Okazaki and Geoff Johnson's *Kawaii!! Japan's Culture of Cute*, 2013, 26.

<sup>189</sup> Nozomi Masuda, ‘Shojo Manga and Its Acceptance: What Is the Power of Shojo Manga’, in *International Perspectives on Shojo and Shojo Manga: The Influence of Girl Culture*, ed. Masami Toku (New York; London: Routledge, 2015), 24.

<sup>190</sup> Hanamura, Eico Hanamura, 21.

<sup>191</sup> Deborah M. Shamoon, *Passionate Friendship: The Aesthetics of Girl's Culture in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2012).

<sup>192</sup> Macoto Takahashi, Macoto Takahashi, interview by Manami Okazaki and Geoff Johnson, book section of Manami Okazaki and Geoff Johnson's *Kawaii!! Japan's Culture of Cute*, 2013, 28.

<sup>193</sup> Rachel ‘Matt’ Thorn, ‘Before the Forty-Niners’, [rachel-matt-thorn-en](https://www.en.matt-thorn.com/single-post/2017/06/12/Before-the-Forty-Niners), 12 June 2017, para. 7, <https://www.en.matt-thorn.com/single-post/2017/06/12/Before-the-Forty-Niners>.

<sup>194</sup> Takahashi, Macoto Takahashi, 28.

<sup>195</sup> “TAKAHASHI Makoto,” Baka-Updates Manga, accessed October 14, 2017, <https://www.mangaupdates.com/authors.html?id=7263>.

authors like Nishitani Yoshiko (*Mary Lou*, 1965), Hanamura Eiko (*Kiri no Naka no Shōjo*, “Girl in the Fog,” 1968), Hideko Mizuno (*Fire!*, 1969–1971, the first girls’ manga with a male protagonist and a sex scene), and Maki Miyako—who also created Japan’s famous Barbie-like doll, Licca-chan, in 1967 [Figure 61]—were instrumental in developing *shōjo* manga visually, narratively, and thematically throughout the 1960s. Drawing from Masubuchi Sōichi’s *Kawaii Shokogun* (“Cute Syndrome,” 1994), Shiokawa Kanako explains that:

The most significant feature of this particular art style in the late sixties was the overwhelmingly large eyes of just about all the characters, many taking up nearly half of the faces.... Specifically (and often derisively) known as *shōjo* manga eyes, characters in such girls’ comics had huge eyes made of enormous, dilated orbs of black pupils filled with numerous stars, sparkles, and glittering dots... These large-eyed girls were always accompanied by highly stylized drawings of blooming flowers that crowded the background. These flowers were so abundant and so consistent in girls’ comics that their presence became the signature feature, an icon, of the girls’ comics style.<sup>196</sup>

Shiokawa also notes the “nearly complete avoidance of secondary sexual features, especially breasts”<sup>197</sup> during this period, that kept heroines in safe girl-child territory and assured they were cute girls instead of beautiful, *grown-up* women.

In the postwar period, *kodomo* manga (children’s comics) continued to prosper, with characters in the tradition of interwar children’s mascots like Norakuro and Tank Tankuro. The unavoidable reference is Tezuka Osamu (1928-89), the author whose centrality to the postwar manga and anime canon and industry earned him the monikers “father of manga,” “god of manga,” or “the Walt Disney of Japan.”<sup>198</sup> Tezuka is the author of cute characters which have raised to the status of Japanese national mascots, such as Leo and Tetsuwan Atomu—known, in the West, as Kimba the White Lion and Astro Boy, respectively, a lion cub and a boy robot. The latter was also the first anime television series, produced by Tezuka’s animation studio Mushi Production and aired from 1963 to 1966. [Figure 62] Although Tezuka dabbled in *shōjo* manga with *Ribbon no Kishi* (*Princess Knight*, 1953-56), a fantasy adventure following in the footsteps of *Nazo no Clover*’s tomboy (*otenba*) heroine, Tezuka’s main contribution to *kawaii* culture was his borrowing of Disneyesque cuteness to create *kyara*, i.e., a very stylized

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<sup>196</sup> Shiokawa, “Cute but Deadly: Women and Violence in Japanese Comics,” 101.

<sup>197</sup> Shiokawa, 101.

<sup>198</sup> Natsu Onoda Power, *God of Comics: Osamu Tezuka and the Creation of Post-World War II Manga* (Jackson Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 2009); Helen McCarthy and Katsuhiro Otomo, *The Art of Osamu Tezuka: God of Manga* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2009).

character, often with cute features and proportions.<sup>199</sup> As noted by scholar Marco Pellitteri, although Tezukian *kyara* were *kawaii*, they were often “involved in stories where their substance is not abstract but solid, vulnerable, and at times mortal.”<sup>200</sup> However, in the case of later *kyara* that took inspiration from Tezuka, like the beloved robotic cat Doraemon, [Figure 63] the body of the cute mascot typically becomes “dehumanized and superhumanized, abstract and inanimate,”<sup>201</sup> and thus no longer subject to vulnerability and death.

In the 1970s, authors like Igarashi Yumiko (*Candy Candy*, 1975-79) or Yamato Waki (*Haikara-san ga Tōru*, 1975-77, *Asakiyumemishi*, 1979) helped revitalize the *shōjo* demographic with strong female leads, while sticking to traditional themes (e.g., heart-warming stories about orphans). [Figure 64] Moreover, the 1970s cemented an influential trope that contrasted ordinary cute heroines with the more mature-looking, *utsukushii* (“beautiful”) nemesis. Shiokawa exemplifies the cute vs. beauty trope, for instance, by comparing Marie Antoinette, the protagonist of Ikeda Ryoko’s manga hit *Versailles no Bara* (*The Rose of Versailles*, 1972-73), with her nemesis, Madame Du Barry. As she puts it,

This particular formula implicitly leaves a message that being ‘cute’ is a virtue and, in an oddly paradoxical way, strength. However, cuteness in this instance is not in direct opposition to ugliness or neatness. It is clear by the characteristics of the heroine’s nemesis that cuteness in the girls’ comics convention battles against “beauty,” that is, perfection and maturity... Masubuchi argues that physical beauty is a fatefully determined state of perfection, unlike the states indicated by such expressions as *kirei* (pretty, neat), *suteki* (dashing), or *kakko ii* (cool, good-looking)... In other words, even conventionally ‘ugly’ or ‘plain’ persons, as many girls’ comics heroines are supposed to be, can make themselves ‘cute’ by working hard at it.<sup>202</sup>

Ikeda Ryoko is part of the Year 24 Group (*Nijūyo-nen Gumi*), a group of female manga artists that revolutionized the *shōjo* genre in the 1970s. Along with Ikeda, authors such as Hagio Moto (*Thomas no Shinzō*, *The Heart of Thomas*, 1974-75), Takemiya Keiko (*Kaze to Ki no Uta*, “Ballad of the Wind and the Trees,” 1976-84), or Aoike Yasuko’s *Eroica Yori Ai wo Komete* (*From Eroica With Love*, 1976-2012),<sup>203</sup> changed the form and content of Japanese

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<sup>199</sup> Pellitteri, *The Dragon and the Dazzle*, 80, 184.

<sup>200</sup> Pellitteri, 80.

<sup>201</sup> Pellitteri, 80.

<sup>202</sup> Shiokawa, “Cute but Deadly: Women and Violence in Japanese Comics,” 107.

<sup>203</sup> Other notable authors and works of associated with the Year 24 Group include Ōshima Yumiko’s *Banana Bread no Pudding* (1978), Wata no Kuni Hoshi (*The Star of Cottonland*, 1978-87), Yamagishi Ryoko’s *Shiroi Heya no Futari* (“Couple of the White Room,” 1971), Kihara Toshie’s *Angélique* (1977), Ichijō Yukari’s *Maya no Souretsu* (“Maya’s Funeral Procession,” 1972), or Morita Jun’s short stories.

girls' comics. As well, their work rehabilitated the genre in the eyes of the critics and a broader crowd (beyond the target audience of teenage girls), that up to that point had generally held a negative view on girls' comics.<sup>204</sup> The Year 24 Group breathed a new depth and expanded the scope of what cuteness can express. Ikeda's *Versailles no Bara*, for instance, experimented with gender and class roles and introduced a political flavor into the love narrative, namely, with the iconic character of Lady Oscar, an androgynous female lead who joins the French Revolution, playing a foundational role in the rise of the "cool" (more than cute) *shōjo* heroine. [Figure 65] In turn, Hagio and Takemiya pioneered the *shōnen-ai* genre in manga with stories about same-sex love between *bishōnen*, i.e., doe-eyed "pretty boys" with angelic faces and androgynous bodies. *Thomas no Shinzō* and *Kaze to Ki no Uta* are both dark, existential stories set in "exotic," decidedly non-Japanese backgrounds, namely, nineteenth-century European Catholic boarding schools, dealing with difficult topics like suicide, sexual abuse, racism, homophobia, and pedophilia. [Figures 66 & 67]

In the 1980s, the majority of *bishōnen* characters morphed from Hagio and Takemiya's genderless cherubs to incorporate more masculine features, already found in the characters of Oscar and Andre from Ikeda's *The Rose of Versailles* or Dorian and Klaus from Aoike's *From Eroica with Love*. *Bishōnen* characters also became associated with the rise of the *dōjinshi* ("self-published" or "niche" magazines) or amateur manga movement and girls' comics magazines (e.g., *June*) that published *tanbi* ("aesthetic") gay erotica "fusing together beauty, romance, and eroticism, along with a dash of decadence."<sup>205</sup> In amateur manga, female fans began to self-publish pornographic parodies of their favorite (male-oriented) shows, such as *Captain Tsubasa*, *Uchū Senkan Yamato* (*Space Battleship Yamato*), or *Saint Seiya*, where they "liked to do silly things with manly male characters, like putting them in ballet tunics or giving them kitty ears," or even "put the manly males in bed together."<sup>206</sup> The self-deprecating term *yaoi*—an acronym of *yama nashi*, *ochi nashi*, *imi nashi*, meaning "no climax, no point, no meaning"—emerged to describe these plotless gay dramedies or over-the-top melodramas. *Yaoi* characters from the 1980s and 1990s were often *bishōnen* with elongated faces, pointy chins, wide and sparkly rectangular eyes, flowy hair, and slender bodies with long legs and

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<sup>204</sup> Rachel "Matt" Thorn, "Introduction," in *The Heart of Thomas* (Seattle, Washington: Fantagraphics Books, 2013), 521.

<sup>205</sup> James Welker, 'A Brief History of Shonen'ai, Yaoi, and Boys Love', in *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan*, ed. Mark McLelland et al. (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 42–75.

<sup>206</sup> M. J. Johnson, "A Brief History of Yaoi," Sequential Tart, accessed October 15, 2017, [http://www.sequentialtart.com/archive/may02/ao\\_0502\\_4.shtml](http://www.sequentialtart.com/archive/may02/ao_0502_4.shtml).



well-developed torsos. In Ozaki Minami's iconic *Zetsuai 1989* (1989-91), that started as a *Captain Tsubasa* fanzine before transitioning to commercial publication, the characters are so stylized that at times they look more like alien creatures than men. [Figure 68]

While *tanbi* was never entirely divorced from the *kawaii*, the late 1990s and 2000s brought back a cuter sensibility to boys' love or BL (the dominant term for this genre today). Popular series like Nakamura Shungiku's *Junjō Romantica* (*Pure Romance*, since 2003) or *Sekai-Ichi Hatsukoi* ("The World's Greatest First Love," since 2006) retain *tanbi* elements but are populated with *chibi* "cute caricatures," adorable animal mascots, round-eyed blushing boys, and lots of pink in covers and illustrations. [Figure 69] Contemporary *bishōnen* designs, both in *yaoi* and "regular" (heterosexual) *shōjo* manga like *Fruits Basket* (1998-2006) or *Ōran Kōkō Host Club* (*Ouran High School Host Club*, 2002-10), tend to have slighter body frames, larger heads with delicate jawlines and necks, and bigger eyes than the majority of their 1980s and early 1990s predecessors (e.g. *Sailor Moon*'s Tuxedo Mask or *Mars*' Rei Kashino). Anime also contributed to the cutification of characters, as television adaptations of manga tended to make characters rounder and more standardized (see, for instance, the difference between the *Sailor Moon* manga and its 1990s anime adaptation). More recent titles like *Free!* or *Yuri!!! on Ice* draw on this "cute continuum" to deliver sports anime (swimming and figure skating, respectively) catering to female audiences with "passionate friendships" between male protagonists and fanservice for women. [Figure 70]

Cuteness played an equally crucial role in the development of boys' comics, or *shōnen manga*. During the 1970s and 1980s, many heroines in *shōnen* manga morphed into what Japanese psychologist Saitō Tamaki calls the *sentō bishōjo* or "beautiful fighting girl."<sup>207</sup> This new breed of cute female character was perky with a childlike face, and wore increasingly revealing outfits "that emphasized their smallish but well-developed breasts."<sup>208</sup> [Figure 71] She was also powerful enough to fight alongside male heroes, or become the protagonist herself. [Figure 72] These characteristics distinguished the *sentō bishōjo* from the virtuous madonnas and passive sidekicks abounding thus far,<sup>209</sup> fluctuating between empowerment and sexual objectification in a challenge to "easy categorization as either (or simply) a feminist or sexist script."<sup>210</sup> Indeed, one of the most iconic *sentō bishōjo*, appearing in the *Daicon IV*

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<sup>207</sup> J. Keith Vincent, "Making It Real: Ficition, Desire, and the Queerness of the Beautiful Fighting Girl," in *Beautiful Fighting Girl* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

<sup>208</sup> Shiokawa, "Cute but Deadly: Women and Violence in Japanese Comics," 110.

<sup>209</sup> Shiokawa, 107-12.

<sup>210</sup> Vincent, "Making It Real: Ficition, Desire, and the Queerness of the Beautiful Fighting Girl," x.

*Opening Animation*—a 6-minute anime made for the 1983 Nihon SF Taikai convention in Osaka, by an amateur group that went on to form the influential animation studio Gainax—is a cute girl in a Playboy bunny outfit, who singlehandedly fights an endless array of famous sci-fi and fantasy characters while air surfing in a magical sword. [Video 7] Moreover, the *sentō bishōjo* spread across male and female demographics, from Miyazaki Hayao’s animated feature films (e.g., *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*) to magical girl animanga like Takahashi Rumiko’s *Urusei Yatsura*, Nagai Gō’s *Cutie Honey*, or Takeuchi Naoko’s *Sailor Moon*.

The *sentō bishōjo* contributed to the appearance of *lolicon* during the early 1980s, in specialized comics magazines like *Lemon People* or *Manga Burikko*, as well as *dōjinshi* and home video animations. *Lolicon*, from “Lolita complex,” is a genre of pornographic manga, anime, or videogames in which underage characters engage in sexual acts, ranging from soft eroticism to violent or “perverse” (*hentai*) scenarios, often with techno-fetishist elements.<sup>211</sup> [Figure 73] While aimed at a male adult audience, *lolicon* magazines in the 1980s often featured the work of female *shōjo* manga artists, male artists mimicking the style of girls’ comics, or other forms of cuteness.<sup>212</sup> In fact, “the first blatantly *lolicon* work in Japan”<sup>213</sup> was published in 1979 by the “father of *lolicon*,” Azuma Hideo, in a contribution to the manga fanzine *Cybele* that featured erotic depictions of *kawaii* Tezuka-style characters. Other heroines, like Miyazaki’s *sentō bishōjo* or magical girls like Minky Momo, became *lolicon* icons portrayed by fans in erotic and pornographic amateur manga. As scholar Shigematsu Setsu suggests, in *lolicon* manga, “it is not the age of the girl that is attractive, but a form of ‘cuteness’ (*kawaii-rashii*) that she represents.”<sup>214</sup> In this same vein, Patrick Galbraith argues that *lolicon* cannot be reduced to a male power fantasy, as its imagery is diverse in terms of style, content, reception, and its place in the broader crossgender flows at play in Japanese comics.<sup>215</sup>

In 1989, the incident of serial killer Miyazaki Tsutomu, the “*otaku* murderer,” who killed several children, originated a nation-wide debate on obscenity that targeted “hazardous

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<sup>211</sup> Setsu Shigematsu, ‘Dimensions of Desire: Sex, Fantasy, and Fetish in Japanese Comics’, in *Themes and Issues in Asian Cartooning: Cute, Cheap, Mad, and Sexy*, ed. John A. Lent (Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press 1, 1999), 130.

<sup>212</sup> Patrick W. Galbraith, “*Lolicon*: The Reality of ‘Virtual Child Pornography’ in Japan,” *Image and Narrative: Online Magazine of the Visual Narrative* 12, no. 1 (March 1, 2011): 102.

<sup>213</sup> Patrick W. Galbraith, *The Otaku Encyclopedia: An Insider’s Guide to the Subculture of Cool Japan* (Kodansha USA, 2009), 128.

<sup>214</sup> “Dimensions of Desire: Sex, Fantasy, and Fetish in Japanese Comics,” 130.

<sup>215</sup> Galbraith, “*Lolicon*,” 102.

comics” and the anime and manga superfans known as *otaku* (a term roughly equivalent to “nerd” or “geek” in the West). In the early 1990s, the police raided bookstores selling *dōjinshi* and filled obscenity charges against authors, and large-scale self-publishing events, like the Comic Market (or Comiket)—Japan’s largest fan convention, mostly dedicated to amateur manga—were put under scrutiny by the authorities.<sup>216</sup> While the infatuation with *bishōjo* characters did not waver and was reignited by the success of series like *Shinseiki Evangelion* (*Neon Genesis Evangelion*) and *Tokimeki Memorial*, a new trend in male-oriented manga and anime rose in popularity that remains strong to this day: *moé*. *Moé* replaced the explicit sexuality in *lolicon* by feelings of tenderness and rooting for characters that fit “little sister” (*imōto*) or “daughter” (*musume*) types, sometimes round and adorable to the point of blobishness, known as a *loli*. The origins of *moé* overlap with the *lolicon* tradition, wavering between or combining, as Murakami Takashi puts it, “an innocent fantasy” and “distorted sexual desires.”<sup>217</sup> [Figure 74] However, other series within the *moé* anime and manga genre, like the iconic *Yotsuba&!* by Azuma Kiyohiko, present wholesome slice of life comedies, in which cuteness is the central affect in sophisticated storytelling and artwork. [Figure 75] For a more in-depth analysis of *moé*, read the encyclopedia entries “It Girl” and “CGDCT,” or the paper “She’s Not Your *Waifu*; She’s an Eldritch Abomination.”

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<sup>216</sup> Comic Market Committee, “What Is the Comic Market?” (COMIKET, 2014), “The 3rd Harumi Era,” <https://www.comiket.co.jp/info-a/WhatIsEng201401.pdf>.

<sup>217</sup> Murakami, *Little Boy*, 55.

# CODA

## Feeling cute, might delete later

i.

When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk—harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring—I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. “I” want none of that element, sign of their desire; “I” do not want to listen, “I” do not assimilate it, “I” expel it. But since the food is not an “other” for “me,” who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself.

- Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection*<sup>218</sup>

A sticky film of protein forms over hot milk—white milk, sweet milk, a signifier of childhood, and baby schema. Kristeva’s words emphasize the minorness of the lactoderm. *Harmless, thin, and pitiful*. A fragile, volatile surface entangled with the realm of abject phenomeno-poetics, of the primal impulse to spit out and expel the Other in us.

How far can you stretch the cute, until it is nothing but insignificant?

How cute is a nail paring?

ii.

In its apparent immediacy and “dumbness,” cuteness resists, even repels, the seriousness expected from art and the academia. No matter how much thought one puts into analyzing cute things, there remains an impression of an academic hoax.

(Do we *really* need a paper on cat videos?)

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<sup>218</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2–3.

The expression “Cute Studies” captures this contradiction. Do Cute Studies study cuteness, or are the studies themselves cute? The “cute” before the “studies” adjectivizes less than it classifies.

iii.

In “The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the ‘Informe’ and the Abject,” Hal Foster and Benjamin Buchloh refer to the scatological and “scatterological” impulses in art,<sup>219</sup> the latter suggesting a Batailleian collapse of the structure. Like the formless, the cute is seldom informal. Instead, as Sianne Ngai puts it, it “bears the look of an object not only formed but all too easily de-formed under the pressure of the subject’s feeling or attitude towards it.”<sup>220</sup>

My encyclopedia explores how cuteness’s dark side ties in with these de-forming drives. To which one may add—an eschatological drive toward the end of human history. Enantiodromia: the unconscious opposite of the *kinderschema* is death; and, of beginnings, the end.

iv.

The cute is a valuable, although undervalued, tool for navigating issues of time and scale, critical in topical debates like the Anthropocene—or, as Jen Boyle and Wan-Chao Kao point out, “the study of cuteness, at its heart, is an investigation of the problematics of temporality.”<sup>221</sup>

Cuteness “facilitates a kind of aesthetic time travel backward and forward,”<sup>222</sup> an out-of-jointness in which the Child works as a time-traveling device between the far-off past and the distant future. Our childhood (or even, *ancestral*) memories are put on a continuum with the discourse of “reproductive futurism,”<sup>223</sup> projecting our species into the future. After all, as

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<sup>219</sup> Foster et al., “The Politics of the Signifier II.”

<sup>220</sup> “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde,” 816.

<sup>221</sup> “Introduction: The Time of the Child,” in *The Retro-Futurism of Cuteness*, ed. Jen Boyle and Wan-Chuan Kao (New York: Punctum Books, 2017), 13.

<sup>222</sup> Kao and Boyle, 14.

<sup>223</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2004), 3.

Lee Edelman puts it, “the future is kid stuff.”<sup>224</sup> But in the face of our present social, technological, and environmental crises, survival is not a simple thing to do.

Far from removed from reality, the “minor” aesthetic category of cuteness has factored, and continues to factor, into the evolution of humans and nonhumans. Dogs, cats, and other “companion species” have been selectively bred to create cute pets, often with terrible consequences for their health.<sup>225</sup> Other species are killed in favor of cuter ones—like the grey squirrels in England, in favor of the native, and quainter, reds.<sup>226</sup> Studies suggest that the strong presence of cute animals like giraffes, tigers, elephants, or pandas in popular culture creates a ‘virtual population’ in the public’s mind, “actively contributing to the false perception that these animals are not at risk of extinction, and therefore not in need of conservation.”<sup>227</sup> Moreover, plush toys, used by green organizations to raise awareness for environmental issues, often contain non-biodegradable materials like polyester, undermining their causes.<sup>228</sup>

v.

Against this backdrop, the global dissemination of *kawaii* culture may index a broader “crisis of the future that modern capitalist societies such as Japan know,” suggesting that the West is just catching up to the state of political depression in which Japan has lived for several decades.

The image of Japan’s social order as one of harmony and consensus, “effectively solving the problems of advanced industrial societies through group cooperation,”<sup>229</sup> has translated into—to use Lauren Berlant’s formulation—a form of “cruel optimism.” That is, it has become a “relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose

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<sup>224</sup> Edelman, 2.

<sup>225</sup> “‘Survival of the Cutest’ Proves Darwin Right,” *ScienceDaily*, January 21, 2010, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/01/100120093525.htm>.

<sup>226</sup> Patrick Barkham, “‘Kill Them, Kill Them, Kill Them’: The Volunteer Army Plotting to Wipe out Britain’s Grey Squirrels,” *The Guardian*, June 2, 2017, sec. Environment, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jun/02/kill-them-the-volunteer-army-plotting-to-wipe-out-britains-grey-squirrels>.

<sup>227</sup> Agence France-Presse, “Using Cute Animals in Pop Culture Makes Public Think They’re Not Endangered – Study,” *The Guardian*, April 13, 2018, sec. Environment, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/apr/13/using-cute-animals-in-pop-culture-makes-public-think-theyre-not-endangered-study>.

<sup>228</sup> “Saving or Harming the Planet with Plush Toys?,” *Fur Commission USA*, accessed June 14, 2018, <http://furcommission.com/saving-the-planet-with-plush-toys/>.

<sup>229</sup> Ellis S. Krauss, Thomas P. Rohlen, and Patricia G. Steinhoff, eds., *Conflict in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984).

realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic.”<sup>230</sup> The phenomeno-poetics of the *kawaii* negotiate this complex web of impossible or too possible desires regarding gender, nature, society, and techno-science.

vi.

While the *kawaii* (and the cute in general) is entangled with the systemic violence of capitalism, it does not inevitably submit to it. In “The Art of Cute Little Things: Nara Yoshitomo’s Parapolitics” (2010), Marilyn Ivy produces the concept of parapolitics to indicate an alternative form of political engagement which often goes unrecognized but can “produce forms of solidarity resistant to right-wing politics, the justification of war, and neo-nationalist movements in Japan (and elsewhere).”<sup>231</sup> Works like Nara’s, in their re-functioning of the *kawaii* with an activist sensibility, enact a parapolitics of cuteness that hovers outside the arena of mainstream politics, as an “expressive means to identify... experiences of advanced capitalist everydayness and the mysteries of psychic maturation.”<sup>232</sup>

The “weak-strength” (Brandon LaBelle) of the *kawaii*, with all its negotiations and contradictions, can potentially resist the subjugation and control of living bodies, human or otherwise, through the joy of connectedness, of losing ourselves in the anarchic (para)politics of play.<sup>233</sup>

vii.

Tackling with the cute and the *kawaii* entails a constant reckoning with their ambiguity. Cuteness thrives in the crevices of dialectic oppositions. Man, woman; adult, child; Western, non-Western; human, nonhuman, sexed, asexual; animate, inanimate; reality, fantasy; art, craft. Sometimes these oppositions are clouded, sometimes reinforced, but always knotty, as cute objects are “both amenable to manipulation by authoritarian structures and available as a tool to critique such institutions.”<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 24.

<sup>231</sup> “The Art of Cute Little Things: Nara Yoshitomo’s Parapolitics,” *Mechademia* 5, no. 1 (November 10, 2010): 29.

<sup>232</sup> Ivy, 5.

<sup>233</sup> Cross, *The Cute and the Cool*, 44.

<sup>234</sup> Dale et al., *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, 27.

Often, cuteness works as an ambiguous image akin to Ludwig Wittgenstein's rabbit-duck illusion, slipping between two ways of reading it that seem to be mutually exclusive but coexist in the same formation: avant-garde or reactionary, subversive or complacent, engaged or escapist and apathetic, capable of destabilizing conservative patriarchal power or aligned with its chauvinist fantasies.

viii.

As Sianne Ngai suggests, "it is not just that cuteness is an aesthetic oriented toward commodities" but that "something about the commodity form itself already seems permeated by its sentimentality."<sup>235</sup> The contrived charm of the cute, seen in adorable blobjects and smiling mascots begging us to take them home, wraps us in the warm and fuzzy feelings of self-indulgent tenderness and nostalgia, domesticity and romance.

Here, cuteness is arguably at its darkest: embedded in the industrial-complex, working as an affective apparatus for binding humans to a social and economic order that fails the Earth we inhabit and us.

ix.

Two impulses coexist in contemporary art and pop culture as far as cuteness is concerned. On the one hand, the impulse to wildify the cute. On the other, the desire to cutify the wild and dangerous.

The first takes something that is considered adorable, harmless or otherwise "prosocial" and infuses it with qualities liable to cause shock, disgust, or discomfort. The trends of *guro-kawaii*, *kimo-kawaii*, or *busu-kawaii*, among others, capture this stretching of the limits of the cute to the disturbing ends of antagonism and aversion. The wildification of cuteness ranges from the "soft" creepiness of Kyary Pamyu Pamyu and Kobitodukan to bloodier incarnations like Happy Tree Friends or Gloomy Bear, or even the sexualization of cuteness in *lolicon*, *ero-guro*, and *ero-kawaii*.

In turn, the cutification of the wild is "connected to domestication in its broadest sense: the taming of the wild and dangerous"<sup>236</sup> found, for instance, in Japanese alternative idols like

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<sup>235</sup> Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 2012, 4.

<sup>236</sup> Dale, 'The Appeal of the Cute Object: Desire, Domestication, and Agency,' 52.



Babymetal or BiS, that take music genres characterized by violent imagery and mainstream inaccessibility, like metal or punk, and cutify them with the aesthetics of Japanese idol groups (e.g., Babymetal’s “Gimme Chocolate!!” or BiS’s “Idol Is Dead”). Likewise, the Superflat movement seeks to cutify the tropes of Western modernism and postmodernism. In such cases, “cuteness is raising deep-rooted anxieties towards authenticity and originality in art, and the appropriation of negativity by a sanitizing embrace of ‘cute capitalism.’”<sup>237</sup>

Perhaps contrary to expectations, then, the cutification of the wild—epitomized by Murakami Takashi’s cutification of the atomic bomb in *Little Boy*—often comes off as more unsettling than the wildification of the cute.

x.

In *Logique de la Sensation (The Logic of Sensation, 1981)*, Gilles Deleuze writes that Francis Bacon considered himself to be “cerebrally pessimistic” but “nervously optimistic.”<sup>238</sup> The former relates to his figurative side, his painting the horrors of the world; the latter, to his faith in the intensity of life and sensation.

Bacon, of all artists, is decidedly not cute. But there may still be something to take home in relation to cute aesthetics. In the realm of the spectacle, the benign cute object evokes the violence inherent to the commodity form; as Ngai puts it, “what we love because it submits to us.”<sup>239</sup> But archaic cuteness, the “natural” cute, manifests the love of life—a shameless enjoyment of pretty colors and cuddly characters, of the fluffy, soothing, and playful. Regardless of how minor these may be with respect to the Western art canon, the aww-factor is a violent enough sensation to bleed through the spectacle, to disarticulate our sense of self and the narrative of our desires—to fall open to play, and insist on boundless compassion.

xi.

My encyclopedia maps the relationship between cuteness and negativity through cute filth, cute outbreaks, cute others, and cute scatters. It follows the entanglement of *kawaii* aesthetics with dirty or disgusting matters, from physical pollution to pollutive formations in mediatic milieus; instances in which alterity is rendered cute, including “abject” human others

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<sup>237</sup> Anne Allison, “The Cultural Politics of Pokemon Capitalism,” January 1, 2002, 2.

<sup>238</sup> *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation by Gilles Deleuze* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003), 43.

<sup>239</sup> Ngai, “Our Aesthetic Categories,” October 1, 2010, 64.

(women, LGBT+), abhuman (supernatural, alien, monstrous), and nonhuman entities (animals, robots); the collapsing boundaries of the political, legal, institutional, or stylistic, that is, the perceived contagiousness (miasma?) of cute aesthetics. Cuteness shapes and sometimes disrupts the Whole, by enacting a cutification of form and composition.

As pop-cultural artifacts associated with Japan become a central feature of twenty-first century mediatic milieus—reaching from the heights of contemporary fine arts to the netherworlds of mass culture and the “wrong side” of the Internet—the *kawaii* (as a corner piece of the broader cute aesthetics framework), anime, manga, visual novels, and so on may be used as privileged analytical tools to explore these *liaisons dangereuses* in contemporary society at large, as they are very far from being a Japanese predicament.

The shared territories between Japanese and Western art (and societies, for that matter) in today’s globalized world become a fluid common ground that continuously shapes contemporary worldviews.

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# Absolute Boyfriend

*Zettai Kareshi*,<sup>240</sup> or *Absolute Boyfriend*, is a reverse harem shōjo manga by Watase Yū, [Figure 1] serialized between 2003 and 2005 in *Shōjo Comic*, a comics magazine known for running contents more risqué than other competing publications (e.g., *Margaret* or *Hana to Yume*). Given its popularity, the series has also been adapted into a dorama in Japan (*Zettai Kareshi*, 2008) and other East Asian television series, including the Taiwanese *Absolute Darling* in 2012 and Korean *My Absolute Boyfriend* in 2019. [Video 1] Despite Watase’s mastery of the comics medium, *Zettai Kareshi* does not appear outwardly different from the many comedy-dramas abounding in Japanese comics aimed at teenage girls. Except perhaps for its somewhat daunting premise: Izawa Riiko, a virgin high school student who is consistently rejected by her crushes, accidentally orders an ideal “boyfriend” online. At the beginning of the series, Riiko, amidst her latest romantic frustration, meets a mysterious sales clerk with an orientalist sci-fi look reminiscent of a genie in the lamp, who directs her to a shady-looking website called *LoverShop*. *LoverShop*, that Riiko at first mistakes for a slave trade organization, promises to “furnish you with the ideal lover, who will exist solely for your sake.” Convinced that it is a joke, Riiko ends up seizing a “three-day free trial period” opportunity to design her fully customized boyfriend. And so, the next day two delivery men hand her a card box the size of a man containing, well, a *man*. [Figure 2] More precisely, what appears to be a life-sized Ken android programmed to fall in love with his buyer when activated with a kiss. After speed reading through the handling manual—whose first Q&A entry is “is it possible to get pregnant?” (“The hell!! That’s so wrong!!” says Riiko)—Riiko learns that the body’s lips have a sensor that recognizes the customer as its “lover.” In an inverted fairy tale sequence, complete with sparkling screentone effects, heartbeat onomatopoeia and lots of blushing on Riiko’s part (“I’ve never even done this with a living male, but...here goes nothin’!!”), the heroine reaches towards Night and wakes her enchanted prince with a kiss on the lips, thus setting him to fall madly in love with her.

Riiko’s “boyfriend” is a new type of sex doll: the Nightly 01 model by a company of dubious origins, called Kronos Heaven. The android’s realism resembles that of high-end products like the CandyGirl dolls, produced and marketed in Japan by the Tokyo-based

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<sup>240</sup> Yū Watase, *Absolute Boyfriend*, 6 Volumes (San Francisco, CA: VIZ Media LLC, 2006).

company Orient Industries. [Figure 3] Like the supple silicon flesh covering the CandyGirls' stainless steel skeleton, Riiko immediately marvels at the softness of Nightly 01's skin.<sup>241</sup> Unlike the CandyGirls, however, Nightly 01 is a *bishōnen*, a “beautiful boy,” typical of manga for adolescent girls, where most male cast members fit into this mold. During Nightly 01's setup procedure (“Hello, Girlfriend,” he greets upon waking), Riiko names the figure “Night” and quickly realizes that her “boyfriend” has a predisposition to undress and make sexual advances—that the heroine promptly refuses, explaining that “I want to do it right and fall in love first...! Then we're supposed to wait until after we both say ‘I love you!’!! That's why, (for now) it's no!!”. Confronted with Riiko's normative *shōjo* manga fantasies, Night kisses her on the forehead at states, smiling, that “a boyfriend... doesn't force his girlfriend to do anything she's not ready for.” This early interaction, in which Night swiftly adjusts from a potential rapist to a respectful lover, establishes the basis of Riiko and Night's relationship.

Together, Riiko and Night undergo a coming-of-age journey in which they discover love while tackling with posthuman issues such as what distinguishes humans from a figure that can think and feel emotions. As the story progresses, the romance between the heroine and the android turns out to be “real,” exploring a theme dear to Japanese comics and animation, that of cyborg subjectivity, with its fair amount of corniness and genuinely heart-warming moments. Indeed, *Zettai Kareshi*'s camp sensibility makes for a truly captivating read. On the one hand, it embraces many soap opera clichés and plot twists: a love triangle involving Riiko's childhood friend and suitor Sōshi, who is secretly and not so secretly in love with the heroin; the manipulative frenemy; the breakup drama; or Riiko's long lost first love, who suddenly emerges from her past. On the other, these tropes are intermingled with the genres of fantasy and science fiction, deliberately removing the story from its grounded, daily life scenarios. Night, for instance, proves to be a bona fide action hero, ready to give anyone who messes with his girlfriend a piece of his mind and fist. Additionally, *Zettai Kareshi* is sprinkled with pulpy and nonsensical occurrences, including mood rings, flash visits to paradisiac tropical islands, obstacle courses in spas, miniaturization, and epic fights with rival robots. The result is a quirky yet perfectly integrated mix of by-the-book *shōjo* manga and genre pastiche, making Watase's series a rare bird within Japanese girl-oriented media. [Figure 4]

In “Sex and the Single Cyborg,” Sharalyn Orbaugh notes that although Donna Haraway's *The Cyborg Manifesto* proclaims that “the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender

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<sup>241</sup> Patrick W. Galbraith, *The Otaku Encyclopedia: An Insider's Guide to the Subculture of Cool Japan* (Kodansha USA, 2009), 39.

world,” Japanese manga and anime often deal with this topic in ways that are very much ingrained within the binary opposition between sexes. Even in highly innovative anime works such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and *Ghost In The Shell*, that “challenge the notion of the individual, autonomous identity housed in a singular body,”<sup>242</sup> sex-gender roles play an essential role. At first glance, *Zettai Kareshi* appears removed from such complex debates, as the series’ humorous tone and light-hearted *shōjo* manga tropes frame its sci-fi element. What is more, all the characters in *Zettai Kareshi* are “normative” (hetero, cis) individuals, including Night, who is not at all the monstrous or uncanny cyborg, but a pretty boy—in fact, as one reviewer points out on *Goodreads*, by the end of the series, one could almost forget that Night is not human. But it is precisely because *Zettai Kareshi* lacks the posthuman radicalism of *Evangelion* or *Ghost In The Shell* that it is worth scrutinizing. *Zettai Kareshi*’s focus is on the subversion of an “ordinary” female fantasy: the Prince Charming. Night (whose name is pronounced like “knight,” as in “knight in shining armor”) is the series’ crucial element, as the narrative shenanigans revolve around his anomalous personhood, or objecthood, in a silly and charming way that nevertheless manages to gnaw at traditional social categories and hierarchies.

Unlike other iterations of the Prince Charming, *Zettai Kareshi* does not *naturally* present Night as the dashing handsome model boyfriend of *shōjo* romance. Instead, he is shown to be the product of Riiko’s point-by-point (and rather gigantic) wishlist, which she eagerly orders on the *Kronos Heaven* website: “Skilled, smart, cute, stylish, kind!!, reliable, manly (will scold me when I need it), adorably naïve, specialty is cooking, pre-emptive reflexes, just a little perverted, a strong fighter!!, good hygiene, will save me when I’m in a tight spot, gets just a little bit jealous, a little forceful, humble, refreshing.” [Figure 5] Riiko’s wishlist is hardly surprising; after all, Night was custom-made by the target demographics of *shōjo* manga—a 16-year-old girl. This breakage of the Fourth Wall, acknowledging the medium and the gender conventions occurring between the characters and the audience, is one among the various ways in which *Zettai Kareshi* presents the Prince Charming as a highly processed commodity for mass consumption.

For instance, Night’s “love at first sight” for the heroine is a preprogrammed feature, like the romantic relationships between the player of an *otome* game and the *bishōnen* characters who pursue her. Even the “kiss of life” through which Riiko initiates Night is an

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<sup>242</sup> Sharalyn Orbaugh, “Sex and the Single Cyborg: Japanese Popular Culture Experiments in Subjectivity,” *Science Fiction Studies* 29, no. 3 (2002): 439.

activation procedure in the latter's user manual. Furthermore, in a reversal of social ascension tales like Cinderella, in which a pauper marries a prince and becomes a princess, Riiko acquires her fantasy boy through a commercial transaction that leaves her on the brink of bankruptcy. As the Kronos Heaven sales clerk later explains to Riiko, each customization option comes at the cost of 1 000 000 yen, confirming her suspicions that LoverShop is, in fact, an exploitative scheme. "By th' way, ya put in too many ideal options!!", the seller chastises, stressing both the unrealistic quality of Riiko's expectations and her penchant for conspicuous consumption.

To make up for her debt of 100 million yen, Riiko takes up a job as a hostess in a club. Night, who accompanies her to the job interview, is also recruited ("You have a beautiful face!" says the club manager, "If you'll wear women's clothing, then ok!!") and ends up serving customers in maid crossplay, while Riiko in a *nekomimi* ("cat ear") costume complains that the place reeks of *otaku*. Night's crossplaying sequence, which is a fanservice sequence to please *Zettai Kareshi*'s female audience, highlights the *bishōnen* as an ambiguously gendered figure outside human "normalcy" (for instance, seeing Night in his maid get-up, Riiko mentions defeatedly that "it suits you too well" and that "it's true... he's perfect because he's a figure, but..."). Moreover, when confronted with the hostess club's (as she puts it) "world of adults," Riiko becomes aware not only of the aggressive male gaze directed at her but that she too has been reduced to the condition of a reified sex figure, like Night. At one point, a customer grabs Riiko's shirt and pulls it up her bra, prompting Night to jump to her rescue and physically threaten the customer. As a result, they are fired, but the issue of objectification is followed-up in the next pages. Confronted with the fact that Riiko is unable to pay for Night, the sales clerk from Kronos Heaven demands that she lets the company collect information on her feelings to improve Night's performance. Kronos Heaven's objective, therefore, is to create the perfect lover not only in appearance but one who is capable of answering the ultimate Freudian question of "what does a woman want?" After all, concludes the sales clerk, "If ya don' have feelin's fer him, ya don' wanna do him, right?" To mine Riiko's emotions, Night wears a mood ring that turns red if the girl is happy, blue if angry, and black if sad. "An' when she feels good, it's pink! A pleasin' shade of pleasure" pitches the clerk.

The fact that the "female mystique" is reduced to a basic color code aligns with *Zettai Kareshi*'s camp sensibility, suggesting that Riiko's passions are just as objectifiable, and merchandisable, like Night's "fake" preprogrammed love. The objectifying element underlying *Zettai Kareshi* is most visible in the character of Night, who despite the narrative insistence on his humanization, suffers from several uncanny troubles throughout the series that disqualify

him as a proper human being. Not only does Riiko initially assume that Night is a corpse, but he is home delivered in a card box like an *Amazon* package, has a 72 hours trial period, a warranty, requires maintenance, and eventually, as we will see, succumbs to planned obsolescence. Riiko's childhood friend, Sōshi, even spots a bar code on the back of Night's ear, causing him to tell Riiko that Night is "strange" and "doesn't exactly seem human..."

On one memorable occasion, Night, forced to fight against a more advanced robotic model sent to fulfill the mission of becoming Riiko's lover in his stead, ends tearing off his rival's arm. The sight of the other robot's exposed circuits and metal frame is enough to keep Riiko awake at night, giving her second thoughts about her boyfriend's humanity ("Night really isn't human," Riiko reasons, "although I knew that from the time I brought him, now that I've seen an actual detached arm...!! I wonder if the h...head detaches too?"). The next day, Riiko learns that Night too did not escape unscathed from the confrontation: he greets Riiko in Chinese, has a conversation in Spanish, and prepares a foul-tasting breakfast. At school, Night reads the lesson in German as smoke starts to come out of his ear, and his arms bend into unnatural positions. Finally, Night feels dizzy and is taken to the infirmary. His mechanical malfunctions intensify Riiko's anxiety-filled thoughts: "Somehow like this, he seems like a machine, although he is soft to the touch, although he is warm and even though he is breathing... This is a robot," she concludes, wearily.

As Kronos Heaven takes Night's body in for repair, they provide him with a substitute miniature body. [Figure 6] During this time, Riiko attends school with Night in her pocket, like a portable toy reminiscent of Polly Pocket or Mighty Max.<sup>243</sup> At home, Night slips into Riiko's pajama, puts toothpaste on her now gigantic toothbrush, tries to fry an egg in a skillet four times his size, gets chased by a cat and is almost vacuum cleaned by his love rival, Sōshi. His recurring arguments with Sōshi also acquire a slapstick tone, due to the sheer difference in size between the two, as well as Night's bravado despite his diminutive form. Moreover, because Night's body swap from *bishōnen* to a *chibi* caricature happens towards the latter half of the story when his humanization is well underway, it tosses the android back into the uncanny valley of quasi-humanness. Along with other instances of Night's reification, the incident highlights what, according to Orbaugh, is a fundamental question of cyborg fiction:

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<sup>243</sup> Polly Pocket and Mighty Max were toy lines produced by the English company Bluebird Toys in the 1990s. While Polly Pocket was market at girls and Mighty Max at boys, both lines consisted of miniature figurines inside pocket-size cases containing playsets with different themes (for instance, a beauty salon or a dungeon).



“What is the power relationship between the biotic and the techno-mechanical components; which is ‘really’ in control.”<sup>244</sup>

*Zettai Kareshi*’s breakup arc addresses this topic: when another woman manages to kiss Night’s lips, she causes him momentarily to become her boyfriend and Riiko his “ex-girlfriend.” When Riiko confronts the Kronos Heaven sales clerk about it, he explains that Night identifies whoever kisses his lips as his lover and that the only way for the bond to become permanent is by having sex with him. “Ya need t’ hurry up an’ have sex with ‘im!” urges the clerk, in a perverse recreation of the peer pressure that teenagers experience to have sexual relations. After that, Riiko makes up her mind to steal Night back from the woman before he becomes hers irremediably. When she finally succeeds, *Zettai Kareshi* implies that Night himself wished to return to his former owner, thus circumventing his techno-mechanical imperative in the name of true love. Still, the question of whether Night’s attachment to Riiko is “real” remains an important one throughout the series.

Meanwhile, Riiko’s childhood friend, Sōshi, who, we learn, has always been in love with the heroine, attempts to win her over by asserting his biosocial supremacy over Night’s perceived abnormality. During the latter half of the series, Sōshi finally discovers Night’s secret and confronts Riiko, eventually confessing his feelings for her. From that moment on, the choice between Sōshi and Night and its ethical implications becomes *Zettai Kareshi*’s central point. Does Riiko prefer the Prince Charming, who is nothing but a figure preprogrammed to love her? Or the “real” man, who has silently loved and looked over her for years? As Riiko herself admits, “Sōshi, he’s pretty great... He can cook and his grades are good and he has a pretty face. And he knows me better than anyone...” hinting at the realness of the bond she shares with her childhood friend. Sōshi, in turn, insists that the heroine should wake up from the fairy tale and face reality. “Now’s the time to open your eyes,” he tells Riiko, warning her that Night is not human and that “someday you absolutely must separate.” In his attempts to convince Riiko, Sōshi appeals to nature and normality,<sup>245</sup> arguing that Riiko’s liaison with Night is *contra natura*: they will not grow old, have children or otherwise experience the “normal” human biological life cycle together. After much drama and indecision, the heroine eventually chooses Night over Sōshi, eliciting an outpour of anger from a significant part of *Zettai Kareshi*’s readers, who preferred that Riiko chose the human over a figure. At last, the

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<sup>244</sup> Orbaugh, “Sex and the Single Cyborg,” 440.

<sup>245</sup> Bo Bennett, *Logically Fallacious: The Ultimate Collection of Over 300 Logical Fallacies* (eBookIt.com, 2012), 87; Bo Bennett, “Appeal to Normality,” *Logically Fallacious*, November 24, 2014, <https://www.logicallyfallacious.com/tools/lp/Bo/LogicalFallacies/37/Appeal-to-Normality>.

couple consummates their love and, ironically, Night performs his original role not as a sex doll, but as Riiko's "true" lover. [Figure 7]

What makes Riiko's choice so provocative is not so much the human/robot or reality/fantasy dichotomy, but the interposition of Night between Sōshi and his "natural right" to the heroine. Indeed, as the "ground zero for all Princely Tropes,"<sup>246</sup> the Prince Charming has long since been a tool at the hands of patriarchal ideology, equating women with submission and men with a provider figure upon which feminine happiness is founded.<sup>247</sup> And while Riiko, herself, often fits the part of the damsel in distress rescued by her knight (or rather, her Night) in shining armor, *Zettai Kareshi* nevertheless turns the spell against the sorcerer. For when Riiko chooses Night over Sōshi, the choice is not merely between fantasy and reality, but what Sōshi himself represents: Riiko's socially legitimate partner, a hard-working, rational man who can provide her a "normal" life and does not hesitate to pathologize the heroine's attraction to Night. Sōshi also plays the part of a moral guardian of monogamy, lashing out at Riiko when she dares suggest that she might be in love with both him and Night. "That's ridiculous, saying 'both of you.' Normally people fall in love with one person, right?" he reprimands her angrily, proceeding to invalidate Riiko's polyamorous feelings: "I guess, you still haven't really fallen in love with anyone." [Figure 8]

Sōshi's insistence on framing Riiko's choice in terms of human exceptionalism, rather than a choice between two individuals, is his downfall. By arguing that he is categorically different from his love rival ("I'll teach Riiko that a human guy has more good points than a figure!!"), Sōshi fails to account for the fact that human sexuality is inseparable from fantasy, and that to some extent we all exist as imaginary characters in our partners' minds. As Keith Vincent explains in the preface to Saitō Tamaki's treatise on *otaku* sexuality, *Beautiful Fighting Girl*,

If our normative understanding of sexuality insists that it must have an object in the real world (preferably the opposite sex) and that everything else is only transitory, Saito's *otaku* recognizes that, insofar as the 'real world' is itself an extension of the Imaginary, there is no intrinsic difference between wanting a figure drawn or animated or a human being.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> "Prince Charming," *TV Tropes*, May 20, 2009,

<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/PrinceCharming>.

<sup>247</sup> Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 88.

<sup>248</sup> Keith Vincent, "Making It Real: Ficition, Desire, and the Queerness of the Beautiful Fighting Girl," in *Beautiful Fighting Girl* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xviii.

In this light, no matter how vanilla the sex, *Zettai Kareshi* already engages with a queering of normative romance—more than an android, Night is a Prince Charming, belonging in the realm of fantasy and fairy tales. At one point, the Kronos Heaven sales clerk even remarks about Night that “If this kind of fellow actually existed, I’d be scared!” only to conclude, wearily, “Well, he has been made already, but...” This comment testifies to the extent to which Night exists outside our “normal” reality.

The last chapter of *Zettai Kareshi* can indeed be understood as a return to order, despite its divergence from the typical happy ending of mainstream *shōjo* manga, in which the usual question is not whether, but *how* the leading couple ends up living happily ever after. At the end of the story, Night renounces his alterity, smashing the mood ring because “a normal boyfriend doesn’t need this”—this decision, however, seemingly leads to Night’s exclusion from the commodified world that he inhabits, i.e., the pages of a girls’ comic. After a few weeks of marital bliss, Night becomes sleepy and does not wake up from a nap on the couch. In a heartbreaking sequence, the “kiss of life” trope is subverted one last time, as Riiko attempts and fails to revive Night with several kisses, imitating how she had first activated him at the beginning of the story. Riiko is heartbroken and struggles to overcome the death of her lover until, one day, Sōshi returns from his self-exile in Spain, to where he had traveled after being rejected. He brings with him a letter where Night asks him to take care of Riiko after his “death.” In the end, it appears, the conservative agenda prevails, as, in the manner of a conventional bildungsroman, the status quo absorbs the heroine’s youthful transgressions. Still, the bildungsroman’s focus on compromise is ultimately absent from *Zettai Kareshi*. First, because as the sales clerk explains to Riiko, although Night has expired his shelf life, the body will be kept intact inside the headquarters of Kronos Heaven and the company will continue to attempt to repair it. Incidentally, Kronos Heaven’s offices look like a futuristic castle, and Night’s body is kept inside a narrow box resembling Snow White’s glass coffin (again, inverting the positions of the Prince Charming and the damsel). Thus, while *Zettai Kareshi*’s ending is undoubtedly tragic, the hope—or *threat*—remains that Night will one day return and claim the heroine.

Second, because Sōshi is “hurried out” of the picture in the last pages of the story, causing many readers to complain that the series’ finale felt rushed. It may very well be, but the fact remains that there is no ultimate celebration of adjustment or compromise in *Zettai Kareshi*. Not only that but when Sōshi returns to Japan, Riiko momentarily mistakes him for Night, in a beautifully executed scene conveying her wishful thinking through the comic

medium. In two identical panels, the heroine's hand is in the foreground, revealing an approaching silhouette beyond them, with Riiko uttering the syllable "Ni-" before realizing that the person is her childhood friend. [Figure 9] There is a dissonance at work between Sōshi's return to be by Riiko's side—and eventually, take over Night's place as her lover—and how the whole sequence focuses on Night's last words to the heroine, which Sōshi dictates to her in the form of a letter. After performing his duty as Night's envoy, Sōshi's screen time is cut to a single panel in a dismissive, slapstick tone. Above all, Riiko's final words in *Zettai Kareshi* leave no room for doubt: "Night... You will forever be my first man. My absolute boyfriend."

In the end, *Zettai Kareshi*'s understated queering of an otherwise "normal" heterosexual romance may lack the radical tone in which oft-analyzed works like *Evanglion* or *Ghost In The Shell* handle the question of singularity. Nevertheless, Watase's series shares their same belief that "while we may design our technologies, these tools... shape us in turn,"<sup>249</sup> i.e., that humans are and have always been complex entanglements of flesh, bones, and the whole body of techniques, methods, and processes through which we mediate our world. By turning the Prince Charming into a sex doll, *Zettai Kareshi* negotiates a space for nonconforming desires within the heteronormative matrix of mainstream Japanese girls' comics, playing into binary sex/gender oppositions to express fantasies and anxieties concerning the possibilities (and limits) of intimacy in late capitalist societies.

(See also "Floating Dakimakura," "Poison Girls" and "She's Not Your Waifu; She's an Eldritch Abomination")

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<sup>249</sup> Boris Ondreicka & Nadim Samman, *Rare Earth*, ed. Boris Ondreicka and Nadim Samman (Vienna: Sternberg Press, 2016).

# (Betamale)

As you look at the screen, it is possible to believe you are gazing into eternity. You see the things that were inside you. This is the womb. The original site of the imagination. You do not move your eyes from the screen. You have become invisible. The images captivate you, but still you drift off. You can still see every detail clearly, but can't grasp the meaning. Whenever a shift in your spiritual life occurs, fragments such as these surface. You won't be distracted; either by the reflection of yourself, or by the last glimpse of the things now being lost forever. As you look at the screen, it is possible to believe you are gazing into eternity. For a moment, it all interlocks. But then a new pattern of ordered disorder emerges in front of you. Always the one before the last. You are again in a dream, walking endlessly winding paths. You can't find your way out of the maze you are convinced has been solely created for you.

- *Still Life (Betamale)*

With a total running time of four minutes and fifty-four seconds, *Still Life (Betamale)*<sup>250</sup> is a video art work by Canadian artist, filmmaker, and essayist Jon Rafman (b. 1981). [Video 1] The video consists of a montage of photographs, digital drawings, and short clips of video, in which Rafman uses visual and compositing effects to manipulate color, scale and movement, emphasizing the different on-screen materialities of digital artifacts. [Figure 1] *Still Life (Betamale)*, the first part of a video trilogy followed by *Mainsqueeze* (2014) and *Erysichthon* (2015), was initially posted to *YouTube* in September of 2013 as a music video for Daniel Lopatin's homonymous song. In what some considered "an unprecedented move,"<sup>251</sup> the video was banned from *YouTube*, then re-uploaded to the video-sharing website *Vimeo*, only to be taken down again due to its explicit content. Rafman has since re-uploaded it successfully to *Vimeo*, and the video is also available on both artists' websites. In addition to the music by Lopatin—better known under his stage name Oneohtrix Point Never—*Still Life (Betamale)* is accompanied by the lyrics at the beginning of this section delivered by a flat female voice. On Rafman's website, *Still Life (Betamale)* is accompanied by a notice expressing "Special thanks to FM TOWNS MARTY, Swampy T Fox, Winifox, Kigurumiwa, Rajutenrakuza, Kiwikig2,

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<sup>250</sup> Jon Rafman and Daniel Lopatin, *Still Life (Betamale)*. Music video. Directed by Jon Rafman 2013.

<sup>251</sup> Jamie Otsa, "Oneohtrix Point Never NSFW Still Life Betamale Video Banned From Youtube," *Glasswerk Magazine*, September 25, 2013, para.1, <http://glasswerk.co.uk/magazine/article/19289/Oneohtrix+Point+Never+NSFW+Still+Life++Betamal e++Video+Banned+From+Youtube/>.

ShittyBattleStations, Gurochan.net, Daniel Swan,” as well as a 43-page-long PDF document of a thread from *4chan*'s /mu/ board, in which users react to and discuss the video at length (<http://jonrafman.com/4chan.pdf>). The document, heavy on Internet slang, image macros, and reaction pics, records a wide range of conversations, including the realization that Rafman himself had anonymously initiated the *4chan* thread.

Contentwise, *Still Life (Betamale)* is like a stream of consciousness from the wrong side of the Internet, a downward spiral towards the creepy stuff. For instance, kinks that have gained a reputation for being weird or disgusting, like *furries* [Figure 2] and *dollers* or *animegao kigurumi*. [Figure 3] While neither is necessarily sexual,<sup>252</sup> these subcultures are frequently understood as deviant erotic preferences, thriving in the underbelly of art and video-sharing websites like *DeviantArt*, *YouTube*, and *Vimeo*. In *Still Life (Betamale)*, Rafman uses footage from the *YouTube* channels of amateur fursuiters and dollers around the world: Winfoxi from Ukraine, Kigurumiwa from China, Kiwikig from the UK, among others. The countries vary, but with their masks on these performers are stateless and timeless, their velvety muzzles “gazing into eternity,” beyond the camera. The *animegao* girls, too, move uncannily about like living dolls. Furries and dollers embody the “interspecies affect”<sup>253</sup> of cuteness, as a “process [that] may bring us closer to animals, or other humans, but... also functions if the cute object is a toy, doll, or fictional character,”<sup>254</sup> expanding intersubjectivity beyond its organicist tenets, towards the broader field of interobjectivity in which commodities take part. Still, the suggestion that such “interspecies affect” might overflow the boundaries of propriety into bestiality, agalmatophilia or technophilia casts a long shadow, keeping furries and dollers wrapped in the abject phenomeno-poetics of the Internet’s “wrong side.”

Furries and dollers easily “stick” to other paraphilias, like WAM (“wet and messy”) or splashing fetishes. In *Still Life (Betamale)*, Rafman includes videos from the (now defunct) *Vimeo* channel of Swampy T Fox, “a quicksand pornographer who specializes in furries”<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Kim Wall, “It’s Not about Sex, It’s about Identity: Why Furries Are Unique among Fan Cultures,” *The Guardian*, February 4, 2016, sec. Fashion, para. 21, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2016/feb/04/furry-fandom-subculture-animal-costumes>.

<sup>253</sup> Elizabeth Legge, “When Awe Turns to Awww... Jeff Koon’s Balloon Dog and the Cute Sublime,” in *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, ed. Joshua Paul Dale et al. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 21.

<sup>254</sup> Megan Arkenberg, “Cuteness and Control in Portal,” in *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, ed. Joshua Paul Dale et al. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 18.

<sup>255</sup> Stephanie Mercier Voyer, “Swampy T. Fox Is a Quicksand Pornographer Who Specializes in Furries,” *Vice*, December 16, 2013, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_ca/article/swampy-t-fox-is-a-quicksand-pornographer-who-specializes-in-furries](https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/swampy-t-fox-is-a-quicksand-pornographer-who-specializes-in-furries).

who existed in the niche where furry desire meets the arousal of sinking in quicksand. [Figure 4] In his appearance in Rafman's video, Swampy struggles to pull himself out of a mud pit that slowly engulfs his body. In another, he is drenched in pink and blue liquids, pouring from an invisible source above him. In an interview for *Vice*, Swampy explained that he was inspired by the slapstick humor of animal cartoons to react against the "elitism and drama of the furry community... who deemed fur suits too precious to handle a romp in the mud."<sup>256</sup> The disruptive cuteness of funny animals, which in early comics and cartoon often bordered on cruelty,<sup>257</sup> is picked apart and slowed down, in an affirmative stance on furry materiality resulting in oddly intimate and dramatic videos. Swampy rejoices in becoming nothing but mud—thick and coarse, formless mud.

*Still Life (Betamale)* is also packed with Japanese *ero*ge ("erotic videogames") from the 1980s and 1990s, poetically thread together in sequences of screenshots and GIFs, conveying an ethereal sense of eeriness. There are glimpses of interspecies love between a blonde woman and an anthropomorphic green wolf-unicorn. [Figure 5] Eviscerated cats, hanged bodies, suicide bridges. Girls urinating or sleeping in trains, with spread legs revealing their underwear. Saucer-eyed schoolgirls with colorful hair appear next to old technologies: VCRs, CDs, old computers, landline telephones, fax machines. Nightscapes of electrically powered skyscrapers and neon advertising signs contrast with unlit rooms, shadowy staircases, and the recurrent first-person shot of a night drive through the forest. Not unlike Swampy's mud pit, these hypnotic visuals, resembling classic Windows 95 and 98 screensavers, echo the erotic pull of vortexes, voids, and mazes on screen. Like Swampy, there is something cute about the earnestness of early videogames, with characters pixelized and compressed into small colored units. Static or moving ever so slightly, these images translate into an immersive experience of futurepast scenarios filled with longing, arousal, fear, pain, or disgust.

At one point, Rafman uses layers and masks to deliver a particularly feverish collage of pornographic images from *Gurochan*, an online artwork community specializing in *ero-guro*, often in animanga style and with *lolicon* themes. *Gurochan* has been called one of the creepiest websites on the Internet, whose "fetish physics"<sup>258</sup> reflects Rafman's process of surfing the Internet *ad nauseam*. "There's this moment at the climax of the film where there's an enormous accumulation of this violent fetish imagery," Rafman explains. "I was trying to

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<sup>256</sup> Voyer, para. 7.

<sup>257</sup> Dale, "Cute Studies," 6.

<sup>258</sup> Gary Zhexy Zhang, "The Online Anthropologie of Jon Rafman," *Frieze: Contemporary Art and Culture*, February 2016, 94.

express the feeling of sensory overload after surfing the deep Internet and consuming so many images.”<sup>259</sup> [Figure 6] *Gurochan* characters in *Still Life (Betamale)* are deformed and dismembered, inflated, overflowing with abject body fluids, violated by tentacles and other monstrous attackers. One illustration, showing a pool of bikini-clad anime girls dissolving into blobs, calls to mind the tigers in *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, racing each other around a tree so fast that they turn to butter.<sup>260</sup> [Figure 7] Although these drawings are hardcore pornography, there is a softness to their contents and form, mirrored by the smooth gradations and highlights of digital painting, fleshy pastel hues, and the fuzzy outlines of blown-up images.

Fittingly, one of the first images to appear in *Still Life (Betamale)* is the photograph of a fat white man coming “towards” the viewer, increasing in size from a tiny rectangle at the center of the screen until it occupies the whole field of vision. The naked man sits in a room covered in Japanese anime posters, pointing two revolvers at his head while wearing a face mask made of pink panties with cute cartoon girls and two kid bikini tops. [Figure 8] The image appears again in brief, quasi-subliminal flashes, with superimposed digital sweat beads running down its surface, in a glaring collage of photograph and computer-generated imagery emphasizing a body about to burst from its limits. Such a squeamish body is the beta male that Rafman’s still life represents—not the nerdy Silicone Valley entrepreneur but the emasculated incel (“involuntary celibate”) whose resentment, misogyny and self-pity constitute a toxic residue of hegemonic masculinity, threatening to spill from the fringes of the Internet where it dwells and brews.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Jon Rafman, Jon Rafman, interview by Stephen Froese, *Pin-Up: Magazine for Architectural Entertainment*, Fall Winter 2013, 88, [http://jonrafman.com/PU\\_JonRafman.pdf](http://jonrafman.com/PU_JonRafman.pdf).

<sup>260</sup> *The Story of Little Black Sambo* is a children’s book written and illustrated by the Scottish author Helen Bannerman, first published in 1899. It tells the story of Sambo, an Indian boy who encounters and outsmarts four hungry tigers. Sambo is forced to give his clothes to the tigers in exchange for his life. Each tiger thinks they are better dressed than the others, and in the heat of the competition, they chase each other around a tree until they are reduced to butter. Sambo then recovers his clothes and brings home the butter to his mother. *The Story of Little Black Sambo* is widely criticized for its racist depictions of Sambo and his family.

<sup>261</sup> Contemporary online incel subculture is mostly composed of white heterosexual men. According to *Wikipedia*, discussions in incel forums are often characterized by “resentment, misanthropy, self-pity, self-loathing, misogyny, racism, a sense of entitlement to sex, and the endorsement of violence against sexually active people” “Incel,” in *Wikipedia*, August 2, 2018, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Incel&oldid=853038519>. Ironically, the expressions “involuntary celibate” and “incel” were first used by a queer woman in the 1990s, to encourage lonely socially awkward men and women to share their experiences in an inclusive community.



Rafman relies on cuteness to articulate what some have termed the “Beta Uprising,”<sup>262</sup> i.e., the revenge of the “pale, white and angry”<sup>263</sup> manosphere of Internet forums like 4chan’s /r/9k/ or Reddit’s r/ForeverAlone, manifesting, for instance, in their adoption of the starry-eyed anthropomorphic frog character Pepe the Frog, a grotesque-cute Internet meme adopted, as unofficial mascot (against the wishes of Pepe’s creator, Matt Furies, author of the comic series *Boys’ Club*).<sup>264</sup> [Figure 9] *Still Life (Betamale)* wallows in how beta culture mixes an “aestheticization of powerlessness”<sup>265</sup> with terrorism enacted in fantasy, when not in reality—at least four mass murders in North America were committed by self-identifying incels or men known to be aligned with incel ideology, resulting in forty-five deaths.<sup>266</sup> The connection of beta-maleness with animanga and cuteness is unsurprising. After all, “chan” culture (from “channel”) initially sprang from Japanese imageboards like *Futaba Channel* (a.k.a. *2chan*, launched in 2001) and their gaming, underground, and *otaku* culture, before it spread to hacktivist groups like Anonymous, Internet troll culture, and far-right Internet phenomena like the alt-right movement and the Gamergate controversy. *Otaku*, themselves, are stigmatized as failed beta men, effeminate in their habits of shopping or staying at home, contrary to the ideal of salaryman masculinity.<sup>267</sup>

Other artists besides Rafman have explored the connections between the incel, alt-right, and trolls with animanga culture, using similar strategies of shocking Internet *objets trouvés*. An example is *An Illustrated Guide of Capitalism*,<sup>268</sup> released by Onamatopee in 2017, by Italian visual artist and poet Ddk (Davide Andreatta), an unconventional comic book accompanied by an essay about the relationship between capitalism and *Twitter* trolls, thoroughly intertwined with manga and anime imagery. [Figure 10a, b] Ddk explores the contradictions of contemporary cyberculture by presenting, like Rafman, a piece of digital

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<sup>262</sup> Caitlin Dewey, “Incels, 4chan and the Beta Uprising: Making Sense of One of the Internet’s Most-Reviled Subcultures,” *Washington Post*, October 7, 2015, sec. The Intersect, para. 17, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/10/07/incels-4chan-and-the-beta-uprising-making-sense-of-one-of-the-internets-most-reviled-subcultures/>.

<sup>263</sup> Zhang, “The Online Anthropologie of Jon Rafman,” 95.

<sup>264</sup> “The Truth About Pepe the Frog,” *Fantagraphics*, October 6, 2016, <https://fantagraphics.com/flog/truthaboutpepe/>.

<sup>265</sup> Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 2012, 64.

<sup>266</sup> “Incel.”

<sup>267</sup> Thiam Huat Kam, “‘Otaku’ as Label: Concerns over Productive Capacities in Contemporary Capitalist Japan,” in *Debating Otaku in Contemporary Japan: Historical Perspectives and New Horizons*, ed. Patrick W. Galbraith, Thiam Huat Kam, and Björn-Ole Kamm (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 182.

<sup>268</sup> Davide Andreatta, *An Illustrated Guide of Capitalism* (Eindhoven: Onamatopee, 2017), <https://www.onamatopee.net/exhibition/an-illustrated-guide-to-capitalism/>.

anthropology, consisting of a collection of tweets and memes with displays of extreme racism, misogyny, far-right politics, and violent and scatological imagery—by users whose *Twitter* avatars are pictures of cute anime girls. Ddk presents the collection in comics form, with smooth, light blue gradients serving as background and speech balloons (containing the tweets) coming from the adorable user profile images. All this is digitally printed on glossy paper, contrasting the *kawaii* characters and almost techno-utopian “cleanliness” of the panels with the sheer abjectness of the tweets, in which the fandom of *moé* and CGDCT (“cute girls doing cute things”) animanga, in all its supposed innocence, runs alongside and blends with the lowest, most toxic confines of the “wrong side” of the Internet.

Works such as Rafman’s *Still Life (Betamale)* and Ddk’s *An Illustrated Guide of Capitalism* highlight how incel and chan culture undermine the “triumphant narrative”<sup>269</sup> around nerds and “geek chic,”<sup>270</sup> in the Western media and Cool Japan campaigns alike. One *ero*ge illustration in *Still Life (Betamale)* captures the obsessive, dangerous, unhealthy streak of such ignoble desires particularly well: the hand of an unseen man gripping viciously at a wire fence while spying on a happy couple playing tennis on the other side. [Figure 11] Like that invisible man clutching at the fence, such works succeed in making one aware of the act of seeing by either looking away from or despite the unbearable things coming at us from the glossy screen or comic book pages. In the case of *Still Life (Betamale)*, along with quicksand furry erotica and *lolicon* amputee porn, Rafman instrumentalizes our disgust to make the work “intolerable to the extent that it cannot be absorbed by the pluralist economy of an aesthetic eclecticism.”<sup>271</sup>

Nevertheless, when the anthropomorphic body is absent in *Still Life (Betamale)*, the result is equally terrifying. The real “still life” in Rafman’s video emerges from the Reddit thread ShittyBattleStations, where Redditors share their photographs of appalling desktop computer setups.<sup>272</sup> Rafman uses several images of these computers in perilous situations,

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<sup>269</sup> Patrick W. Galbraith, Thiam Huat Kam, and Björn-Ole Kamm, “Introduction: ‘Otaku’ Reserach: Past, Present and Future,” in *Debating Otaku in Contemporary Japan: Historical Perspectives and New Horizons*, ed. Patrick W. Galbraith, Thiam Huat Kam, and Björn-Ole Kamm (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 5.

<sup>270</sup> Kate Youde, “The Triumph of the Nerds: Geek Chic!,” *The Independent*, December 11, 2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/the-triumph-of-the-nerds-geek-chic-6275414.html>.

<sup>271</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 349.

<sup>272</sup> In gamer slang, a “battlestation” refers to “a desktop computer setup, including the tower, monitor, mouse, keyboard, mouse pad (if applicable), audio playback and recording devices (if applicable), and even wires/cables” (“Battlestation,” Urban Dictionary, June 2, 2010, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Battlestation>.)

complete with garbage and messy cable arrangements. Some of the rooms in these photographs show large quantities of hoarded objects, covering cramped living areas and gaming setups. Computer monitors, towers, keyboards, laptops, external hard disk drives, graphics tablets, televisions, printers, home consoles, virtual reality headsets, DVD players, CD boxes, and headphones can be spotted among empty beer cans, used cigarettes, uncooked food, plastic bags, and scattered blankets. In other pictures, the hoarding is replaced by stark basements, void of any amenities except for a computer and its accessories on the floor. There is improvised bedding nearby, infiltrations on the walls, exposed bricks, ripped wallpaper covered in newspapers. One “shitty battlestation” shows an elaborate arrangement in which a bulky computer monitor hangs over an adjustable bed, with the keyboard on a bed tray and a cat lazing on the mattress. [Figure 12] This self-sufficient unit to eat, sleep, and play is a grotesque show of human ingenuity, homely and revolting, mocking the comforts and technological achievements of first-world countries. But perhaps the most notorious picture in this series is the simple close-up of a computer keyboard, with grease, dirt, crumbs and human hair filling the spaces in between the keys. [Figure 13] In these “shitty battlestations,” our home computers have been stripped from their upright position, floored “against the axis of the human body.”<sup>273</sup> The photographs are devoid of both people and ergonomic amenities, with a notable scarcity of “proper” chairs, desks, tables or beds. The beta male emerges in what is left out, omitted like “a disposable non-technology”<sup>274</sup> traceable only through the waste they leave behind.

The “bad matter”<sup>275</sup> in *Still Life (Betamale)*, however, cannot be reduced to dirt. “Dead time,”<sup>276</sup> too, is played to its full hauntological effect, focusing on still images, slow motion, and minimal movements, matching the intermittences and interruptions in Oneohtrix Point Never’s music. Lips are moving in a frozen face — cities, motionless, except for window lights turning on and off. A river is undulating in an otherwise inert forest or the barely noticeable splash of someone falling from a bridge. But also, the eventlessness of amateur fetish videos on *YouTube* and *Vimeo*. Pursuiters and dollers that parade in front of the camera, performing simple actions and poses with no beginning or end, their dullness accentuated by Rafman’s use of slow motion. Even when there *is* a progression, like Swampy T Fox’s quicksand videos, it

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<sup>273</sup> Krauss and Bois, *Formless*, 94.

<sup>274</sup> Germán Sierra, “Filth as Non-Technology,” *KEEP IT DIRTY* a. (2016): 9, <http://keepitdirty.org/a/filth-as-non-technology/>.

<sup>275</sup> Parikka, “Medianatures,” 99.

<sup>276</sup> Krauss and Bois, *Formless*, 200.

is a “cancelation of the future”<sup>277</sup> rather than actual progress, as Swampy is steadily sucked to his demise in the mud pit. *Still Life (Betamale)* envisions the time of contemporary pop culture as a stratified pile of obsolete artifacts, memeable resonances, unprocessable fetishes, and electronic waste—the deposition, and erosion, of pop-cultural debris. As such, it evokes a broader category of digital disgust, those sticky, “mammalian”<sup>278</sup> practices that clog content circulation in (supposedly) democratic, informed and participatory Web 2.0 societies.<sup>279</sup>

It is ironic and oddly appropriate that Rafman’s “online anthropology”<sup>280</sup> is itself the target of disgust and contempt. As mentioned before, Rafman initiated a *4chan* thread on *Still Life*, as a homecoming to the Mecca of viral Internet content and shock imagery to which in video pays tribute. But this did not translate into a red-carpet walk (nor, one suspects, would Rafman expect it to) if the action of nevertheless turning the thread into an “archival art” PDF document is any indication. Indeed, the thread attests to the extent to which Rafman’s artistic integrity is found problematic by those who are familiar with his sources, eliciting sarcastic comments like “this is just a bunch of tumblr and furry shit thrown together” or “wow, you have a tumblr! good job. furies are so WEIRD! japanese porn is so CREEPY!” (sic). The most indignant comments, however, came not from *4chan* but *Tumblr*, revolving around Rafman’s use of over 30 screengrabs and GIFs of Japanese video games from the *Tumblr* blog *fmtownsmarty* without permission or proper credit. One fellow Tumblr user, *ulan-bator*, was particularly vocal in their protests, accusing Rafman of perpetuating the practice “slumming” in outsider cultures.<sup>281</sup> These claims are not without reason, as Rafman compares himself to the “figure of the Romantic explorer”<sup>282</sup> trailblazing through the Internet’s most exotic regions and cultures. Rafman’s series of photographs *You are Standing in an Open Field* (2015)—a phrase reminiscent of RPGs and adventure games, involving quests for lost artefacts in fantasy

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<sup>277</sup> Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Zero Books, 2014), 13.

<sup>278</sup> Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York; London: NYU Press, 2013), 4, 291–93.

<sup>279</sup> Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 304, 305.

<sup>280</sup> Zhang, “The Online Anthropologie of Jon Rafman.”

<sup>281</sup> An excerpt from *ulan-bator*’s post on Jon Rafman: “When *fmtownsmarty* gives Jon Rafman a hint that maybe what’s happened here isn’t all as it should be, he gets a nondescript link in the description on vimeo to his imgur account, neglecting to link to his tumblr where he’s been exposed for ripping off *fmtownsmarty*’s work, neglecting to say anything about the extent of his “work” that actually comes from *fmtownsmarty*. Of course Jon Rafman gets seen as a pioneering artist for his slumming in internet culture, much like artists in the past have been “pioneering” for slumming in street art culture or ‘primitive’ culture” (*ulan-bator*, Tumblr, October 29, 2013, <http://ulan-bator.tumblr.com/post/62549448638/vimeo-com75402303>.)

<sup>282</sup> Rafman, Jon Rafman, 87.

settings—shows the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich and other Romantics serving as backgrounds for a cyber-consumerist “apotheosis of trash,”<sup>283</sup> much like that in *Still Life (Betamale)*. [Figure 14]

In art magazines and the artist’s own words, Rafman’s work is said to stand in “resolute solidarity with the virtual revelers who populate his work, from the denizens of *Second Life* to the ‘furry’ fetishists of 4chan.”<sup>284</sup> But the adverse reactions in *4chan* and *Tumblr* against the appropriation of amateur labor by a professional artist hint at a more complex, certainly less harmonious, interplay between the realms of the art gallery and gritty mass culture. Indeed, even if Rafman was granted permission by the authors from whom he appropriates, most of us “do not care if the copyright papers are all in order; for what is at stake are the aesthetic rights of style based on a culture of originals.”<sup>285</sup> There is a dissonance in the fact that, although Rafman replicates an Internet “cut and paste” culture that celebrates anonymity and permissiveness towards intellectual property—and that, according to “Luddite” writers like Andrew Keen, is “enabling a younger generation of intellectual kleptomaniacs”<sup>286</sup> — *Still Life (Betamale)* still ended up in a gallery in Chelsea.<sup>287</sup> This stresses the privileges and inequalities at work in the processes of both digital culture and art historical recognition, and the resentment it generates from those who, as George Bataille famously put it, are “like a spider or an earthworm”<sup>288</sup> that gets squashed everywhere and has with no rights of its own. The beta male becomes a metaphor for the broader construction of humanity not as something but as “nothing.”<sup>289</sup> The female voice in the video had it right all along: “You do not move your eyes from the screen. You have become invisible.”

The body and electronic horror at work in *Still Life (Betamale)* tells us that humans, like computers, rot away; that they are soon-to-be obsolete. Or, as Donna Haraway writes, “we

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<sup>283</sup> Patricia Yaeger, “Editor’s Column: The Death of Nature and the Apotheosis of Trash; or, Rubbish Ecology,” *PMLA* 123, no. 2 (March 1, 2008): 321, 334.

<sup>284</sup> Zhang, “The Online Anthropologie of Jon Rafman,” 92.

<sup>285</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), 6.

<sup>286</sup> *The Cult of the Amateur: How Blogs, MySpace, YouTube, and the Rest of Today’s User-Generated Media Are Destroying Our Economy, Our Culture, and Our Values* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 23.

<sup>287</sup> Mariam Naziripour, “How Furrries Wound up in an Art Gallery in Chelsea,” *Kill Screen*, December 9, 2013, <https://killscreen.com/articles/furrries-betamale-and-future-stealing-art-online/>.

<sup>288</sup> Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 31.

<sup>289</sup> Botting, “Dark Materialism.”

are all compost, not posthuman,”<sup>290</sup> i.e., the reassuring, self-contained “author” or “human” subject is no longer living, but *undead*, and rotting before our eyes. The realm of digitality struggles against its chaotic waste, the amorphous matters that pollute our high technological milieus, highlighting “the unsustainable, politically dubious, and ethically suspicious practices that maintain technological culture and its corporate networks.”<sup>291</sup> In *Still Life (Betamale)*, the “clean and proper body”<sup>292</sup> is an unattainable construction, applicable neither to humans nor to our filthy computers bursting with obscene content. It perceptualizes Simon Reynolds’s suggestion that we are heading towards a “cultural-ecological catastrophe, when the seam of pop history is exhausted.”<sup>293</sup> Rafman fuses the bad taste of plagiarism and amateurism with the bad time of nostalgia, encapsulated in the millennials’ obsession with retrogaming and 1980s and 1990s cartoons. Like looking up-close, the Other blurs into the Self, disturbing the “boundaries separating the animate from the inanimate, the organic from the inorganic, the dead from the living.”<sup>294</sup> It is significant that, at the very beginning of the video, a man in a suit points at the viewer while falling in and out of focus, leaving a trail of zigzagging lines and chromatic aberration. **[Figure 15]** The human cannot (can no longer?) be represented, existing only as a loud absence. As no-body and no-time, devitalized by the encounters of flesh and technology, yet surviving in self-insistence, drawn on longer than necessary.

(See also “Creepypasta,” “Dark Web Bake Sale,” and “Floating Dakimakura”)

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<sup>290</sup> Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015): 161.

<sup>291</sup> Jussi Parikka, *The Anthroscene* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

<sup>292</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 72.

<sup>293</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), xiv.

<sup>294</sup> Krauss and Bois, *Formless*, 202.

# CGDCT

CGDCT is an acronym for “cute girls doing cute things,” a genre which has come to be associated with one of the more pervasive and problematic phenomena in twenty-first-century *otaku* culture: *moé*. Complaints about CGDCT and *moé* range from their stultifying effect on the *otaku* industry, i.e., their dumbing down of the epic or tragic mode in sci-fi and battle *manga*, to accusations of misogyny and pedophilia. This is because, 1) CGDCT is typically written by male authors for male readers, calling to mind Laura Mulvey’s famous aphorism “woman as image, man as bearer of the look.”<sup>295</sup> And, 2) CGDCT casts are almost exclusively composed of *loli* characters, a cuter and rounder type of *bishōjo* that looks pubescent or pre-pubescent no matter how old she is, diegetically. Such visual and behavioral infantilization of characters in CGDCT animanga results in the overall decrease of the series’ artistic age, prompting critics like Jason Thompson or Amelia Cook to raise “anti-*moé*” questions regarding the genre’s misogynistic undertones, despite its apparent benignness.<sup>296</sup> After all, media psychology has taught us that a comic, TV show or videogame is never “just” a comic, TV show, or videogame, for “mass media are a persistent and pervasive influence in our lives and... their influence is meaningful.”<sup>297</sup> Spectatorship is, among other things, an act of ethical responsibility.

CGDCT is entangled with the format of *yonkoma* manga (“four-panel manga”), a Japanese equivalent to the comic strip. *Yonkoma* manga is typically composed of four vertically arranged panels of the same size, with a reading direction from top to bottom, and right to left. [Figure 1] Often, two or more *yonkoma* come together side by side to form a larger narrative arc. For instance, in Figure 2, from Ogataya Haruka’s *Potemayo* (2004-2011), the first *yonkoma* strip introduces the elements of narrative continuity, with the second picking up where the first left off by “transferring” a comical element from one strip to the other—in this case, the cute Potemayo locked inside the household refrigerator. Thus, the two strips of four panels each create a more extended narrative consisting of a total of eight panels. This

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<sup>295</sup> Lorraine Code, ed., *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories* (London: Routledge, 2003), 219.

<sup>296</sup> Jason Thompson, “Moe: The Cult of the Child,” *Comixology*, July 9, 2009, <https://pullist.comixology.com/articles/265/Moe-The-Cult-of-the-Child>; Amelia Cook, “Moé, Misogyny and Masculinity: Anime’s Cuteness Problem—and How to Fix It,” *The Mary Sue*, September 7, 2016, <https://www.themarysue.com/moe-misogyny-and-masculinity/>.

<sup>297</sup> Karen E. Dill, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality: Seeing Through Media Influence* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

technique allows for relatively complex narratives to be created by juxtaposing a potentially unlimited number of comics strips, with the story gradually unfolding in multiples of fours (4x2, 4x3, 4x4, etc.). Recent *yonkoma* manga, e.g., Wakabayashi Toshiya's *Tsurezure Children*, make plentiful use of narrative continuity among comic strips, with each set of four panels serving more as rhythmical punctuation in an ongoing story than as individual one-liners.

*Yonkoma* was initiated in the early 1900s by the founding fathers of manga, Kitazawa Rakuten and Ippei Okamoto, influenced by the political caricatures of Frank Nankivell and Frederick Opper. [Figure 3] After World War II, Hasegawa Machiko's *yonkoma* manga *Sazae-san* became extremely popular, running in the national newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* for nearly thirty years. *Sazae-san*'s focus on the everyday life was carried on by Ishii Hisaichi's *Tonari no Yamada-Kun*, later renamed *Nono-chan*, a *yonkoma* manga which continues to run to this day, also in *Asahi*.<sup>298</sup> [Figure 4] Despite the tendency towards the cutification of characters observable from Kitazawa's naturalistic representation to *Sazae-san*'s cartoonish features and *Nono-chan*'s bloblike appearance, there is a notable stylistic shift in CGDCT *yonkoma* series from the 2000s, which are *otaku*-oriented rather than circulating in mainstream newspapers.<sup>299</sup> [Figure 5] The *yonkoma* format is also associated in Japanese comics with *omake*, meaning "extra," referring to bonus materials included at the end of manga or anime (e.g., cut scenes, actor interviews, etc.). When *omake* are presented in *yonkoma* format, characters are removed from their original contexts and reframed in comical, trivial, or non-canonical situations. For instance, Figure 6 is an *omake* of the supernatural thriller *Death Note*, demonstrating how even manga with dark adult themes can become CGDCT-like through the use of *yonkoma*.

As Thompson puts it, "It's no surprise that one of the manga formats which has embraced *moé* is four-panel manga, which, like traditional American comic strips, trades on a similar set of clichés: reassuring domestic situations, the warmth of family, and cute characters who never grow old."<sup>300</sup> But unlike the cute protagonists of comic strips such as *Peanuts*, *Garfield* or *Calvin and Hobbes* that bear a stylistically varied cartoonish cuteness oriented towards satire and caricature, *loli* allow little formal variation to convey their particular brand

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<sup>298</sup> *Tonari no Yamada-Kun* was also adapted into the animated feature film *Hōhokekyō Tonari no Yamada-kun (My Neighbors the Yamadas)* by Studio Ghibli, in 1999.

<sup>299</sup> Significant CGDCT *yonkoma* manga series include *Azumanga Daioh* (1999-2002), *Sketchbook* (2002), *Lucky Star* (2004), *Hidamari Sketch* (2004), *Potemayo* (2004-11), *Working!!* (2005), *Sweet Valerian* (2005), *Yurumates* (2005), *Hetalia: Axis Powers* (2006), *A Channel* (2008), *K-On!* (2007-12), *Kill Me Baby* (2008), *Yuyushiki* (2008), *Shiba Inuko-san* (2010), or *Wakaba Girl* (2010-13).

<sup>300</sup> Thompson, "Moe: The Cult of the Child," para. 13.



of cuteness. While this aspect might appear cosmetic, the result is that CGDCT is thoroughly gendered feminine and dislocated from the generalistic sitcomish or satirical feel of comic strips whose main protagonists are male. In other words, CGDCT is not just a question of themes and setting (e.g., *Azumanga Daioh*'s Sakaki loves cats like Garfield loves lasagna) but of the *loli* and girl-girl relationships as a site of affective flatness within the patriarchal order. The flatness of femininity is something that literary critic Sianne Ngai traces back to psychoanalysis:

while the concept of anxiety is useful as a critical framing device, it also has a history of being gendered in Western culture, particularly in the discursive arenas where it has played the largest role. Psychoanalysis is the strongest example, since its primary model of gender differentiation, the castration complex, relies partly on affective categories to fully distinguish “masculine” and “feminine” attitudes towards perceived loss. In response to this imagined privation, only male subjects are capable of experiencing genuine anxiety or dread, whereas female subjects are allotted the less traumatic and therefore less profound (certainly more ignoble) affects of nostalgia and envy.<sup>301</sup>

The stereotype of women limited to the sphere of “minor” affects is sexist, but it is not *merely* sexist. Instead, the longstanding connection between femininity and states of undifferentiation (including, flatness) imbues female characters with negativity that only they can perform. In this context, a young girl or woman-child character is particularly useful due to their double alienness, as they represent not only the nonmale but an infantile regression opposing “the seriousness of the paternal realm in their emphasis on childlike play and subversion.”<sup>302</sup> Ngai identifies this, for instance, in Isabel’s character from Herman Melville’s novel *Pierre: or, The Ambiguities* (1852), whose “excruciatingly childish language” seems to “inhabit an entirely different signifying register”<sup>303</sup> from the protagonist Pierre, an intellectual “fully indoctrinated into the symbolic order of language and patriarchal law.”<sup>304</sup>

This “excruciatingly childish” register is often found in CGDCT animanga, for instance, in the recurring *dojikko* “ditzy girl” archetype. Historically, ditzy girls and comic strips are intertwined, starting with *Bécassine*, a comic strip about a young Breton housemaid first appearing in the French girls’ magazine *La Semaine de Suzette* in the early twentieth century (1905-1908). [Figure 7] Being a provincial girl in the sophisticated Parisian household

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<sup>301</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 213.

<sup>302</sup> Rina Arya, *Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 116.

<sup>303</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 238.

<sup>304</sup> Ngai, 239.

of the Marquise of Grand Air, Bécassine (whose name means “fool” in French) commits countless blunders played for the laughs of the magazine’s urbanite readers. Despite the schadenfreude derived from Bécassine’s misadventures and the readers’ corresponding sense of superiority, Bécassine’s representation throughout the series becomes more benign, and she remains to this day a beloved character of Franco-Belgian comics.

Interestingly, one recent popular CGDCT anime series, *Kobayashi-san Chi no Meidoragon* (*Miss Kobayashi’s Dragon Maid*, Kyoto Animation, 2016),<sup>305</sup> about a dragon called Tōru who turns into a humanoid girl and works as the personal maid of a female office worker called Kobayashi, reproduces a similar setting to that of Bécassine. Namely, the culture shock between Kobayashi, who works a boring “nine to five” job, and Tōru’s supernatural (and, sometimes, violent) world: for instance, Tōru cleans Kobayashi’s apartment by destroying all her furniture and then bringing it back with magic, or she cooks and feeds Kobayashi her tail. [Figure 8a, b] Nevertheless, the differences are plain to see between Bécassine and *Meidoragon*. Not only does *Kobayashi* unabashedly play on the girls’ sexy-cute appeal (unlike Bécassine, who is resolutely non-sexual), but the backdrop of social stratification that underlines Bécassine’s professional relationship with the Marquise is dissolved in the former, where Kobayashi’s relationship to her maid is founded upon equality and affection. This aspect of hierarchical dissolution is an essential characteristic of the CGDCT genre.

If, as feminist critic Kotani Mari writes, “*Otaku* are the outsiders of salaryman society,”<sup>306</sup> CGDCT reimagines Japan’s “infantile capitalism”<sup>307</sup> transformed into a literal playground, removed from the coercive forces of the male-centric corporation. Namely, CGDCT disavows the social stratification and work ethic underlying Japan’s collective capitalism—the pillar of the country’s postwar economic miracle—by removing authority figures from their traditional roles as supervisors or educators. Teachers behave like students and police officers are more interested in playing video games, reading manga, and getting drunk than in enforcing the law. Parents are often lovable losers with no moral authority over their daughters. Even when conforming to more typical parental images, they remain surgically

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<sup>305</sup> *Kobayashi-san Chi no Meidoragon*, 13 episodes, directed by Yasuhiro Takemoto and produced by Kyoto Animation, aired from 11 January to 6 April 2017, on Tokyo MX, TVA, ABC, BS11.

<sup>306</sup> Mari Kotani, “Memories of Youth: A Feminist Perspective on Otaku,” interview by Patrick W. Galbraith, *The Moe Manifesto*, 30-37, June 24, 2014, 32, 34.

<sup>307</sup> Akira Asada, “Infantile Capitalism and Japan’s Postmodernism: A Fairy Tale,” in *Postmodernism and Japan*, ed. Masao Miyoshi and Harry Harootunian, trans. Kyoko Selden (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1989), 276.

separated from the rigid schedules of a traditional “salaryman” jobs, working at home as translators, writers, or designers (e.g., Koiwai in *Yostuba&!*). High school students are also cut off from the reality of Japanese youths, whose lives are subsumed to the country’s ruthless education system. And unlike situation comedies both in Japan and the West, that embrace “middle-class domesticity and material comfort of the privatized family life,”<sup>308</sup> CGDCT focuses on schoolgirls instead of mothers and other family members, shifting away from private homes as primary settings to school grounds and classrooms, where the girls meet and socialize.

The overall impression is one of affective flatness or shallowness, even when characters work hard to achieve their goals or run into (always momentary, never extreme) emotional turmoil. Because of this, while series like *Azumanga Daioh*, *Lucky Star*, or *K-On!* present the reader with well-rounded protagonists with strengths, weaknesses, and individual drives, these qualities often go unrecognized by critics. For instance, in the CGDCT *yonkoma* series *Azumanga Daioh*, an “event” can consist of a character simply following eye floaters with her look for four panels, [Figure 9] and strong affects are often directed at shallow or overtly cute and girly objects (e.g., pets, ribbons, etc.). [Figure 10] Indeed, CGDCT series reinforce their “dumb aesthetic”<sup>309</sup> by rendering characters in *puni* plush style, the most extreme type of *moé* cute caricature with maximum roundness and deformation.<sup>310</sup> [Figure 10] The *puni* refers to the onomatopoeic word *punipuni* (ぷにぷに), meaning “squishy,” used to describe the squishiness of chubby cheeks, arms, or animal paws.<sup>311</sup> The suggestion of formlessness exuding from the *puni* style has prompted the appearance of the derogatory term “*moé* blob,” for characters that lack any distinct physical or personality feature beyond a high percentage of *otaku*-catering cuteness.

One can draw a parallel with the “wobbly aesthetics”<sup>312</sup> of *yuru kyara*, the local Japanese mascots with poor or unpretentious designs that transmit a “sense of instability that

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<sup>308</sup> Yoda, “The Rise and Fall of Maternal Society: Gender, Labor, and Capital in Contemporary Japan,” 246.

<sup>309</sup> Elizabeth Legge, ‘When Awe Turns to Awww... Jeff Koon’s Balloon Dog and the Cute Sublime’, in *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, ed. Joshua Paul Dale et al. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 142.

<sup>310</sup> “Puni Plush,” *TV Tropes*, accessed July 26, 2017, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/PuniPlush>.

<sup>311</sup> Floor-chan, “Japanese Mimetic Words: PuniPuni ぷにぷに,” *PuniPuniJapan*, October 12, 2014, paras. 9-10, <https://www.punipunijapan.com/mimetic-words-punipuni/>.

<sup>312</sup> Occhi, “Wobbly Aesthetics, Performance, and Message: Comparing Japanese Kyara with Their Anthropomorphic Forebears.”

makes them all the more lovable, and one's heart feels healed... just by looking at them.”<sup>313</sup> Both the squishy *loli* and the wobbly *yuru kyara* hinge on systemic *healing*, as opposed to capitalism's systemic violence. Indeed, popular *otaku* Internet slogans such as “*Loli* is Love; *Loli* is Life” or “Flat is justice” establish a connection between the *loli* and moral or spiritual virtue (in the latter's case, the reference to the *loli*'s flat chest may also index the affective flatness of the CGDCT genre). Considering that there is a longstanding view of the *otaku* themselves as failed men”<sup>314</sup> with a “*dame*-orientation—an orientation toward things that are no good”<sup>315</sup> (the Japanese word “*dame*” meaning “useless,” “hopeless,” “purposeless”), only rivaled by their stereotypical ugly appearance of greasy hair, goofy teeth, poor fashion sense, and so on, these slogans hint at the possibility of the *otaku*'s redemption through what Socrates, in Plato's *Symposium*, calls “a desire of the needy for the beautiful and the good.”<sup>316</sup> CGDCT animanga is therefore tied to the sociocultural context of the *otaku*, not because *loli* characters represent the physical and moral opposite of *otaku* (i.e., that *loli* are beautiful and good, while *otaku* are ugly and bad) but because the *loli* reimagines the *otaku*'s *dame*-orientation as beautiful and good.

That is why CGDCT reframes flaws as adorable traits. Many *loli* characters are stupid, lazy, shy, awkward, apathetic, overeager, snooty, or unfriendly. In other words, in the universe of CGDCT where such flawed characters are lovable, it becomes acceptable—even desirable—to have “an emotionally stunted life and no job prospects,”<sup>317</sup> as Thompson describes the *otaku* in his article “*Moé*: The Cult of the Child.” Wearing glasses, hand-hiding oversized sleeves, rain boots (i.e., pragmatic footwear used by children), clumsiness, or other childish “imperfections” are desirable insofar as they point to “relaxed,” “loose,” or “undemanding” (*yurui*) states, associated with slower-paced, easy-going lifestyles.<sup>318</sup> [Figure 12] Therefore, CGDCT cannot be reduced to a male sexist fantasy of mastery and domination but represents

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<sup>313</sup> Occhi, 113.

<sup>314</sup> Patrick W. Galbraith, “‘Otaku’ Research’ and Anxiety About Failed Men,” in *Debating Otaku in Contemporary Japan: Historical Perspectives and New Horizons*, ed. Patrick W. Galbraith, Thiam Huat Kam, and Björn-Ole Kamm (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 26.

<sup>315</sup> Takashi Murakami, Toshiki Okada, and Kaichiro Morikawa, “Otaku Talk,” in *Little Boy: The Art of Japan's Exploding Subculture* (New York; New Haven: Japan Society, Inc. / Yale University Press, 2005), 166.

<sup>316</sup> Dorothea Frede, “Plato's Ethics: An Overview,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2016 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), “4.1 Happiness and the desire for self-completion” para. 1, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/plato-ethics/>.

<sup>317</sup> Thompson, “Moe: The Cult of the Child,” para. 12.

<sup>318</sup> “Yurui,” *Web Japan*, September 5, 2006, <http://web-japan.org/trends/buzz/bz0608.html>.

a systematic attempt to “loosen” the coercive if invisible forces of Japan’s salaryman society—and, today, of global neoliberalism, with its brutal ethos of human and environmental precarity and depletion. The value of a “signifying register” of looseness and slowness is not only therapeutic: it is *political*, in Lauren Berlant’s sense that these “disassociative genres” (in her case, referencing magical realism and science fiction, but applicable in my view to CGDCT) perform an affective time-out-of-joint, which does not (necessarily) have to be a blueprint for living.<sup>319</sup> To be sure, CGDCT represents “badly” the problems and experiences of real teenage girls, but only in eclipsing them in favor of the cuteness of the woman-child, can the genre enact an out-of-jointness with the “malign velocities” of our time.<sup>320</sup>

Let us examine some examples of CGDCT *yonkoma* manga. As mentioned before, *yonkoma* are composed of rectangular modules whose existence precedes narratives, contrary to what is common in comics, where stories determine the location and dimensions of each panel. Moreover, the term *yonkoma* (“four panels”) pre-determines the number of panels used to tell stories, reinforcing their formal sameness, and resulting in a regular structure that seldom exists in different types of comic strips (for instance, *Peanuts* or *Garfield* greatly vary in terms of number and disposition of panels). Even when two or more *yonkoma* are put next to each other, these assemblages are invariably multiples of four. When CGDCT aesthetics are applied to *yonkoma*, they can produce an impression of regressing to the panel’s original meaninglessness or, to put it dramatically, a return “to an earlier state of things,”<sup>321</sup> to the inorganic itself, as Freud famously formulated it in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920). While comic strips as a whole arguably tend towards “hermeneutical stupor,”<sup>322</sup> emphasized by an economy of means (eye-level shots, schematic or non-existent backdrops, cute standardized characters, etc.), CGDCT *yonkoma* manga often lack a discernible punchline. Unlike the overt gag-oriented feel of *Sazae-san* and *Tonari no Yamada Kun*, CGDCT is closer to the “looseness” of cute *yonkoma* manga like Igarashi Mikio’s *Bonobono*,<sup>323</sup> whose target audience are commuting salarymen “unwinding” from tension at work. *Bonobono* tells the adventures of a baby otter and its family and friends in the forest, only the concept of “adventure” is radically reduced to minimal meaning and movements, for

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<sup>319</sup> DukeWomenStudies, 2012 Sixth Annual Feminist Theory Workshop - Roundtable, 2012, 38:50-39:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wni7qAhabcY>.

<sup>320</sup> Joshua Paul Dale et al., eds., *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 6.

<sup>321</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961), 30.

<sup>322</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 253.

<sup>323</sup> Mikio Igarashi, *Bonobono*, vol. 1 (Bamboo Shobo, 1987).

instance, slightly changing direction while floating in the river. As Ngai puts it, in such cases, the story “progresses into a narrative of non-progressing.”<sup>324</sup>

Many CGDCT series are worthy of the Seinfeldian epitome of a “show about nothing.” The following examples are taken from the animanga series *Lucky Star*,<sup>325</sup> *Azumanga Daioh*,<sup>326</sup> and *Sketchbook*,<sup>327</sup> all of which are CGDCT series about the daily life of high schoolgirls. For instance, in the first chapter of *Lucky Star*, published in December of 2003, the protagonists have an in-depth discussion over a total of sixteen panels about the best way to eat a Japanese chocolate cornet—a kind of pastry cone filled with chocolate custard, in which the filling tends to leak through the opposite side where bites occur. [Figure 14] The anime adaptation of *Lucky Star*,<sup>328</sup> made by the Japanese studio Kyoto Animation in 2007, expanded these sixteen panels to an endless six-minute sequence where the girls discuss *ad nauseam* the taxonomy and eating techniques of different sweet and savory foods. The girls’ lengthy, quasi-scientific attention to such tiny matters, especially by brainy Miyuki, along with frequent lapses on the part of the protagonist, Konata, into the poorly spoken or loss for words (e.g., she describes the motion of eating an ice cream from a cone as “*gui gui*”), aligns with what Ngai calls the “stuplime,” a combination of sublimity with stupor. [Figure 15a, b, Video 1] Whereas the Kantian sublime arises as an initially dysphoric reaction to inconceivable quantitative or qualitative greatness culminating in catharsis,<sup>329</sup> stuplimity is an anti-cathartic experience in which the ascending momentum of the sublime is inverted or neutralized. For Ngai, certain types of “greatness” force subjects into a state of affective lack, arousing a counterintuitive connection between excessiveness and boredom or stupidity.<sup>330</sup> In a typically stuplime kind of “shocking boredom,” in this sequence from *Lucky Star*, the stuplime is brought about by modular operations of enumeration, permutation, and classification, in which the narrative rises and falls are barely noticeable in the story’s (non)progression.

Another example of stuplime cuteness is Azuma Kiyohiko’s *Azumanga Daioh*, a CGDCT *yonkoma* manga that often plays with very similar panels where action and dialogue are reduced to a minimum. In *Azumanga Daioh*’s most stuplime *yonkoma* strips, there is a

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<sup>324</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 255.

<sup>325</sup> Kagami Yoshimizu, *Lucky Star, Vol. 1* (Cypress, Calif.: Bandai Entertainment, 2009).

<sup>326</sup> Kiyohiko Azuma, *Azumanga Daioh 1-4* (Houston, Tex.: ADV Manga, 2003).

<sup>327</sup> Totan Kobako, *Sketch Book 1-12 Set* (MagGarden, 2003).

<sup>328</sup> *Lucky Star*, episode 1, “*Tsuppashiru Onna*,” directed by Yamamoto Yutaka and produced by Kyoto Animation, aired April 8, 2007, on Chiba TV, KBS Kyoto, SUN-TV, and Tokyo MX.

<sup>329</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 265–67.

<sup>330</sup> Ngai, 161.

sense of retardation, as if the narrative pace was slowed down to the point where the story becomes “stuck” and cannot advance. Often, this is associated with a dumbing down of the characters’ mental faculties. For instance, in **Figure 16**, the 10-year-old child prodigy Chiyo and Osaka, known for her mental slowness, ride first on an escalator (right), and then on an elevator (left). These actions, which are more non-actions requiring minimal movements, each occupy four panels, an extended duration reinforced by the sole dialogues where Osaka tautologically describes and nearly fails to differentiate their actions: “this is an escalator...”, followed by “this is an es... elevator.” On the other hand, in **Figure 17** the four panels are practically the same, and a single, simple action—Sakaki petting Chiyo’s dog—is uncomfortably prolonged, frustrating both Chiyo and the readers. In these cases, like in *Lucky Star*’s chocolate cornet sequence, formal differences are usurped by modular differences.<sup>331</sup>

Furthermore, the repetitive format of *yonkoma* manga reinforces the characters’ compulsive repetitions. Throughout the series, Sakaki, who has a weakness for cute things (hence, her fondness for Chiyo’s dog) and cannot resist petting the neighborhood cats despite their inexplicable animosity toward her, is repeatedly bitten in a plethora of situations. **Figure 18** shows various *yonkoma* strips where Sakaki gets bitten, demonstrating how its structural modularity reinforces both the sequence’s inexorability (the outcome of each comic strip is always the same) and Sakaki’s process of trial and error, recalling the procedural standardization of scientific protocols. Sakaki’s repetition of trauma also exemplifies excellently how CGDCT and *yonkoma* align with what Ngai calls “the stuplidity of slapstick comedy”<sup>332</sup> popularized in cinema by actors such as Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Like Chaplin and Keaton’s “accumulation of comic fatigues,”<sup>333</sup> in *Azumanga Daioh*, for the most part, characters are either out of time, i.e., in a state of lack of mental and physical activity or—as if rusty from the lack thereof—out of place, as they are subjected to a world inhabited by “things” that seem bent on resisting them, or otherwise highlighting their out-of-jointness. **[Figure 19]**

Similarly, in Kobako Totan’s *Sketchbook*, the story’s linear progression is continuously interrupted by the mistakes, misunderstandings, and noncommunication with which the protagonist Sora struggles daily. These range from tiny physical obstacles to the social inability of classmates, teachers, and Sora herself, resulting in a series of embarrassments, discomforts,

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<sup>331</sup> Ngai, 259.

<sup>332</sup> Ngai, 272.

<sup>333</sup> Ngai, 273.

and general awkwardness. For instance, **Figure 20** shows a batch of variations on failing to open different types of packages, in which the division of actions in sets of four panels effectively breaks them down in regular intervals, serving as obstacles preventing a smooth narrative flow from starting point A (e.g., holding a package) to conclusion point B (opening a package). In the first *yonkoma* strip, Sora is not only unable to open an *onigiri* package by hand but fails to find the scissors she needs to open it. The next day, she buys both the *onigiri* and scissors, much to the store clerk's bewilderment as he stares at the weird object coupling. After that, Sora is unable to open the packaged scissors themselves, resulting in an undignified outcome where the solution becomes part of the problem in a repetitive chain of small traumas. The following two *yonkoma* strips depict Sora's struggle with a popsicle package, as she first opens it backward and then accidentally pulls the stick out of the popsicle. In all these cases, the punchline (i.e., the last panel of each *yonkoma*) is invariably a sort of formal resistance—unopened packages, odd pairs, incorrect forms—as readers progress towards non-progression of fatigues. Additionally, the visual and comical effectiveness of the sequence is enhanced by the page layout composed of four-panel comic strips, and the underlying principle emerging from it: the grid.

The grid is by nature “anti-natural, anti-mimetic, anti-real”<sup>334</sup> or, as Rosalind Krauss refers: “the grid extends, in all directions, to infinity. Any boundaries imposed upon it... can only be seen—according to this logic—as arbitrary. By virtue of the grid, the given work of art is presented as a mere fragment, a tiny piece arbitrarily cropped from an infinitely larger fabric.”<sup>335</sup> Therefore, the grid as an arbitrary fragment emphasizes the dissolution of the classical four-part Japanese narrative or poem structure known as *kishōtenketsu* (起承転結), i.e., introduction (起, *ki*), development (承, *shō*), climax or twist (転, *ten*), conclusion (結, *ketsu*).<sup>336</sup> [Figure 21] Indeed, while the single *yonkoma* strip retains the memory of these four parts of *kishōtenketsu* and therefore implies a progression, the accumulation of several *yonkoma* strips tends towards a regular progressionless grid. The *yonkoma* that I have shown so far, especially from *Azumanga Daioh*, exemplify a tension at the core of the CGDCT genre as a whole, in which the seemingly meaningful fragment, when repeated again and again in the same way, begins to dissolve into meaninglessness. As Ngai puts it, the stuplimity, in this case of CGDCT (and *yonkoma* in particular), “paradoxically forces the reader to go on in spite of

<sup>334</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “Grids,” *October* 9 (1979): 50.

<sup>335</sup> Krauss, 60.

<sup>336</sup> “Kishōtenketsu,” *Using Narrative Structures*, accessed July 26, 2017, <http://narrativestructures.wisc.edu/home/kishotenketsu>.



its equal enticement to readers give up.”<sup>337</sup> It is no wonder that the popularity of CGDCT is often accused of having had a stultifying effect on the anime and manga industry,<sup>338</sup> in which science fiction had traditionally reigned with masterpieces full of action, tragedy, and pathos (e.g., *Ghost In The Shell*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, etc.).

A series that addresses this aspect is *Joshiraku*, itself a CGDCT anime about five young female performers of *rakugo*, a type of traditional Japanese comedic storytelling. In one of the episodes of *Joshiraku*,<sup>339</sup> the girls attempt to chronicle their summer vacation as *yonkoma* manga; however, when they apply the *kishōtenketsu* formula to their tale, they conclude that it is too dull and therefore can do away with some panels. After all, they tell themselves, not having a punchline is not a big deal, as many *yonkoma* manga do not. In the end, the girls decide to go for a “*yonkoma*” strip with only three panels, titled “Summer Vacation.” In this unconventional “*yonkoma*,” in the first panel, the girls say, “We’re going on a summer vacation,” in the second panel, “Then let’s go buy swimming suits together,” and the third panel shows the girls in swimsuits. The fourth and last panel is simply an empty black square, driving home the point that there is not enough story or contents in CGDCT to fill up a classic type of narrative. [Figure 22] The three-panel “*yonkoma*” in *Joshiraku* is followed by an even more radical experience: a one-panel “*yonkoma*.” Here, the girls are in a hot spring, and the four panels are reduced to four speech bubbles with appreciative expressions: “What a nice feeling,” “I’m glad we came here,” “This is the best,” “Fufufufufufu.” [Figure 23] It is as if the comic strip regressed to the singleness of the “original” panel, before of its modular repetition into four panels. In both these “*yonkoma*” strips the girls express only “low,” self-indulgent affects related to shopping and bathing in a hot spring, poking fun at the affective and hermeneutical flatness in the CGDCT genre, and suggesting that narrative (at least, linear narrative) occupies a peripheral or contingent role in its signifying economy.

Whereas grids generally work to flatten and deflate, this does not necessarily implicate a movement towards “hermeneutical stupor.” For instance, in the context of Western modernism, grids are often attuned with the avant-garde’s “advanced intellectual

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<sup>337</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 272.

<sup>338</sup> John Oppliger, “Ask John: Is the Moé Boom Really Dying?,” *AnimeNation*, August 30, 2010, <http://www.animation.net/ask-john-is-the-moeacute-boom-really-dying/>.

<sup>339</sup> *Joshiraku*, “*Yonmai Kishō, Musashi Hakkei, Shimobe no Adauchi*,” directed by Mizushima Tsutomu and produced by J.C.Staff, aired August 10, 2012. Based on the manga by Kumeta Kouji (story) and Yasu (art), published by Kodansha.

conscience,”<sup>340</sup> through the self-reflexive exploration of medium specificity of abstract and minimalist art. [Figure 24] In CGDCT, however, the grid is filled with the anticathartic, non-ironic flatness of feminine shallowness, “reconfiguring the experience of genuine repetition as one of a superficial and almost abject horizontality.”<sup>341</sup> An excellent example of the “stupliming” effect of CGDCT on Western grids is Superflat artist Mr.’s homages to Damien Hirst’s spot paintings. Mr.’s work generally relies on his trademark *loli* characters, whose template is the same, varying only in permutations of haircut, eye, hair and skin color, accessories, and decorative details. In some paintings and sculptures, these operations of repetition and variation extend in *mise en abyme*, as there are entire miniature worlds inside a *loli*’s eyes or hair. [Figure 25] Mr.’s spot paintings, made in the mid-to-late 2000s, are almost identical to Hirst’s originals, but Mr. replaces some spots with tiny *loli* heads. [Figure 26a, b] Other spots contain miniature scenes of “cute girls doing cute things,” like building a snowman (e.g., *There May Be Lots of Bears, Merere*, 20004), playing or walking around, or picturesque Japanese views of temples, fireworks, or the Tokyo Big Sight, where the Comiket *otaku* convention takes place (e.g., *In Pools of Sunlight*, 2009). The titles of these works are comically sentimental, cryptic or overly descriptive, as if they were excerpts from manga, like *From Winter to Spring*, *In Pools of Sunlight* or *There May Be Lots of Bears, Merere*, going against the grain of minimalist clinicalism in which paintings are often untitled or numbered within a series.

But why parody superstar Damien Hirst’s spot paintings, in particular? According to British art critic Jonathan Jones, the spot paintings are “a cynical epilogue” to “the great adventure that was 20th-century abstraction,” replacing “the tragic visions of a Rothko with self-mocking sitcom farce.”<sup>342</sup> Hirst’s spots are easily absorbed into the abject sphere of deflatedness of meaning and the intense passions associated with painting’s progress and grandeur, aligning with Ngai’s claim that “while the sublime traditionally finds a home in the serious modes of the lyrical, elegiac, or tragic, stuplimity could be said to belong more properly to the dirtier environments of... ‘bottom humor.’”<sup>343</sup> Therefore, Mr.’s spot paintings align with

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<sup>340</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Gard and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* 6, no. 5 (1939): para. 4, <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/kitsch.html>.

<sup>341</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 281.

<sup>342</sup> Jonathan Jones, “Do Damien Hirst’s Dots Really Matter?,” *The Guardian*, December 11, 2013, sec. Art and design, para. 2, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2013/dec/11/damien-hirst-spot-paintings-heist>.

<sup>343</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 271.

Superflat's overall strategy of humorously "hacking" the Western art world, but they share a more profound affinity with Hirst's abstraction—"cute" paintings doing "cute" things, in which "cute" is said in a sarcastic, mocking tone. The *loli* dwells in this (historically, feminized) shallow place of artistic "lack" of formal experimentation and innovation, a seemingly "cozy" kitsch and mass-cultural realm where individual characters are nevertheless revealed to be accumulations of fragments and information, to be tediously consumed and absorbed.

(See also "Gakkōgurashi," "Hamster" and "Poppy")

# Creepypasta

Creepypasta is an Internet slang term for short horror stories, urban legends, or images propagated on the Internet via chain emails, message boards, and social media with the intent of causing web scares.<sup>344</sup> “Creepypasta” is a derogatory wordplay on “copypasta,” a term coined by the *4chan* community for forum posts copy-pasted from memes, old forum posts, or other materials.<sup>345</sup> Old-school creepypasta is usually brief, consisting of scary anecdotes and tales, instructions for performing rituals, or macabre “lost episodes” of popular comedy or children cartoon TV shows, like *The Simpsons* or *Mickey Mouse*, where characters act violently, kill each other, or otherwise behave in alarming ways.<sup>346</sup> Well-known creepypasta of this kind includes Slender Man, Jeff the Killer, Candle Cove, The Expressionless, The Grifter, The Russian Sleep Experiment, Smile Dog, Penpal, Polybius, Squidward’s Suicide, or This Man. Another type of creepypasta consists of rumors and accounts of “bad encounters”<sup>347</sup> with computers and the Internet, like cursed data files, haunted CDs, floppy discs or videogames, mysterious websites, or the horrors of the dark web.

The word “creepypasta” has a slapstick ring to it that does not agree, at least on the surface, with the horror genre. Indeed, a quick *Google* image search returns dozens of comical images of spaghetti Bolognese with “bloody” tomato sauce, and meat or mozzarella balls posed as eye globes. One *DeviantArt* user even took a charming photograph of a tentacled figure made of wrapped spaghetti strands in a small plate of red sauce, which has been reused in several Internet memes. **[Figure 1]** A description accompanying the picture states that “I’ve been told that there’s some sort of image in the spaghetti if you squint your eyes and look sideways, but I think that’s a load of hooey”<sup>348</sup>—a comical allusion to urban myths often hitting at concealed images or texts visible only in specific conditions. But not only does this wobbly Cthulhu lack in vitality, with the “creepypasta”’s silly spaghetti tentacles floating listlessly on the sides, but the dish arrangement resembles a cheap mid-week meal, as well as the childish

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<sup>344</sup> Austin Considine, “Creepypasta, or Internet Scares, If You’re Bored at Work,” *The New York Times*, November 12, 2010, para. 5, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/14/fashion/14noticed.html>.

<sup>345</sup> Considine, para. 11.

<sup>346</sup> “What Is Creepypasta?,” *Creepypasta Wiki*, paras. 3-5, accessed April 29, 2018, [http://creepypasta.wikia.com/wiki/Creepypasta\\_Wiki:What\\_Is\\_Creepypasta%3F](http://creepypasta.wikia.com/wiki/Creepypasta_Wiki:What_Is_Creepypasta%3F).

<sup>347</sup> Parikka, “Medianatures,” 99.

<sup>348</sup> melaphyre, “Creepypasta,” *DeviantArt*, accessed April 29, 2018, <https://melaphyre.deviantart.com/art/Creepypasta-333286660>.

table manners of one who plays with their food. There is a ridiculous contrast between the grotesque grandeur to which the creature seemingly aspires and the prosaicness of the situation. This wannabe eldritch abomination looks rather *cute*.

The spaghetti Cthulhu illustrates an interplay of cuteness and disgust underlying various instances of the creepypasta phenomenon. The word “creepypasta” entails a certain degree of failing and diminutiveness, in tension with its horror-themed tales. To some extent, the word “creepypasta” may be meant to declaw these stories whose over-circulation makes them unreliable and annoying, prompting the contempt (or sometimes, the disgust) of cybernauts. Moreover, many of the art produced by fans about creepypasta is in the style of manga and anime, with characters such as Jeff the Killer, Jason the Toymaker, Candy Pop, Laughing Jake, or The Puppeteer becoming fan favorites in online art communities like *DeviantArt*. [Figure 2] The dissonance between these characters’ inherent creepiness and their potential to crossover to cute imaginaries is also present in more recent entries to the creepypasta bestiary, e.g., the Momo online phenomenon, which first surfaced in 2016 and later again, in early 2019. [Figure 3] According to *Know Your Meme*,

Momo is a nickname given to a sculpture of a young woman with long black hair, large bulging eyes, a wide smile and bird legs. Pictures of the sculpture are associated with an urban legend involving a *WhatsApp* phone number that messages disturbing photographs to those that attempt to contact it, linked to a game referred to as the Momo Challenge or Momo Game. Similar to the Blue Whale Challenge, many have accused the suicide game of being a hoax.<sup>349</sup>

In reality, Momo was a statue by Tokyo-based artist Aiso Keisuke, whose work (mainly, horror props for television and film) is informed by his love of *yōkai* spirits from Japanese folklore; Momo, in particular, was inspired by the *ubume*, a ghost of a woman who died at childbirth.<sup>350</sup> Although Momo is disturbing, there is an underlying element of burlesque cuteness to her image, her big round eyes and small nose giving her a youthful look, fitting of her name (“Momo” not only sounds cute, but means “peach” in Japanese). So much so that, after the initial panic, Momo became a favorite character in *Tumblr* and *DeviantArt* fandoms, and even made the cover of New York’s *Buzzfeed* newspaper on March 2019, with the headline

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<sup>349</sup> “Momo Challenge,” *Know Your Meme*, accessed June 1, 2019, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/momo-challenge>.

<sup>350</sup> Alex Martin, “Japanese Artist behind Ghastly Creature in Viral ‘Momo Challenge’ Baffled by Disturbing Hoax,” *The Japan Times Online*, March 6, 2019, para. 6, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/03/06/national/social-issues/japanese-artist-behind-ghastly-creature-viral-momo-challenge-baffled-disturbing-hoax/>.

stating: “How Momo Went from Viral Hoax to Viral Hottie.” According to writer Katie Notopoulos, “Momo has gone from nightmare to dreamy, in record time,” alluding to Momo’s fandomization and the plenty of Internet fanart in which Momo appears as a lovable monster girl, often depicted in anime style. [Figure 4] Additionally, several image macros and fanart emerged on social media in which positive motivational phrases replaced the self-harm instructions that Momo allegedly spread on *WhatsApp* and *YouTube*. “Eat healthy. Get exercise,” “You are loved,” or “Believe in yourself”<sup>351</sup> thus became the new maxims of Wholesome Momo, rehabilitated by her Internet fans as an icon of positivity. [Figure 5]

Such linguistic and stylistic features make the creepypasta phenomenon representative of Internet artifacts infused with negative energies—either associated with the horror genre or otherwise deemed harmful to one’s digital hygiene—but rendered in cute visuals or otherwise cutified by online fandoms. Another instance of this is the trend of *moé* anthropomorphism (*moé ginjinka*), responsible for the fandomization of an entire lineage of hazardous Internet memes. Ebola-chan and Winter-chan are two such cases, to which I now turn.

Both Ebola-chan and Winter-chan are anthropomorphizations of humanitarian disasters as cute anime girls, created in response to the Ebola and Migrant crisis, respectively.<sup>352</sup> As described in *KnowYourMeme*, Ebola-chan is “a young female anime character wearing a nurse outfit, holding a bloody skull and wearing a ponytail hairstyle ending in strains of the Ebola virus.”<sup>353</sup> [Figure 6] The character, which was initially called Ebola-tan, was created in early August of 2014 by a user on *Pixiv* (a Japanese online art community akin to *DeviantArt*) immediately migrated to a thread posted to *4chan*’s /a/ (anime) board.<sup>354</sup> There, Ebola-chan spread as a reasonably harmless joke through fan art and image macros that, in the fashion of chain emails, urged users to answer with the phrase “I love you Ebola-chan” to avoid contracting the disease. Later, Ebola-chan became more markedly racist, falling victim to the racially-divisive propaganda typical in Internet troll culture.<sup>355</sup>

In turn, Winter-chan, who resembles the protagonist Elsa from Disney’s *Frozen* (2013), was overtly racist from the start: the idea being that “The harsh, cold winter summoned by the

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<sup>351</sup> “Momo Challenge,” “Wholesome Momo.”

<sup>352</sup> Olivia Rose Marcus and Merrill Singer, “Loving Ebola-Chan: Internet Memes in an Epidemic,” *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 3 (April 1, 2017): 341.

<sup>353</sup> “Ebola-Chan,” *Know Your Meme*, 2015, “Origin,” para. 1, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/ebola-chan>.

<sup>354</sup> “Ebola-Chan,” para. 2.

<sup>355</sup> “Ebola-Chan,” para. 5.

Winter-chan would be painful, or fatal, to those fleeing the Middle East in the European Migrant Crisis.”<sup>356</sup> [Figure 7] Other targets of this kind of toxic *moé* anthropomorphization include phenomena as diverse as serial killers (Nevada-Tan), deadly diseases (Malaria-senpai, Marburg-nee-san, Black Plague-sama, AIDS-kun, Rabies-tan), terrorist groups (ISIS-chan), and government-developed Internet censorship filters (Ipo-chan, Green Dam Girl), among others. [Figures 8 & 9] All these characters have Japanese suffixes attached to their names. “-Chan” is the prevailing one, an endearing suffix for a familiar person, usually girlfriends and children, along with “-tan,” a cuter version of “-chan,” as if mispronounced by a child. Other suffixes include “-senpai,” “-sama,” “-neesan,” or “-kun.” These suffixes are common in Japanese language, but in this Internet context are meant to enhance the characters’ anime-likeness, namely, as associated with the *otaku*’s cult of cuteness and *moé*. As such, these memes attest to the phenomeno-poetic link between the *kawaii* and the aesthetics of disgust that permeates the Internet, with more or less malicious intentions.

The world of haunted videogames is another facet of this connection. In the *Creepypasta Wiki*, there is a category dedicated to videogame-themed creepypasta “For all your gaming weirdness.”<sup>357</sup> The category contains two major subsections, for *Pokémon* and *Legend of Zelda* creepypasta. Popular *Zelda* creepypasta, such as BEN Drowned<sup>358</sup> or Majora’s Mask,<sup>359</sup> revolve around haunted cartridges, hacks, bootlegs, and glitches. [Figure 10] *Pokémon* creepypasta includes, for instance, the Lavender Town Syndrome, a report of a mass hysteria that afflicted children who listened to the Lavender Town theme music in *Pokémon Red and Blue*, the first *Pokémon* game released in Japan in 1996.<sup>360</sup> [Figure 11] The *Mario*

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<sup>356</sup> “Winter-Chan,” *Know Your Meme*, 2016, “Origin” para. 1, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/winter-chan>.

<sup>357</sup> “Video Games,” *Creepypasta Wiki*, accessed April 30, 2018, [http://creepypasta.wikia.com/wiki/Category:Video\\_Games](http://creepypasta.wikia.com/wiki/Category:Video_Games).

<sup>358</sup> According to the *Creepypasta Wiki*, “BEN Drowned, or Haunted Majora's Mask, is a well-known creepypasta (and later, an alternate reality game) created by Alex Hall, also known as ‘Jadusable.’ The story revolves around a Majora's Mask cartridge that is haunted by the ghost (if it is a ghost) of a boy named Ben” (“BEN Drowned,” *Creepypasta Wiki*, accessed April 30, 2018, [http://creepypasta.wikia.com/wiki/BEN\\_Drowned](http://creepypasta.wikia.com/wiki/BEN_Drowned).)

<sup>359</sup> According to the *Creepypasta Wiki*, “Majora's Mask is a Legend of Zelda creepypasta about hacking a used copy of Majora's Mask with a GameShark” (“Majora’s Mask,” *Creepypasta Wiki*, accessed April 30, 2018, [http://creepypasta.wikia.com/wiki/Majora%27s\\_Mask](http://creepypasta.wikia.com/wiki/Majora%27s_Mask).)

<sup>360</sup> According to the *Creepypasta Wiki*, “The Lavender Town Syndrome (also known as ‘Lavender Town Tone?’ or ‘Lavender Town Suicides’) was a peak in suicides and illness of children between the ages of 7-12 shortly after the release of *Pokémon Red and Green* in Japan... Rumors say that these suicides and illness only occurred after the children playing the game reached Lavender Town, whose theme music had extremely high frequencies, that studies showed that only children and young teens can hear, since their ears are more sensitive. Due to the Lavender Tone, at least two-hundred children supposedly committed suicide, and many more developed illnesses and afflictions... After the

and *Sonic the Hedgehog* franchises are also popular subjects within the creepypasta community. All these classic Japanese videogames feature mascots like Pikachu and other pokémon, Link and Zelda, Mario and Luigi, or Sonic and Tails, whose loveliness plays a vital role in boosting the creepiness of the stories, contrasting with the pluckiness, bubbly colors, and upbeat songs of 8-bit, 16-bit and 32-bit videogames. Incidentally, the reality is not always as far off from legend as one would think. Case in point: the first season of the *Pokémon* anime in Japan was marked by the “Pokémon Shock” incident, on December 16, 1997, in which 685 viewers were hospitalized due to epileptic seizures induced by one of Pikachu’s flashing attacks.<sup>361</sup> [Video 1] The event also resulted in a four-month hiatus for the *Pokémon* anime, and several rules came into force regarding visual effects in animation.<sup>362</sup> The “Pokémon Shock,” being a true story, effectively conveys the uncanny poetics of cute characters gone materially “bad,” even if involuntarily.

Another example is the finding of pokémon inside the Fukushima Exclusion Zone and Chernobyl during the peak of the *Pokémon Go* mania,<sup>363</sup> an augmented reality game released by the American company Niantic in July of 2016, adding to the moral panic following the game’s release. The fact that one could find Japan’s *kawaii* “pocket monsters” in the “material metaphors for the filthiest places on Earth,”<sup>364</sup> demonstrates the many contradictions arising when cute virtual characters become threats to the physical integrity of players and nonplayers around the world. On the level of symbolic rather than material risks, local authorities have demanded that Niantic deletes Pokéstops and Gyms (i.e., important points within the game hosted in local landmarks, to which players flock) from solemn sites serving as memorials of civilizational horror and death, like the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, the Auschwitz Memorial, the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C., Ground Zero, and

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Lavender Tone incident, the programmers had fixed Lavender Town’s theme music to be at a lower frequency, and since then children were no longer affected by it. “Lavender Town Syndrome,” *Creepypasta Wiki*, accessed April 30, 2018, [http://creepypasta.wikia.com/wiki/Lavender\\_Town\\_Syndrome](http://creepypasta.wikia.com/wiki/Lavender_Town_Syndrome).

<sup>361</sup> “Dennō Senshi Porygon,” in *Wikipedia*, July 10, 2018, para. 2, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Denn%C5%8D\\_Senshi\\_Porygon&oldid=849697485](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Denn%C5%8D_Senshi_Porygon&oldid=849697485).

<sup>362</sup> “Dennō Senshi Porygon,” “Aftermath” para. 3.

<sup>363</sup> Griffin Andrew, “Pokemon Go: Don’t Try and Catch Creatures in the Fukushima Disaster Zone, Trainers Told,” *The Independent*, July 27, 2016, online edition, sec. Gaming, <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/gaming/pokemon-go-fukushima-japan-dangers-radioactive-zone-concerns-a7158141.html>; Alexandra Klausner, “You Can Play Pokémon Go in Radioactive Chernobyl,” *New York Post*, December 15, 2016, online edition, sec. Living, <http://nypost.com/2016/12/15/you-can-play-pokemon-go-in-radioactive-chernobyl/>.

<sup>364</sup> Sierra, “Filth as Non-Technology,” 5.



cemeteries.<sup>365</sup> [Figure 12] Such instances of extreme physical and moral disgust were moreover complemented by an endless series of smaller, slapstickish traumas. According to various sources, “Players reported falling over potholes, twisting ankles, and even walking into lampposts and other obstacles as they spent their time engrossed in their phones without paying full attention to their surroundings.”<sup>366</sup> There were also reports of players that fell off a 50-foot cliff<sup>367</sup> or slipped and fell into a ditch, breaking several bones.<sup>368</sup>

Apart from causing severe injuries, *Pokémon Go* was deemed noxious on several other charges, including muggings, traumatic experiences like finding a dead body in the woods while playing the game, job loss, car crashes, marital arguments, dead batteries and phone viruses, sore legs, data charges, trespassing charges, and even parents abandoning their children to catch a pokémon.<sup>369</sup> Massive human mobs were moved around by virtual cuties, for instance, when the appearance of a Vaporeon and a Squirtle resulted in the sudden crowding of New York’s Central Park<sup>370</sup> and the Santa Monica Pier,<sup>371</sup> [Video 2] respectively. In a stroke of Oscar Wildian “life imitates art far more than art imitates life,” the world seemed to have gone mad in ways reminiscent of the *denpa* (“electromagnetic wave”) tradition in anime, manga, light novels, and visual novels, in which ordinary people are mind-controlled by exterior forces (electromagnetism, hypnosis, demons, etc.) that make them act in unfamiliar, out-of-character ways. Or, in Kristevian terms, *Pokémon Go* perceptualized—for a time—the abject realization

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<sup>365</sup> Associated Press, “Hiroshima Unhappy Atomic-Bomb Park Is ‘Pokemon Go’ Site,” *Naples Herald*, July 27, 2016, <http://naplesherald.com/2016/07/27/hiroshima-unhappy-atomic-bomb-park-pokemon-go-site/>; Allana Akhtar, “Holocaust Museum, Auschwitz Want Pokémon Go Hunts Out,” *USA Today*, July 12, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2016/07/12/holocaust-museum-auschwitz-want-pokmon-go-hunts-stop-pokmon/86991810/>; Russell Holly, “Please Stop Playing Pokémon Go in Cemeteries,” *Android Central*, July 29, 2017, <https://www.androidcentral.com/please-stop-playing-pokemon-go-cemeteries>.

<sup>366</sup> Matthew Loffhagen, “The 15 Worst Real World Dangers of Playing Pokémon GO,” *Screen Rant*, July 12, 2016, “Injuries” para. 1, <https://screenrant.com/pokemon-go-dangers/>.

<sup>367</sup> Harry Cockburn, “Two Men Walk off Cliff While Playing Pokemon Go,” *The Independent*, July 14, 2016, paras. 1-2, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/pokemon-go-men-fall-off-cliff-san-diego-android-ios-app-a7136986.html>.

<sup>368</sup> Amalthea, “Pokemon Go Put Me in the ER Last Night,” *Reddit*, July 7, 2016, para. 1, [https://www.reddit.com/r/pokemongo/comments/4rq9bs/pokemon\\_go\\_put\\_me\\_in\\_the\\_er\\_last\\_night/](https://www.reddit.com/r/pokemongo/comments/4rq9bs/pokemon_go_put_me_in_the_er_last_night/).

<sup>369</sup> Andrew Campbell, “Pokemon Go and Moral Panic,” *Looking Up*, August 2, 2016, <http://andrewscampbell.com/2016/08/02/pokemon-go-and-moral-panic/>; Loffhagen, “The 15 Worst Real World Dangers of Playing Pokémon GO.”

<sup>370</sup> Dave Smith, “Hundreds of People Mobbed Central Park to Catch a Vaporeon in Pokémon GO,” *Business Insider*, July 17, 2016, <https://www.businessinsider.com/pokemon-go-mob-runs-after-vaporeon-video-2016-7>.

<sup>371</sup> Ben Gilbert, “This 40-Second Video Will Convince You That ‘Pokémon GO’ Is an Insane Phenomenon,” *Business Insider*, July 15, 2016, <https://www.businessinsider.com/pokemon-go-mob-runs-after-squirtle-video-2016-7>.

that there is something “impossible within”<sup>372</sup> us, an invisible otherness stemming from the core of our Self, stealing away one’s control over one’s actions and surroundings.

Omari Akil, author of the article “Pokémon GO is a Death Sentence if you are a Black Man,” goes one step further in describing the underlying racial politics of *Pokémon Go*. He writes:

When my brain started combining the complexity of being Black in America with the real world proposal of wandering and exploration that is designed into the gameplay of *Pokemon GO*, there was only one conclusion. I might die if I keep playing. The breakdown is simple: There is a statistically disproportionate chance that someone could call the police to investigate me for walking around in circles in the complex. There is a statistically disproportionate chance that I would be approached by law enforcement with fear or aggression, even when no laws have been broken. There is a statistically disproportionate chance that I will be shot while reaching for my identification that I always keep in my back right pocket. There is a statistically disproportionate chance that more shots will be fired and I will be dead before any medical assistance is available.<sup>373</sup>

According to Akil, because *Pokémon Go* is a location-based video game, it can make players acutely aware that the public space is not equal for everyone. To be fair, there are many redeeming stories about *Pokémon Go*, like a couple who met while hunting for Lapras (a water-type pokémon) and eventually got married,<sup>374</sup> or the game’s healing effects on folks with mental health issues,<sup>375</sup> including *hikikomori* shut-ins,<sup>376</sup> or those struggling with obesity or lack of physical activity.<sup>377</sup> Still, Akil’s racialized take on *Pokémon Go* shows how cuteness and aggression go hand in hand in our real and virtual worlds, highlighting their many gaps and biases. In the end, despite the positive effects of active videogames, excessive gaming is

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<sup>372</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 5.

<sup>373</sup> Omari Akil, “Warning: Pokemon GO Is a Death Sentence If You Are a Black Man.,” *Medium*, July 7, 2016, paras. 8-13, <https://medium.com/mobile-lifestyle/warning-pokemon-go-is-a-death-sentence-if-you-are-a-black-man-acacb4bdae7f#.kfps5v1y5>.

<sup>374</sup> Lynzee Loveridge, “Couple Who Met via Pokémon GO Receive Ultimate Wedding Video,” *Anime News Network*, November 16, 2018, <https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/interest/2018-11-16/couple-who-met-via-pokemon-go-receive-ultimate-wedding-video/.139605>.

<sup>375</sup> MrBijomaru, “R/Pokemongo - How Pokémon GO Saved Me [Discussion],” *Reddit*, accessed June 1, 2019,

[https://www.reddit.com/r/pokemongo/comments/8g805k/how\\_pokémon\\_go\\_saved\\_me\\_discussion/](https://www.reddit.com/r/pokemongo/comments/8g805k/how_pokémon_go_saved_me_discussion/).

<sup>376</sup> Takahiro A. Kato et al., “Can Pokémon GO Rescue Shut-Ins (Hikikomori) from Their Isolated World?,” *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 71, no. 1 (n.d.): 75–76.

<sup>377</sup> Ying Xian et al., “An Initial Evaluation of the Impact of Pokémon GO on Physical Activity,” *Journal of the American Heart Association: Cardiovascular and Cerebrovascular Disease* 6, no. 5 (May 16, 2017).

still bad for one's health, with muscle pains, seizures, obesity, aggressive behavior, poor grades, sleep deprivation, and attention disorders as a few of its costs. On the other hand, computers continue to be associated with many scary, impalpable techno-things that threaten to leak into real life. Like the troll, a creature from Scandinavian folklore which has become a symbol of the Internet's dark underbelly, of the impulse to crush and wreak havoc, where nothing is too offensive or inflammatory that it cannot be exploited for the sake of "lulz."

But when creepiness and cuteness are entangled, it significantly alters the phenomeno-poetics of these artifacts and phenomena. They become something else—a *dark cute digital aesthetic*. It is no wonder that one of the creepiest websites on the Internet, *Gurochan*, is filled with *kawaii* imagery. *Gurochan* is a website where users upload pornographic drawings depicting extreme forms of sexual violence, mutilation, necrophilia, and scatology,<sup>378</sup> most of them drawn in animanga style, often with *lolicon* themes. [Figure 13] Although the term "guro" derives from the Japanese interwar art movement *ero guro nansensu* ("erotic grotesque nonsense"), much contemporary *guro* does not hold the countercultural artistry that makes the former the target of academic interest (certainly, not *Gurochan*).<sup>379</sup> Existing as an *.onion* website as well as a regular one, *Gurochan* has disappeared more than a few times in recorded history. As one Redditor points out:

The Gurochan system is a patchwork of soft- and hard-wares which do not quite form the coherent system one might imagine. The people it relies on to keep running live scattered all over this gore-spattered planet, and have lives (or so they say). And when you think about it, guro is death and mutilation, so being fragmented and going down all the time, is pretty much in Gurochan's nature.<sup>380</sup>

*Gurochan's* material scattering echoes the destruction inflicted on the characters, the cute animanga boys and girls made to burst from their limits, crushed and reduced to ruined things. The websites particularly unstable nature has prompted the satirical website *Encyclopædia Dramatica* to call it "the thing that just won't die," stating that "just like any

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<sup>378</sup> Hashtags such as "beheading," "skull fuck," "eye fuck," "brain fuck," "hanging," "amputation," "impalement," "broken neck," "petrification," "necrophilia," "electrocution," "evisceration," "cut in half," "strangulation," "taxidermy," or "crushed head," are but a small sample of the materials which can be found on the website,

<sup>379</sup> Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense*, 28–30.

<sup>380</sup> Raisin-In-The-Rum, "Gurochan's Onion Url While 'Gurochan.Ch' Is down Answers," Discussion Group of Blog Posting, *Reddit*, May 29, 2017, [https://www.reddit.com/r/guro/comments/6dsv9c/gurochans\\_onion\\_url\\_while\\_gurochanch\\_is\\_down/](https://www.reddit.com/r/guro/comments/6dsv9c/gurochans_onion_url_while_gurochanch_is_down/).

cockroach, it seems that no matter how many times you kill this site, it keeps coming back.”<sup>381</sup> Their description of *Gurochan*’s current administrators enclaved and ryonaloli suggests that they are insane serial killers and pedophiles and that the FBI monitors *Gurochan*’s IRC channel. *Gurochan* may provide a glimpse into what Fred Botting calls “dark materialism,” which “engages matter at the thresholds of its annihilation and disappearance.”<sup>382</sup> *Gurochan* is always on the brink of vanishing from the Internet, of self-negation, of falling to bits and pieces as its networks collapse and the workarounds fail.

If we accept philosopher Aurel Kolnai’s claim that “disgust is never related to inorganic or non-biological matter,<sup>383</sup> then the repulsion elicited by our digital culture can only be attributed to its non-technologic performance or its *filthiness*.<sup>384</sup> Therefore, if cuteness is a kind of evolutionary “technology” in and of itself—to ensure the survival of babies and cubs, or facilitate social relationships—one may understand the spread of cute aggressions in our mediaspheres as the result of cuteness that “has started behaving non-technically.”<sup>385</sup> Indeed, Dylan Wittkower suggests that the predominance of cuteness in digital culture today is connected to the rising popularity of other aesthetics of excess, all sharing a certain degree of emotional immediacy. “The general movement towards extreme images may play a role in increasing the expectation in new media communications for immediately engaging and evocative content,” Wittkower writes. “And so, even though the cute is very different from the hot, shocking, or disgusting, all may play a role in determining the speed and level of desublimation within new media culture.”<sup>386</sup>

Wittkower’s categories of aesthetic excess each in their own way outline what one may call a *dark digitality* of technical matters, both physical and moral, ranging from general morbidity to the proliferation of online pornography, from resource depletion to digital pollution like bugs, viruses, worms, spam, pop-up ads, clickbait, or Internet trolls. Interestingly, if *dark digitality* accounts for those undesired remainders of cybercapitalism—supposedly

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<sup>381</sup> “Gurochan,” in *Encyclopedia Dramatica*, accessed January 23, 2017, <https://encycopediadramatica.se/Gurochan>.

<sup>382</sup> Fred Botting, “Dark Materialism,” *Backdoor Broadcasting Company*, 2011, para. 1, <http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2011/01/dark-materialism/>.

<sup>383</sup> Aurel Kolnai, *On Disgust*, ed. Barry Smith and Carolyn Korsmeyer (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), 30.

<sup>384</sup> Aurel Kolnai put forth this idea in the first comprehensive study on the phenomenology of disgust, *Der Ekel* (“On Disgust”), in 1929.

<sup>385</sup> Sierra, “Filth as Non-Technology,” 2.

<sup>386</sup> “On The Origins of The Cute as a Dominant Aesthetic Category in Digital Culture,” in *Putting Knowledge to Work and Letting Information Play*, ed. Timothy W. Luke and Jeremy Hunsinger, *Transdisciplinary Studies* 4 (SensePublishers, 2012), 219.

smooth and clean but rotten to the core—these abject human desires are less the turf of “cleaner” official products of corporations than a product of the social media and the boom of user-generated content in the twenty-first century Web 2.0. In sum, Creepypasta, along with related phenomena examined in this section, including toxic *moé* mascots, *Pokémon Go* hysteria, or *Gurochan* pornography, index the interlacing of cuteness and *dark digitality* on the Internet and in our personal computers, as cuteness, distorted by cybercapitalism, becomes irredeemably laced with digital disgust.

(See also “(Betamale),” “Ika-Tako Virus” and “Red Toad Tumblr Post”)

# Dark Web Bake Sale

On November 13, 2015, the Internet art group Cybertwee, founded by the artists Gabriella Hileman, May Waver, and Violet Forest, held a 24-hour bake sale on the dark web. They sold 95 rosewater cookies sprinkled in edible gold glitter. The cookie recipe, made available in Cybertwee's *Kickstarter*, was as follows:

3 cups plain flour; 1tsp baking powder; 225g butter, softened; 1 ¼ cups sugar; 1 egg; 2 tsp rosewater. Combine flour and baking powder in a medium bowl. Set aside. In a large bowl, cream butter and sugar until light and fluffy. Beat in egg and rosewater. Gradually add flour mixture to wet mixture, mixing well between each addition. Once all added, mix until well combined and dough comes together, away from the sides of the bowl. Split into two balls, flatten into discs and wrap in glad-wrap. Refrigerate for at least one hour. Preheat oven to 175 degrees Celsius and line baking tray. Remove dough from fridge and roll on lightly floured bench until about 0.5cm thick. Cut out shapes and transfer to baking tray. Bake for 10-13 minutes or until cookies begin to turn light brown around the edges. Allow to cool on tray for 5 minutes, then transfer to rack to cool completely.<sup>387</sup>

Every five cookies, baked by Hileman and Wave (Forest handled the website programming) cost \$7 or 0.0212 BTC,<sup>388</sup> and the proceeds from the sale, just over \$300, were donated to the feminist biohacker collective GynePunk.<sup>389</sup> The Dark Web Bake Sale was the result of a Kickstarter held the month before, in October 2015, raising money for ingredients and shipment costs. The 53 backers who contributed with \$5 or more received an invitation to the bake sale via email, including the time and date of the event, and a link to Cybertwee's .onion website and password-protected *Tumblr*. Backers also received a unique bitcoin wallet address and an informational PDF on how to use the *Tor* software, bitcoin, and the encryption program Pretty Good Privacy (PGP), for added security during the

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<sup>387</sup> Cybertwee, "Bake Sale on the Deep Web!," *Kickstarter*, 2015,

<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/cybertwee/cybertwee-bake-sale-on-the-deep-web>.

<sup>388</sup> Kari Paul, "I Bought Adorable Cookies on the Deep Web," *Motherboard*, December 9, 2015, para. 6, [https://motherboard.vice.com/en\\_us/article/i-bought-adorable-cookies-on-the-deep-web](https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/i-bought-adorable-cookies-on-the-deep-web).

<sup>389</sup> GynePunk is based in Calafou, an industrial post-capitalist ecovillage in Catalonia. Their activities focus on subverting traditional physician-patient and gender roles in women's health through open-source tools and DIY kits, e.g. 3D-printed speculums or do-it-yourself urinalysis. Elise D. Thorburn, "Cyborg Witches: Class Composition and Social Reproduction in the GynePunk Collective," *Feminist Media Studies* 17, no. 2 (March 4, 2017): 153–67.

transaction.<sup>390</sup> “We wanted to make the Dark Web more accessible to ourselves and others,” Hileman explained in an interview. “We felt like it was made out to be this difficult and dangerous thing, but we thought it was a really valuable tool. We were really inspired by whistle-blowers, and wanted to make it easier to understand for others like us who may have felt alienated or intimidated by the process.”<sup>391</sup> The bake sale made the members of Cybertwee aware of the challenges of the cryptocurrency market, as the constant fluctuations in bitcoin value forced them to be flexible with prices.<sup>392</sup> A video screen capture of the Deep Web Bake Sale is available on Cybertwee’s website (<http://cybertwee.net/>), [Video 1] along with the description and documentation of the collective’s other activities, such as exhibitions, installations, and app/ Internet art, including the *Cybertwee Headquarters*, the *Cybertwee bb Dome*, the *Shared Memory Emotional Infiltration*, and *The Oracle*.

The *Dark Web Bake Sale* also encouraged the members of Cybertwee to educate themselves and others on technologies with little female participation, pushing against the image of macho cybercrime often associated with the dark web. (Although, according to some accounts, even the infamous online black market Silk Road once served as a site of “constructive activism”<sup>393</sup>). In addition to the *Dark Web Bake Sale*, Cybertwee produced the *Dark Web Handbook*, a zine on how to access the dark web and use bitcoin. Each zine came with \$15 in bitcoin, “which you can use to make a bitcoin transaction and have homemade super cute edible cookies sent to your house.”<sup>394</sup> The zine included a moiré animation (an optical illusion created by parallel lines crossing over each other) of a golden ring from the *Sonic The Hedgehog* videogames—a cuter, more nostalgic kind of virtual “coin.” *The Dark Web Bake Sale*’s visuals emphasized the feminine and innocent connotations of the bake sale with cursive letters and floating stars on bright pastel backgrounds, rainbow gradient, cute GIFs of laughing cookies, computers with ribbons, glitter flowers, butterflies, and so on. [Figure 1]

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<sup>390</sup> Zach Brooke, “A Marketer’s Guide to the Dark Web,” *American Marketing Association*, July 15, 2015, “Sales and the Dark Web” para. 5, <https://www.ama.org/publications/MarketingInsights/Pages/marketers-guide-to-dark-web.aspx>.

<sup>391</sup> Brooke, “Sales and the Dark Web,” para. 3.

<sup>392</sup> According to the website *Motherboard*, “Cybertwee added that the experience underscored for them the volatility of Bitcoin, which saw a 70 percent spike in value in November, right when the bake sale was scheduled. The founders had sent out an email to backers before the sale began reminding them to buy bitcoins early, as the currency generally takes about a week to show up in wallets after being purchased, but the collective had to be flexible on prices for customers due to the constant fluctuation.” Paul, “I Bought Adorable Cookies on the Deep Web”.

<sup>393</sup> Alexia Maddox et al., “Constructive Activism in the Dark Web: Cryptomarkets and Illicit Drugs in the Digital ‘Demimonde,’” *Information, Communication & Society* 19, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 111.

<sup>394</sup> Cybertwee, “Cybertwee Dark Web Handbook,” *Cybertwee*, November 30, 2016, para. 2, <http://cybertwee.net/cybertwee-dark-web-handbook/>.

This aesthetics aligns with Cybertwee’s manifesto, “The singularity is dear,” available on the website’s homepage,<sup>395</sup> whose title is a cutified pun on *The Singularity Is Near*, the influential 2005 book about artificial intelligence by Ray Kurzweil.

Cybertwee’s online manifesto includes a facsimile of the typewritten document decorated with cute stickers of flowers and bugs, a transcription of the text, and a video of Cybertwee’s members reading the manifesto out loud. [Video 2, Figure 2] In this video, Gabriella, May, and Violet are snuggled up against each other, bathed in a dreamy light, enclosed by a frame in gradients of yellow and pink. “Romantic is not weak. Feminine is not weak. Cute is not weak,” Cybertwee declares. “Lack of emotion is oft favored because success is defined as the ability to be mechanical and efficient. But sentimentality, empathy, and being too soft should not be seen as weaknesses.”<sup>396</sup> Cybertwee’s affirmative “politics of emotional experience and social bonding”<sup>397</sup> speak of the decolonizing power of cuteness as a tool for techno- and cyberfeminism. By strategically deploying its “emotional vernacular”<sup>398</sup> creativity, cute aesthetics, and the *kawaii* in particular, push against the male-dominated Internet, cyberspace, and new media technologies where misogyny, sexism, and racism often run loose. As scholar Larissa Hjorth puts it, cute has become “integral in the politics of personalization in the age of affective technologies”<sup>399</sup> like social media. And while this customization often takes place in the capitalist realm, cuteness’s grassrootness and the affects orbiting around it—the intimate, the feminine, the romantic—can be reclaimed as a mobilizing strength, capable of opening up emancipatory spaces and conversations.

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<sup>395</sup> The complete Cybertwee’s manifesto: “the singularity is dear. far too long have we succumbed to the bitter edge of the idea that power is lost in the sweet and tender. romantic is not weak. feminine is not weak. cute is not weak. we are fragmented and multifaceted bbs. lack of emotion is oft favored because success is defined as the ability to be mechanical and efficient. but sentimentality, empathy, and being too soft should not be seen as weaknesses. we see the limitations of corporeality, as solipsists, we know the body is the original prosthesis for operating in this universe, we know the body illusory, we curate our candy. our sucre sickly sweet is intentional and not just a lure or a trap for passing flies, but a self-indulgent intrapersonal biofeedback mechanism spelled in emoji and gentle selfies” Cybertwee, “The Singularity Is Dear.,” *Cybertwee*, accessed May 8, 2018, <http://cybertwee.net/>.

<sup>396</sup> Cybertwee, “The Cybertwee Manifesto,” 2014, para. 2, <http://cybertwee.net/>.

<sup>397</sup> Gabriella Hileman, May Waver, and Violet Forest, The Journey of cybertwee into the Deep Web, interview by Emily Braun, *Coin Cafe Blog*, November 5, 2015, para. 6, <http://blog.coincafe.com/2015/11/05/cybertwee/>.

<sup>398</sup> Hjorth Larissa, “Digital Art in the Age of Social Media: A Case Study of the Politics of Personalization via Cute Culture.,” 2009, 3, <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/09287.29520.pdf>.

<sup>399</sup> Larissa, 7.



Before I continue, I will make a short interlude to address the phenomeno-poetics of the dark web. According to most definitions, “the Surface Web is anything that a search engine can find while the Deep Web is anything that a search engine can’t find,”<sup>400</sup> including perfectly harmless if ungoogleable contents that one can only access via search boxes within websites. The dark web, in turn, is a small part of the deep web, intentionally hidden so that it can only be accessed through non-standard web browsers like *Tor*, allowing for anonymous and untraceable communication.<sup>401</sup> *Tor*’s domain suffix, “.onion,” is an acronym derived from the original software name, *The Onion Router*. In turn, *Tor*’s logo features an onion in place of the “o,” with a quarter of its bulb sliced off, revealing the hidden layers of scale leaves beneath the tunica. [Figure 3]

*Tor*’s onion imagery is appropriate, considering how it introduced a sense of inscrutable deepness into the otherwise panoptical World Wide Web. The growing awareness of a negative space lurking under, or beyond, the traditional Internet, contributed to the fact that despite relatively small-sized, the dark web gained the reputation of a readily accessible cyber underworld of child pornography, illegal drugs, weapons, and other criminal activities.<sup>402</sup> As a result, the creepypasta multiplied, feeding off the “the myth that, if you dig deep and long enough, you will find the furthest reaches of human depravity—torture, murder, terrorism, you name it—on the Dark Web.”<sup>403</sup> The dark web is the site of fabled “red rooms,” live streaming assassination and rape, of cannibal recipes for cooking women, DIY vasectomy kits, and spine-chilling stalking tales.<sup>404</sup> Not unlike the exploding television in David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome* (1983), the dark web threatens to spill its viscera onto our everyday “normal” lives, to leak out of its constraints like radioactive waste. [Figure 4] The tagline of the American

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<sup>400</sup> “Clearing Up Confusion - Deep Web vs. Dark Web,” *BrightPlanet*, March 27, 2014, “Moving a Little Deeper” para. 1, <https://brightplanet.com/2014/03/clearing-confusion-deep-web-vs-dark-web/>.

<sup>401</sup> “Clearing Up Confusion - Deep Web vs. Dark Web,” “Getting a Little Darker” para.1-2.

<sup>402</sup> Andy Greenberg, “Hacker Lexicon: What Is the Dark Web?,” *WIRED*, September 11, 2014, <https://www.wired.com/2014/11/hacker-lexicon-whats-dark-web/>.

<sup>403</sup> Caitlin Dewey, “In Search of the Darkest, Most Disturbing Content on the Internet,” *The Washington Post*, September 2, 2015, para. 3, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/09/02/in-search-of-the-darkest-most-disturbing-content-on-the-internet/?utm\\_term=.628537dd3237](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/09/02/in-search-of-the-darkest-most-disturbing-content-on-the-internet/?utm_term=.628537dd3237).

<sup>404</sup> Rob Waugh, “12 Scary Things Which Happen When You Go on the ‘Dark Web,’” *Metro*, July 8, 2015, <http://metro.co.uk/2015/07/08/12-scary-things-which-happen-when-you-go-on-the-dark-web-5285640/>; Jen Lennon, “18 Creepy True Stories About the Deep Web,” *Ranker*, November 6, 2015, <http://www.ranker.com/list/creepy-dark-web-stories/jenniferlennon>; Cale Guthrie Weissman, “The Creepiest and Most Bizarre Stories Told by People Who Explored the Internet’s Hidden Websites,” *Business Insider*, June 30, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/creepy-and-weird-deep-web-stories-from-reddit-2015-6>.

procedural drama *CSI: Cyber* (2015-16), “It can happen to you,” captures very well this technomiasmatic image of the dark web. [Figure 5] As author Germán Sierra puts it, the dark web points towards the unsettling realization that our digital culture is haunted by “a more problematic, deep wet interiority fighting against its own limits to pour itself out.”<sup>405</sup>

The promotional photographs for Cybertwee’s *Dark Web Bake Sale* were also not entirely devoid of eerie undertones. Instead of the natural look typical of food photography, Cybertwee displayed their heart-shaped cookies in purplish neon lights, with an uncanny glow reflecting on the aluminum foil underneath them, like bakeries out of *Johnny Mnemonic* or other old-school cyberpunk vision. [Figure 6] There were also slight mismatches in the photograph, emphasizing the digital medium like a glitch in the Matrix. It was as if the eeriness of the dark web stuck to the cookies. Indeed, Emily Braun, a writer for the *Coin Cafe Blog* who participated in *Dark Web Bake Sale*, describes her nervousness when unpacking the cookies, despite the legality and smoothness of the transaction, “perhaps due to the nefarious reputation of deep web purchases.”<sup>406</sup> The *Dark Web Bake Sale* played with one’s fear of the unresting digital substances that circulate the dark web, using something cute and innocent—a bake sale—to wreak havoc in the Internet’s “deep wet interiority.”

In the process, Cybertwee captured something cute about *Tor* itself with its onion imagery, like Apple with the bite. Among other *Dark Web Bake Sale* visuals, Cybertwee included *Tor*’s onion logo cutified with emoji flowers, as if the bulb was a flower vase. [Figure 7] Another GIF shows two browser tabs with colorful icons shaped like stars and hearts, with the words “deep” and “web” inside. [Figure 8] The cutification of *Tor* creates an unresolved tension with our mental image of the dark web as a “locus of the disgusting, the nasty, the excessive.”<sup>407</sup> This cutification, however, was not created artificially by Cybertwee; instead, it was a trend already brewing in the dark web. For instance, users of *Tor* have come across sellers of pointless goods like fresh-baked pretzels or carrots. One Redditor reports they “Found a guy selling carrots. Like, it wasn’t code for anything, he was literally just selling carrots for bitcoin. 10/10 would visit again.”<sup>408</sup> The effect of such accounts is comical and nonsensical. After all,

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<sup>405</sup> Sierra, “Filth as Non-Technology,” 2.

<sup>406</sup> Emily Braun, “The Sweetest Things on the Deep Web,” *Coin Cafe Blog*, December 10, 2015, para. 6, <http://blog.coincafe.com/2015/12/10/deep-web-cookies/>.

<sup>407</sup> Susanna Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* (Cambridge, Mass.: London: The MIT Press, 2011), 208.

<sup>408</sup> Waugh, “12 Scary Things Which Happen When You Go on the ‘Dark Web,’” para. 14.

minor goods like vegetables or cookies are inconsistent with the high technological hellhole that the dark web supposedly is.

In “5 surprisingly wholesome things I’ve found on the dark web,” Emily Wilson describes the dark web as “a mix of eBay for criminals, the weirdest flea market you’ve ever been to, and a bad guy meet-up.”<sup>409</sup> Wilson lists some of her cutest dark web finds, including a book called *Mind Blowing Modular Origami*, a guide to fishkeeping, a smooth jazz Internet radio station, a grilled cheese sandwich, and Tor Kittenz, an onion website consisting of “a never-ending slideshow of cat pictures.”<sup>410</sup> [Figures 9 & 10] Another article, by Nicholas Nakayama Shapiro, lists the “The 7 Cutest Puppies On The Dark Web.” [Figure 11] Poking fun at Internet pet celebrities, these puppies are, according to the author, “untraceable and irresistibly cute.” Shapiro’s dark web puppies include Roger The Next Incarnation of Christ, Buddy The Alien, Leila The Talking Pup, Harry The Cannibal, Fifi The Psychoactive Hallucination, and Rover The Dark Web Hit-man. One puppy, an adorable black pug, is simply labeled A Monster. “Nope. Not even gonna address what this one did. I hope they put him away for life,” Shapiro writes. “Still cute, though.”<sup>411</sup> The cryptocurrency technology itself has also been used for recreational purposes in virtual games like CryptoKitties, dubbed “2017’s version of Neopets,”<sup>412</sup> which exist within a decentralized Ethereum blockchain. Each kitty is “Collectible. Breedable. Adorable”<sup>413</sup> and possesses a “256-bit genome that holds the genetic sequence to all the different combinations kittens can have.” Such eruptions of cuteness in the dark web and related instances like cryptographic technologies may appear absurd at first. However, their intersections of affect, gender, and digitality invite us to consider not just the broader destiny of our digital culture, including the challenges of techno- and cyberfeminism in the twenty-first century.

From the first home computers emerging in the 1970s, the Information Age seemed to hold a potential to bring about our wildest transhumanist fantasies of physical and intellectual

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<sup>409</sup> “5 Surprisingly Wholesome Things I’ve Found on the Dark Web,” *The Next Web*, February 24, 2018, para. 2, <https://thenextweb.com/contributors/2018/02/24/5-surprisingly-wholesome-things-ive-found-dark-web/>.

<sup>410</sup> Wilson, para. 13.

<sup>411</sup> Nicholas Nakayama Shapiro, “The 7 Cutest Puppies On The Dark Web,” *Odyssey*, February 28, 2017, para. 7, <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/7-cutest-puppies-on-the-dark-web>.

<sup>412</sup> Bryan Clark, “Kittens on the Blockchain Is the Future Nobody Asked For,” *The Next Web*, December 2, 2017, para. 3, <https://thenextweb.com/insider/2017/12/02/kittens-on-the-blockchain-is-the-future-nobody-asked-for/>.

<sup>413</sup> Axiom Zen, “CryptoKitties | Collect and Breed Digital Cats!,” *CryptoKitties*, accessed May 10, 2018, <https://www.cryptokitties.co>.

enhancement. Instead, we got cat videos and porn, both of which have attracted a considerable amount of scholarship in the 2010s. While books such as Susanna Paasonen's *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* (2011) and the launch of the academic journal *Porn Studies* in 2014 attest to the former, cat videos have been addressed from sociological, anthropological, and ethnographic frameworks, and even made it to museums and film festivals. In 2015, for instance, New York's Museum of the Moving Image (MoMI) hosted the exhibition *How Cats Took Over The Internet*, entirely dedicated to the cat video medium, featuring famous Internet cats like Grumpy Cat, Maru or Lil Bub.<sup>414</sup> [Figure 12] The fact that cats have effectively become the "unofficial mascot of the Internet"<sup>415</sup> has led journalists to joke that "viral cat videos are warming the planet,"<sup>416</sup> our appetite for online cuteness being powered by massive, energy-intensive server farms occupying millions and millions of square meters from the United States to China, from Wales to India. [Figure 13] Indeed, if, as media theorist Jussi Parikka suggests, humanity (or, at least, a significant part of it) is becoming "less-high tech," and more "defined by obsolescence and depletion,"<sup>417</sup> perhaps cuteness in the *Anthropocene* is filthified or filthiness is cutified—the "low" or "easy" humor and "natural" softness of cute objects and subjects dirtying the metaphorical cutting edge of high technologies.

Within the broader category of cute aesthetics, the *kawaii* has gained a special place in the universe of Internet cuteness. Leah Shafer, one of the few scholars to examine cat videos from the viewpoint of aesthetic criticism—arguing that cat videos are an updated version of the early twentieth-century cinema of attractions—even establishes a link between cat videos and the aesthetics of *Superflat* art informed by Japanese cuteness.<sup>418</sup> Another example is Alicia Eler and Kate Durbin's pinpointing of the *kawaii* as a critical element of what they call the "teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic." In their article for the online magazine *Hyperallergic*, Eler and Durbin characterize the "teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic" as an outlet for "vulnerability and telling

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<sup>414</sup> Jordan Hoffman, "How Cats Took over the Internet: New Exhibition Is Catnip for Feline Fans," *The Guardian*, August 7, 2015, sec. Art and design, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/aug/07/how-cats-took-over-the-internet-new-exhibition-is-catnip-for-feline-fans>.

<sup>415</sup> Leigh Alexander, "Why The Internet Chose Cats," *Thought Catalog*, January 25, 2011, para. 7, <https://thoughtcatalog.com/leigh-alexander/2011/01/why-the-internet-chose-cats/>.

<sup>416</sup> Adam Vaughan, "How Viral Cat Videos Are Warming the Planet," *The Guardian*, September 25, 2015, sec. Environment, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/sep/25/server-data-centre-emissions-air-travel-web-google-facebook-greenhouse-gas>.

<sup>417</sup> Jussi Parikka, *The Anthropocene* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 17.

<sup>418</sup> "Cat Videos and the Superflat Cinema of Attractions," *Film Criticism* 40, no. 2 (July 2016): 16.

one's own narrative (as opposed to the projection of an idyllic youth onto an 'other'),"<sup>419</sup> circulating in microblogging platforms like *Tumblr*. They begin their text on girl angst by addressing the death of Elisa Lam, a young Asian-Canadian woman struggling with mental illness, whose body was recovered from the water tank of a Los Angeles hotel after guests complained about the water supply.<sup>420</sup> Lam, and the friends that witnessed her tragedy, were avid *Tumblr* users, pouring their hearts out into their blogs about depression, anxiety, and pain, between pretty fashion photos, cute animals and illustrations, and GIFs.

Eler and Durbin's use of Elisa's death was not without controversy, with the article's comment section flooding with accusations that they were exploiting her for attention. Nevertheless, their article conveyed how, on the Internet, angst, shock, and disgust often interlace with the girly and the cute. For instance, it is not rare to find, in visual-driven social media like *Tumblr* or *Instagram*, "aesthetic" posts by users showing off their bruises, accompanied by cute band-aids, temporary tattoos, frilly dresses, or emoticons. [Figure 14] "Like the Tumblr teen-girl aesthetic that is currently making its way through the veins and channels of culture, Lam is everywhere, seeping into the pores of the Internet's most hidden corners," Eler and Durbin write. "The media sensation that her death became, along with the teen-girl online social universe she embodied, has metastasized."<sup>421</sup> Accompanying Eler and Durbin's article is a repertoire of visual references, ranging from a GIF of Frida Kahlo with sparkling eyebrows to it-girls like Elle Fanning and Sasha Grey or artworks by Rineke Dijkstra and Tracey Emin. Durbin's *Tumblr* project, "Women as Objects," which curated user-generated content from 2011 to 2013, also reflects this aesthetic of the teenage girl as "A position in which one wields one's own objecthood playfully, glitteringly, and problematically."<sup>422</sup>

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<sup>419</sup> Alicia Eler and Kate Durbin, "The Teen-Girl Tumblr Aesthetic," *Hyperallergic*, March 1, 2013, para. 41, <http://hyperallergic.com/66038/the-teen-girl-tumblr-aesthetic/>.

<sup>420</sup> According to Eler and Durbin: "In the Internet land of immediate responses, reactions, and reprimands via text chatter, reblogs, deleted comments, likes, and unlikes, hearts, and de-hearted emotional Tumblr affirmations, Elisa Lam's 19-year-old friend Jialin began Tumblr blogging about her friend's death. Was she a bad friend? How could this have happened to Elisa? 'She's a real person. Stop it. The autopsy results were inconclusive. I have anger issues,' she writes on the portion of her tumblelog tagged "Elisa Lam." She poured her emotions out through Tumblr, the simple instant blogging platform founded by young entrepreneur David Karp in 2007 for exactly that purpose. Forbes dubbed it Karp's \$800 million art project, and it does indeed exist for personal expression." Eler and Durbin, "The Teen-Girl Tumblr Aesthetic."

<sup>421</sup> Eler and Durbin, para. 4.

<sup>422</sup> Kate Durbin, Where Are The Girls, Online? Part Two of an Interview with Kate Durbin. *Hyperallergic*, January 16, 2013, para. 4, <https://hyperallergic.com/63678/where-are-the-girls-online-part-two-of-an-interview-with-kate-durbin/>.

Cybertwee, like the teen-girl *Tumblr* aesthetic, tackles with feminine aesthetics such as the cute and the pretty (a kind of “demoted” beautiful, lacking the latter’s grandiose connotations to “high art”), which have received little attention within art history, but now dominate the high technological realms from which their practitioners, such as women, communities of color, queers, and amateurs, are traditionally excluded. In Eler and Durbin’s words, Internet cuteness has “metastasized.” The word is appropriate, capturing cuteness’s tendency to spread and multiply yet remain, to some extent, abject: in Internet slang, a “cancer” is something which degrades the quality of contents and conversations. For sure, not everyone was happy with or receptive to Cybertwee’s cutification of the dark web. “There have been a couple of guys saying, ‘You’ve ruined the dark web,’” Cybertwee’s Hileman tells the website *Motherboard*. “People want this to be counter culture in a way, and feel threatened we are infiltrating their clique or something.”<sup>423</sup> By “simply” asking, “what happens when something cute and innocent takes place on the deep web?”<sup>424</sup> Cybertwee’s *Dark Web Bake Sale* demonstrates how cuteness can help individuals configure their encounters with (or even, participate in a culture of) *dark digitality*.

For better or for worse, as Emily Wilson points out, “When you spend years scrolling through listings for stolen tax documents, porn accounts, fake bank statements, and hacking guides, ‘unusual’ takes on a new meaning.”<sup>425</sup> Or, in the recesses of the dark web, wholesomeness is the rare event, the odd one out. Indeed, whereas the earlier cyberfeminist waves of the 1990s envisioned the information superhighway as a post-patriarchal frontier—see, for instance, the representations of posthuman female strength in the *Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century*, [Figure 15] an artwork presented 1991 by Australian media art collective VNS Matrix—for artists like Cybertwee, cookies, rainbows, and kitties are valuable tools to “hack the codes of patriarchy,” as writer Izabella Scott phrases it in her short history of cyberfeminism.<sup>426</sup> The emancipatory extent of these encounters where “bad” technological matters in cyberspace and the Internet meet the twee, i.e., the sugary overload of that which is overly quaint, cute or nice, depends on the context of each experience. Regardless,

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<sup>423</sup> Paul, “I Bought Adorable Cookies on the Deep Web,” para. 11.

<sup>424</sup> Cybertwee, “Bake Sale,” para. 1.

<sup>425</sup> Wilson, “5 Surprisingly Wholesome Things I’ve Found on the Dark Web,” para. 4.

<sup>426</sup> Izabella Scott, “A Brief History of Cyberfeminism,” *Artsy*, October 13, 2016, para. 2, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-how-the-cyberfeminists-worked-to-liberate-women-through-the-internet>.

the singularity is dearer than ever, as the sweetness of the cute infiltrates even our shadiest, cultural and technological black holes.

(See also “(Betamale)” and “Pastel Turn.”)

# END, THE

Most Vocaloid productions keep with the standard formats of pop songs and music videos, played by pop singers at pop concerts. But recently, authors from outside “traditional” fandom circles have demonstrated that Vocaloids, such as the crowd-sourced virtual idol Hatsune Miku can be used just as successfully in “high art” contexts. Such instances include Tara Knight’s *Mikumumentary* series, installed at Tokyo’s Mori Art Museum in 2013. [Video 1] Or Tamawari Hiroshi’s *Vocaloid Opera AOI with Bunraku Puppets* (2014), “a 30 minute-long opera film... in which the Vocaloid singing synthesizer technology is used for the music in the play, and all the actresses are *bunraku* puppets.”<sup>427</sup> [Video 2] On a different, poppier note, the American chiptune-inspired band Anamanaguchi launched their track “Miku” in 2016. [Video 3]

Another example is *Still Be Here* (2016), an hour-long media performance and installation featuring Hatsune Miku, commissioned by the Transmediale/CTM Festival and first presented at the prestigious Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. [Video 4] Initiated and conceptualized by artist Mari Matsutoya in collaboration with electronic musician Laurel Halo, choreographer and visual artist Darren Johnston, virtual artist LaTurbo Avedon, and digital artist Martin Sulzer, *Still Be Here* is a haunting multimedia performance of great beauty and conceptual depth. Halo provides live sound processing and a minimalistic score made of “gentle pads, insectoid chittering and industrial clanks.”<sup>428</sup> In turn, Miku rendered holographic much like the official shows by Crypton Future Media (Miku’s mother company), performs evocative, uncanny dance moves, hardly shifting from the same center-stage spot. Her twin tails move about and bend unnaturally, as if they were extra limbs. Accompanying Miku’s performance, there is a giant video triptych displaying various visuals, from austere 3D virtual environments to documentary interludes featuring interviews with fans, developers, and academics.<sup>429</sup> Towards the end, Miku sings two ethereal songs with elegiac melodies, whose

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<sup>427</sup> Keisuke Yamada, “Thoughts on Convergence and Divergence in Vocaloid Culture (and Beyond),” *Ethnomusicology Review*, February 27, 2017, “Divergence in the Contemporary Moment,” para. 2, <http://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/content/thoughts-convergence-and-divergence-vocaloid-culture-and-beyond>.

<sup>428</sup> Tom Faber, “Review: Still Be Here Featuring Laurel Halo at The Barbican,” Resident Advisor, January 3, 2017, para. 4, <https://www.residentadvisor.net/reviews/20716>.

<sup>429</sup> Faber, para. 3.



lyrics were collected and randomized from fifteen Vocaloid hit songs.<sup>430</sup> These songs, “As You Wish” and “Until I Make U Smile,” are available on *Still Be Here’s* YouTube account to be watched as 360° videos on mobile devices and tablets. [Video 5a, b] *Still Be Here’s* experimentalism, collaborative ethos, and mixing of different media, genres, and expressions is a textbook example of Miku’s capacity to explore the “weird materialities”<sup>431</sup> emerging from human-nonhuman interaction.

Among the “high art” uses of Hatsune Miku and Vocaloid technology, *THE END*, a multimedia spectacle created by Japanese musician and composer Shibuya Keiichiro (b. 1973), remains the larger-scale project. [Video 6] Promoted as “the first humanless opera,” *THE END* was commissioned by the Yamaguchi Centre for Arts and Media and first performed at that venue in December of 2012. Since then, it has traveled to other locations in both Japan and Europe, such as Tokyo, Paris, Amsterdam, Germany, and Denmark, receiving wide critical acclaim and even being called “the first performance of the third millennium”<sup>432</sup> by Jean-Luc Choplin, director of the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, that hosted *THE END* in October 2013. *THE END* is a crossover between the Western operatic tradition and Japanese popular culture, with Miku starring as the leading lady and all arias and recitatives performed using the Crypton’s VOCALOID software *Hatsune Miku* and *Kagamine Len*. During the performance, Shibuya, half-hidden within a translucent compartment, is the only person on the stage occupied by four overlapping giant screens, onto which seven high-resolution devices project *THE END’s* existential film on the meaning of “death” and “end” for humans and virtual entities alike.<sup>433</sup> [Figure 1]

In addition to Shibuya, the production results from a collaborative “dream team” including the libretto by playwright and novelist Okada Toshiki, an iconic writer of Japan’s recessionary “lost decade” (*ushinawareta jūnen*), and visuals and co-direction by the celebrated graphic designer YKBX (Yokobe Masaki). [Figure 2] They were joined by a large team of specialized creators from various fields: architect Shigematsu Shohei, known for his conceptual projects and collaborations with artists such as Marina Abramovic and Kanye West, did the

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<sup>430</sup> LaTurbo Avedon, “Still Be Here - Hatsune Miku,” *LaTurbo Avedon*, para. 4, accessed July 19, 2017, <https://turboavedon.com/still-be-here-hatsune-miku/>.

<sup>431</sup> Parikka, “Medianatures,” 97.

<sup>432</sup> Jean-Luc Choplin, “Preface,” in *THE END Liner Notes* (Sony Music Entertainment Japan, 2013), 1.

<sup>433</sup> Kazunao Abe, “Introduction,” in *ATAK 020 THE END* (Sony Music Entertainment Japan, 2013), backcover; Fuji TV Official, “*THE END*” *Hatsune Miku x Keiichiro Shibuya VOCALOID OPERA*, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uyh99RH-sqs>.

stage design; sound artist and electronic musician Evala, was in charge of the sound design; Pinocchio-P, a Vocaloid producer originating from the Japanese video sharing website *Niconico*, took care of the *VOCALOID* programming; A4A Inc., a digital production agency specializing in transdisciplinary art projects, produced the show.<sup>434</sup> Finally, the most talked-about contribution was eight costumes by Marc Jacobs, at the time artistic director of Louis Vuitton, using the brand's trademark Damier pattern to evoke enlarged pixels.<sup>435</sup> [Figure 3] The result of this collaboration among heavyweights in their respective creative areas was brilliant: a uniquely immersive, hauntological experience, in which Miku is displaced from the familiar narrative of Japanese *aidoru* and plunged head-first into an uncanny valley of surreal beauty.

It is ironic that Choplin's words about "the first performance of the third millennium" concern an art form—the opera—whose sustainability in twenty-first-century concert halls has preoccupied all parties involved in its production and dissemination.<sup>436</sup> For Shibuya, the label "opera" is a deliberate provocation, allowing *THE END* to play in a broader art-historical and geographical arena, beyond the restrictive categorization of a new media performance by a Japanese composer.<sup>437</sup> In the genealogy of the medium, *THE END* should be classified as a "post-opera," sharing affinities with radical proposals like Morton Feldman and Samuel Beckett's anti-opera *Neither* (1977) or Robert Ashley's television operas *Music with Roots in the Aether* and *Perfect Lives* from the late 1970s. However, unlike these experimental approaches to opera, *THE END* maintains the classic "structure used by Mozart and Wagner"<sup>438</sup> consisting of arias, recitatives, opening, and climax, as well as its iconic mode, the tragedy,<sup>439</sup> inspired by the death of Shibuya's wife Maria, in 2008.<sup>440</sup> Shibuya goes as far as to assert that

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<sup>434</sup> Choplin, "Preface."

<sup>435</sup> Master Blaster, "Hatsune Miku Stars in Humanless Opera 'THE END', It Ain't Over 'Till the Incredibly Skinny Vocaloid Sings," *RocketNews24*, November 22, 2012, para. 7, [http://en.rocketnews24.com/2012/11/23/hatsune-miku-stars-in-humanless-opera-the-end-it-aint-over-till-the-incredibly-skinny-vocaloid-sings/?iframe=true&theme\\_preview=true](http://en.rocketnews24.com/2012/11/23/hatsune-miku-stars-in-humanless-opera-the-end-it-aint-over-till-the-incredibly-skinny-vocaloid-sings/?iframe=true&theme_preview=true).

<sup>436</sup> In 2014, Peter Gelb, director of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, said that an opera is "a kind of dinosaur doomed to extinction." Terry Teachout, "The Future of Opera," *Wall Street Journal*, July 17, 2014, sec. Life and Style, para. 1, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-future-of-opera-1405641354>.

<sup>437</sup> Atsushi Kōdera, "Composer Shibuya Tests Limits of Music," *The Japan Times Online*, March 2, 2014, para. 18, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/03/02/national/shibuya-tests-limits-of-music/>.

<sup>438</sup> Kōdera, para. 13.

<sup>439</sup> Kōdera, para. 12.

<sup>440</sup> Andrew Taylor, "'What Is Death?' How Tragedy Inspired a Japanese Composer's Virtual Opera," *Financial Review*, September 6, 2017, para. 1, <https://www.afr.com/lifestyle/arts-and-entertainment/ozasia-festival-how-the-suicide-of-his-wife-inspired-a-composers-virtual-opera-20170825-gy3wq2>.

“I thought it was fitting to deal with death... using a medium as a coffin,”<sup>441</sup> reiterating his deliberate mobilization of the opera as a “dead” or anachronistic art form, contrasting with Miku’s futuristic image as the “first sound of the future.”<sup>442</sup>

*THE END* features two additional co-stars: the Animal (*Dōbutsu*) and the Visitor (*Houmonsha*). [Figure 4] The Animal resembles a large stuffed mouse toy, similar to popular *kawaii* children’s mascots like Pokémon or Studio Ghibli’s Totoro. The Visitor, in turn, is Miku’s grotesque doppelganger, who takes on different configurations during the show. These range from an imperfect copy of Miku—somewhat akin to Ellen Ripley’s failed clones in *Alien Resurrection*—to a Cthulhuesque monster made of large eyes and mouths, with long strands of greenish hair undulating like tentacles. [Figure 5] Miku’s existentialist conversations with the Animal and the Visitor are a significant part of the plot, which initially unfolds in an austere grey compartment with only a sofa and a lamp. In the first recitative, “Miku and Animal” (*Miku to dōbutsu*), Miku levitates in the center of the room, while the Animal paces around the stage. A forward tracking shot runs over dunes, stylized buildings and factories, and Miku’s large reclining body. It penetrates her nostrils, in an endoscopic view revealing a palpitating and carnal interior. [Figure 6]

The first words are spoken by the Animal, telling us that “Light falls on an object/ and it comes into existence/ Everything is like this/ Especially us.”<sup>443</sup> These words are important. As philosopher Timothy Morton puts it, “light itself is the most viscous thing of all, since nothing can surpass its speed... a luminous honey that reveals our bone structure as it seeps around us.”<sup>444</sup> By inserting Miku and the other characters into an immersive milieu, intimate and vital despite its obvious digitality, *THE END* tackles with this “weird sensual space in which everything is entangled.”<sup>445</sup> Even Miku’s interiors are not hologrammatic “bodies without organs” but represented as pulsating flesh. As such, *THE END*’s first words and images run counter the implied sense of dematerialization that the expression “humanless” suggests, prompting the viewer to readjust their expectations, to consider that virtual beings come into

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<sup>441</sup> 39CH MIKU channel, [VOCALOID OPERA] “THE END” Artist Interview 【渋谷慶一郎・初音ミク】, YouTube video, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1-YbcbAQ84>.

<sup>442</sup> The name Hatsune Miku, written 初 (*hatsu*), “first”; 音 (*ne*), “sound”; and ミク (*miku*, an alternative reading of 未来, *mirai*), “future,” means “First Sound of Future.”

<sup>443</sup> Toshiki Okada, “THE END SCRIPT,” in *ATAK 020 THE END* (Sony Music Entertainment Japan, 2013), “02. Miku and Animal (Recitative).”

<sup>444</sup> Timothy Morton, “Hyperobjects Are Viscous,” *Ecology Without Nature*, October 25, 2010, 32, <http://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com/2010/10/hyperobjects-are-viscous.html>.

<sup>445</sup> Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 173.

existence within the same physical, rich environment in which humans exist.

This aspect is already embedded within *THE END*'s staging devices from the start. For instance, Shigematsu's stage design, whose projection screen unfolds into a three-dimensional object with depth and layers, allows for the film's complex visual interplay of scales, colors, textures, and planes. Also, the "electronic fortress"<sup>446</sup> created by Shibuya's music, combined with Evala's sound programming for a 10.2 surround sound system. Or even the simultaneous translation from Japanese to English performed by a female text-to-speech voice during the dialogues,<sup>447</sup> which Shibuya integrated as part of the music, highlighting the physicality of the language and the processes of translation. Loops, static, cross-conversations, and sentences erased or corrected on screen undermine Miku's dialogs with the Animal and the Visitor, demonstrating the irreducibility of words to their meaning, so often corrupted by human and mechanical errors. Thus, in *THE END*, the apparent emptying of the stage, devoid of human singers and actors, emphasizes other physical dimensions that reinforce and resonate with each other, capturing those ephemeral "weird materialities"<sup>448</sup> that Miku embodies on the threshold of the organic and inorganic, real and virtual, original and the derivative. The materiality of digital matters is also present in the 3D models of Miku, the Animal, and the Visitor used in *THE END*, agitated by rebellious shapes, fleshy patches, and irregular shadows, dipped in greyish contemplative lightning which contrasts with explosions of luminous and chromatic intensity at critical moments in the story. This environment differs radically from the smooth and glossy textures commonly found in Crypton Future Media's concerts, whose 3D models draw on Sega's *Project DIVA* videogame series. The message is that *THE END*'s Miku is not the same as Crypton's universal, consensual Miku, meant to promote an anonymous consumer crowd.

*THE END* abides by the aesthetics of excess and digital error: flashing lights, static, glitches, overlapping images. [Figure 7] It insists on the thickness of virtual bodies revealed by that "luminous honey" in the form of LED screens of personal computers, hologrammatic apparitions on stage, or others. Precisely because Miku disrupts our anthropocentric notions of materiality, *THE END*'s co-director YKBX decided to insert movements "that no real human, only a computer can do,"<sup>449</sup> like levitate, fly, duplicate, or shatter into pieces. This aspect of

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<sup>446</sup> Abe, "Introduction."

<sup>447</sup> Keiichiro Shibuya, "THE END" complete liner notes Keiichiro Shibuya and Masato Matsumura, interview by Masato Matsumura, *THE END Liner Notes*, 2013, "I Have To Take Care of You."

<sup>448</sup> Parikka, "Medianatures," 97.

<sup>449</sup> 39CH MIKU channel, "*THE END*" Artist Interview.

nonhumanity is mainly encapsulated by the Visitor, who is a deconstructed parody of Miku, threatening her self-image and mental stability by questioning her on difficult topics like death and imperfection. At one point, the Animal even refers to the Visitor as “That woman... who tries to look like you but failed” and that “said something to you / That you did not need to know.”<sup>450</sup> The Visitor is to Miku what Miku is to humans: for instance, in “What’d You Come Here For?” (*Nani shi ni kita no*), Miku accuses the Visitor of being unnatural and dieting to imitate her, thus replicating the accusations often directed at Miku herself by critics of her normative and commodified female body. The Visitor, however, is not Miku’s only doppelganger or copy in *THE END*. In “Aria for Death” (*Shi no Aria*), Miku sinks and drowns in an ocean filled with inanimate and shattered clones of herself, floating around her like dismembered dolls. [Figure 8] The Visitor, as well as these lifeless replicas, seem to index different stages of Miku’s material existence, from “tabula rasa” (a synthetic voice and a corporate image) to uncanny hybridizations with humans, and her potential “deaths.” Indeed, near *THE END*’s conclusion, the Visitor merges with Miku, originating a single body, meaning that, from the beginning, Miku and her grotesque mockery were not separate entities but more like points in a continuum, amalgamated and combined to form an endless array of liminal objects.

The social upheaval which takes place off-camera also reflects Miku’s psychological and emotional malaise. On various occasions, the Animal comments on the passing of helicopters and exalted speeches in the distance, or the fact that their city is without garbage collection and crows are everywhere. In “The Gas Mask and the Gas” (*Gazu masuku to gas*), Miku floats around aimlessly in a yellowish mist wearing a gas mask, as if the air was made unbreathable by the collapse of the social structures around her, or her own mental breakdown. [Figure 9] An abstract, unpinpointable “cultural-ecological catastrophe”<sup>451</sup> seems to haunt her virtual reality. Considering that it is “the separation of garbage [that] makes culture possible,”<sup>452</sup> its accumulation suggests a pessimistic view on the salubrity of our twenty-first-century media cultures and societies.

Furthermore, the presence of crows links this toxic atmosphere to the miasmatic vapors of death that stick to the characters. For instance, the Visitor comments that, unlike Miku,

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<sup>450</sup> Okada, “THE END SCRIPT,” 01. I Have to Take Care of You (Recitative)”.

<sup>451</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), xiv.

<sup>452</sup> Susan Signe Morrison, *The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 80.

humans have a smell, and that the most potent odor they ooze is the stench of their corpses decomposing after they die. At the climax “Because I am Imperfect” (*Watashi ga fukanzen da kara*), the Animal “eats” Miku originating the Superanimal, a hybrid dragon-like creature with Miku’s face running in front of a gigantic burning sun and dancing amid a shower of comets, or bombs, in a virtual world in disintegration. **[Figure 10]** The camera shots vary in distance and dynamism, from far-off visions to the tumbling proximity of a GoPro camera, following the Superanimal’s labyrinthic flight. In the end, the Superanimal mutates into what could be a monster out of a horror videogame, in which Miku and the Animal merge with the dragon’s lower and upper jaws, like a monstrous Frankenstein’s creature. Like Frankenstein’s creature, this monster is not evil, but a materialization of Miku’s radically “othered” forms that sometimes come off as disturbing due to their uncanniness to human senses.

In the case of *THE END*, Miku’s “weird materialities” extend to its complex conditions of reception as an experimental artwork produced by professionals in the context of a pop-cultural subculture run by amateurs. On the one hand, *THE END* was covered by Miku’s official *YouTube* channel, presenting trailers and extensive artist interviews. On the other, a great deal of the comments on *THE END*’s recordings include perplexed Vocaloid fans expressing their confusion, or alluding to the show’s unsettling aesthetic (as one fan puts it, “It’s doesn’t compare with others Vocaloid events... It’s difficult and dark... and rest is colorful and happy...”<sup>453</sup>). Regardless, and despite the occasional negative comment, most fans have responded positively to *THE END*, even when expressing their bewilderment. Some write that “I didn’t understand, but IT WAS AMAZAIN!!!!”<sup>454</sup> or that “This is unsettling in a really beautiful way...”<sup>455</sup> There is even fan art and cosplay of *THE END*’s Miku appearing online, along with checkerboard cosplay costumes for sale that, due to the show’s specificity, are simultaneously hobby items and Louis Vuitton knock-offs. **[Figure 11, 12a, b]** This considerable potential for overlapping “high art” and pop mass culture, along with their audiences, is Miku’s viscousness in action, bringing people together independently of their gender, class, or education.

The fact that Shibuya and Miku go on stage together after the performance is over,

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<sup>453</sup> “[VOCALOID Opera] THE END [English Subtitles] - Comments,” YouTube comment, accessed January 10, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ey8oj8S-j3U>.

<sup>454</sup> AnDroidV, “[VOCALOID Opera] THE END [English Subtitles] - Comments,” YouTube comment, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ey8oj8S-j3U>.

<sup>455</sup> NekoShey, “[VOCALOID Opera] THE END [English Subtitles] - Comments,” YouTube comment, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ey8oj8S-j3U>.

bowing to thank the audience in synch—Shibuya in person, Miku on the screen—reinforces *THE END*'s co-constitutive nature. [Figure 13] They are also both enthusiastically applauded, emphasizing Miku's agency and co-responsibility in *THE END* beyond simplistic notions of her as a passive receptacle for unilateral fan fantasies. It also disavows the moral panic that Vocaloids (or other "oids") will substitute humans that often arises in this context (see, for example, two episodes from Fine Brothers' *React* series on *YouTube*, "KIDS REACT to Hatsune Miku" and "Elders React to Vocaloids!"). While Miku is dependent on the continued use of her voice and image by the fans, she still arouses in both children and adults the threat that artificial intelligence will eventually replace us. Miku's prophetic name, the "first sound of the future," discloses that very "uncanny futurity of nonhumans"<sup>456</sup> that, as Morton suggests, makes humans aware of the possibility of a future without them.<sup>457</sup>

But *THE END* brings Miku back from the "dehumanized and superhumanized, abstract and inanimate"<sup>458</sup> realm of immortal characters and voices to the vulnerable precarity of the digital and its technologies—not dematerialized but sensual in their own ways, and perishable like us. As Miku tells her audience during the performance, "I can speak at much faster speeds than this/ because I never get out of breath/ but without words to say next/ With no set words to speak next/ I'd grind to a stop like just now."<sup>459</sup> In other words, if fannish activities were to stop, Miku would "die" by obsolescence; there would be no more words for her to speak or feelings to express. By enveloping Miku, the Animal, and the Visitor in the intensities of the operatic and tragic, dipping them in aqueous fluids, toxic gases, visceral interiors, and cosmic arenas of war or natural destruction, *THE END* reflects on the human condition not as separate but as implicated in a "web of material—and often warm-blooded—relations the technical is situated within."<sup>460</sup> Their bodies, subject to an extensive repertoire of mutations and impossible movements, echo the way in which *THE END*'s stage and its sonic implementation emphasize the physicality of the screen and music. They resonate carnally with the flashes, glitches, overlaps, and irregularities that animate *THE END*'s vital aesthetics of digitality. Miku is represented as an imperfect, shifting entity that, far from being an agency-less vessel, serves as an ambassador for the more or less tangible material flows of sound, light, relationality,

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<sup>456</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 137.

<sup>457</sup> Morton, 94.

<sup>458</sup> Pellitteri, (*The Dragon and the Dazzle*, 80.

<sup>459</sup> Okada, "THE END SCRIPT," "02. Because I am Imperfect (Arioso)."

<sup>460</sup> Brian House, "Machine Listening: WaveNet, Media Materialism, and Rhythmanalysis," *APRJA - A Peer Review Journal About Machine Research* (2017): 5, <http://www.aprja.net/machine-listening-wavenet-media-materialism-and-rhythmanalysis/>.

interstitiality, and affectivity intertwined in our increasingly “weird” technological culture.

(See also “Gesamptcutewerk” and “Nothing That’s Really There.”)



# Fairies

“Mankind’s sad end began a long time ago,” the Heroine explains, like one does to a group of children. “Very soon, we’ll be extinct.” Her tone is remorseless, matter of fact. Still, the fairies dote on the Heroine, telling her to “Hang in there!” “Don’t give up!” and “Let’s spend more time together!” Their concern for humans resembles the superficial pity of a child for an injured animal, before forgetting about it and moving on to the next play activity. In the anime series *Jinrui wa Suitai Shimashita* (*Humanity Has Declined*, AIC, 2012), or *Jintai* for short,<sup>461</sup> the fairies are a mysterious race of advanced “new humans” who will replace us after we are extinct. [Figure 1] Humanity’s extinction, however, is not framed as a global annihilation. Instead, in the Heroine’s words, it is retirement. A withdrawal, a decline; not trauma, but anticlimax. [Figure 2] The fairies coexist with humans peacefully but have no qualms about causing trouble for the sake of entertainment. They are hedonists who relentlessly seek out pleasure and amusement, feeding off candy and spontaneously multiplying when having fun. Although they are said to possess advanced technology, its exact nature remains vague throughout the series, and is mostly aligned with Arthur C. Clarke’s famous adage that “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” The fairies adhere enthusiastically to whatever they perceive as the new fad in town but seem to lack social filters. As a result, they often say horrible things light-heartily, like hyping death by starvation as a new and exciting way to die, or quickly slipping into bouts of severe depression. [Figure 3] As one of the few people left capable of creating confectioneries, the Heroine is especially apt at communicating with the “new humans,” who naturally flock to her side, calling her Okashi-chan (“Ms. Sweets”). Because of this talent, the Heroine works as a representative of the United Nations Conciliation Committee, acting as a mediator between humans and fairies.

In terms of appearance, the fairies are tiny gnome-like creatures with pointy ears and caps. [Figure 4] Their expressions are permanently locked in a face-splitting “:D” grin, reminiscent of Murakami Takashi’s Superflat flowers.<sup>462</sup> [Figure 5] Like Murakami’s

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<sup>461</sup> *Jinrui wa suitai shimashita* is an animated television adaptation of the homonymous light novel series by Tanaka Romeo, published by Shogakukan between 2007 and 2016, with illustrations by Yamasaki Tōru and Tobe Sunaho. The anime series by studio AIC, consisting of 12 episodes aired from July 2, 2012 to September 17, 2012, directed by Kishi Seiji.

<sup>462</sup> Steven Jones, “Humanity Has Superflattened,” Tumblr, WON’T FORGET NEVER, February 2013, para. 2, <http://vestenet.tumblr.com/post/39973145072/humanity-has-superflattened-jinrui-wa-suitai>.

Superflat mascots—DOB, the flowers, Kaikai and Kiki—the fairies are quintessential *kyara*, embodying the merchandization of cuteness in “characters without stories,”<sup>463</sup> removed from a privileged relationship with traditional diegetic worlds.<sup>464</sup> Murakami brought the *kyara* into the field of contemporary art as a way of addressing the postmodern death of authorship, represented by corporate characters like Hello Kitty, Di Gi Charat, or Hatsune Miku. With their post-authorial design, the *kyara* allows for never-ending variations that provide a false sense of variety, enacting more or less straightforward, more or less complicated changes on a template that remains mostly unaltered and always recognizable. Fairies, too, differ among themselves only in ways akin to popular collectibles like Nendoroid or Funko Pop figures.<sup>465</sup> Different clothing colors and models, different hats, different hairstyles, and hair colors, hinting at the databasization of cuteness that Hiroki Azuma recognizes in the sampling of atomized components to create characters for the *otaku*’s consumption.<sup>466</sup> [Figure 6]

*Jintai*’s opening reinforces this impression of incomplete personhood—after all, the word “*kyara*” itself is but a cropped-out version of *kyarakutā* (“character”)—with its injection of J-pop and frantic choreographies, in which hundreds of fairies and sweets swarm across the screen. [Video 1] The Heroine and the fairies are almost *too* alive yet evade the phenomenological experience of “proper” living organisms. They dance like puppets or battery-powered toys. As Grafton Tanner writes, “There is a horror here in the proliferation and constantly reproducing throng of sentient objects. They are nonhuman, autonomous, unconscious, and eerily precise in their repetitions.”<sup>467</sup> At one point, three fairies hanging by nooses around the neck, like suicide victims, come “alive” with glee when the Heroine feeds them a piece of candy. Indeed, the fairies reflect the perceived endlessness, and deathlessness,

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<sup>463</sup> Lukas Wilde, “Winter School: De/Recontextualizing Characters: Media Convergence and Pre-/Meta-Narrative Character Circulation,” Universität Tübingen, 2018, para. 7, <https://www.uni-tuebingen.de/fakultaeten/philosophische-fakultaet/fachbereiche/philosophie-rhetorik-medien/institut-fuer-medienwissenschaft/institut/zentrum-fuer-interdisziplinaere-medienforschung/veranstaltungen/winter-school-derecontextualizing-characters-media-convergence-and-pre-meta-narrative-character-circulation.html>.

<sup>464</sup> Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*, trans. Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 39–47.

<sup>465</sup> The Nendoroid series is a series of collectible palm-sized figures by the Japanese manufacturer Good Smile Company, featuring characters from various anime, films, and videogames with a *chibi* design. The American company Funko is known for their vinyl bobblehead figures of characters from pop culture.

<sup>466</sup> Azuma, *Otaku*, 39–47.

<sup>467</sup> Grafton Tanner, *Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave And The Commodification Of Ghosts* (Winchester, UK ; Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2016), 16.

of mechanically reproduced commodities, whose death drive manifests as an “indecent surplus of life.”<sup>468</sup>

The fairies are both “agitated things and deactivated persons,”<sup>469</sup> a stultified form of humanity in which individuals have lost their unique shapes and autonomy. Fairies all look the same, and their psychosocial processes resemble that of hive or mob mentality. “New humans” do not require facial expressions, a primary means of communicating emotions and social cues, other than a contrived, emoticon-like “:D” smile that does not falter, even when they get depressed and suicidal. [Figure 7] Such immutability adds to the ventriloquist effect of their disembodied voices, for when they talk, the fairies’ mouths remain unmoving. In fact, their mouth is not much of a mouth at all. Not an opening, not a cavity, but a flat “D” shape drawn on their faces, lacking any biological or metabolic function. The fairies’ language bears the phaticness of small talk and soundbites, matching the pantomimic nature of their interactions with humans and other fairies. The fairies reduce interpersonal desires to superficial curiosity, dispensing with any kind of deep connection: even their reproduction becomes a “clean” asexual process of spontaneous generation. As mentioned by one commentator, “if we read the fairies as humanity’s successors, then perhaps the fairies are just superflattened humans.”<sup>470</sup> Indeed, the fact that the Heroine’s Grandfather refers to them as “a giant melting pot of culture and science” fits neatly into the theory of Superflat’s crumbling hierarchies and temporalities. Stuck in a continuous loop at the end of history, the fairies’ insistent pursue of play does not seem to carry the emancipatory quality of Jacques Rancière’s aesthetic regime, but fashions a playground world where memory is short, and bonds are shallow. Where nothing lies ahead nor, for that matter, behind; just characters out of time, and a time out of joint.

The fairies inhabit the threshold of innocence and wickedness, childlikeness and chaos, and therefore represent not just flattened humanity, but the externalization of unrepressed human drives. In this sense, they become what Slavoj Žižek calls an “Id machine,” insofar as their presence allows for the magical realization of human discontentment, using Sigmund Freud’s words in his influential book *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). In *The Pervert’s Guide To Cinema* (2006), Žižek argues that Harpo Marx, the mute brother distinguished from Groucho and Chico by his use of visual (rather than verbal) comedy, is a typical personification of this trope. [Video 3, Figure 8] Harpo is “childishly innocent, just striving for pleasure, likes

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<sup>468</sup> Kolnai, *On Disgust*, 2004, 55.

<sup>469</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 91.

<sup>470</sup> Jones, “Humanity Has Superflattened,” para. 3.

children, plays with children,” but he is also “possessed by some kind of primordial evil, aggressive all the time.”<sup>471</sup> Žižek’s claim that “this unique combination of utter corruption and innocence is what the Id is about,”<sup>472</sup> echoing the antagonistic qualities often attached to the aesthetics of cuteness in which care and play are laced with violence and aggression.<sup>473</sup> As pioneering scholars like Daniel Harris and Sianne Ngai compellingly argue, the aesthetics of cuteness “coexists in a dynamic relation with the perverse.”<sup>474</sup> For Harris and Ngai, cuteness is infused with the violence enacted in every commodification process, for “in its exaggerated passivity and vulnerability, the cute object is as often intended to excite a consumer’s sadistic desires for mastery and control as much as his or her desire to cuddle.”<sup>475</sup> Too cute for comfort, the fairies give off an eerie aura of obscenity, one which we also find in the work of Superflat artists like Murakami, Mr., Aoshima Chiho, or Takano Aya.

While the fairies play a secondary role throughout most of *Jintai*, whose narrative focus is on human characters, the series’ ninth and tenth episodes—“The Fairy’s Survival Skills” (“*Yōsei-san no, Hyrōryū Seikatsu*”) and “The Fairies’ Earth” (“*Yōsei-san-tachi no, Chikyū*”)—are devoted to the Heroine and the fairies alone. These episodes engage with genre fiction in the form of utopian and dystopian speculation, weaving a counterfactual history of human civilizational evolution. They also muddle the dialectical opposition between humans and “new humans,” making it evident that the fairies are a puppet theater staging the farce of humanity. “The Fairy’s Survival Skills” is a concentrated history of human civilization. After an increase in the fairy population leads to bullying among “new humans,” the Heroine is tasked with accompanying a group of depressed fairies who seek asylum in a different country. However, in a Gulliveresque fashion, she ends up stranded with her tiny companions in an uninhabited island, isolated from the world, with no prospects of rescue. On the second day of being stranded, the fairies make an elegant piece of rococo period furniture, with tasteful simplifications to compensate for the lack of glass and other materials. “Although there is nothing innovative about design,” the Heroine says, “the mix of styles deserved praise!” (although she would have preferred they made a bed, the Heroine adds as an afterthought). The Heroine’s comments play on the postmodern *zeitgeist* of movements like Superflat, that

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<sup>471</sup> Sophie Fiennes, *The Pervert’s Guide To Cinema*, Documentary film (P Guide Ltd, 2006).

<sup>472</sup> Fiennes.

<sup>473</sup> Joshua Paul Dale, “The Appeal of the Cute Object: Desire, Domestication, and Agency,” in *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, ed. Joshua Paul Dale et al. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 36.

<sup>474</sup> Daniel Harris, *Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 17.

<sup>475</sup> Ngai, “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde,” 816.

question the notion of originality and authorship in art, reinforcing the fairies' role as an embodiment of the "melting pot" metaphor. This occurrence foreshadows the ensuing parody of recycled imagery, historical references, and collapsed temporalities.

From that point on, in a very Superflatesque blend of Neolithic Revolution, seventeenth-century European aristocracy, and Industrial Revolution (not necessarily in that order), we are shown the rise and fall of the fairies' civilization in little over a week. They start by dividing the island's population into a privileged power elite (the Heroine) ruling over a subordinate rural populace (the fairies), thus giving birth to *hierarchies*, social classes and inequality, and division of labor. By engaging in agriculture, manufacture, trade, and research, the fairies extend their collective control over natural resources and establish the basis for massive population growth.<sup>476</sup> They devise the toilet, or, as the Heroine describes it, "a marvel of civilization that preserves human dignity." But also, like the Swiftian inventors of Balnibarbi, they extract electricity from pineapples, tea grains, leaf coffee, and radish that produces sugar cubes. The fairies' "techno-science" offers a glimpse into a Bizarro world where everything is the same, but insanely different. [Figure 9]

The Heroine exercises law and punishment, criminalizing narcotics and drug possession, and even sending a junkie fairy to jail. She also applies the principles of distribution of wealth by making and giving sweets to the fairies. Through genetic manipulation and intensive farming—the fairies invent a plant that can produce confectioneries—the island-nation reaches a golden age of material abundance, turning into a candy arcadia of endless, self-indulgent celebration. Out of boredom, the fairies go on a monument-building spree, stuffing the island with miniature park replicas of humankind's monuments: Easter Island *moai* statues, the Great Wall of China, Egyptian pyramids, totem poles, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Arc de Triomphe, Stonehenge, among others. All packed together and "databased," displaced from their original functions of storied cultural remembrance. [Figure 10] This surge of unrestrained construction leads to severe environmental and social issues. Soil and water pollution. Electricity rationing and food shortage. Unemployment and depression. Ultimately, the island collapses due to a rainstorm caused by the fairies' collective gloom. The Heroine wakes up on the lake's shore, surrounded by fairies who promptly ask her to rule them in a new nation. "Honestly," the Heroine says, "this new humankind doesn't learn from its mistakes." Ironically, the Heroine herself is suspiciously like the fairies. When her Grandfather informs

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<sup>476</sup> Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1, A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 34–41.

her that the island was the habitat of several rare species of spiders, which are now extinct, the Heroine quickly deflects away from the responsibility, blaming the fairies and hiding her involvement in the incident.

The unwillingness to be held accountable for one's actions continues in "The Fairies' Earth," set during the Heroine's first job as a mediator. This episode takes on the problems of individual identity and the *res publica*. When the Heroine comes across a small group of fairies and learns of the fairies' lack of personal names, she decides to either give them names or allow them to choose their own. Names are, after all (according to our world's United Nations), a child's right from birth. The introduction of names is also a primary tool for telling individuals apart and identifying them for legal or administrative purposes. The Heroine thus appoints the fairies with names like Cap and Nakata. Two other fairies decide to name themselves Sir Christopher McFarlane and Fish-Paste. [Figure 11] Immediately, the Heroine's action sets off a significant civilizational jump. Overnight, the fairies turn an uninhabited dump into a futuristic metropolis, complete with a public defense system—a super robot, about the Heroine's height. The robot is a product of the fairies' citizenship or, as they put it, "everyone's devotion" to the community. [Figure 12] As the personal name fad catches up, the Heroine provides the city with a naming dictionary, so that fairies can name themselves freely. In turn, she inadvertently becomes a cultural icon, hailed as a god with a monumental stone statue carved to her likeness. [Figures 13 & 14] However, when she attempts to pass the title (and responsibilities) of god back to the fairies, panic spreads, and the whole population deserts the city, turning it back into a dump.

"The Fairy's Survival Skills" and "The Fairies' Earth" engage with the "more obviously political mode of speculative fiction, utopia,"<sup>477</sup> drawing on the emphasis on *place* that has shaped utopian literature from its beginnings. This "placeness" takes the form of, respectively, an island-nation (like Japan) and a metropolis (city-nation), two settings that allow for the exploration of communal power relationships. If "Survival Skills" deals with the politics of the social and economic development of civilization, "Earth" tackles with the issue of identity and citizenship, the relationship between person and state. In both, the fairies' imitative nature and fear of responsibility are ultimately responsible for their communities' demise. The fairies coerce the Heroine into assuming the positions, respectively, of monarch and god. As utopia turns into dystopia before her eyes, *Jintai* stresses that the fairies' inability to maintain

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<sup>477</sup> Adam Roberts, "The Copernican Revolution," in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Mark Bould et al. (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), 10.

sustainable societies and infrastructures is a result of their pathological tendency for deresponsibilization.

Perhaps the fairies are a stand-in for Japan's *shinjinrui*, the “new breed” or “new humans,” a moniker given to the Japanese generations from the 1970s and 1980s, who grew up “in an affluent, wealthy, powerful, influential, arrogant Japan,”<sup>478</sup> with no direct experience of postwar trauma. After the first wave of 1960s student activism gave way to *uchigeba*<sup>479</sup> and left-wing terrorism in the late 1970s,<sup>480</sup> there was a general retreat from activism. Students become increasingly apolitical, more conservative, and concerned with getting good grades to impress prospective employers in a recession-stricken job market.<sup>481</sup> In the Japanese media, they became known as the *shirake sedai*, a generation of apathetic youths with little interest in anything other than play and material comfort.<sup>482</sup> In turn, the 1980s *shinjinrui* were “feted and feared for their misplaced, though voracious, consumer appetites.”<sup>483</sup> Hello Kitty, released by Sanrio in 1975—who, like the fairies, has no real mouth for speaking or protesting—captures the *zeitgeist* of this reactionless “new breed” that spawned contemporary *kawaii* culture in the full force of its consumerist drives.

While the resonance with postmodern Japan is clear, the fairies' situation rings a bell with the broader context of an Anthropocene malaise, particularly, as the issue of human accountability in the present ecological crisis becomes increasingly urgent. Jussi Parikka's concept of *Anthrobscene* (Anthropocene + obscene) is a useful framework within which to understand *Jintai*'s critique of humanity's planetary impacts. “Finally, one felt, a concept to describe the effects of the human species and its scientific-technological desires on the planet,” Parikka writes, regarding the Anthropocene. “And yet it is a concept that also marks the various variations of environmental and human life in corporate practices and technological culture that are ensuring that there won't be much of humans in the future scene of life.”<sup>484</sup> In *Jintai*, fairies are the Id machines of hypercapitalism, and human culture and its discontents are

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<sup>478</sup> Paul A. Herbig and Pat Borstorff, “Japan's Shinjinrui: The New Breed,” *International Journal of Social Economics* 22, no. 12 (December 1, 1995): 49.

<sup>479</sup> *Uchigeba*, combining the Japanese word *uchi*, meaning “home” or “inside,” and “*gewalt*,” the German word for “force” or “violence,” was the vicious, nationwide infighting among New Left sects during the 1970s which resulted thousands of injuries and many deaths.

<sup>480</sup> Shimbori et al., “Japanese Student Activism in the 1970s,” 139.

<sup>481</sup> Shimbori et al., 140, 142.

<sup>482</sup> Herbig and Borstorff, “Japan's Shinjinrui,” 49.

<sup>483</sup> William W. Kelly, “Finding a Place in Metropolitan Japan: Ideologies, Institutions, and Everyday Life,” in *Postwar Japan as History*, ed. Andrew Gordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 198.

<sup>484</sup> Jussi Parikka, *The Anthrobscene* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 11.

represented in a constant state of flux. Their sometimes comic, sometimes terrifying remainders shape the fairies' civilizations, rising from desert islands and dumpsters—those patches of Earth uninhabited by humans, either for their pristineness or their taintedness—only to collapse back into ruins and debris. *Jintai* uses fiction and metafiction to investigate the historical past and possible futures, mashed together to weave a satirical commentary on flawed individual and collective selves. This commentary is never entirely cautionary, but more ambiguous, absurd. The fairies are cute, *filthy cute*, embodying humanity's obscenity. Our unrepressed desires, transmogrified from techno-scientific to magical, but retaining their complete disregard for the safety of fellow humans and nonhumans, like those poor island spiders, annihilated on a capricious whim.

At the beginning of “The Fairy’s Survival Skills,” we find the portrait of the fairies’ social death drive. When the Heroine asks the depressed fairies, who have been bullied by their peers what they want to do in their new country, they perk up and answer with barely concealed delight: “Taxation! Oppression! Elimination! Persecution!” [Figure 15] The fairies appear to be oblivious to the contradictions of perpetuating the very system that terrorized them. They make the same mistakes relentlessly, again and again, without a shred of memory or regret. “I guess...,” “I wonder...,” “Who knows...” (*saa...*), they tell the Heroine throughout the episodes, whenever she attempts to pry more in-depth into the meaning or logic of their behavior. But whether the fairies work in mysterious ways, acting on the unregulated shifts of the human unconscious, or they are genuinely mindless and “flat,” is an unresolved matter in *Jintai*. In fact, although the fairies are mostly apolitical, such lapses into the ideologies of oppression are not uncommon. They parrot our group decision-making processes and political catchphrases (“You need leadership experience to get elected,” one fairy tells another, at some point) and mock the witch-hunts that often ensue (e.g., in a Red Scare allusion, one fairy accuses their interlocutor of being a candy communist). [Video 3] What such moments do tell us is that the fluctuation between sovereignty and non-sovereignty, domination and subalternity, lies at the heart of the decline in a world whose “new humans” want to be led, rather than lead, but are virtually ungovernable. It is a catch-22, inevitably amounting to self-implosion.

(See also “Paradog” and “Red Toad Tumblr Post”)



# Floating Dakimakura

I came across the photograph one day, scrolling down my *Tumblr* dashboard—a *dakimakura*, floating on turbid waters, stranded on a pile of soaked reeds and domestic debris. [Figure 1] *Dakimakura*, or “hug pillows” (from *daku*, 抱き, “hold in arms,” and *makura*, 枕, “pillow”), are used by Japanese children as comfort objects, and they are similar, in shape, to Western orthopedic body pillows. In the 1990s, *otaku* and *cosplay*-oriented clothing companies like Cospa (founded in 19995) began to manufacture pillowcases printed on both sides with characters from *manga*, *anime*, and videogames. A typical *dakimakura* consists of a female character (male ones, rarer, also exist) occupying the entire length of the pillowcase, sprawled in poses that range from softly erotic to hardcore pornographic. Often, characters are dressed on the front side of the pillow, and partially or fully naked on the back. [Figure 2] Within the realm of contemporary consumer goods, then, the *dakimakura* belongs to the “sex toy” category and, within this, to “love pillows.” If, as stated by Karl Marx at the beginning of *Das Kapital*, a “commodity is, first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind... whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination,”<sup>485</sup> then, of all the commodities, the sex toy is the one most invested in the satisfaction of human desires, in the form of sexual fantasies. In this case, a solitary and unexpectedly low-tech pleasure, given that the *otaku* are known for their tech-savviness and preference for a digital lifestyle.

The floating *dakimakura* on my *Tumblr* dashboard features a cute anime girl, wide-eyed in her pajama blouse which flares open at the bottom, suggestively. Drifting amidst the garbage, she is in the mood for love. I ask what happened? However sordid it may be, there is something hopelessly melancholy about the idea that this longing-laden object can be reduced to rubbish or wreck like any other commodity. How did an object that seldom costs under 5000 yen come to be discarded like worthless trash? After all, a *dakimakura* is no mere sex doll. *Otaku* are known to be strongly possessive of their *waifu*, the *otaku*’s significant other *par excellence*. Was the girl on the floating *dakimakura* somebody’s *waifu*? On *Tumblr*, she appears removed from any caption or subtitle. She has no geography, no time, no author—no context other than a small number in the corner, indicating thousands of likes and reblogs. Still,

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<sup>485</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London; New York, N.Y: Penguin Classics, 1992), 125.

my thoughts drift to the 3/11 earthquake and tsunami. Is the floating *dakimakura* the wreckage of an *otaku*'s home, devastated by the relentless torrent? Perhaps. Perhaps not. Anyone can buy a *dakimakura* on the Internet or their local J-store or convention. The entire scene could be fabricated. What does remain, despite all speculation, is the picture of an affective utopia coming undone among the debris of our globalized junk world.

Patrick Galbraith kicks off *The Moé Manifesto* by recounting an episode from the American television comedy series *30 Rock*. Guest star James Franco carries around a *dakimakura* called Kimiko, asking: "Are you familiar with Japanese *moé* relationships, where socially dysfunctional men develop deep emotional attachments to body pillows with women painted on them?"<sup>486</sup> [Video 1] *Moé* is a nebulous term. For Galbraith, it indicates the *otaku*'s passion for their *waifu*,<sup>487</sup> pursued through the consumption of merchandise like figures, posters, *dakimakura*, and so on. Contrary to female fans, who tend to spend their money on smaller collectibles, male *otaku* are more possessive, preferring to make one or two yearly purchases of expensive objects bearing the likeness of their favorite character.<sup>488</sup> In Japan, but really, *anywhere*, the possession of a *dakimakura* is enough to enter one into the "creepy geek" category.<sup>489</sup> The reasoning goes that, incapable of forging bonds with real women, *otaku* take refuge in the anxiety-free companionship of *moé* relationships to "little sister" or "daughter" type characters (i.e., idealized visions of youngness and dependency). The *dakimakura* has thus become iconic of those alienated, abject individuals who satisfy their most basic needs of human contact (embracing, touching, cherishing) through an eroticized transitional object.

In this sense, recent advances in *dakimakura* technology add insult to injury: for instance, 3D add-ons mimicking breasts<sup>490</sup> and Y- or cross-shaped pillows with spreadable

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<sup>486</sup> Patrick W. Galbraith, *The Moe Manifesto: An Insider's Look at the Worlds of Manga, Anime, and Gaming* (Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2014), 5.

<sup>487</sup> Galbraith, 5–7.

<sup>488</sup> Louise, "Anime Is Changing to Focus on Female Fans to Survive," *GoBoiano*, February 22, 2017, "The 'Quality' of Otaku," <http://goboiano.com/anime-is-changing-to-focus-on-female-fans-to-survive/>.

<sup>489</sup> Martin Schneider, "Is Owning an Anime Body Pillow Creepy? Answers," Discussion Group of Blog Posting, *Quora*, January 10, 2017, <https://www.quora.com/Is-owning-an-anime-body-pillow-creepy>; James Burke, "How Are Anime Body Pillows Viewed by Mainstream Japanese Society? Answers," Discussion Group of Blog Posting, *Quora*, September 8, 2017, <https://www.quora.com/How-are-anime-body-pillows-viewed-by-mainstream-Japanese-society>; Angelo Ferrer, "How Are Anime Body Pillows Viewed by Mainstream Japanese Society? Answers," Discussion Group of Blog Posting, *Quora*, September 8, 2017, <https://www.quora.com/How-are-anime-body-pillows-viewed-by-mainstream-Japanese-society>.

<sup>490</sup> Casey Baseel, "You Can Now Buy Breast Implants for Anime Huggy Pillows in Japan," *SoraNews24*, February 1, 2018, para. 3, <https://soraneews24.com/2018/02/01/you-can-now-buy-breast-implants-for-anime-huggy-pillows-in-japan/>.

“legs” or “arms.”<sup>491</sup> Or *dakimakura* with an opening which can be equipped with an *onahole*,<sup>492</sup> a Japanese term for masturbatory sleeves shaped like a vagina (similar to Western fleshlights), often illustrated with pictures of anime girls. There even exists a talking *dakimakura* that responds to rubbing with moans and other verbal responses, “including angry outbursts if you get too grabby.”<sup>493</sup> [Video 2] The *dakimakura* thus becomes a symbol of alienation and misogyny—unethical, reinforcing the unequal power structures and sex-role stereotypes that reify women and children, therefore violating fundamental human values.<sup>494</sup> Anthony Ferguson, the author of the first monograph on the centuries-long history of fornicatory dolls, goes so far as to say that “their very existence is a potential threat to the future of human biological relationships,”<sup>495</sup> one that becomes increasingly tangible with the imminent development of sex robots.

Despite these and other anxieties towards technosexual singularity, the *dakimakura* can be more frightening than a realistic sex doll. Because the *dakimakura* does not aim for realism like most contemporary sex dolls and masturbatory aids do, it harbors no space for the pygmalionesque substitution of the *waifu* for the wife, unless as a grotesque mockery. The *dakimakura* is also unlike a CandyGirl, the high-end Japanese silicone sex dolls branded for their full-body detail and lifelike faces, [Figure 3] or fleshlight sleeves molded after pornstars. Nor are they sleek and stylish like Tenga, the “Apple of the sex toy industry,”<sup>496</sup> with their myriad of space-age designs. If anything, *dakimakura* resemble the life-sized cloth dolls used by seventeenth-century sailors on long naval voyages, called *dames de voyage*.<sup>497</sup> According to historian Julien Arbois, these first appeared during the seventeenth century, crafted by

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<sup>491</sup> Brian Ashcraft, “A Natural Hug Pillow Evolution,” *Kotaku*, June 1, 2011, para. 3, <https://kotaku.com/5807258/a-natural-hug-pillow-evolution>; Casey Baseel, “Y-Shaped Naked Anime Girl Pillow Cover Features Spreadable Legs,” *SoraNews24*, September 9, 2017, para.3-4, <https://soranews24.com/2017/09/09/y-shaped-naked-anime-girl-pillow-cover-features-spreadable-legs%E3%80%90pics%E3%80%91/>.

<sup>492</sup> Ashcraft, “A Natural Hug Pillow Evolution,” para. 7.

<sup>493</sup> Casey Baseel, “Anime Pillow Responds to Your Rubbing with Moans and Groans, Gets Angry If You Get Too Grabby,” *SoraNews24*, February 28, 2015, para. 2, <https://soranews24.com/2015/02/28/anime-pillow-responds-to-your-rubbing-with-moans-and-groans-gets-angry-if-you-get-too-grabby/>.

<sup>494</sup> Alexandra-Ann Hodges, “About,” *Campaign Against Sex Robots*, September 12, 2015, <https://campaignagainstsexrobots.org/about/>.

<sup>495</sup> *The Sex Doll: A History* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2010), 4.

<sup>496</sup> Ottimo Massimo, “The New Tenga 3d Takes Pleasure To A New Dimension,” *Fleshbot*, October 26, 2011, para. 1, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120508173436/http://straight.fleshbot.com/5853504/the-new-tenga-3d-takes-pleasure-to-a-new-dimension>.

<sup>497</sup> Ferguson, *The Sex Doll*, 16.

Dutchmen after observing the East and Southeast Asian costume of the bamboo wife (known as *chikufujin* in Japanese)—long cylindrical objects made of weaved bamboo for hugging and cooling one’s body during sleep in hot climates. [Figure 4] Hence, the *dames de voyage* also became known as “Dutch wives.”

Nevertheless, whereas the *dame de voyage* was strictly utilitarian, a *dakimakura* manifests the *moé* utopia of reciprocity, an idealized domestic order doomed to be unfulfillable. The *dakimakura* is as cute as it is othered and obscene. In this light, is the *dakimakura* really out of place, floating among the amorphous products one could find on any supermarket shelf—as my knee-jerk reaction first suggested? Or are these subcultural, idiosyncratic desires right where they belong? “Residue is a way of haunting the commodity,” wrote Patricia Yeager. “Detritus is the opposite of the commodified object—new, sleek, just off the assembly line, already losing its value as we walk out the store. Trash has a history, about the object as it is individuated and the object as it decays and enters entropy.”<sup>498</sup> As the *otaku*’s polluted libido overlaps with a polluted environment, the floating *dakimakura* becomes an unprocessed, and morally unprocessable, debris. In their refusal to vanish, our “trashy” desires disturb the proper flow of time, just like the *dakimakura*’s polyester cover that will not decompose for the next 100 years. Indeed, the so-called “environmental” or “ecological turn” in the arts and humanities has led to an increased interest in the state of being cast off. What is cast-off has long since hung on the margins of history, of cities, and our awareness. As Susan Signe Morrison puts it, “From the garbage-filled moats of the Middle Ages to the overflowing landfills of today, waste has been and continues to be an enduring issue.”<sup>499</sup> Nowadays, it seeps through our soil, our air, our water. It runs underground in the conduits carrying waste matter beneath our feet. It hangs above our heads, in the form of “nearly 20,000 pieces of small debris from a half-century of space missions, left to float aimlessly in orbit.”<sup>500</sup> [Figure 5]

Nevertheless, schools of thought like New Materialism, seeking to reintroduce an affirmative perspective on matter back into Western theory, have fostered what Yeager calls the “act of saving and savoring debris,”<sup>501</sup> a “rubbish ecology” of the wasted, discarded, rejected, dirty, filthy, toxic. Jussi Parrika’s theory of “medianatures and dirty matter,” for

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<sup>498</sup> “Editor’s Column,” 335.

<sup>499</sup> *The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1.

<sup>500</sup> Danny Clemens, “This Is How Much Garbage We’ve Left in Orbit Around Earth,” *Discovery Blog*, December 30, 2015, <http://www.discovery.com/dscovrd/space/this-is-how-much-garbage-weve-left-in-orbit-around-earth/>.

<sup>501</sup> “Editor’s Column,” 329.

instance, has gravitated towards those weird materialities that are not necessarily ethical or emancipatory: “The materiality of waste is one concrete way to think about ‘new materialism’ not only as ‘good’ agency of matter,” Parikka writes. “There is a whole materialism of dirt and bad matter too, which is not only about ‘thing-power’ but about things de-powering.”<sup>502</sup> Parikka’s concept of Anthroscene, a wordplay indexing “the various violations of environmental and human life in corporate practices and technological culture”<sup>503</sup> happening in the Anthropocene, is another facet of this “rubbish ecology.” It highlights what is *obscene* about our anthropogenic actions on Earth, and what is left out in techno-optimistic narratives that represent humankind as an undifferentiated, inequality-free species rising to planetary power.<sup>504</sup> The floating *dakimakura* captures this social and environmental obscenity, along with the sexual obscenity that violates common standards of morality and decency. Or, as Dominic Pettman suggests, “people will always *desire*, but the motivation behind that desire, and the objects towards which it reaches out, are severely debased and compromised by our political, economic, and technical arrangements.”<sup>505</sup>

Meanwhile, the floating *dakimakura*, like hazardous debris, refuses to vanish from the Internet’s virtual ocean. Five years after I first saw it, the *dakimakura* remerged in a *Reddit* post titled “Does art imitate life, or life imitate art?” There, the floating *dakimakura* appeared side by side with John Everett Millais’s *Ophelia* (1851–52), showcasing their uncanny resemblance. [Figure 6] In the comments section, someone hyperlinks the post to another *Reddit* thread, *r/AccidentalRenaissance*, emphasizing the picture’s entropic artistry. The comparison between the floating *dakimakura* and *Hamlet*’s tragic heroine is apt in more ways than one. *Ophelia*’s “muddy death”<sup>506</sup> may be a proto-example of what Kristy Guevara-Flanagan calls the “Laura Palmers” trope in television and film: beautiful female corpses floating in the water or washed up dead on beaches and riverbanks.<sup>507</sup> [Figure 7] Like Laura Palmer in a body bag, the floating *dakimakura* exists in a state of cast-offness: they evoke what is missing (the living) by pulling on the invisible strings that connect presence to absence, the

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<sup>502</sup> Parikka, “Medianatures,” 99.

<sup>503</sup> *The Anthroscene*, 2014, 1.

<sup>504</sup> Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, “The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative,” *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 1 (April 1, 2014): 1.

<sup>505</sup> *Human Error: Species-Being and Media Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 150.

<sup>506</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Philip Edwards, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 224.

<sup>507</sup> Kristy Guevara-Flanagan, What Happened to Her – An Interview with Kristy Guevara-Flanagan, interview by Blythe Worthy, March 22, 2017, para.6-8, <https://fourthreefilm.com/2017/03/what-happened-to-her-an-interview-with-kristy-guevara-flanagan/>.

vestiges of desire and death. The *trompe-l'œil* effect at work in the floating *dakimakura* accentuates this uncanniness: lying on her fictional sheets, the cute anime girl is sexually available, yet confined to the narrow boundaries of the pillow, she is just as close to a corpse on a boat-grave—the love pillow is thus superimposed on a phantasmatic burial at sea. All these muddy deaths are remnants of the social and cultural catastrophe of violence against women, reimaged as an ecological disaster. Unlike Ophelia and Laura Palmer, however, cold and deathly serene, the *dakimakura* remains “indecently cute”<sup>508</sup> in her debasement.

Moreover, the *dakimakura*'s cuteness is miasmatic. It spreads to our imagination, infecting *Ophelia*'s body and her surroundings, forcing us to compare that lush, painterly landscape to a pile of rubbish and debris. Like the miasma in Greek mythology—a contagious power stemming from unnatural human deeds, that took on a life of its own and plagued them with catastrophe until purged by sacrificial death<sup>509</sup>—the floating *dakimakura* pollutes the sacred and the beautiful with a deathly drive towards an absolute low, and utter shallowness. That which is “indecently cute” holds power to reduce Shakespeare to *moé* trash. It seems, then, that Murakami Takashi's promise-cum-threat, that “The world of the future might be like Japan is today—super flat,”<sup>510</sup> erred only on the side of caution: not merely the future, but also the past, is turning super flat. Significantly, *Hamlet* is also the source of Derrida's formulation of hauntology: “a disjointed or disadjusted now, ‘out of joint.’”<sup>511</sup> The floating *dakimakura* plays on the missing human subject, the girl “out of joint,” neither dead nor fully alive, to which it is connected by invisible threads of presence and absence, tragedy and farce.

Japanese pop culture, like garbage, is now ubiquitously disseminated. The floating *dakimakura* is everywhere and anywhere. As comedian Patton Oswalt puts it in a text about geek culture in the United States, “Looking back, we were American otakus.”<sup>512</sup> And adds: nowadays, “Everyone considers themselves otaku about something—whether it's the mythology of *Lost* or the minor intrigues of *Top Chef*. *American Idol* inspires—if not in depth, at least in length and passion—the same number of conversations as does *The Wire*.”<sup>513</sup> No longer contained within the physical and symbolic borders of Japan, the “otakuness” spreads,

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<sup>508</sup> Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 2012, 60.

<sup>509</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* (Anchor Books, 2007), 55.

<sup>510</sup> *Superflat*, 5.

<sup>511</sup> *Specters of Marx*, (New York; London: Routledge, 2006), 1.

<sup>512</sup> “Wake Up, Geek Culture. Time to Die,” *WIRED*, December 27, 2010, para. 3, [https://www.wired.com/2010/12/ff\\_angrynerd\\_geekculture/](https://www.wired.com/2010/12/ff_angrynerd_geekculture/).

<sup>513</sup> Oswalt, para. 10.

sparkling concerns about the infantilization of societies geared towards “the juvenile pleasures of empowered cultural consumers.”<sup>514</sup> But “*otaku*” and “infantilization” have always gone hand in hand; after all, manga has always been the turf of children and teenagers, or adult-rejecting adults. Reading manga was an act of dissent for the unruly, elite Japanese college students of yesteryear, during the uprisings of the 1960s, a form counterculture alongside rock music and yakuza films.<sup>515</sup> Today, it emerges in the stereotype of the apathetic NEET or lonely “parasite singles” fawning over cute 2D girls. The term “moratorium people,” coined by Okonogi Keiko in 1978 to describe a growing movement of youths who evaded fundamental values of Japanese society, like self-discipline, responsibility, and hard work,<sup>516</sup> captures this sense of suspended animation by those who refuse to grow up and process their loss of innocence in a healthy, practical manner. The proverbial Little Boy, articulated by Murakami in a play between the tender image of a boy and the code name of the atomic bomb that hit Hiroshima, encapsulates the “The *otaku* child figure, lost to normal sociality, sexuality, and national-cultural identification”<sup>517</sup> as a symbol of powerlessness in an age afflicted by looming social-environmental disasters. [Figure 8]

The aesthetic of the *kawaii* is therefore as much about the child as an “emblem of futurity’s unquestionable value and purpose”<sup>518</sup> as it is retrogressive, nostalgic. It resists teleology through the “idealization of latency,”<sup>519</sup> indexing our individual and collective desires for an ever-vanishing youth. Indeed, as Wan-Chuan Kao and Jen Boyle point out, the cute is retro-futuristic, in the sense that “The study of cuteness, at its heart, is an investigation of the problematics of temporality. Faced with a cute object, the subject makes a simultaneous double move: the subject regresses to the time-space of childhood and projects the child onto the future.”<sup>520</sup> In both, childhood is “hauntologized” as the return, in the present, of a transient

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<sup>514</sup> A. O. Scott, “The Death of Adulthood in American Culture,” *The New York Times*, September 11, 2014, para. 7, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/magazine/the-death-of-adulthood-in-american-culture.html>.

<sup>515</sup> Japan’s uprisings of the late sixties were a series of demonstrations, strikes, and occupations by Japanese college students, factory workers, and other alienated factions of society that resulted in violent confrontations with the police and the closure of university campuses across the nation. Oguma, “Japan’s 1968: A Collective Reaction to Rapid Economic Growth in an Age of Turmoil,” *Counterculture and the Student Uprisings*.

<sup>516</sup> Sharon Kinsella, “Cuties in Japan,” in *Women, Media, and Consumption in Japan*, ed. Lise Skov and Brian Moeran (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 250–51.

<sup>517</sup> Ivy, “The Art of Cute Little Things,” 4.

<sup>518</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 4.

<sup>519</sup> Margaret Morganroth Gullette, “The Exile of Adulthood: Pedophilia in the Midlife Novel,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 17, no. 3 (1984): 216.

<sup>520</sup> “Introduction: The Time of the Child,” 13.

past (the lost child), which is also (or fundamentally) a threat to the future, erased or block, never to come to pass. Sharon Kinsella singled out this aspect in "Cuties in Japan" (1995), arguing that *kawaii* culture may not differ significantly from the nihilistic spirit of "NO FUTURE" celebrated by punk bands like the Sex Pistols.<sup>521</sup> As such, while at first glance, the sugary frenzy of Japanese pop culture may not seem like the most appropriate place to look for the hauntological, in the twenty-first century, the aesthetic of the *kawaii* has become an arena in which the civilizational malaise of postmodernity is exercised. Or rather, *exorcised*.

In the marketplace, cuteness is a manifestation of retrofuturism, an attempt to suspend the commodity in a state of eternal freshness and desirability. This endeavor often generates a whole new set of anxieties. The dread of an inexorable thing-depowerment already permeated, say, the urban melancholy of the Baudelairean spleen, indexing the Obsolete in its "potential for devaluation that exists in any commodity or object of fashion, once its moment of newness had passed."<sup>522</sup> Cuteness helps to conceal the Obsolete in objects by imprinting them with perpetual traits of neoteny, but never sufficiently soothes one's tacit understanding that the life of commodities, as well as the infrastructures and resources implicated in their production, is a trajectory of inexorable decline. One whose uncanny resemblance to ourselves (humans) Marx had already pointed out, stating that "The lifetime of an instrument of labor is thus spent in the repetition of a greater or lesser number of similar operations. The instrument suffers the same fate as the man."<sup>523</sup> In this sense, the cute commodity in its overeagerness to be connected to and loved by consumers paradoxically discloses the precariousness of human exceptionalism within the broader scope of interobjective (thing-thing) relations.

In other words, even Hello Kitty cannot mask the underlying impression of "apocalyptic cute"<sup>524</sup> exuding from the *kyara*'s "indecent surplus of life,"<sup>525</sup> infecting homes and shop windows everywhere in the world—in their willingness to transcend their condition as a "mere" object and conquer the human heart, the cute commodity can become "dehumanized and superhumanized, abstract and inanimate,"<sup>526</sup> corrupting our bodies and

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<sup>521</sup> Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan," 252.

<sup>522</sup> Tyrus Miller, "Eternity No More: Walter Benjamin on the Eternal Return," in *Given World and Time: Temporalities in Context*, ed. Tyrus Miller (CeU Press, 2008), 289.

<sup>523</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 312.

<sup>524</sup> Yoke-Sum Wong, "A Presence of a Constant End: Contemporary Art and Popular Culture in Japan," in *The Ends of History: Questioning the Stakes of Historical Reason*, ed. Amy Swiffen and Joshua Nichols (Abingdon (UK): Routledge, 2013), 15.

<sup>525</sup> Aurel Kolnai, *On Disgust*, ed. Barry Smith and Carolyn Korsmeyer (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), 55.

<sup>526</sup> Pellitteri, *[(The Dragon and the Dazzle)*, 80.



environments through excessive materialism and waste. The infinitely spreadable thing evokes the individual and collective end of humans, from dead girls to species extinction, perceptualizing the Benjaminian claim that “The concept of progress is to be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things ‘just go on’ is the catastrophe. It is not that which is approaching, but that which is.”<sup>527</sup> Like a Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come (the most hauntological of Dickensian spirits), the floating *dakimakura*, adrift among soda cans, plastic bags, spheroid containers, and discarded papers, is a disastrous relic of our civilization, made *past*.

P.S. To this day, I continue to track the floating *dakimakura*’s travels across the Internet. The latest I found at *MemeCenter*, with the overlaid text “When your friend finally realizes the errors of their ways,” suggesting that the floating *dakimakura* results from an *otaku*, at last, realizing that their lifestyle—and, consequently, their *waiifu*—is trash. [Figure 9] On the comment section, comments like “they always told me my *waiifu* was trash...” and “When you want to do dirty stuff with your *waiifu*,” draw on the pun between the *dakimakura*’s literal state of uncleanliness and the figurative use of “trash” and “dirty” in qualitative and sexual contexts. Another comment offers a more sophisticated pun, stating that “This would make a Weeahobo so happy.” This is a play on the Internet slur “weeaboo”—from “wannabe Japanese,” applied to Western fans who uncritically adhere to manga, anime, and Japanese videogames; also, a reclaimed word used for self-deprecating humor (e.g., “I’m weeaboo trash”)—and “hobo,” painting an absurdist scenario in which a homeless person who happens to into anime is lucky enough to find a *waiifu* on a dumping ground. Even in such a small venue, the floating *dakimakura* still brings a series of sexual, cultural, and class connotations afloat, that easily adhere to this captivating image.

(See also “Absolute Boyfriend,” “(Betamale)” and “Creepypasta”)

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<sup>527</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Central Park,” *New German Critique*, no. 34 (Winter 1985): 50.

# Gakkōgurashi!

“Lately, I just love going to school!”

Thus speaks Takeya Yuki, a carefree, pink-haired girl who loves her school so much that she never wants to leave. Yuki has become a member of the School Living Club, for students who have taken residency within the school building. Every day, Yuki wakes up in an improvised classroom-cum-bedroom, puts on her trademark cat ear barrette and sailor school uniform (*seifuku*), along with a pink backpack with cute angel wings (evocative of magical girl icon Cardcaptor Sakura), and heads off seeking fun school activities. The other club members are Wakasa Yuuri, the president and *onee-sama* (“big sister”) figure to the girls; the athletic tomboy, Ebisuzawa Kurumi; the serious junior, Naoki Miki; the supervising teacher, Sakura Megumi; and, last but not least, the club dog Taromaru. [Figure 1] The members of the School Living Club not only attend classes but eat, play, and even sleep in the school’s precincts. “I know it sounds weird, but school is awesome,” Yuki tells us as she sprints through the corridors. “The physics room has these weird devices. The music room has beautiful instruments and intimidating portraits. In the communications room, all the school is your stage!” And adds for good measure: “We’ve got everything. We’re like our own country!”

This is the premise of *Gakkōgurashi! (School-Live!)*—in Japanese, *gakkō* means “school” and *kurashi* means “life, living, livelihood, life circumstances”—a manga series written by Kaihō Norimitsu and illustrated by Chiba Sadoru.<sup>528</sup> [Figure 2] The series began serialization in July 2012, in the *seinen* magazine *Manga Time Kirara Forward*. In 2015, it was adapted into a 12-episode animation by the animation team Lerche, directed by Ando Masaomi.<sup>529</sup> The first episode of *School-Live!* focuses on Yuki and Miki as they chase Taromaru around various school locations. It is an unhurried parade of overdone *moé* settings, clichéd slice-of-life tropes, and stale character designs. At some point, Yuki gets gently reprimanded for running in the hallways by Sakura-sensei. Yuki, who nicknames her Megu-nee (“big sister Megu”), candidly apologizes that “I didn’t notice you since you don’t really stand out much!” much to her teacher’s dismay.

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<sup>528</sup> Kaihō Norimitsu and Chiba Sadoru, *School-Live!* (New York, NY: Yen Press, 2015). Originally published by Houbunsha in Japan.

<sup>529</sup> *Gakkōgurashi!*, 12 episodes, directed by Ando Masaomi, written by Kaihō Norimitsu, and produced by Lerche, aired from July 9 to September 24, 2015, on AT-X, Tokyo MX, Sun TV, and BS11.

The episode's mood is cheerful and slapstick, yet the astute viewer will notice that something is amiss. Miki's expressions sometimes feel out of place, sad and perplexed. She is also shown reading a book by Stephen King, a somewhat inappropriate appearance for the circumstances and location of your typical *moé* show. But it is not until the very end of the episode that the truth is exposed. When Yuki is talking cheerfully to some girls in her class, Miki calls out to her from the entryway. As Yuki turns around, the classroom, once a stereotypical school environment, transforms into a war zone. **[Figure 3]** The room is empty, and the windows are broken. There is shattered glass all over the floor. Blood splattered everywhere. The desks are turned. Yuki greets Miki and continues talking to herself, alone inside the classroom. Outside, the playground is filled with zombified teenagers in torn school uniforms, groaning and wandering around aimlessly, their flesh rotten. **[Figure 4a, b]** "You seem tense. Nervous?" says Yuki to Miki. "Not at all," Miki answers. To which Yuki retorts, "You don't have to be on edge just because I'm older." The banter is interrupted when Yuki notices a shattered window that has been left open. "The window is opened..." she says, closing it. A soft breeze blows her hair, passing through the naked frame, but Yuki ignores it. Instead, she flashes a confident smile at the world outside. **[Figure 5]**

Thus, *Gakkōgurashi!* exposes the School Living Club for what it is: a farce, created to protect Yuki who suffered a mental breakdown during the Zombie Apocalypse, and of which she and the other club members are the sole survivors. The club activities are, in truth, survival missions. Even Sakura-sensei is a figment of Yuki's delusions, as the real Megumi Sakura died before the series started, sacrificing her life to save the students. The recurring joke in anime and manga comedies, where an adorable character is teased for their lack of presence, is subverted by the fact that the teacher has indeed been absent—dead—all along. **[Figure 6]**

Another tell-tale sign that *Gakkōgurashi!* is not your everyday *moé* show is the fact that a member of the Japanese visual novel company Nitroplus wrote it (Kaihō Norimitsu). Although the characters created by Nitroplus are often cute, the company specializes in stories whose tone is dark and deconstructive (e.g., *Saya no Uta*). In *School-Live!*, the derivative characters, settings, and designs are deliberately planted to fool the viewer into believing the show is too *moé* for its own good. **[Figure 7]** The existence of a School Living Club, as improbable as it is, is readily accepted by the viewers of *Gakkōgurashi!* as the culmination of school life being at the narrative core of much *moé* animanga. Not "real" school, but the school as a safe place devoid of work, violence or harassment, a utopia of idealized companionship. Indeed, variations of "school is fun!" have by now become stock phrases within the *moé* genre.

But as the show discloses its apocalyptic scenario, the escapism of *moé* blurs into the escapist delusions of the main character, Yuki.

As such, the timing of *Gakkōgurashi!*'s release is revealing: the manga began serialization little over a year after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, followed by the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Using the Zombie Apocalypse as a metaphor for Japan's "envirotechnical disasters,"<sup>530</sup> *School Live!* reflects on the possibility of *moé* in a post-disaster world. *Moé*, arguably the most pervasive genre/aesthetic in twenty-first-century Japanese animation, gained enormous popularity among the *otaku* crowd during the 2000s, but not without criticism. On the one hand, *moé* is accused of stultifying the anime and manga industry.<sup>531</sup> Unlike "noble" genres like science fiction, from which many anime classics have stemmed (*Space Battleship Yamato*, *Ghost In The Shell*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, etc.), cute girls doing cute things are—at least, in the eyes of many critics—hardly conducive to high art.

On the other hand, *moé* girls are frequently interpreted as problematic fabrications of the *otaku*'s regressive sexual politics.<sup>532</sup> The criticism has intensified over the last several years, with reports and counter reports on the "death of *moé*" circulating the Internet. For instance, author and industry observer Akamatsu Ken has proclaimed the genre's dismissal, while others, such as anime critic John Opplinger, suggested that it is merely evolving into "a new variety that hasn't become entrenched enough yet to be easily and immediately recognizable."<sup>533</sup> Opplinger argues that this new variety of *moé* is less tied to the genre's *lolicon* origins and therefore less possessive and sexualized. In this context, *Gakkōgurashi!* offers a surprising contribution to this debate, suggesting that *moé* is neither dying nor changing for the best. Instead, it has become *zombified*.

Despite its gimmicky "moé + Zombie Apocalypse" premise, *Gakkōgurashi!* is a sophisticated critique of cuteness and escapism in *otaku* culture, and Japan at large. For instance, the members of the School Living Club disagree on how to deal with Yuki's delusions. At one point, the club president Yuuri and Miki, the newcomer, argue after the latter refers to Yuki saying that "I hope she gets better soon." Hearing this, Yuuri tells Miki: "As

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<sup>530</sup> Sara B. Pritchard, "An Envirotechnical Disaster: Nature, Technology, and Politics at Fukushima," *Environmental History* 17, no. 2 (April 1, 2012): 219–43.

<sup>531</sup> Opplinger, "Ask John."

<sup>532</sup> Lady Saika, "The Moeblob vs. the Strong Female Character," *Lady Geek Girl and Friends*, December 24, 2012, <https://ladygeekgirl.wordpress.com/2012/12/24/the-moeblob-vs-the-strong-female-character/>; Cook, "Moé, Misogyny and Masculinity."

<sup>533</sup> Opplinger, "Ask John," para. 4.

long as you're here, will you please play along with her?" To which Miki retorts that "if we do that, she'll never recover." "It isn't about whether or not she recovers," says Yuuri, annoyed. "This is different. I'm sure you don't understand just yet." At face value, the argument between Yuuri and Miki concerns their different views on post-traumatic stress and mental illness in an extreme scenario. For Yuuri, Yuki's smile keeps the group going and must be protected at any cost, even by playing along with Yuki's dementia. On a meta-level, though, Yuuri and Miki's argument addresses the ethics of *moé* itself as a genre.

Yuki is a prototypical *genki* girl: a hyperactive female character who runs everywhere, babbles and is generally fired up about anything and everything (the Japanese word *genki* means "energetic" or "enthusiastic"). [Figure 8] Yuuri, the club president, refers to Yuki's displaced vitality as her "smile." Yuki's "smile" thus works as "a heightened announcement of the fact that life *is there*"<sup>534</sup> not despite, but because of reality's horrors. In this sense, Yuki and the zombies are on a continuum with each other, representing two sides of the same coin—both are zombified, animated beyond their death, which in Yuki's case amounts to her broken spirit. But whereas the zombies are straightforward expressions of Thanatos, i.e., the death drive, Yuki is an embodiment of life forces (Eros), of the will to live, and the affective "work of pleasure-making, fantasy-building, and game-creating."<sup>535</sup> Yuki expresses the *genki* girl trope within the highly formulaic and repetitive parameters of *moé* because, as Gilles Deleuze writes, "Eros can be lived only through repetition, whereas Thanatos... is that which gives repetition to Eros, that which submits Eros to repetition."<sup>536</sup> The *Zombie Apocalypse in Gakkōgurashi!* thus captures the status of *moé* as an inadequate interface in a post-disaster world, which nevertheless persists as a form of healing, even if it is more risky than beneficial.

Yuki, one might argue, is a "body of dementia,"<sup>537</sup> a term coined by Ōtori Hidenaga to describe a state of "bodily rampage" where "not the mind but the body is in the state of dementia."<sup>538</sup> According to Ōtori, the "body of dementia" is a typically postmodern condition thoroughly observable in Japan:

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<sup>534</sup> Aurel Kolnai, *On Disgust*, ed. Barry Smith and Carolyn Korsmeyer (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), 53.

<sup>535</sup> Benjamin Hagen, "Slow Reading (1.18): Deleuze's DR (Pp. 18-19)," *Sketching a Present*, December 30, 2017, <https://www.sketchingapresent.com/blog/2013/12/30/slow-reading-1-18-deleuzes-dr-pp-18-19>.

<sup>536</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 18.

<sup>537</sup> Hidenaga Otori, "Revolt, Dysfunction, Dementia: Toward the Body of 'Empire,'" in *How Latitudes Become Forms: Art in the Global Age* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003), 102.

<sup>538</sup> Otori, 102.

Since the Aum Shinrikyo terrorist gas attack on the Tokyo Subway in 1995, we have witnessed many such maddening scenes in Japan. While a high school student in Columbine, Colorado, was engaged in random shootings of his classmates, a man suffering from dementia was randomly stabbing passers-by in downtown Tokyo, and another was driving his car right up to a railroad platform and randomly running over passengers. What characterizes these people is that throughout their bodily rampages they never even thought about running away from the scene of the crime.<sup>539</sup>

For Ōtori, “something more drastic than being dysfunctional has arrived, and at least in Japan, bodies are behaving very strangely in the streets... the bodies themselves are, in a sense, in a state of dementia by lacking any circuit for self-examination.”<sup>540</sup> Sadly, the “body of dementia” observed by Ōtori continues to manifest today in tragedies like the Kyoto Animation arson attack in July of 2019, one of the deadliest massacres in Japan’s postwar history that killed thirty-five members of the animation studio known, among other things, for popularizing the “*moé* eyes” (a particularly recognizable style of big, cute eyes associated with the *moé* phenomenon) in beloved series like *Suzumiya Haruhi* (2006, 2009), *Lucky Star* (2007), and *K-On!* (2009). However, the “body of dementia” can be traced back to psychosocial phenomena like the dancing mania—also known as choreomania, dancing plague, or tarantism, as it was believed to be caused by the bite of a tarantula—a form of mass hysteria from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, in which groups of up to four hundred people danced until they collapsed or died from exhaustion.<sup>541</sup> [Figure 9] Yuki, like these mad dancers, is also a rampaging body whose agency has been compromised. Hence, the *genki* girl in *Gakkōgurashi!* not only serves as a mechanism for coping with trauma but encapsulates the very correlation between “life-exuberance”<sup>542</sup> and the loss of subjective awareness. For instance, according to Aurel Kolnai, author of *Der Ekel* (“On Disgust,” 1929), this “indecent surplus of life”<sup>543</sup> which both Yuki and the zombies possess is fundamentally associated with the motif of putrefaction (a connection also observable in *vanitas* still life paintings, where food would be shown to be starting to rot and therefore have insects crawling about it).<sup>544</sup>

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<sup>539</sup> Otori, 102.

<sup>540</sup> Otori, 106.

<sup>541</sup> Ned Pennant-Rea, “The Dancing Plague of 1518,” *The Public Domain Review*, July 10, 2018, para. 2, 6, <https://publicdomainreview.org/2018/07/10/the-dancing-plague-of-1518/>.

<sup>542</sup> Kolnai, *On Disgust*, 2003, 73.

<sup>543</sup> Kolnai, 55.

<sup>544</sup> “Still Life,” in *New World Encyclopedia*, “Seventeenth century” para. 2, accessed June 17, 2019, [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Still\\_Life](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Still_Life).

In *Ugly Feelings* (2007), Sianne Ngai also notes the “ambiguous interplay between agitated things and deactivated persons”<sup>545</sup> in old animation technologies, like Claymation. According to Ngai, the magic of animation derives from “the most basic or minimal of all affective conditions: that of being in one way or another ‘moved.’”<sup>546</sup> Indeed, Yuki’s “body of dementia” exposes her status as a stock character in Japanese animation, whose flatness, both literal and figurative, prevents her from making sense outside the narrative fabric of *moé*, even when the latter is coming apart at the seams. Yuki runs giddily through dangerous hallways. She chats with non-existent classmates and gets scolded by a teacher whose lack of presence stems, not from a demeaning joke, but being, in fact, dead. The *genki* girl, out of place in the *Zombie Apocalypse*, becomes a symbol and a symptom of Japanese cute culture and postmodernity.

Still, Yuki’s character development involves a trajectory towards “grounding.” Even amid dementia, Yuki realizes her fantasy is plagued with inconsistencies, occasionally panicking when glimpsing the truth of the world she inhabits: the anime “camera” loses focus to convey her existential vertigo, and the fantasy comes apart at the seams, revealing the veiled reality (e.g., her ordinary classmates are transformed into zombies). [Figure 10a, b] Little by little, Yuki begins to come to terms with reality, wishing to be helpful instead sheltered by the other girls. This “grounding” aligns with Miki’s belief that Yuki needs a reality check to cure her inability to distinguish reality from fantasy. Yuki’s “body of dementia” can be interpreted as a cautionary tale about the escapism of *otaku* culture: as Ōtori points out, “for those who overindulge in animations and computer games, reality and fantasy are indistinguishable.”<sup>547</sup> But *Gakkōgurashi!*’s relishing in the emancipatory power of Yuki’s “smile” proposes a more sophisticated take on the relationship between fantasy and reality, art and trauma. Yuki does not merely see the world differently from every other character—she modifies the anime, the *medium* itself, as viewers see the world through her eyes. In this sense, *Gakkōgurashi!*’s is not a *moé* show set in *Zombie Apocalypse* but slips in and out of the *moé* genre, as the viewer slips in and out of Yuki’s delusion. The School Living Club enacts dissensus, as formulated by philosopher Jacques Rancière, i.e., a critique of the unequal distribution of the sensible and knowledge-producing regimes in society.<sup>548</sup> In *Gakkōgurashi!*, the sensible is redistributed by

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<sup>545</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 91.

<sup>546</sup> Ngai, 91.

<sup>547</sup> Otori, “Revolt, Dysfunction, Dementia: Toward the Body of ‘Empire,’” 102.

<sup>548</sup> For Rancière, dissensus is “an intersection of the ways in which we establish the criteria of knowledge... not an epistemological break but a break *of* epistemology as the qualifying perceptual criterion for political participation.” Davide Panagia, “‘Partage Du Sensible’: The Distribution of the

endorsing Yuki's "play impulse"<sup>549</sup> as a rival interpretation of a seemingly univocal reality, namely, the horrifying Zombie Apocalypse. The places of the massacre become pristine schoolrooms. A life or death mission to get food supplies transmogrifies into a thrilling *kimodameshi* ("test of courage") beyond the barricades blocking the hallway. And it is not that staying inside the school is the girls' only chance at survival; it is just that school is so much fun they do not, *of their own volition*, want to leave! The result is a constant back and forth between *moé* and survival fiction, a cute Zombie Apocalypse intermingling the opposite ends of cuteness and horror, Eros and Thanatos.

There is, therefore, no easy resolution for Miki and Yuuri's conflict. Contrary to Miki's expectations, you cannot extract the *moé* out of *Gakkōgurashi!* without dissolving its mediatic milieu, i.e., without it ceasing to *be*. Nevertheless, *Gakkōgurashi!* does not disavow a critical perspective on *moé* as aesthetics of capital. The fact that Yuki gradually "wakes up" from her delusion to face the grim and gritty reality attests that, to some degree, the *moé* is a false consciousness, preventing her from seeing and engaging with the world as is. At one point, *Gakkōgurashi!* reveals that the zombie outbreak results from a biological weapon, but one gets the impression that, more likely, this is a "Zombie Formalism apocalypse,"<sup>550</sup> akin to that coined by artist and critic Walter Robinson to describe the dubious rise of provisional painting and the New Casualists in the global art market.<sup>551</sup> [Figure 11] The formal triteness of *moé*, i.e., the fact that the art, characters, and settings in *Gakkōgurashi!* are overused, is the reason why the plot twist effectively challenges our expectations as viewers. It is a condition *sine qua non* for the show's playful tautology: a *moé* zombie apocalypse about the zombification of *moé*,

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Sensible," in *Jacques Ranciere: Key Concepts*, ed. Jean-Philippe Deranty (Durham: Routledge, 2014), 98, 100.

<sup>549</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2004), 75.

<sup>550</sup> Andrew M. Goldstein, "I Survived the Zombie Formalism Apocalypse: The Hard-Won Lessons of London Dealer Rod Barton," *Artspace*, February 12, 2016, [http://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews\\_features/rod-barton-dealer-interview](http://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/rod-barton-dealer-interview).

<sup>551</sup> In "Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism" (2014), Robinson described it as "'Formalism' because this art involves a straightforward, reductive, essentialist method of making a painting... and 'Zombie' because it brings back to life the discarded aesthetics of Clement Greenberg, the man who championed Jackson Pollock, Morris Louis, and Frank Stella's 'black paintings,' among other things" Walter Robinson, "Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism," *Artspace*, April 3, 2014, [http://www.artspace.com/magazine/contributors/the\\_rise\\_of\\_zombie\\_formalism](http://www.artspace.com/magazine/contributors/the_rise_of_zombie_formalism). Zombie Formalism is associated with "the vogue for a certain type of painting among collectors known for their speculative investment in young artists" (Chris Wiley, "The Toxic Legacy of Zombie Formalism, Part 1: How an Unhinged Economy Spawned a New World of 'Debt Aesthetics,'" *Artnet*, July 26, 2018, para. 2, <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/history-zombie-formalism-1318352>), often process-based abstract paintings with a "shabby chic" look.



a walking corpse hollowed out of substance by its intensive commercial exploitation. But as argued before, the *genki* girl in *Gakkōgurashi!* also envisions a form of individual and collective emancipation from reality based on play—a central feature of cute aesthetics in general.

The School Living Club enacts a resilient and biding cuteness against the precarity and uncertainty that afflicts its members. The *genki* girl, as “body of dementia,” holds an affirmative intensity capable of altering what her animated world looks like, which cannot be dismissed as mere escapist fiction. If, as scholar Joshua Dale puts it, “cuteness is an appeal to others,”<sup>552</sup> the emancipatory potential of Yuki’s “smile” is that, like a zombie bite, it is infectious, spreading from one person to another, suturing a gap between the positive and the negative, Eros and Thanatos. *Gakkōgurashi!* offers an opportunity to think about the political role of cuteness, in addition to its therapeutic one, in navigating the many disasters in our world for which zombie apocalypses are well-known metaphors. *Gakkōgurashi!*’s provocation is that one can play with the triteness of the *kawaii* and animanga aesthetics in unpredictable, creative ways, envisioning, as Thomas Lamarre phrases it, “not the inertia of the commodity-object but the stirrings of a commodity-life,”<sup>553</sup> with all its snags and contradictions.

(See also “CGDCT” and “Zombieflat”)

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<sup>552</sup> “The Appeal of the Cute Object: Desire, Domestication, and Agency,” in *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, ed. Joshua Paul Dale et al. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 37.

<sup>553</sup> “Introduction,” xvii.

# Gesamptcutewerk

Gunji Masao is a retired policeman who holds the Guinness World Record for the most extensive collection of Hello Kitty memorabilia in the world, since 2017. [Video 1] Located in Chiba, Gunji's Hello Kitty house is a picturesque wooden structure, painted in baby pink and decorated all over with Hello Kitty motives. On the entrance and the inside, the house contains over 5000 Hello Kitty items, collected for 35 years—to be exact, 5169 objects, and counting. The result is an impressive “dream scene” of totalizing cuteness. When asked what he likes about Hello Kitty for the Guinness World Records *YouTube* channel,<sup>554</sup> Gunji answered, candidly, that it “is because of her expression.” “For some reason when I’m sad she looks a little bit sad as well, and when I’m happy she looks happy,” Gunji explains, and continues: “Hello Kitty has always cheered me up when I was unhappy.” Most people would find this baffling: after all, Sanrio’s mascot is famous, and *infamous*, for her lack of expression.<sup>555</sup> Two deadpan black dots form her eyes, plus a small nose, and no mouth. In another interview, for a Japanese television channel, Gunji goes as far as stating that he feels sad for unsold Hello Kitty items on shops’ shelves, so he ends up buying them all.<sup>556</sup> [Figure 1a, b] The comments on Brian Ashcraft’s *Kotaku* article about Gunji’s collection are demonstrative of the anxiety generated by such “slyness” of things that manipulate and entrap humans: “5,169 things that share 1 soul,” one commentator, writes, to which another responds, “5,169 things that share 0 soul. They stare deeply into you looking for an opportunity to steal yours.”

Gunji’s Hello Kitty house and his compulsion to keep buying unsold items out of pity (*kawaisō*, “that poor thing”) supports Sianne Ngai’s claim that cute commodities reimagine the Marxist formulation of capital’s interobjectiveness (as “a social relation between men themselves which assumes... the fantastic form of a relationship between things”<sup>557</sup>) by clothing it in a fantasy of humane one-on-oneness,<sup>558</sup> akin to a parent-child or owner-pet relationship. However, when this intimate bond between the buyer and the cute commodity is

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<sup>554</sup> Guinness World Records, *Largest Collection of Hello Kitty Memorabilia - Japan Tour*, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KLtV3P8Qv0>.

<sup>555</sup> Ben Gabriel, “I Have No Mouth but I Must Scream,” *The New Inquiry*, February 16, 2012, para. 2, <https://thenewinquiry.com/i-have-no-mouth-but-i-must-scream/>.

<sup>556</sup> Brian Ashcraft, “The Largest Hello Kitty Goods Collection In The World,” *Kotaku*, June 24, 2017, para. 2, <http://kotaku.com/the-largest-hello-kitty-goods-collection-in-the-world-1796374876>.

<sup>557</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 165.

<sup>558</sup> Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 2012, 64.

multiplied to absurdity, the inhumanity of their liaison begins to leak through the phantasmatic fabric. And according to the comments on *Kotaku*, the *kawaii* character itself assumes the vampiric, predatory contours that Marx often sardonically attributes to capitalism—in this case, the accumulation of Hello Kitties brings out her soul-sucking abilities. More precisely, the Hello Kitty house is a fine example of what media theorist Marc Steinberg calls the *kyara*'s “immaterial force of attraction, and a material propensity for distribution”<sup>559</sup> that both binds things together and spreads them.

Indeed, Hello Kitty is the ultimate *kyara*. Shimizu Yūko, a designer at Sanrio, created the adorable cat in 1974 as the company sought to capitalize on Japan's “fancy goods” craze by decorating stationery and other items of bric-a-brac with cute characters.<sup>560</sup> For this purpose, there was no need for originality or talent; in fact, Kitty heavily resembles Miffy (or Nijntje in the original version, meaning “little rabbit”), a beloved character that had been created twenty years earlier, in 1955, by Dick Bruna, a Dutch illustrator and graphic designer of De Stijl descent. [Figure 2] The latter did not hide his contempt for the Japanese knockoff,<sup>561</sup> which took Miffy's “pure-blooded” Rietveldian palette of primary colors, precise designs and narratives, only to bastardized them with pink ribbons in the service of pure marketing. More recent *kyara*, like Broccoli's Di Gi Charat (1995, the mascot of retail chain Gamers) or Crypton Future Media's Hatsune Miku (2007), have continued and expanded on this concept of self-sufficient characters that, as philosopher Azuma Hiroki suggests, do not require stories to live long and prosper in global markets. [Figure 3]

Contrary to traditional characters whose focus is on narrative substance, the *kyara* is “a very stylized type of character... an icon with an easily recognizable name that lends itself to many different forms of marketing.”<sup>562</sup> As an abbreviation of “*kyarukutā*,” the Japanese transliteration of the English word “character,” the *kyara* aptly translates the notion of a compressed or abstracted character that does not exist within a narrative work. In the age of

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<sup>559</sup> *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 83.

<sup>560</sup> Kinsella, “Cuties in Japan,” 225–26.

<sup>561</sup> Horatia Harrod, “Miffy Creator Dick Bruna: ‘Hello Kitty Is a Copy of Miffy. I Don't like That at All,’” *The Telegraph*, February 17, 2017, para. 17, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/authors/miffy-creator-dick-bruna-hello-kitty-copy-miffy-dont-like/>; Rosie Millard, “The Man Who Made Miffy,” *Financial Times*, March 25, 2011, para. 17, <https://www.ft.com/content/6f9b7356-54ef-11e0-96f3-00144feab49a>.

<sup>562</sup> Pellitteri, *The Dragon and the Dazzle*, 78.

the “*transmediagesamtkunstwerk*,”<sup>563</sup> the “total work of art” that finds expression through multiple media, the *kyara* offers a valuable asset: synergy. Steinberg emphasizes that the *kyara* is unspecific to any medium yet transposable across media, and is transformed by its various incarnations in a snowball effect.<sup>564</sup> In short, every time a *kyara* materializes as a TV series, a comic book, a toy, and so on, this new materialization affects all existing materializations, and the sum of these parts change the meanings and form of the immaterial *kyara* itself. According to Steinberg, the *kyara* wield massive interobjective networks in which “the mediatization of things... precedes their becoming mediators between people.”<sup>565</sup> The fact the *kyara*’s interobjectivity precedes their intersubjectivization (i.e., their role in human-human relations) aligns with what philosopher Timothy Morton calls “the sly solidarity between things.”<sup>566</sup> It is such recognition of the agency of “inanimate” objects and matters that sparked the appearance of twenty-first-century philosophies such as New Materialism, Thing Theory, or Object-Oriented Ontology.

As Gunji’s Hello Kitty house shows, Hello Kitty adheres not only to individual objects, but to whole spaces and places, and consequently to the people who inhabit them. When expressed as a spatial concept, the *kyara*’s viscosity arouses a sense of unreality. Taking after Ilya Kabakov’s idea of “total installation,” art historian Claire Bishop classifies this derealization as a “dream scene,” a “model of viewing experience... that not only physically immerses the viewer in a three-dimensional space, but which is *psychologically* absorptive too.”<sup>567</sup> The “dream scene” is a phenomenon widely observed in *otaku* culture. For one, in the skyscrapers and public spaces of *otaku* neighborhoods like Akihabara in Tokyo, the “*otaku* Mecca,” packed with animanga merchandise on the inside and covered with giant banners on the outside, promoting popular animated series and games. [Figure 4a, b]

Architect and scholar Morikawa Kaichirō, who curated the Japanese pavilion at the 9th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale in 2004, is an essential figure concerning this re-evaluation of the spaces and places of *otaku* culture. Morikawa’s exhibition *OTAKU: persona = space = city* reflected on how the *otaku*’s private space of individual hobby had, over the past decades, taken over and transfigured the city’s public spaces. The

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<sup>563</sup> Frank Rose, “What Richard Wagner Can Teach Us about Storytelling in the Internet Age,” *Deep Media*, May 8, 2011, para. 5, <http://www.deepmediaonline.com/deepmedia/2011/08/what-wagner-can-teach-us-about-storytelling-in-the-internet-age.html>.

<sup>564</sup> *Anime’s Media Mix*, 84.

<sup>565</sup> Steinberg, 91.

<sup>566</sup> *Hyperobjects*, 30.

<sup>567</sup> Claire Bishop, *Installation Art* (London: Tate, 2010), 14.

exhibition's catalog was boxed with a plastic-figure assembly kit of a giant *loli* character straddling an iconic rail bridge in Akihabara, like a *moé* revisioning of the classic sci-fi film *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (1958). [Figure 5a] This figure, made for the occasion by renowned *bishōjo* figure creator Ōshima Yūki, effectively captures the awe (and aww!) at the extent to which cute *kyara* can “colonize” our everyday lives, as well as the anxiety that they may continue to expand indefinitely, overwhelming us with the sheer magnitude of their massive physical distribution. In fact, in 2005, various photomontages of Ōshima's figures in the streets of Akihabara circulated the internet, deceiving Western *anime* fans into believing that this “dream scene” was a real event. [Figure 5b]

The *kyara* also colonizes the *otaku*'s private spaces, e.g., bedrooms converted to anime and *manga* shrines, with endless shelves full of books and DVDs, walls coated with character posters or armies of anime figures on display. A closer look at the genealogy of *otaku* rooms demonstrates that they easily slip from dream to nightmare. Although books like Danny Choo's *OTACOOOL: Worldwide Otaku Rooms* (2009) and Patrick Galbraith's *Otaku Spaces* (2012) have helped promote Japanese nerds to trendy *otacool*, [Figure 6a, b] at their core is the specter of Miyazaki Tsutomu, the “*otaku* killer” arrested in 1989 for the brutal murders of four children. As Galbraith explains, “Images of Miyazaki's room were consistently reproduced in news coverage. The two-room bungalow was stuffed with boxes stacked to the ceiling, enough to block out the light from his window. The small mat where Miyazaki slept was encircled by magazines, manga, and 5,763 videotapes.”<sup>568</sup> [Figure 7] On television and newspapers, commentators reasoned that Miyazaki was addicted to computers and cartoons—the reason behind his crimes—and called him an *otaku*.<sup>569</sup> Since then, with the globalization of Japanese pop culture, much has changed about the public perception of anime and manga fans, but the nightmarish footprint of Miyazaki's room never entirely vanished.<sup>570</sup>

At the extreme end of the *otaku* room spectrum, there are the rooms of *hikikomori* shut-ins—those suffering from acute social withdrawal, who will not leave their rooms for over six months, sometimes several years, as a coping strategy against excessive social pressure.<sup>571</sup> Although the reasons for this behavior are varied, and there is no correspondence between

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<sup>568</sup> Patrick W. Galbraith, “A Room of Their Own: Otaku In the Popular Imagination,” in *Otaku Spaces* (Seattle, WA: Chin Music Press Inc., 2012), 16.

<sup>569</sup> Galbraith, 16.

<sup>570</sup> Galbraith, 16–17.

<sup>571</sup> americanhikikomori15, “What Hikikomori Is And What It Isn't,” *American Hikikomori Blog*, March 4, 2019, <https://americanhikikomoridotblog.wordpress.com/2019/03/04/what-hikikomori-is-and-what-it-isnt/>.

being *hikikomori* and being an *otaku*,<sup>572</sup> in the collective imagination, the two instances have become somewhat connected. Both tend to manifest spatially in the person's private spaces. In the case of *hikikomori*, their condition can result in compulsive hoarding, in which objects command the complete subservience of humans to their disordered accumulation. [Figure 8] Although such images of *hikikomori* hoarding are widely circulated on the Internet, many *hikikomori*'s rooms simply stark or quite normal.

While these “total works of merchandise” in *otaku* culture may strike us as little more than a well-honed profiting strategy from the culture industry, there is an affirmative side to the *kyara* as “binder” of things (“5,169 things that share 1 soul,” as one comment on Gunji's Hello Kitty house stated). William Kelly, for instance, argues that merchandise allows fans to have a “visual and tactile intimacy” with characters, who are otherwise abstract entity lacking a physical body. As Kelly puts it, “fans want the visual and tactile intimacies of ownership... paradoxically seeking this intimacy in highly commodified settings.”<sup>573</sup> The Internet meme Dinner with *Waifu* is an example of such “visual and tactile intimacy” with characters that merchandise can provide us, problematizing what may be a radical human-thing “sociality.” [Figure 9] According to *Know Your Meme*,

Dinner with *Waifu* (Japanese: 嫁との晚餐, Yome To No Banson), also known as “Otaku Dates”, refers to an annual event observed by Otakus on Western romantic holidays, namely Christmas Eve and Valentine's Day, during which users on the Japanese textboard 2channel share photographs of themselves enjoying dinner with their favorite anime character known as a “*waifu*.” The photographs typically show food placed in front of a monitor or body pillow with the character's likeness on it.<sup>574</sup>

For all its self-deprecating humor on the *otaku*'s “*dame*-orientation—an orientation toward things that are no good,”<sup>575</sup> the Dinner with *Waifu* does not involve an incapacity to distinguish fiction from reality, as moral panics surrounding the *otaku* often imply. Instead, what is at play is the self-aware logic of “*je sais bien, mais quand-même*,” formulated by Octave Mannoni in his influential essay *Clefs pour l'imaginaire ou l'autre scène* (1969). This self-

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<sup>572</sup> Laurence Butet-Roch and Maika Elan, “Pictures Reveal the Isolated Lives of Japan's Social Recluses,” *National Geographic*, February 14, 2018, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/proof/2018/february/japan-hikikomori-isolation-society/>.

<sup>573</sup> William W. Kelly, ed., *Fanning the Flames: Fans and Consumer Culture in Contemporary Japan* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 9.

<sup>574</sup> “Dinner with Waifu / Otaku Dates,” *Know Your Meme*, January 28, 2012, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/dinner-with-waifu-otaku-dates>.

<sup>575</sup> Murakami, *Little Boy*.

awareness has originated several comical Dinner with *Waifu* image macros. For instance, the photographic image of a *dakimakura* sitting at a table with a slice of pizza and a romantic candle on the side, with superimposed phrases stating, “Sorry I can’t eat the pizza, I’m stuffed” or “Still a better love story than Twilight.”

Some *otaku* even marry their *waifu* in real-life wedding ceremonies, occasionally grabbing the headlines of sensationalist media. One such case is that of Korean *otaku* Lee Jin-gyu, who “married” a *dakimakura* of Fate Testarossa from the popular anime series *Mahou Shōjo Lyrical Nanoha*.<sup>576</sup> [Figure 11] While the ceremony was a staged event with no legal value, reports that Jin-gyu has been dating Fate for six years captured the media’s attention. “They go out to the park or the funfair, where it will go on all the rides with him,” one friend reports. “Then when he goes out to eat, he takes it with him and it gets its own seat and its own meal.”<sup>577</sup> Such “unions” are deemed abject because they overflow the boundaries of human-human intersubjectivity, slipping into the broader, nonhuman realm of the interobjective (human-thing, thing-thing). As such, their existence poses a phantasmic threat to the biological perpetuation of the human species and its social orders. The marriage of real people to holograms, love pillows, or cardboard cutouts stages a totalizing “dream scene” where media-commodities overthrow the foundations of human—or even, *animated* – exceptionalism.

“Works of total merchandise” represent a commoditization of concepts such as “total art style,” “total design,” and “total building,” upheld by proto-modernist and modernist schools like Arts and Crafts, Art Nouveau, and Bauhaus. These included everything from structures to accessories, to furnishings, and even landscape and lifestyle design.<sup>578</sup> In the case of the *kyara*, it hovers outside the sphere of “proper” works (comics, film, music, etc.) in the form “related goods,” i.e., merchandise ranging from small *bric-à-brac*, like figurines and other paraphernalia, to large-scale enterprises. In the Hello Kitty house, the merchandise is so encompassing that it would be possible to get through the day without stepping outside a

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<sup>576</sup> John Funk, “Korean Otaku Marries Anime Body Pillow,” *The Escapist*, March 5, 2010, <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/news/view/98910-Korean-Otaku-Marries-Anime-Body-Pillow>; Thomas DeMichele, “People Can Legally Marry Inanimate Objects - Fact or Myth?,” *Fact / Myth*, May 23, 2016, <http://factmyth.com/factoids/people-can-legally-marry-inanimate-objects/>.

<sup>577</sup> “South Korean Lee Jin-Gyu ‘marries’ Pillow Lover Fate Testarossa,” *The Daily Telegraph*, March 16, 2010, para. 4, <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/lifestyle/south-korean-lee-jin-gyu-marries-pillow-lover-fate-testarossa/news-story/d9b3d4741542b1df0c65c9ccc362e759>.

<sup>578</sup> Michael A. Vidalis, “Gesamtkunstwerk,” *GreekArchitects*, June 30, 2010, para. 3, <http://www.greekarchitects.gr/en/architectural-review/gesamtkunstwerk-id3185>.

*kyara*'s thematic universe. In contemporary art, the *work of total merchandise* is a crucial artistic strategy for Neo-Pop and Superflat artists, such as Takashi Murakami, Nara Yoshitomo, Mr., Aoshima Chiho, and Takano Aya. All of these artists are prolific retailers, who communicate not only through “proper” artworks in painting, sculpture, installation, video, or comics—a medium in which Takano has been especially prolific, producing alternative manga like *Space Ship Ee* (2002) *Cosmic Juice* (2009), and *The Jelly Civilization Chronicle* (2017)—but also using branded “related goods” and “art merchandise” as a medium in and of itself. As such, the Superflat movement has turned into a breeding ground of cute and immediately recognizable mascots, applicable to everything from toys to stationery to clothes, and all kinds of accessories sold by Murakami's art production company, Kaikai Kiki, and other parties. [Figure 12]

The collaborations of Superflat artists with popular global brands are well-known and remain controversial, among art critics and other commentators. For instance, in 2004, Takano Aya teamed up with fashion designer Miyake Issei to create a complete collection of clothing and accessories, with Takano's paintings used as prints in rain boots, coats, hats, umbrellas, luggage bags, and more. [Figure 13] In 2010, she collaborated with cosmetics house Shu Uemura to make *Abracadabra Fantasy*, a Christmas makeup collection including palettes, cleansing oils, blush tints, lip tint and gloss, brush sets, and false lashes. As for Murakami Takashi, beside his emblematic collaboration with Louis Vuitton starting in 2003 (including two short video commercials *Superflat Monogram* and *Superflat First Love*), he has also designed collections for Miyake in 2000, Uemura in 2013 (*6♡PRINCESS*, inspired by Murakami's animated film *6HP*), [Figure 14] independent Japanese watchmaker Hajime Asaoka (the customized watch *Death Takes No Bridges*), and Vans in 2015, among others.<sup>579</sup> Murakami's collaborations with Louis Vuitton included the colorful redesign of the brand's monogram mixed with anime eyeballs, the Cherry Blossom Collection in 2005, the Monogramouflage Collection in 2008, and a temporary Louis Vuitton concept store in the Museum of Contemporary Art of Los Angeles dedicated to Murakami's products in 2007. He and Mr. have also collaborated with Supreme to create a line of skate decks. Nara Yoshitomo's merchandise features a vast array of goods ranging from plush and ornamental toys to coasters, stamps, stationery, t-shirts, exclusive edition watches, alarm clocks, and more.

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<sup>579</sup> Vincent Kozsilovics and Carlotta Montaldo, “Takashi Murakami Case Study,” *Observatoire de l'art contemporain*, December 14, 2016, [http://www.observatoire-art-contemporain.com/revue\\_decryptage/analyse\\_a\\_decoder.php?langue=en&id=20120866](http://www.observatoire-art-contemporain.com/revue_decryptage/analyse_a_decoder.php?langue=en&id=20120866).



Murakami is the one artist who most extensively explores the notion that the *kyara* “cannot be reduced to any one of its incarnations but must be thought of both in its material forms and in the ways that it exceeds them.”<sup>580</sup> Murakami’s *kyara* include his trademark laughing flowers, DOB, Kaikai, Kiki, and even a self-portrait where Murakami represents himself as a *chibi* or “super-deformed” character (i.e., cute caricature with a large head and a small body), accompanied by his dog Pom. [Figure 15] These *kyara* change shape to adapt to different media (painting, sculpture, video, toys, clothes, etc.) yet allow the different materialities to communicate and influence each other. For instance, Murakami’s character DOB is known for its shapeshifting abilities. Originally, DOB was a cute hybrid of Mickey Mouse and Sonic the Hedgehog, but over the years he has known many incarnations, from various monstrous many-eyes creatures with sharp teeth to more abstract forms in which DOB seems to collapse into a whirlpool of shapes and colors. [Figure 16] While some forms retain only a bare minimum of DOB’s standard features, such as its “jellyfish eyes” or the name “DOB,” all these manifestations are bound together by the *kyara*’s immaterial “surplus.”

The *kyara*’s elasticity allows for a provocative blurring of the line between the “high art” market and the realm of mass-produced merchandising goods. Murakami’s *Superflat Museum* (2003) demonstrates this aspect of the *kyara* most effectively. [Figure 17] The *Superflat Museum* was inspired by *shokugan* or “food toys” for children sold in Japanese convenience stores, small boxes containing a snack and a carefully crafted toy featuring characters from popular anime or videogames.<sup>581</sup> In *Superflat Museum*, some of Murakami’s most famous—and, therefore, most expensive—works, like *Hiropon*, *Miss Ko2*, the DOB and mushroom sculptures, or Inochi-kun, are turned into cheap collectible miniatures. Murakami’s “art merchandise” engages with the ideal reconciliation of mass-production and the art world at the core of Bauhausian utopias of democratization of art and design. By “infiltrating” all kinds of established commercial goods, be them high-end Louis Vuitton monogram bags or cheap *shokugan* toys, *Superflat* troubles Western expectations about art’s exclusivism, gnawing at (but not eradicating) the boundaries of original and copy, the banal and the auratic.

The viscosity of the *kyara* in Japanese pop culture also prompts us to think of the *gesamtkunstwerk* in terms of a 12th art, one not defined in terms of the *medium*, but in terms of the *producer*: fan labor, that is, derivative works created by fans. One rare use of *kyara* and fan labor in the context of contemporary art is Nara Yoshitomo’s Yokohama Project, or

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<sup>580</sup> Steinberg, *Anime’s Media Mix*, 84.

<sup>581</sup> Sharp, “Superflatworlds,” 249–50.

Hamapuru, held for Nara's landmark exhibition and retrospective *I Don't Mind If You Forget Me*, in 2001. [Figure 18] Like Murakami's *kyara*, Nara also became known for his trademark characters: naughty children, sausage dogs, and other cuties. And like Murakami and other Superflat artists, Nara's *kyara* are also merchandised into purchasable goods such as toys and stationery. Unlike Murakami, though, Nara's fandom in Japan is mostly composed of women who identify with his works.<sup>582</sup> This aspect is particularly interesting given the intricate historical relation between Japanese women and fan labor, namely, during the first five years, the vast majority of the Comic Market (or Comiket, one of the world's largest comics conventions specializing in *dōjinshi*, i.e., amateur manga) participants were women, and even today, over half of the participating artists are female.<sup>583</sup> [Figure 19] In her essay "The Art of Cute Little Things: Nara Yoshitomo's Parapolitics," anthropologist Marilyn Ivy presents an in-depth analysis of the Yokohama Project:

The Hamapuro entailed putting out an open call through the Nara Yoshitomo fan web site for volunteers each to sew a stuffed doll-toy of one of Nara's figures. In a reversal of the commercialized trajectory in which one of Nara's eminently copyable *kyara* becomes licensed out to toy companies and made into purchasable plush toys, Nara incorporated his fans in an enterprise that was outside the commodity circuit: make your own hand-sewn Nara plush toy and then donate it for use in the exhibition. Imagined as a way to produce a fan collectivity, as an "action" that would incorporate the energies of fans in the exhibition itself, the Yokohama Project drew on the immense longings and identifications of Nara fans to share his world. In attempting to move out of the commodity circuit... and to reframe the star-fan relationship as one of gift exchange, Nara works to produce the sensation of a shared emotional and aesthetic community.<sup>584</sup>

The hundreds of dolls created by fans based on Nara's *kyara* were put into large acrylic letters, spelling the exhibition's title, *I Don't Mind If You Forget Me*. [Figure 20a, b] Ivy reports the strong emotional responses by fans, who used expressions such as "I was so happy I could hardly stand it," "I thought it was really wonderful that I could participate," and "I started to cry a little" to describe their experiences.<sup>585</sup> There were also letters addressed to Nara, which used expressions such as "brothers" and "sisters" to refer to other fans and "children" to the stuffed dolls.<sup>586</sup> Such passionate fan engagement suggests that Nara's Yokohama Project was not about the forcefully activated spectatorship of much participatory art, but the centrality

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<sup>582</sup> Ivy, "The Art of Cute Little Things," 5.

<sup>583</sup> Comic Market Committee, "What Is the Comic Market?"

<sup>584</sup> Ivy, "The Art of Cute Little Things," 17.

<sup>585</sup> Ivy, 20.

<sup>586</sup> Ivy, 20.

of affective identification and reciprocity in fandoms as a way of attaining intimacy in our “advanced capitalist everydayness.”<sup>587</sup>

The participatory energy prompted by Nara’s Hamapuro brings us to Kelly’s proposition that “fans are the most aggressive appropriators and the most brazen producers among consumers.”<sup>588</sup> Indeed, fans’ capacity for communal production creates an alternative “dream scene,” as absorptive as that of “pure” and overwhelming consumption, which has become a vital part of “totality” in contemporary mediatic milieus. Through fan labor, the *kyara*’s embrace, with all the implications of intimacy that the word “embrace” conveys, holds an emancipatory potential that does not necessarily surrender to the capitalist order of the *total merchandise*—that, as we have seen, often carries an uncanny sense of thing-totalitarianism. Instead, if as Jacques Rancière’s puts it, “Emancipation is the possibility of a spectator’s gaze other than the one that was programmed,”<sup>589</sup> then the *kyara*’s drive towards “totality” and “transmediality” can be reframed in terms of a boundary-distorting or synergetic drive for short-circuiting the roles of specialist and amateur, using and doing, reception and production.

(See also “END, THE,” “Metamorphosis” and “Nothing that’s really there.”)

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<sup>587</sup> Ivy, 5.

<sup>588</sup> Rachel “Matt” Thorn, “Girls and Women Getting Out of Hand: The Pleasure and Politics of Japan’s Amateur Comics Community,” in *Fanning the Flames: Fans and Consumer Culture in Contemporary Japan*, ed. William W. Kelly (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 7.

<sup>589</sup> Joseph J. Tanke, *Jacques Ranciere: An Introduction* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 90.

# Grimes, Nokia, YoLandi

Grimes and her girl gang ride in an Escalade through the desert, wielding swords and morning stars, looking impossibly cool. They dance, showing off their sick moves like “Beyoncé meets Dune or something.”<sup>590</sup> Brooke Candy walks the streets in a skimpy *Final Fantasy*-style silver armor with high platform shoes, white contact lenses and black lipstick. Her shocking-pink hair falls in knee-length extensions around her body, like a braided curtain, as she sucks on a lollipop with bravado. On the back of a limousine, Grimes parties with friends in an oversized Japanese sailor school uniform (*seifuku*) jacket, holding an albino python on her shoulders in homage to Britney Spears’s iconic VMA performance.<sup>591</sup> Her hair is tied in long, dreamy, blonde twin tails. Later, she poses in the woods with a group of ennuied hipsters. [Figure 1] Plays with fireworks. Holds a flaming sword like a divine messenger. [Figure 2] This is “Genesis”—the lead single from *Visions* (2012), the third studio album by Canadian musician and visual artist Grimes (Claire Boucher, b. 1988). [Video 1]

A hypnagogic anthem with feathery vocals and nostalgic electropop riffs, “Genesis” went viral on *Tumblr* with its self-directed video, shot in Los Angeles under the influence of trippy Boschian imagery<sup>592</sup> and girly pastel grunge aesthetics. Cuteness spiked with the fighting power of *Lolitas* in armor, armed with snakes and maces and platforms raising them to the sky. The posthuman vibe of Japanese animation and video games permeates “Genesis,” as well as more recent videos like “Flesh Without Blood,” “Kill V. Maim,” or “Venus Fly” from Grimes’s 2015 album *Art Angels*. Like her previous albums, Grimes made the cover and art for *Art Angels*, only this time, the influence of Japanese pop culture intensified. [Figure 3] The cover features a digital drawing of a blue alien head floating in space, with pointy ears, a queue hairstyle, and three big, bloodshot anime eyes. On the right, there is a side panel with a pink-haired anime elf. Inside, various illustrations accompany the record, filled with references to *kawaii* culture, high fantasy, Internet memes, and graffiti. Like a witch, Grimes stirs her magic potions in the massive cauldron of the cultural memory, where “high art” meets “low” mass culture, and the past and the future become intertwined, flattened, and indistinguishable.

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<sup>590</sup> Claire Boucher, Grimes: “Genesis,” interview by Carrie Battan, *Pitchfork*, August 27, 2012, “Why did you decide to add...,” <https://pitchfork.com/features/directors-cut/8929-grimes/>.

<sup>591</sup> Boucher, “It looks just like the snake...”

<sup>592</sup> Boucher, “There’s a lot going on here.”

Cuteness is recurring if largely overlooked visual trope in hauntological aesthetics, even if the Derridean concept of hauntology itself, coined in *The Specters of Marx* (1993), has been called “a cute and amusing play on ontology.”<sup>593</sup> Hauntological music in the 2000s pioneered, and to some extent engendered, many Internet-bred microgenres that shaped the sonic landscape of the 2010s: witch house, vaporwave, certain types of alternative hip-hop. While the “genealogical throwbacks”<sup>594</sup> that characterize hauntological music are nothing new, Simon Reynolds argues that the amount of time separating the present from the quoted is shrinking. “Earlier eras had their own obsessions with antiquity, of course, from the Renaissance’s veneration of Roman and Greek classicism to the Gothic movement’s invocations of the medieval,” Reynolds explains. “But there has never been a society in human history so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of its *own immediate past*. That is what distinguishes retro from antiquarianism of history: the fascination for fashions, fads, sounds, and stars that occurred within living memory.”<sup>595</sup> Such temporal proximity has paved the way for Japanese pop culture to be hauntologized by those in the West who have it in their living memory. Namely, the millennials (roughly, born between 1981 and 1996) who entered adulthood in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Series like *Dragon Ball*, *Sailor Moon*, *Evangelion*, *Pokémon*, and many others that became imprinted in the aesthetic orientation of millennials across the globe, now proliferate online on websites like *Instagram* and *Tumblr*.

As Sharon Kinsella argues, “Western youth have become extremely receptive to ideas and images which first flourished in Japan.” And adds: “In the 1990s, weakness, dependence, passivity, and childlikeness, have been key themes in Western youth culture and fashion. They are new themes in Western youth culture which have a strong connection and similarity to the themes of Japanese youth culture from the mid-1970s.”<sup>596</sup> In the 1990s, feminist bands associated with the Riot Grrrl<sup>597</sup> movement and kinderwhore aesthetics embraced and twisted

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<sup>593</sup> Robert Albritton, *Dialectics and Deconstruction in Political Economy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 156.

<sup>594</sup> Krauss and Bois, *Formless*, 118.

<sup>595</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), xiii–xiv.

<sup>596</sup> Sharon Kinsella, “Japanization of European Youth,” *Nightwave97*, 1997, para. 4, <https://web.archive.org/web/20050228152302/http://www.kinsellaresearch.com/Japanization.html>.

<sup>597</sup> Riot Grrrl is a genre of punk and indie-rock music and subculture associated with third-wave feminism that emerged in the United States in the early 1990s. According to *AllMusic*, “Many (but not all) riot grrrl lyrics addressed gender-related issues -- rape, domestic abuse, sexuality (including lesbianism), male dominance of the social hierarchy, female empowerment -- from a radical, militant point of view... To most riot grrrl bands, the simple act of picking up a guitar and bashing out a screeching racket was not only fun, but an act of liberation” “Riot Grrrl Music Genre Overview,”

the cute and the pretty<sup>598</sup> to confront “ideologies that phobically associate mass culture—and its ‘tainting’ or corruption of high modernist values—with female and queer bodies.”<sup>599</sup> Their stance echoed a broader disenchantment towards Western modernity and individualism, brought about by the disastrous impact of late-capitalism or neoliberalism on the global social-ecological fabric. In this context, the “Japan” of anime, manga, and the *kawaii*, with its “transnational transgressions,”<sup>600</sup> has become associated in the twenty-first century with this “tainting” of Western modernism.

Vaporwave, for instance, exploits the association of East Asian imagery (particularly, Japanese) with “futurepast” consumer culture and techno-orientalism, in an ambiguous critique or appreciation of cybercapitalist displacement. As Ben Smith explains, “In the case of vaporwave, a genre preoccupied with escapism, memory, and nostalgia, modern Japan perfectly embodies that tension between strangeness and familiarity, old and new, reality and artificiality that vaporwave artists strive to create.”<sup>601</sup> The quintessential vaporwave album, *Floral Shoppe* (2011), by American electronic musician Vektroid (Ramona Xavier, under the alias Macintosh Plus), is technically named フローラルの専門店 (*Furōraru no Senmon-ten*) and its songs are all titled in Japanese. [Figure 4] There is also an entire faction of hypnagogic pop in online audio distribution platforms, like *SoundCloud* and *Bandcamp*, whose songs and visuals are directly inspired by anime and manga. The Hong Kong-based record label Neoncity Records is an excellent example of this trend, hosting musical artists as Sailorwave, cmky!, マクロス MACROSS 82-99, Night Tempo, 忍, ImCoPav, datfootdive, or Desired. [Figure 5] More than Japan as a country in and of itself, then, it is the concept of Japaneseness, in all its *mukokuseki* (“stateless”) or “culturally odorless” splendor,<sup>602</sup> that seems to fascinate vaporwave artists. Japaneseness, as such, becomes a crucial building block in vaporwave’s

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AllMusic, accessed August 28, 2018, <https://www.allmusic.com/style/riot-grrrl-ma0000011837..> Bikini Kill is most well-known Riot Grrrl band.

<sup>598</sup> Kinsella, “Japanization of European Youth,” “Cute in European and American Youth Culture,” para. 1.

<sup>599</sup> Christopher Schmidt, *The Poetics of Waste: Queer Excess in Stein, Ashbery, Schuyler, and Goldsmith* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 4–5.

<sup>600</sup> Christine R. Yano, “Flipping Kitty: Transnational Transgressions of Japanese Cute,” in *Medi@sia: Global Media/Tion in and Out of Context*, ed. T. J. M. Holden and Timothy J. Scrase (London u.a.: Routledge, 2006), 207.

<sup>601</sup> Ben Smith, “The Tomorrow That Never Was: Japanese Iconography in Vaporwave,” *Neon Music*, October 15, 2017, para. 4, <https://neonmusic.co.uk/japanese-iconography>.

<sup>602</sup> “Mukokuseki,” *TV Tropes*, accessed November 15, 2017, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/Mukokuseki>; Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2002), 28.

aesthetics of virtual utopia and consumer leisure, brought about by the deliberately heavy-handed use of postmodern remixes and parodies from history and mass-mediatic culture. As noted by several commentators, Japanese animanga characters and letters are often deployed alongside other icons of corporate anonymity and escapist nostalgia, such as malls, video games, obsolete technology, or 90s television.<sup>603</sup>

For these millennial artists, the process of Japanization seems to have become a form of strategic negation or transgression of the dominating hierarchies of taste and originality enforced by the Western high modernist canon. Take the case of Nuyorican rapper Princess Nokia, the alter ego of Destiny Frasqueri (b. 1992). Princess Nokia often explores postcolonial and feminist themes in her songs, reflecting on her experience growing up in the Bronx, Spanish Harlem, and Lower East Side of New York.<sup>604</sup> A simple Google search returns various promotional photographs where Frasqueri appears as comfortable in the shoes of a Harlem tomboy as in front of a window filled Hello Kitty merchandise. In one picture, Frasqueri holds a stuffed Totoro toy, while in another she stares longingly at the camera wearing a cat ear headband. **[Figure 6]** Grinning, she smokes a cigar in a Pokémon shirt. The music video “Dragons,” a song inspired by *Game of Thrones* character Daenerys Targaryen, starts with a shot of animated Shenron, the magical dragon from the animanga series *Dragon Ball*. **[Video 2]** The video shows Frasqueri and her boyfriend in an amusement arcade, playing classic Japanese video games like *Street Fighter* (the camera lingers on Chun-Li in a pink uniform), mixed with sequences from anime and cartoons ranging from *Dragon Ball* and *Pokémon* to *X-men* and *Winx*. In the video, Frasqueri’s bedroom is filled with posters and drawings of retro twentieth-century pop cultural icons—Star Wars, Bruce Lee, American comics, video games like *Grand Theft Auto*. **[Figure 7]** At one point, Frasqueri and her boyfriend watch a VHS tape on an old television, curled up next to each other, in the intimate confines of nostalgia where today’s technology seemingly has no place.

The cover of Princess Nokia’s debut album, *Metallic Butterfly* (2014), also features an illustration of Japanese virtual idol Hatsune Miku. **[Figure 8]** Set against an endless urban nightscape, Miku perfectly incarnates the aesthetics of “high-tech fairy music”<sup>605</sup> that,

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<sup>603</sup> Simon Chandler, “Escaping Reality: The Iconography of Vaporwave,” *Bandcamp Daily*, September 16, 2016, <https://daily.bandcamp.com/2016/09/16/vaporwave-iconography-column/>.

<sup>604</sup> Chelsea Campbell, “Princess Nokia Is Really out Here as the Multidimensional Queen of NYC,” *KultureHub*, September 8, 2017, para. 4, <https://kulturehub.com/princess-nokia-queen-nyc/>.

<sup>605</sup> “Princess Nokia: ‘Cybiko,’” *(The) Absolute*, 2014, para. 1, <http://theabsolutemag.com/14243/music/princess-nokia-cybiko/>.

according to Frasier, underlies the album (“The net is vast and infinite,” she seems to tell us, like Major Kusanagi reborn in *Ghost In The Shell*). “Cybiko” and other singles from *Metallic Butterfly* are filled with references to Japanized cultural commodities made in the United States or Europe under the influence of Japanese popular culture—films and animations like *The Matrix* or *Æon Flux*, video games such as *Mortal Combat*, or bubbly cyber-orientalist Y2K aesthetics from the late 1990s and early 2000s. Somehow, in the global cultural economy, Japanese cuteness and animanga still seem to retain a phenomeno-poetics of (cultural) cross-border “pollution.” In her studies on “pink globalization,” Christine Yano points out that even Hello “Kitty’s global spread has engendered a legion of vociferous detractors”<sup>606</sup> concerned with the perpetuation of harmful race and gender stereotypes (e.g., submissive Asian girl).

American rappers like Hentai Dude or Josip On Deck (Josip Opara-nadi, b. 1993) overtly engage with the poetics of Japanese pop culture, particularly anime and manga, as bad and dirty matter. Josip, who rose to Internet fame with songs like “Anime Pu\$\$y” and “Mai Waifu,” is a self-proclaimed “*otaku* god” who raps about anime and gaming while cuddling with his favorite *dakimakura*. [Figure 9, Video 3] Despite being a black man, Josip is an avid frequenter of *4chan* since he was a young boy,<sup>607</sup> a community known to be a hub of virulent racism. Josip’s songs celebrate and parody *otaku* and *weeaboo* culture, drawing from *4chan*’s political incorrectness to wallow with candor in their most ridicule—and problematic—features. Josip sings outrageous lyrics like,

Damn I love mai waifu, she ain’t nothing like you  
 She don’t bitch and nag me all the time up on her cycle  
 Damn I love mai waifu, her figure is so curvy  
 When you stand by mai waifu I can tell that your not worthy.<sup>608</sup>

Such lyrics that pose the “dehumanized and superhumanized, abstract and inanimate”<sup>609</sup> 2D animanga *waifu* (i.e., the merchandisable *kyara*) in opposition to embodied 3D females, with their biological and organic functions, overlap the misogyny in rap music with *otaku* misogyny. Along with filling his songs with Internet slang and gratuitous Japanese expressions (*kawaii*, *sugoi*...), Josip’s transculturality “pollutes” the integrity of hip-hop music

<sup>606</sup> Yano, “Flipping Kitty: Transnational Transgressions of Japanese Cute,” 217.

<sup>607</sup> Fernando Alfonso, “Introducing Josip on Deck, the Anime-Obsessed Rapper Who Rules 4chan,” *The Daily Dot*, September 9, 2013, para. 3-6, <https://www.dailydot.com/upstream/josip-on-deck-4chan-otaku-anime-rapper/>.

<sup>608</sup> Josip On Deck, *Josip On Deck - Mai Waifu (Music Video)*, YouTube video, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djI6nc9EVMM>.

<sup>609</sup> Pellitteri, [*The Dragon and the Dazzle*, 80.



as a genuine expression of black culture. Or, as he puts it in another song, “When I look in a mirror/ I see a Japanese nigga.”<sup>610</sup> [Track 1]

This “pollutive” Japanization also manifests in the work of the South African group Die Antwoord, formed by Watkin Jones (b. 1974) and Anri du Toit (b. 1984) under their stage names Ninja and Yolandi Visser. Die Antwoord identify as Zef, a South African counterculture akin to “white trash” that “roughly translates as ‘common,’ with connotations of ‘uncool,’ ‘disgusting,’ ‘gross’ and/or ‘trashy’ in Afrikaans.”<sup>611</sup> [Figure 10] In many points, Die Antwoord’s Zef resembles Murakami Takashi’s concept of Superflat; they both self-exoticize their “foreignness,” exposing how cultural uniqueness has become a marketable commodity in a globalized market—what sociologist Kōichi Iwabuchi calls the rise of “inter-nationalism”<sup>612</sup> through glocalization and nation branding. For instance, Die Antwoord’s music video *Fatty Boom Boom*, filled with racial and sexual horror, begins with a bus sightseeing tour in which a guide welcomes a white celebrity (caricaturing Lady Gaga) to South Africa’s “concrete jungle,” commenting how foreigners love that they call the traffic lights “robots” there. Yolandi, in particular, has become nothing short of a twenty-first-century cultural icon, even appearing as a salvaged ancient Roman sculpture in Damien Hirst’s exhibition *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable* (2017).<sup>613</sup> [Figure 11]

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<sup>610</sup> Josip On Deck, *Josip On Deck - I’m Japanese (Music Video)*, YouTube video, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jgE4nV5tirQ>.

<sup>611</sup> “Zef,” in *Wikipedia*, April 10, 2017, “Origin of the term,” para. 1, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Zef&oldid=774677891>.

<sup>612</sup> GARAGEMCA, *Transculturation, Cultural Inter-Nationalism and beyond. A Lecture by Koichi Iwabuchi at Garage*.

<sup>613</sup> *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable* is a solo exhibition by British artist Damien Hirst, presented from April 4 to December 3, 2017, at the Palazzo Grassi and Punta della Dogana, in Venice. According to the press release, “Damien Hirst’s most ambitious and complex project to date, ‘Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable’ has been almost ten years in the making. Exceptional in scale and scope, the exhibition tells the story of the ancient wreck of a vast ship, the ‘Unbelievable’ (Apistos in the original Koine Greek), and presents what was discovered of its precious cargo: the impressive collection of Aulus Calidius Amotan—a freed slave better known as Cif Amotan II—which was destined for a temple dedicated to the sun” “Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable,” *Palazzo Grassi*, accessed August 28, 2018, <https://www.palazzograssi.it/en/exhibitions/past/damien-hirst-at-palazzo-grassi-and-punta-della-dogana-in-2017-1/>. The exhibition received mixed reviews, hailed as Hirst’s comeback by some Jonathan Jones, “Damien Hirst: Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable Review – a Titanic Return,” *The Guardian*, sec. Art and design, accessed May 21, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/apr/06/damien-hirst-treasures-from-the-wreck-of-the-unbelievable-review-titanic-return>. and a flop by others Tiernan Morgan, “Damien Hirst’s Shipwreck Fantasy Sinks in Venice,” *Hyperallergic*, August 10, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/391158/damien-hirst-treasures-from-the-wreck-of-the-unbelievable-venice-punta-della-dogana-palazzo-grassi/>.

Yolandi is known for her infantile look, short and slender, with a mullet and bleached eyebrows, combining cuteness with uncanny and trashy aesthetics. Her singing is a mixture of “*Lolita* songbird vocals and tugged-out raps delivered in a blend of English and Afrikaans.”<sup>614</sup> In the music video for Die Antwoord’s single “Enter The Ninja” (2010), Yolandi appears in a schoolgirl uniform singing “I am your butterfly/ I need your protection/ Be my samurai”<sup>615</sup> in a sweet, high-pitched voice over a sample of “Butterfly”—an orientalist Eurodance song by Smile.dk that became popular on *Dance Dance Revolution*.<sup>616</sup> [Video 4, Figure 12] In *Baby’s On Fire* (2012), Yolandi’s bedroom is decorated with cute stickers, plushies, and nostalgic memorabilia, much like Princess Nokia’s room in *Dragons*. [Video 5] She smokes and makes out with her boyfriend, wearing a skimpy crop top with the word “ZEF” inside a heart and Pikachu sleepers. Later in the video, her boyfriend offers her a Nenuco doll styled like a miniature Yolandi, highlighting her resemblance to a cute doll. In “I Fink U Freeky” (2012), Yolandi embraces the aesthetics of *guro-kawaii* (“creepy cute”) and *kimo-kawaii* (“gross cute”), wearing black scleral contact lenses like an alien and sprawling on the floor surrounded by rats. [Figure 13] “Her image flipped the *Lolita* archetype on its head, with body language that screamed, ‘Look, but don’t fucking touch,’” writes Caroline Ryder. “She may have been dressed like a schoolgirl, but unlike Britney and her entreaties to ‘hit me baby one more time,’ Visser’s attire was more a method of visual torture, double-daring the viewer to underestimate her strength.”<sup>617</sup> In the music video for “ALIEN” (2018), Die Antwoord took the *kimo-kawaii* one step further. Effacing Yolandi almost entirely under the mask of an insectoid alien who dances and eats a space bug, she sings a sad lullaby about being a misfit at school: “I am a alien/ No matter how hard I try I don’t fit in/ Always all on my own, sad and lonely/ All I want is for someone to play with me.”<sup>618</sup> [Video 6]

For all these artists—Grimes, Princess Nokia, Vektroid, Die Antwoord, Josip On Deck—the visuals that accompany their music are not ornamental but inseparable from their

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<sup>614</sup> Caroline Ryder, “Yo-Landi Visser: Dark Star,” *Dazed*, February 26, 2015, para. 2, <http://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/23706/1/yo-landi-visser-dark-star>.

<sup>615</sup> DieAntwoordVEVO, *Die Antwoord - Enter The Ninja (Explicit Version)*, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cegdR0GiJI4>.

<sup>616</sup> First released in 1998, *Dance Dance Revolution* is a Japanese videogame series by Konami that pioneered the genre of rhythm and dance videogames. In *Dance Dance Revolution*, “players stand on a ‘dance platform’ or stage and hit colored arrows laid out in a cross with their feet to musical and visual cues” “Dance Dance Revolution,” in *Wikipedia*, July 11, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Dance\\_Dance\\_Revolution&oldid=849794508..](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Dance_Dance_Revolution&oldid=849794508..)

<sup>617</sup> Ryder, “Dark Star,” para. 14.

<sup>618</sup> Die Antwoord, *DIE ANTWOORD Ft. The Black Goat ‘ALIEN’ (Official Video)*, accessed August 28, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yF2y5y7BxgM>.

music and general aesthetics. Another common trait is that Japanese popular culture, through the influence of animanga, videogames, and cute culture, works as a marker of their filiation into a millennial J-subculture, filtered by the various lens of gender, class, race, and others. As Yoda puts it, the consumers of Japanese popular culture have become a cultural group in and of itself: “Rather than assuming that Japanese popular culture today ultimately refers to some form of a larger national frame, we may understand the prefix J- as inscribing the subculturation of the national,” she explains. “Rather than inscribing a sociocultural boundary between the inside and the outside (that takes the national interiority as the ultimate horizon), the local in the global postmodern operates on a more fluid, affective distinction of familiar and exotic or a visceral sense of proximity and distance that need not presuppose a fixed historical or social point of reference.”<sup>619</sup>

This J-subculturation in contemporary art and music functions as a form of “transnational transgression” to the extent that, like the alien in Die Antwoord’s music video, it indexes a sense of exclusion from the sphere (however mythical) of purity, both ethno-racial and artistic (“high art” and “good taste”). Often, this aesthetic of “impurity” or “pollution” extends to the artists themselves, whose queerness runs counter the tenets of normative and essentialist views on gender, sex, and race. For instance, Princess Nokia is militant about her bisexuality and mixed-raceness. Vektroid is a trans-woman. Grimes and Yolandi both cultivate an image of posthuman androgyny. As mentioned above, Josip on Deck engages with the highly controversial concept of transracial identity<sup>620</sup> through provocative humor, calling himself a “Japanese nigga” and going as far as to sing that “I only fuck with girls of my own race (and that’s far Eastern).”<sup>621</sup> Die Antwoord’s “queering” is even more outrageous—as

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<sup>619</sup> Yoda, “A Roadmap to Millennial Japan,” 46.

<sup>620</sup> The expression “transracial identity” emerged in the context of interracial adoption, i.e. “the act of placing a child of one racial or ethnic group with adoptive parents of another racial or ethnic group” “Interracial Adoption,” in *Wikipedia*, August 15, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Interracial\\_adoption&oldid=855066441](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Interracial_adoption&oldid=855066441). More recently, it has been used to describe cases in which one’s racial or ethnic expression differs from one’s assigned race or ethnicity, akin to the logic of transgender identity. The most well-known case is that of Rachel Dolezal, a former civil rights activist who claimed to be a black woman despite her white ethnic descent, applying skin bronzers and wearing dreadlocks and weaves to create an African American look “Rachel Dolezal,” in *Wikipedia*, August 15, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Rachel\\_Dolezal&oldid=855036136](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Rachel_Dolezal&oldid=855036136). In 2017, the feminist journal *Hypatia* was involved in controversy for publishing the scholarly article, “In Defense of Transracialism,” by Rebecca Tuvel. Critics claimed the article was racist and transphobic, leading to the online shaming of Tuvel and several *Hypatia* editors to resign from the journal “Hypatia Transracialism Controversy,” in *Wikipedia*, July 29, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Hypatia\\_transracialism\\_controversy&oldid=852461993](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Hypatia_transracialism_controversy&oldid=852461993).

<sup>621</sup> Josip On Deck, *Josip On Deck - I’m Japanese (Music Video)*.

various authors have pointed out, Jone's alter ego Ninja is a carnivalesque compound of "colored" and working-class signifiers, while Jones himself is a privately-educated English-speaking white man<sup>622</sup>—and they often deploy controversial forms like blackface and primitivist imaginaries, along with gendered, sexual, class grotesquerie, for shock and excess values.

According to Iwabuchi, the perceived "ability to be transportable and translatable [which] is considered to be a marker of Japaneseness"<sup>623</sup> has been fueled by both Western Orientalism and Japanese "soft nationalism."<sup>624</sup> Often, in these discourses, the "West" and "Japan" are reinforced as entities whose essence remains stable despite their hybridization, prompting Iwabuchi to question "whether this kind of analysis of Japanese domestication of the West actually lends itself to keeping Japanese 'Japanese.'"<sup>625</sup> While in the mass mediatic imagination, the worldwide success of anime and manga is so frequently referred to in terms of a Japanese "invasion" or "revenge"<sup>626</sup> against the West's cultural hegemony, in the works of these artists, "Japan" is a specter haunting the fictions of "purity" in Western modernity's aesthetic (and racial) identity. This hazy, unfixed image that changes according to the artists' agenda highlights how "transnational cultural flows [are] much more de-centered, non-isomorphic and complex than can be understood in terms of a center-periphery paradigm."<sup>627</sup> Much like high fantasy and old computer and Internet aesthetics, Japanese pop culture has become a figment of millennial phantasmagoria, in which the "distortions" arising from the

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<sup>622</sup> Adam Haupt, "Part IV: Is Die Antwoord Blackface?," *Safundi* 13, no. 3–4 (July 1, 2012): 417–23; Anton Krueger, "Part II: Zef/Poor White Kitsch Chique: Die Antwoord's Comedy of Degradation," *Safundi* 13, no. 3–4 (July 1, 2012): 399–408; Bryan Schmidt, "Fatty Boom Boom and the Transnationality of Blackface in Die Antwoord's Racial Project," *TDR/The Drama Review* 58, no. 2 (May 12, 2014): 132–48.

<sup>623</sup> Sharp, "Superflatworlds," 98.

<sup>624</sup> Koichi Iwabuchi, "'Soft' Nationalism and Narcissism: Japanese Popular Culture Goes Global," *Asian Studies Review* 26, no. 4 (December 1, 2002): 450–51.

<sup>625</sup> Iwabuchi, *Recentring Globalization*, 61.

<sup>626</sup> Craig Brownlie, "Manga Invasion," *City Newspaper*, December 28, 2005, <https://www.rochestercitynewspaper.com/rochester/manga-invasion/Content?oid=2131086>; Roland Kelts, *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture Has Invaded the U.S.* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2007); Brenda Velasquez, "The 'Japanese Invasion': Anime's Explosive Popularity in the U.S.," *Asian Avenue Magazine*, September 15, 2013, <http://asianavemag.com/2013/anime/>; Juan Scassa, "Japan Strikes Back: From the American Invasion to Gaijin Magaka," *GAIJIN GEKIGA 外人劇画*, July 24, 2017, <http://blog.berliac.com/post/163611227118/japan-strikes-back-from-the-american-invasion-to>; Jennie Wood, "Manga and Anime: The Japanese Invasion," InfoPlease, accessed August 28, 2018, <https://www.infoplease.com/us/arts-entertainment/manga-and-anime-japanese-invasion>; "The Japanese Invasion / Useful Notes," *TV Tropes*, accessed August 28, 2018, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/UsefulNotes/TheJapaneseInvasion>.

<sup>627</sup> Iwabuchi, "'Soft' Nationalism and Narcissism," 465.

global circulation of cultural commodities are to be enjoyed, transfigured, and played with in queered—sometimes, problematic, and not necessarily emancipatory—ways.

(See also “Hiro Universe” and “Gaijin Mangaka”)

# Hamster

Years ago, I came across a *LiveJournal* post by Momus—the Scottish musician, essayist, and known Japanophile who often wrote about Japanese art and pop culture in his famous, now-defunct blog, *Click Opera*. The post, titled “Holidays from being human,” was about *The Reason Why I Became a Hamster*, a performance by Japanese artist Kojima Sako. [Video 1] First executed in Osaka in 2002 for one week, *The Reason Why I Became a Hamster* was re-enacted several times since then: at the Maison Folie Wazemmes in Lille (four days), on occasion of the 2004 European Capital of Culture, and at Collection Lambert Avignon (one week); at Kunstraum Bethanien in Berlin, in 2012 (one month) and the at Japanisches Kulturinstitut in Cologne (two days), in 2013; in Vilnius, Lithuania (two days); and at the Behaviour Festival Glasgow, in 2015 (five days), which also spawned the short film “A Hamster,” with footage from the performance. In the performance, Kojima, then in her twenties, dressed up in a hamster suit and lived for a week inside the window of a gallery. [Figure 1] She ate giant sunflower seeds, chewed on wood and paper, scratched the walls, sent darting looks at the visitors and generally behaved as “hamsteresque” as a girl in furry rodent cosplay possibly can (in Glasgow, the performance included a human-scale spinning wheel). [Figure 2a, b] The video recording of *The Reason Why I Became a Hamster* immediately became the cutest thing I had seen all year.

But as in most things *kawaii*, there was an underlying dark side to the cuteness of Kojima’s performance. According to Momus, by embodying the hamster, Kojima “took a holiday from being human,”<sup>628</sup> allowing herself to escape the tight social expectations weighing on young Japanese women, as well as “the bombardment of words and information”<sup>629</sup> assaulting the lifestyles of our contemporary, post-industrial societies. Momus’s solemn explanation, contrasting with Kojima’s adorable actions and appearance, raised more than a few eyebrows among the readers of *Click Opera*. Indeed, a cursory look through the comment section of the post is enough to retrieve somewhat antagonistic views on Kojima’s “solution” to her human troubles. One commentator, for instance, is unimpressed

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<sup>628</sup> Nicholas Currie, “Holidays from Being Human,” *LiveJournal*, *Click Opera*, December 2, 2006, para. 2, <http://imomus.livejournal.com/244804.html>.

<sup>629</sup> Currie, para. 2.

with the artist's choice of animal, suggesting that living as a fox in the wild would make for a more convincing escape:

Hmm, except what I see is still very much a Japanese female artist in her 20s, but one whose schtick in this piece is being a cosplay hamster in an art gallery. Enjoyable enough to watch, and maybe perform, but it doesn't seem such a convincing escape. Spending a week in a gallery under close observation seems a bit of a busman's holiday from humanity. How about "For three years I lived in the forest and pretended to be a fox. Nobody ever saw what I did." Shouldn't escaping being human also be an escape from art? Beuys and the coyote, Timothy Treadwell in Herzog's *Grizzly Man*...<sup>630</sup>

Others express their dislike along the same lines, pointing to the futility of Kojima's performance. "The sad thing is, even though Kojima was trying to escape being 'a Japanese female artist in her 20s', she ended up confirming that very stereotype," someone points out. "The stereotype for Japanese females in their 20s is to be unrelentingly cute." And adds: "Maybe I just can't handle that much cute in one sitting." Hinting at the possible (if unintended, according to Kojima) sexual overtones of the piece, someone else writes that "Hell, if she was naked, she'd at least be appealing to my instinctive needs... that'd be a million times more 'animal' like than wearing fuzzy underwear and chewing on paper for a week." For these commentators, the cuteness and domesticity of Kojima's performance appear to be the main point of contention, working against Kojima's intentions and, ultimately, depriving the piece of artistic seriousness and depth.

Adding fuel to the fire, Kojima, interviewed by *Vice*, expands on the politics of *The Reason Why I Became a Hamster*, explaining that it was, in fact, the product of a prolonged period of depression:

I spent the summer of 2002 indoors and alone. My life was empty, all I did was go to the nearby supermarket to buy a simple meal and then come back home to sleep. One day I realized that my life was similar to a hamster's. To me, becoming a hamster is a symbol of how life in today's standardized society is safe and we're spared from hunger, but we're not living... We don't suffer from physical pain, but we seem to have lost the pleasure of living. Our pain is mental, like self-injury, wrist-cutting syndrome and anorexia nervosa. They are ways for people to feel alive in this overprotected society. That's how my mental suffering started.<sup>631</sup>

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<sup>630</sup> sarmoung, "Holidays from Being Human [Comment]," *Click Opera*, December 2, 2006, <http://imomus.livejournal.com/244804.html>.

<sup>631</sup> Sako Kojima, An interview with a human hamster, interview by Milène Larsson and Luca Deasti, *Vice*, May 5, 2009, para. 2-5, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_dk/article/an-interview-with-a-human-hamster](https://www.vice.com/en_dk/article/an-interview-with-a-human-hamster).

Kojima's depressing account of her personal experience with mental illness is seemingly at odds with the cuteness of her performance. Especially since, instead of a realistic hamster, her costume resembles a *kigurumi* (from *kiru*, "to wear," and *nuigurumi*, "stuffed toy"), i.e., a cartoon-character suit. [Figure 3] The get-up gives off the appearance of a stuffed toy, complete with a hamster-eared hood and enlarging contact lenses for big, blue eyes. Kojima's arms and legs remain naked, which highlights the comical difference between the artist's skinny members and the bulky fursuit, adding an extra element of humor. However, those familiar with the roots of cute culture in postmodern Japan will not be surprised about Kojima's dark rationale for *The Reason Why I Became a Hamster*. As demonstrated by Sharon Kinsella in "Cuties in Japan," the *kawaii* is primarily a youth culture mobilized against adulthood, which Japanese young men and women perceive as a bleak period in life, equated with responsibility, self-discipline, tolerating severe conditions, hard work, and obligations.<sup>632</sup> This same notion is brought forth in a more recent volume on *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness* (2016), suggesting that today's pervasive cute aesthetics is a symptom of widespread "political depression." According to the authors, cuteness allows us to cope with the various "malign velocities of contemporary capitalism,"<sup>633</sup> ranging from neoliberal precarity to the loneliness experienced by individuals in the Digital Age:

it is illuminating to situate the rise of cute aesthetics within the context of political depression, a concept that has recently been theorized by Berlant and others... Political depression refers to an affective context in which citizen subjects have reached a state of exhaustion due to the 'brutal relationship of ownership, control, security and their fantasmatic justifications in liberal political economies.' According to Berlant, political depression marks many recent lifestyle trends that signal a retreat from the brutalities of such a system.<sup>634</sup>

This retreatism often rests upon the "return to a state of nature," Jean-Jacques Rousseau's concept for the natural condition of humankind before the advent of the political state and its inequalities.<sup>635</sup> To some extent, contemporary trends like that of organic farming<sup>636</sup> or off-the-grid living<sup>637</sup> reproduce this Rousseaunian notion of nature as an Arcadia away from

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<sup>632</sup> Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan," 251.

<sup>633</sup> Legge, "When Awe Turns to Awww... Jeff Koon's Balloon Dog and the Cute Sublime," 6.

<sup>634</sup> Dale et al., *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, 9.

<sup>635</sup> Debra Benita Shaw, *Technoculture: The Key Concepts* (Berg Publishers, 2008), 65.

<sup>636</sup> Organic farming grows produce without pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, genetic modification or radiation.

<sup>637</sup> Off-the-grid houses are autonomous houses in remote locations that do not rely on municipal water supply, sewer, natural gas, or electrical power grid. The idea has been popularized on television in shows like *House Hunters Off the Grid* and *Building Off the Grid*.



human civilization. Kojima's statement that "today's standardized society is safe and we're spared from hunger, but we're not living" echoes this idea, conceiving a "state of nature" devoid of coercive relations and oppressive hierarchies.<sup>638</sup>

In contemporary art, the representation of wild animals in their natural habitats has been a vital moving force of environmental art, for instance, in the collaborative practice of British artists Olly and Suzi, who have abandoned their studio to paint and draw endangered predators in the wild.<sup>639</sup> But also, rawness itself is perceived to be a desirable, even indispensable, attribute of art. This is because, as artist and writer Steve Baker puts it, "for many contemporary artists, the way they deal with animals reflects the way they see themselves *as* artists: it is part of their self-image."<sup>640</sup> Thus, the status of the domestic animal, especially the house pet (as opposed to the working animal), in contemporary art is by and large a negative one, perceived as "an aberrant creature, a living betrayal of its properly animal potential or trajectory."<sup>641</sup> In *The Postmodern Animal* (2000), Baker traces a genealogy of this "fear of the familiar"<sup>642</sup> evoked by the pet, from Nietzsche's claim in *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* (*The Gay Science*, 1882) that humans "as tame animals... are a shameful sight,"<sup>643</sup> which perfectly fits not just Kojima's "shameful" positioning of herself as a flesh commodity on display, but her shaming in *Click Opera*; to novelist and art critic John Berger's 1977 essay "Why Look at Animals?" or Deleuze and Guattari's adage that "anyone who likes cats or dogs is a fool."<sup>644</sup> Baker concludes that such "lashing out at domesticity"<sup>645</sup> stems from the fact that companion animals, in their ambiguous position between animality and humanity, bring about the specter of art's harmlessness. In his words,

Unlike the romantic image of the wild animal, anthropomorphically epitomizing creativity, independent-mindedness and "outside" status, it is clear that the domesticated animal just *won't do* as the chosen image of the artist or philosopher, regardless of their sympathies for animals as such. Postmodern art's avant-garde roots are particularly evident here: it has no stomach for the safe, the tame. As Mark Cousins has pithily expressed it, it "would have been

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<sup>638</sup> Christopher D. Wraight, *Rousseau's "The Social Contract": A Reader's Guide* (London; New York: Continuum, 2008), 12–13.

<sup>639</sup> Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 10–11.

<sup>640</sup> Baker, 169.

<sup>641</sup> Baker, 168.

<sup>642</sup> Baker, 166.

<sup>643</sup> Baker, 170.

<sup>644</sup> Baker, 167–69.

<sup>645</sup> Baker, 170.

the kiss of death for any avant-garde movement to announce that the subversion of traditional categories was undertaken in the interest of safety.<sup>646</sup>

The romanticization of wilderness is the reason why, for the commentators of *Click Opera*, it is the noble fox in the wild and not the ignoble hamster in a cage that would more appropriately fit Kojima's "holiday from being human." However, it is debatable whether any animal, be it a fox or a hamster or whatever, when absorbed into the sphere of human art, is ever capable of such feat. As Baker puts it, "once inside the sad safe space of the art gallery, neither Hirst's preserved tiger shark nor Beuys's coyote can any longer carry the full weight of its wilderness."<sup>647</sup> There is also an underlying gender politics at work in the stigmatization of the pet as an animal stained by domesticity in a post-humanist landscape that is, more often than not, coded masculine. Both nature and civilization have been constructed as feminine and masculine, depending on the ideological alignment of the writer, and such femininity or masculinity deployed to serve both conservative and progressive agendas. In particular, as argued by environmental historian William Cronon, there is a whole "macho" tradition for which "the comforts and seductions of civilized life were especially insidious for men, who all too easily became emasculated by the femininizing tendencies of civilization."<sup>648</sup> The figure of the metrosexual is an excellent example of this, as an urban heterosexual man who perceivably lost his manliness and became feminized through an excessive attachment to traditionally female occupations, like shopping and fashion. On the opposite side of "high" wilderness and "high" (military, industrial) technology rests the domesticity of housewives and their "low" technologies, such as kitchen appliances and the television.<sup>649</sup>

Even when artists do portray the domesticated animal, it is often in ways that reveal its fundamental untameness. For instance, despite very different in their purpose and execution, both Oleg Kulik's testosterone-filled performances as a rabid dog and Paula Rego's *Dog Woman* engage with "man's best companion" to defy human authority and rationality. In the first case, during a group exhibition in 1996, Kulik was chained to a sign labeled "dangerous," attacking gallery visitors who ignored the warning and even damaging other artists' works. **[Figure 4]** The second case, Rego's 1994 pastel drawing, shows a powerful woman squatting

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<sup>646</sup> Baker, 170.

<sup>647</sup> Baker, 172.

<sup>648</sup> William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 8.

<sup>649</sup> Dennis Weiss, "Post-Human Television: Part I," in *Post-Screen: Intermittence + Interference*, ed. Ana Moutinho et al., Post-Screen Festival (Lisbon: Universidade Lusófona, 2016), 198–99.

down and snarling, as she embraces the raw physicality of her human condition. [Figure 5] In fact, the point made by Kulik and Rego that animals are only ever “temporarily ensnared by domesticity”<sup>650</sup> is also made by Kojima in *The Reason Why I Became a Hamster*. When asked by *Vice* about “why did you choose to be a hamster? If you were a kitten you could just cuddle up and sleep or play with fluffy stuff all day,” the artist brings up the hamster’s supposedly wild nature as justification. “I like hamsters because they’re weak and vicious at the same time and they have this cool, stone-faced approach to humans. You can’t really tame them,” she says. A particularly Rousseauian claim follows Kojima’s statement: “I’ve had three pet hamsters since elementary school and I always felt guilty for keeping them in a cage. Hamsters, just like humans, are meant to live in the wild.”<sup>651</sup>

While Kojima’s insistence on wildness may appear forced or out of place, it raises an interesting hypothesis that hamsters may be the embodiment of the pet’s abjectness. Hamsters are “aberrant creatures” not just because they are pets, but because they are *failed* pets. Hamsters are adorable yet weak and violent, with an infamous penchant for intersexual aggression and cannibalism. They are unintelligent, with poor social skills, mostly solitary and will fight fiercely if housed together. They have short life spans and generally lack the dignified aura of other companion mammals, like dogs and cats. As I have shown at the beginning of this section, the comments in *Click Opera* likewise verbalize the “failness” of Kojima’s performance. As one commentator puts it, “it comes across as an attempt to be super cute but ends up as incredibly mindless and annoying,” expressing a dislike both for the performance’s gimmicky nature, and Kojima’s inability to subvert the racial stereotype of Japanese women as submissive, dependent, and tame. But the premise behind *The Reason Why I Became a Hamster* is, to begin with, laughable and absurd: attempting to escape social constraints by dressing up in a cute hamster costume is bound to disappoint. Considering this, “failure” is perhaps the whole point in Kojima’s performance. The realization that “all individuals and societies know failure better than they may care to admit—failed romance, failed careers, failed politics, failed humanity, failed failures”<sup>652</sup>—resonates deeply with both Kojima’s incapacity to function in society and the Japanese identity, structured around collective failure and defeat. Murakami Takashi’s 2005 book *Little Boy*, precisely, promoted the notion that Japan’s obsession with the *kawaii* steams from the (historical, psychoanalytical, affective) trauma of World War II, as well

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<sup>650</sup> Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 45.

<sup>651</sup> Kojima, An interview with a human hamster.

<sup>652</sup> Lisa Le Feuvre, “Introduction: Strive to Fail,” in *Failure*, ed. Lisa Le Feuvre (London: The MIT Press, 2010), 16.

as the political depression of the Lost 20 Years (*Ushinawareta Nijūnen*, the two decades from bubble's collapse in 1991) marked by economic stagnation and slumping birth rates.

Another important aspect at play in Kojima's performance is the phantasmatic overlap between the pet shop and the gallery, suggesting that "while artists *want* art to be wild, it usually isn't."<sup>653</sup> These two different spaces under surveillance—one for tamed animals, another for the "wild" avant-garde—are thus connected by an aesthetic of failure, linking the window cage to the white cube, the pet shop's transparent displays to the voyeuristic looks of potential gallery visitors (i.e., customers) peeking from the outside. Furthermore, the fact that the glass window showcases a young Japanese woman in a costume that leaves her arms and legs bare inescapably prompts a series of sexual connotations (however unintended) to surface. On the one hand, the Japanese sex industry has a reputation for being the site of bizarre practices, mixing cuteness with erotic or pornographic settings. For example, Tokyo's cuddle cafes (where costumer go to hug and cuddle with girls)<sup>654</sup> or the *ero-kawa* ("erotic *kawaii*") fashion trend<sup>655</sup> have helped to perpetuate a longstanding Western tabloid interest in "Weird Japan."<sup>656</sup> On the other hand, Kojima's costume is suggestive of the furry fandom and their fursonas. Although furies are not intrinsically sexual, on the Internet, they have gained a reputation for creepy sexual deviancy, a phenomenon known as "fursecution" (persecution of furies).<sup>657</sup>

Moreover, cuteness is the leading aesthetic quality separating Kojima's performance from Kulik's and Rego's "dogs," who are thoroughly un-cute and whose untameness is plain for all to see. Arguably, *The Reason Why I Became a Hamster* is closer to the "apocalyptic cute"<sup>658</sup> of artist Aida Makoto's ongoing DOG series, which started in 1989. [Figure 6] Aida—known for his deliberate use of shock imagery of sexual and violent character—depicts beautiful girls resembling *aidoru* singers in archetypal *nihonga* ("Japanese-style paintings") landscapes. The girls, however, are naked, collared and leashed, while walking on all fours with their arms and legs amputated, most likely a reference to the limbless sex slaves in Nagai

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<sup>653</sup> Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 172.

<sup>654</sup> Ryan Duffy, "The Japanese Love Industry," *Vice*, December 25, 2013, para. 1, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/xd58kj/the-japanese-love-industry](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/xd58kj/the-japanese-love-industry).

<sup>655</sup> Aoyagi and Yuen, "When Erotic Meets Cute."

<sup>656</sup> Kirsten Cather, "Must We Burn Eromanga? Trying Obscenity in the Courtroom and in the Classroom," in *The End of Cool Japan: Ethical, Legal, and Cultural Challenges to Japanese Popular Culture*, ed. Mark McLelland (Routledge, 2016), 2.

<sup>657</sup> "Fursecution," *WikiFur, the furry encyclopedia*, August 18, 2006, <http://en.wikifur.com/wiki/Fursecution>.

<sup>658</sup> Wong, "A Presence of a Constant End: Contemporary Art and Popular Culture in Japan," 15.

Go's infamous manga *Violence Jack* from the 1970s.<sup>659</sup> Aida's DOG series has sparked a flurry of protests, namely on the occasion of his retrospective exhibition at the Mori Museum, *Monument for Nothing* (November 2012-March 2013), in which the People Against Pornography and Sexual Violence issued an open letter that called for the show to be withdrawn for its misogynistic pictures.<sup>660</sup> Although Kojima's performance differs from Aida's explicit sexual images, both artists employ cuteness to address negative feelings of aversion, be them body horror or the more existential terror of *The Reason Why I Became a Hamster*, as pantomimic recreation of the "city dweller whose life is helplessly formulated in the daily routine of work-eat-sleep."<sup>661</sup>

*The Reason Why I Became a Hamster* will hardly elicit the angry reactions prompted by Aida's paintings, unless, perhaps, for the waste of funding on a costumed performer. But a cursory look at Kojima's oeuvre, particularly her sculptures of cute animals in sadomasochistic settings, reveals the artist's familiarity with the aesthetics of *kowa-kawaii* ("creepy cute"), *guro-kawaii* ("grotesque cute"), and *kimo-kawaii* ("disgusting cute").<sup>662</sup> [Figure 7] Kojima's hamster performance, however, moves away from the explicit violence and sexuality present in both her sculptures and the other artists' aforementioned "dogs." She does not snarl, sexual gratify, or otherwise seem to acknowledge the presence of humans. This "mindlessness" is so disconcerting that, as we have seen, it prompted one commentator in *Click Opera* to suggest that she should *at least* be naked for the performance to acquire meaning by catering to "animal needs." Indeed, Kojima's performance is "boring" and "pointless" when compared to other famous performances where (male) artists dress up as animals. In *The Reason Why I Became a Hamster*, there is no expedition into the Great Outdoors, like Fischli and Weiss's *Der Rechte Weg* (1983). Nor is she like Japanese artist Miyake, Shintaro, who makes his drawings while wearing various *kawaii* costumes, thus *producing* something while performing. [Figure 8]

As Kojima explains, "while doing the performance I'm almost mindless, as my head goes empty when I mimic a hamster's movement," regarding her process. "When I move quickly, my heart beats faster and my feeling of shame disappears as the world outside gradually becomes meaningless to me." This description agrees with Sianne Ngai's concept of

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<sup>659</sup> Maya Kimura, "Drawing National Specters: Makoto Aida's DOG and The Giant Member of Fuji versus King Gidorâ," *Sightlines*, no. 7 (2008): 95.

<sup>660</sup> Matthew Penney, "'Human Dogs', Aida Makoto, and the Mori Art Museum Controversy," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, March 11, 2013, para. 5, <http://apjjf.org/-Matthew-Penney/4753/article.html>.

<sup>661</sup> Sako Kojima, "Performance," [sakokojima.info/](http://sakokojima.info/), accessed June 13, 2019, <http://sakokojima.info/performance.html>.

<sup>662</sup> Ashcraft, "This Isn't Kawaii. It's Disturbing.," para. 1-3.

“stuplidity,” “a concatenation of boredom and astonishment—a bringing together of what ‘dulls’ and what ‘irritates’ or agitates”<sup>663</sup>; and irritate it does, considering the generally negative impact of *The Reason Why I Became a Hamster* on *Click Opera* readers. Moreover, when told by the *Vice* interviewer that “Hamster life looks like so much fun and everyone is smiling at you!” Kojima responds that “Actually, the quick movements are very difficult and tiring for a human-size hamster.”<sup>664</sup> Kojima’s reply addresses the issue of cuteness as a form of affective labor, which also takes a toll on the performer’s body. “Since in my mind I’m a hamster throughout the whole performance, it isn’t until after that I feel my muscles ache and realize that my front tooth is broken,”<sup>665</sup> she adds. As such, *The Reason Why I Became a Hamster* not only results from the performer’s state of mindlessness, but its “repetitive, minor exhaustions”<sup>666</sup> are contrary to our ingrained expectations of a sublime experience in the face of nature’s greatness. It offers no opportunity for displays of heroic action in the wilderness, only the “minor” bodily damage (muscle ache, the broken tooth) often resulting from occupational injuries in pink- and white-collar jobs.

In 2015, Kojima embraced the more playful and extravagantly cute side of her performance in a 3-day workshop called *The Reason Why We Become Hamsters*, in Osaka, in which Kojima and a group of children made their own hamster suits and then performed in them. [Video 3] One suspects that this debasement of “high art” reduced to an adorable kids’ play party would further aggravate *Click Opera*’s commentators. In 2016, Kojima continued to explore these relational aesthetics with *Hamster collection - A hamster works and collects Art*, a 3-month project at Tokyo Wonder Site Berlin’s residency program. [Video 4] Hamster Kojima curated an exhibition of Berlin-based artists and, in exchange for their participation, undertook whatever task they asked her to perform—organizing their room, cutting their hair, cleaning their windows, cooking Japanese food, babysitting a child, and so on.<sup>667</sup> [Figure 9] Both projects embraced an *iyashikei* (“healing”) approach to art and its role in sociality outside the capitalist art market, suggesting a shift in the way Kojima initially employed cuteness in her performance. Indeed, tameness in art may be a “shameful sight,” but a cursory look at the horrors that circulate in the news every day is enough to make one realize how humans in their wildest, unregulated states often turn out to be cruel, predatory creatures, rather than romantic

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<sup>663</sup> *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 271.

<sup>664</sup> Kojima, An interview with a human hamster, para. 9.

<sup>665</sup> Kojima, para. 9.

<sup>666</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 272.

<sup>667</sup> Sako Kojima, “2016 Project Hamster Collection - A Hamster Works and Collects Art,” [sakokojima.info/](http://sakokojima.info/), accessed June 13, 2019, <http://sakokojima.info/others.html>.

adventurers. The uses of Kojima's hamster character in *The Reason Why We Become Hamsters* and *Hamster collection* seem to engage more thoroughly with scholar Joshua Dale's vision of cuteness as "a form of agency: namely, an appeal aimed at disarming aggression and promoting sociality."<sup>668</sup>

Nevertheless, by executing many household chores like cleaning, cooking, and babysitting, all in her hamster suit, Kojima's actions resonate with popular comedy anime series like Itō Risa's *Oruchuban Ebichu* (1991-2008). Ebichu is a faithful housekeeper hamster who looks after her master's house, an office lady in her late twenties, but always ends up involved in overtly violent, scatological, and sexual situations, and is often punished and beaten. [Figure 10] Although Kojima's actions are candid, her voluntary subjugation to barter economy preserves some of the perverse undertones of her earlier performances. In Japanese pop culture, there is a whole lineage of *becoming-pets* that use the device of *kemonomimi* ("animal ears")—animal features, such as ears or tails, applied to human bodies like cosplay accessories—to problematize these ambiguous politics of power and domination. [Figure 11] One of its most intriguing uses is *Loveless* (since 2002),<sup>669</sup> a *shōnen-ai* battle manga by Kōga Yun, in which boys and girls are born with cat ears and tails that fall off once they lose their virginity. The association between "petness" and the sexual innocence separating children from adults is a powerful idea that resonates deeply with the logic of the *kawaii*. *Loveless* further complicates it with the introduction of dominance/ submission undertones and references to erotic bondage, as there is no shortage of bandages, collars, chains, loops, leather corsets, etc. in the series. [Figure 12]

Whether domination and submission are sexual or post-Fordist, this "blend of tenderness and aggression, fun and unfun"<sup>670</sup> is a common feature to *Loveless* and Kojima's performances. The hamster, a tiny representative of pets, dangling on the borders of tameness and untameness suggests that as Ngai points out, "this powerlessness... makes all art not only seem undignified but even 'ridiculous and clownish.'"<sup>671</sup> "Undignified," "ridiculous," and "clownish" are words that seem to fit the totality of Kojima's *Hamster* series remarkably well, from her gallery performances (as seen in the indignation expressed by *Click Opera*'s commentators) to children's workshops and the residency project as a little hamster helper.

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<sup>668</sup> Joshua Paul Dale, "The Appeal of the Cute Object: Desire, Domestication, and Agency," in *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, ed. Joshua Paul Dale et al. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 37.

<sup>669</sup> Kōga Yun, *Loveless*, run in *Monthly Comic Zero Sum* (Tokyo: Ichijinsha), since 2002.

<sup>670</sup> Ngai, "Our Aesthetic Categories," October 1, 2010, 951.

<sup>671</sup> Ngai, "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," 838.

More generally, though, the premise that, as Dale puts it, “cuteness is an appeal to others”<sup>672</sup> is the political basis of all of these *becoming-pets*; an appeal that delves deep into the cages of human identity and relationality only to gnaw at them from the inside, like Kojima chewing on a sunflower seed until her teeth breaks. Against art’s self-sufficiency, these artists go for broke, seeking our visceral reactions from “aww” to “eww.”

(See also “CGDCT” and “Pastel Turn”)

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<sup>672</sup> Dale, “The Appeal of the Cute Object: Desire, Domestication, and Agency,” 51.



# Hiro Universe

Sunlight streaming through the bedroom curtains, caught by the numerous statues and figurines in the room, created long shadows that notified the three girls idly lying around the bedroom that it was beginning to grow late. Whether it was from what has seemed like endless cases of mochi they had consumed through the day or the increasingly hypnotic ramble of cicadas, Lauren, Rachel and Sua suddenly became attuned to a subtle change in the atmosphere. One look into each other's eyes confirmed that they all felt the same ominous shift. Sua raised a trembling hand and pointed at the Hiro statues that sat high on its own shelf and softly whispered, "...look." Lauren and Rachel both turned their gaze to Hiro and gasped.

The statues innocuous expression seemed incredibly human, and its ceramic body turned milky and translucent like skin. The vines housed within the statue started to grow and wind down its body, spilling over the shelf and grasping along the wall. The three girls only has a moment to register what they were witnessing before they gently collapsed to the ground, their eyes glazing over milky-white like the Hiro statue. Sunlight no longer came through the window. Cloaked in shadow, the girls turned their glazed eyes to the figurines carefully scattered around the room, and began to witness events that they had previously only seen in fiction.

Welcome to the Sister Cities...<sup>673</sup>

*Hiro Universe* is a collaborative art project which began in 2014, by Lauren Elder, Rachel Milton, and Sua Yoo, all three born in 1990 and based in Chicago and Los Angeles. The project, including objects, paintings, comics, an e-book, and an app, "traverses the gap between the physical and virtual, industry and fandom, character and creator."<sup>674</sup> This transmediality is reflected by their installation in gallery shows, in which with a customized plinth incorporating different outputs from the project. [Figure 1a, b] On the website and e-book's short introductory text, the artists are presented as a group of weeaboo ("wannabe Japanese") friends, lazing around in their bedroom when a fantastic event takes place. This introduction situates Lauren, Rachel, and Sua, along with their artworks, as characters and artifacts within their an eight-page fantasy comic drawn by Yoo in pastiche manga style, [Figure 2] available as an e-book called *Hiro.minified*, an abridged version of the more in-

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<sup>673</sup> Lauren Elder, Rachael Milton, and Sua Yoo, "HIRO ☆ Artist Book, Comic, and Sculptures by Lauren Elder, Rachael Milton and Sua Yoo ☆ 2014," *Hiro Universe*, 2014, <http://hiro-universe.com/#publication>.

<sup>674</sup> Elder, Milton, and Yoo.

depth publication *Hiro*.<sup>675</sup> [Figure 3] Filled with references to familiar animescapes, the girls feed on mochi (a kind of Japanese glutinous rice cake) and listen to the sound of cicadas, which often appears in anime as a marker of seasonality. The *Hiro* comic book introduces the mythology that binds together their transdisciplinary project, an expression of the artists' uncanny visions of what Christine Yano calls "pink globalization," i.e., "the spread of goods and images labeled cute (*kawaii*) from Japan to other parts of the industrial world"<sup>676</sup> via supersigns such as Hello Kitty and other anime characters. *Hiro* is thus an abstract but emotion-packed science-fantasy tale, seen through the lens of a dark, sexual post-humanism, digital aesthetics, and trashy celebrity culture. The story revolves around a group of cute warrior girls in skimpy but highly accessorized getups, equipped with smartphones, tribal tattoos, and millennial lingo. *Hiro*'s characters are rendered in Yoo's trademark style, mixing moé anime girls with Internet-bred aesthetics subcultures, like health goth—a fashion combining goth culture with "trans-humanism, Net art, technical sportswear, bionic body parts, combat gear and an understanding of whole body and mental health."<sup>677</sup> [Figure 4]

Along the way, several mystical artifacts are introduced, which are existing tridimensional artworks by Elder and Milton. *Hiro*, for instance, is a bean-shaped creature with healing powers, evoking the merchandisable cute familiars common in anime and manga series, like those of the magical girl variety. [Figure 5] The *Ojōsama* statuettes are jagged bishōjo figures in plaster, cement, ceramic and glass, available in several colors such as limelight and powder ("ojōsama" meaning "young girl" or "rich girl," is a term referring to wealthy female animanga characters). [Figure 6] The *Portrait of Melancholy* is a vertical steel bar with an irregular ceramic plaque glued to its upper end, [Figure 7] featuring a rough sketch of Haruhi Suzumiya's face—the popular heroine of the cult anime series *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* (*Suzumiya Haruhi no Yūutsu*, first aired in 2006). [Figure 8] In turn, *Hello Kitty on Moai Island* is a brutalist rendition of the Sanrio's mascot Kitty White. [Figure 9] Additionally, the Hiro photo app, available from the *Hiro Universe* website (<http://hiro-universe.com/>), allows users to stick cute vector graphics onto their own photographs and pictures. The vector graphics resemble nail decals or teeny temporary tattoos of flowers, bows, strawberries, cherries, and butterflies. Along with photographic

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<sup>675</sup> Lauren Elder, Rachael Milton, and Sua Yoo, *Hiro* (Los Angeles, 2014).

<sup>676</sup> Christine R. Yano, *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>677</sup>"Healthgoth," in *Aesthetic Wiki*, accessed May 18, 2017, <http://aesthetic.wikia.com/wiki/Healthgoth>.

reproductions of Elder and Milton's artifacts, these graphics appear in the *Hiro* comic book, arranged into a pattern on the inside cover and back cover.

The *Hiro Universe* "merchandise," like figures and apps, thus parodies the sleek media mix of the *otaku* culture industry, reproducing the logic of transmedia convergence on a do-it-yourself scale. Instead of finding these mass-cultural references in *otaku* rooms or the shelves of Akihabara (Tokyo's *otaku* neighborhood), from which they originally stem, with *Hiro*, they are destined for the niche of western art galleries. In the same vein, the "About the Authors" section on the *Hiro Universe* website contrasts the artists' statements, written in complex academic language, with portraits of Elder, Milton, and Yoo as cute animanga girls. [Figure 10] Like the cast of an anime show, each girl sports her personality and costume, drawing from the recognizable stock characters in anime and manga, mixed in with subcultural fashion elements. Yoo's cute-cool health goth fashion, including the obligatory FILA shoes and a Mickey Mouse cap; Elder's sassy *ojōsama* loose socks and *tsundere* ("tough outside, soft inside") look on her face; Milton's crop top with the word "*otaku*" written in katakana characters and shy *tareme* "drooping eyes." The contrast between the artists' statements and their animanga portraits short-circuits prevailing notions of cuteness as "a dumb aesthetic."<sup>678</sup> Much like other women artists in the contemporary art world and culture more generally, the reclamation of the cute and the pretty serves as a guerrilla strategy against hegemonic phallogocentrism. See, in this respect, artist Alicia Eler and writer Kate Durbin article "The Teen-Girl Tumblr Aesthetic,"<sup>679</sup> about the aesthetics of adolescence shared online by teenage girls and young adult women on "safe spaces" like *Tumblr*.

Moreover, the references to anime, manga, and *otaku* fan culture deliberately jab at the Western-centered notions of the avant-garde—it is not just cute; it is *kawaii*. Historically, the first Western artworld project to employ animanga visuals was Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno's *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999-2002), nearly 20 years ago. Huyghe and Parreno (born in 1962 and 1964, respectively) acquired the legal rights to an unremarkable manga character called Annlee, "rescuing" her from the corporate environment where she was destined to fade away and disappear. Huyghe and Parreno each produced individual pieces starring Annlee: *Anywhere Out of the World* (2000) and *One Million Kingdoms* (2001). They also "commissioned" other established artists to use Annlee free of charge, gathering

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<sup>678</sup> Elizabeth Legge, "When Awe Turns to Awww... Jeff Koon's Balloon Dog and the Cute Sublime," in *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, ed. Joshua Paul Dale et al. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 142.

<sup>679</sup> Eler and Durbin, "The Teen-Girl Tumblr Aesthetic."

an impressive group of art world stars: Henri Barande, Francois Curlet, Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Pierre Joseph with Mehdi Belhaj-Kacem, Melik Ohanian, Richard Phillips, Joe Scanlan, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Anna-Léna Vaney. The title, *No Ghost Just a Shell*, is a pun on both Oshii Mamoru's sci-fi anime masterpiece *Ghost In The Shell*, and "ghost in the machine," a phrase coined by British philosopher Gilbert Ryle to describe René Descartes' mind-body dualism. Also, in the art poster produced by the creative communication agency M/M (Paris) for the project, they substituted the word "shell" for the logo of the oil supermajor Royal Dutch Shell, [Figure 11] suggesting that the global commodification, circulation, and appropriation of signs has reduced the value system of Western modernity (e.g., Enlightenment rationalism, Cartesian dualism) to a corporate simulacrum—and that the (then, emerging) Japanization of Western media played a critical role in this dethroning.

Huyghe and Parreno's visions of cybercapitalist postmodernity are presented in their works. Huyghe's short animated film *One Million Kingdoms* (2001, color video installation with sound, 7 minutes) shows a ghostly Annlee reduced to luminous contour lines, wandering on her way to nowhere in a land of mountains and craters. [Figure 12] She is represented in primitive computer graphics, reminiscent of old systems as the ZX Spectrum. The ground on which Annlee walks is continually shifting in reaction to the synthesized voice of astronaut Neil Armstrong, who narrates a story mixing the real transmissions from the Apollo 11 mission with selections from Jules Verne's *Voyage au Centre de la Terre*.<sup>680</sup> As the boundaries between history and fiction, past and future, are blurred, Annlee becomes a wandering spirit in a state of suspended death, destined to disappear in a mediasphere overloaded with spectacular images. In turn, Parreno's *Anywhere Out of the World* (2000, color video installation with sound, 4 minutes) is a "videotaped" confession by Annlee, set against a black backdrop, in which she talks about herself in a cynic, disenchanting manner. After stating that her name is Annlee and that "you can spell it however you want, it doesn't matter," as if renouncing her right to complete personhood, she explains how she was bought for 46 000 yen from the catalog of a Japanese studio called Kworks.

"Some other characters had the possibility of becoming a hero," Annlee says in a regretful voice. "They had a long psychological description, a personal history, the material to produce a narration. They were really expensive, and I was cheap. Designed to join any

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<sup>680</sup> "One Million Kingdoms," *Guggenheim*, January 1, 2001, <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/10700>.

kind of story, but with no chance to survive any of them”. And concludes: “I was never designed to survive.” Portrayed as a victim of the “cuteness-industrial complex,”<sup>681</sup> Annlee’s commodity cycle turns into a poignant life story meant to elicit our empathy. “It true, everything I’m saying it’s true,” she urges, asserting the “reality” of this first-person account of commodity cruelty, and adds sarcastically: “Some names have been changed to preserve the guilty.” As the camera closes on her blank yet uncannily emotional stare, she continues her (Parreno’s) statement: “I am a product. A product freed from the marketplace I was supposed to fill.” At one point, Annlee grabs a picture of her original self, before Parreno redesigned her into a 3D model, changing her features to resemble an alien. [Figure 13] “It’s like when you point out an old photo,” she comments and shows it to the camera. Later on, we learn that even Annlee’s voice is not her own, but that of a human model called Danielle. Annlee-Danielle explains that “She is not used to speaking,” pointing at their common objectification: both Annlee, the corporate character, and the human fashion model have their bodies thoroughly commodified, shaped and reshaped, and subjugated to the tyranny of product trends.

To some extent, *No Ghost Just a Shell* illustrates an “outsider” mentality that externalizes the viewer from Japanese pop culture, betraying the artists’ belonging to a generation of Europeans that did not grow up immersed in Cool Japan: manga, anime, Japanese videogames and fashion. One may say that, although animanga aesthetics are at the core of Huyghe and Parreno’s project, it does not exude a genuine taste for or familiarity with manga and anime per se. Instead, *No Ghost Just a Shell* reflects the Y2K aesthetic from the mid-90s to the early 2000s, coincident with the dotcom bubble and preceding the “war on terror” after 9/11; a look which *The Guardian* writer Alexander Leigh describes in terms of “Synthetic or metallic-looking materials, inflatable furniture, moon-boot footwear and alien-inspired hairstyles.”<sup>682</sup> Indeed, at the time of Huyghe and Parreno’s project, *Ghost In The Shell*, which had premiered in 1995, enjoyed a renewed popularity with Wamdue Project’s hit song “King of My Castle” (1999), whose music video featured excerpts from the film.

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<sup>681</sup> David Ehrlich, “From Kewpies to Minions: A Brief History of Pop Culture Cuteness,” *Rolling Stone*, July 21, 2015, para. 2, <http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/from-kewpies-to-minions-a-brief-history-of-pop-culture-cuteness-20150721>.

<sup>682</sup> Leigh Alexander, “The Y2K Aesthetic: Who Knew the Look of the Year 2000 Would Endure?,” *The Guardian*, May 19, 2016, sec. Technology, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/may/19/year-2000-y2k-millennium-design-aesthetic..> The popular *Tumblr* blog *Institute for Y2K Aesthetics* is often credited with coining and disseminating the term.

[**Video 1**] Parreno’s redesigned Annlee also captures the coeval alien craze circulating, for instance, in television advertisement like Playstation’s 1999 “alien girl” commercial. [**Figure 14**]

Contrary to what happens in *Hiro Universe*, in *No Ghost Just a Shell*, there are no references to specific animanga scenarios or tropes. In fact, the modus operandi of *No Ghost Just a Shell* relied on offering up Annlee to contemporary artists who are “outsiders” of the Japanese culture industry, to see the result of the culture shock between West and Japan, “high art” and mass culture. One finds this same rationale, for instance, in the monumental sculptures of Hello Kitty, Melody and Miffy by American artist Tom Sachs (b. 1966). [**Figure 15**] In Sachs’s words:

For me to do a model of “Hello Kitty,” which is this merchandising icon that exists only as a merchandising and licensed character. To then redo that in a “fine” material like bronze, I think is really to the point. It’s recontextualizing, shifting it back to a high level and making it really, really clear... We try to use materials that suggest the item’s usage, because we are in a world where everything is so perfect and seamlessly made that there’s no evidence of its construction, there’s no history. Most things are engineered to resist history. If my work is anything, it is against that theory. I try to show flaws because flaws are human. These details on how things are made show the politics behind how we consume our products... It is sculpture, because it’s talked about, sold, and shown as such. But to me it’s really bricolage, which is the French term for do-it-yourself repair. Bricolage comes from a culture that repairs rather than replaces—American culture just replaces.<sup>683</sup>

Like Huyghe and Parreno, what draws Sachs to characters like Hello Kitty is their being icons of glossy, pure producthood (or shells without a ghost, to put it poetically) that they can deconstruct, e.g., by making the giant bronze sculptures look like they are made of foam core). As such, their engagement with Japanese popular culture is arguably more programmatic and detached than *Hiro Universe*’s “messier” tactics. The generation gap between Huyghe, Parreno, and Sachs and younger artists Elder, Milton, and Yoo partially accounts for these different stances. However, even today, among millennial artists (born between 1981-1996), not all references to Japanese pop culture are “involved.” For instance, in the case of Michael Pybus, an English artist born in 1982, his work makes extensive use of Japanese pop culture in ways similar to *No Ghost Just a Shell* and Sachs’s sculptures of Hello Kitty. Pybus mostly references mascots from popular Japanese franchises like *Super Mario* or *Pokémon*: Pikachu,

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<sup>683</sup> “BRONZE COLLECTION,” *Tom Sachs*, 2008, <http://www.tomsachs.org/exhibition/bronze-collection>.

Meowth, Yoshi, or human characters like Misty, Jessie, Nurse Joy or Princess Peach. He deploys these characters alongside other global brands and pop culture icons: Ikea, Disney or Looney Tunes characters, Lara Croft, MTV, Microsoft Windows, and so on. Pybus also explicitly aligns with the Pop Art tradition by reproducing, in his trademark “flat,” “direct,” or “simple” acrylic paint style, famous artworks by Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, David Hockney, or Christopher Wool, as well as the Japanese icons of Superflat art, like Murakami Takashi’s laughing flower sculptures. In mashing these symbols of contemporary art—including the logo of the *Art Now* book series by Taschen—with global brands in jarring collages, Pybus explores the gaps and continuities between the art market and the popular entertainment industry, “high art” aura and the appeal of mass fashion and design. [Figure 16a, b]

In *No Ghost Just a Shell*, as well as the artworks by Sachs and Pybus, these cute-cool superstars “made in Japan” are used to represent an overarching global consumer culture, including the more recent processes of “pink globalization,”<sup>684</sup> with their worldwide spread of *kawaii* aesthetics. In this sense, no further knowledge of anime, manga, videogames, or fandoms outside the mainstream is necessary for the audience to grasp these works’ significance. Nor do the artists appear to come from *within* particular groups or subcultures, as in *Hiro Universe*. Note that such “detachment” does not mean that the works are less profound, or any less relevant to our understanding of the role and mechanics of Japanese pop culture in the world. On the contrary, *No Ghost Just a Shell* offers us one of the most potent evocations of (now) widely circulated concepts such as the *kyara* (cute commercial mascots) and the media mix (the Japanese implementations of convergence culture and transmediality), which have shaped and continue to be developed in *otaku*-oriented culture industries. But the fact that in the process Annlee is “freed” or “saved” from her original animanga milieu reveals the artists’ separation from the source material.

In contrast, Elder, Milton, and Yoo even portray themselves as animanga characters, showing that, as artists, they could not be more inside the *Hiro Universe*. As such, *Hiro Universe* belongs to a trend in contemporary art reflecting what Yoda Tomiko calls the J-subculturation of millennials: “Rather than assuming that Japanese popular culture today ultimately refers to some form of a larger national frame, we may understand the prefix J- as inscribing the subculturation of the national.”<sup>685</sup> This trend is visible in works of many

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<sup>684</sup> Yano, *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty’s Trek across the Pacific*.

<sup>685</sup> Yoda, “A Roadmap to Millennial Japan,” 46.

western visual artists, for instance, Nichole Shinn, Sven Loven, Yannick Val Gesto, or Bill Hayden. [Figure 17] Shinn's digital collages, for example, showcase her familiarity with the language and trends of animanga fandoms. In *Kiss Me* (TXTbook, 2018), [Figure 18] a 64-page-long artist book about the early Internet-based phenomenon of Kisekae Set System (basically, virtual anime-themed paper dolls), Shinn's collages alternate with various fanart of popular female anime characters, drawn in a deliberately unskilled MS Paint-style reminiscent of the amateur creations in online communities, like *DeviantArt*. These characters, while well-known among fans of anime and manga, are not recognizable to a broader Western audience like Hello Kitty and Pikachu. Therefore, characters like *Sailor Moon's* Black Lady, *Bleach's* Rukia, *Evangeline's* Misato, or *Shōjo Kakumei Utena's* Utena, demand their audience's J-subculturation in order to be recognized. Shinn's fan arts also include Scully from *X-Files* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*, nodding towards the millennial's nostalgia for the "90s experience."

The paintings of Swedish artist Sven Loven (b. 1979, Stockholm) are less specific than Shinn's in their reference to anime and manga, but still explore the dirty yet nostalgic mediatic milieu that we find in *Hiro Universe*. Loven's acrylic paintings emulate messy computer graphics as if the images were smudged and blurred with *Photoshop* brushes, or the lines embossed or "neonified" with digital filters. Remnants of Japanese characters like *Sailor Moon* and *Sonic the Hedgehog*, *furries*, *GeoCities* GIFs, katakana and *kaomoji* (Japanese-style emoticons style) are juxtaposed to other icons of the 1980s and 1990s nostalgia, such as *Home Alone* or old Motorola phones. [Figure 19] Japanese pop culture thus becomes entangled with Internet cyberculture, videogames, and memes, not merely as a super-symbol of globalization, but also as a subcultural marker of millennial phantasmagoria. We find this same strategy in the digital paintings of Belgian artist Yannick Val Gesto (b. 1987). [Figure 20] His most recent artist's book, *Close Both Eyes to See* (Chambre Charbon, 2019), compiling an extensive collection of the artist's drawings, sketches, collages, and virtual photographs, features a broad range of "subcultural" gaming and animanga references, from the online RPG *Phantasy Star Online* and Nintendo's *Xenoblade Chronicles* to *moé* anime and manga series like *K-On!*, *YuruYuri*, and *Yotsuba&!*. [Figure 21] Like Loven and Shinn's works, these Japanese pop-cultural references blend seamlessly with a whole other variety of coeval expressions, from 1990s television shows to cult fantasy and sci-fi worlds, creating the impressions of a melting pot or stream of consciousness from the raw millennial collective imaginary.



In short, *Hiro Universe* and *No Ghost Just a Shell* are collaborative projects among two or more artists incorporating Japanese pop culture, namely, *kawaii* and animanga aesthetics. However, both projects illustrate two different approaches to this subject matter in contemporary art: we may term it a poetic of the “macro” or mainstream, and the “micro” or subcultural trend. Projects like *No Ghost Just a Shell* and Tom Sachs’s Hello Kitty sculptures deal with super symbols (“macro”), while *Hiro Universe* emphasizes the role of cuteness and anime and manga—sometimes, referencing specific characters—in millennial subcultures (“micro”). The latter demands that viewers are familiar with, or even knowledgeable of, Japanese pop culture and cyber microgenres like vaporwave and health goth. These different stances tend to reflect a gap between generation X and the millennials, although this is not always the case (Michael Pybus is an example of a millennial artist whose work focuses on the “macro” Japaneseness of globalized entertainment cultures). What *Hiro Universe* and *No Ghost Just a Shell* do have in common, besides their use of animanga characters, is a shared interest in both collaboration and DIY ethic. That is, a practice of art that, unlike the sleek transmediality of large entertainment franchises, embraces the time attached of objects, their embeddedness in interpersonal relationships, their history, and consequently, their processual hiccups and even their degradation (e.g., the smudged, the dirty, the broken)—what Sachs calls a form of “bricolage,” that also applies, for instance, to amateur fan art. Unlike the glossy, picture-perfect aesthetics popularized by artists like Murakami Takashi, the use-value of the *kawaii* and animanga aesthetics in Western contemporary art seems to be tied to the “rubbish ecology”<sup>686</sup> of postmodernity, to collecting the bits and scraps of late capitalist commodities, what is gone or rejected, hanging on the threshold of the salvageable.

(See also “Grimes, Nokia, Yolandi,” “Poppy” and “Gaijin Mangaka.”)

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<sup>686</sup> Yaeger, “Editor’s Column.”

# Ika-Tako Virus

In August of 2010, media all over the world, from online technology news websites like *PC World* and *The Wired* to television shows like *The Colbert Report*, covered the news of a Japanese computer virus that replaced data files with pictures of cartoony octopuses, squids, and sea urchins. The Ika-tako virus (イカタコウイルス), translating to English as “Squid-Octopus” (in Japanese, *ika*, イカ, means “squid” and *tako*, 蛸, means “octopus”), was uploaded to the Internet by an unemployed 27-year-old man called Masato Nakatsuji, infecting somewhere between 20,000 and 50,000 computers worldwide. The malware, disguised as a music file, lurked in the depths of *Winny*, a Japanese P2P file-sharing program for Windows. When executed, it worked through the affected hard disks, sending their files to a central server set up by Nakatsuji and replacing them with homemade drawings of marine invertebrates. [Figure 1] Eventually, Nakatsuji was arrested and sentenced by the Tokyo District Court to two years and six months in prison, on charges of property destruction.

Nakatsuji’s drawings resembled the “loose” aesthetics of Japanese *yuru-kyara* (“relaxing characters”). *Yuru-kyara* are unsophisticated mascots whose wobbly, awkward looks make them all the more lovable.<sup>687</sup> [Figure 2] *Kawaii* icons such as Hello Kitty are meant to have an enjoyable, even healing effect on observers<sup>688</sup>; but unlike Hello Kitty and other polished corporate commodities, the *yuru-kyara*’s primary function is to “convey a love for the local area or hometown,”<sup>689</sup> promoting tourism to increase a region’s revenue. Despite their economic goals, *yuru-kyara* come off as noncommercial characters, more earnest and flawed than the slick products of well-oiled profit machines, such as Sanrio (Hello Kitty’s motherhouse). The unassuming quality of Nakatsuji’s amateur drawings, too, is *yurui*, meaning “loose,” “wobbly,” “slack,” “relaxed.” In the media, the most circulated Ika-tako mascot was a bubble-shaped orange octopus with chubby tentacles and a round mouth. This character appeared in several variations: giving a friendly wave, comically angry, wearing an afro. Other figures by Nakatsuji included an adorable, spirited white squid, a lazy-looking whelk, a

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<sup>687</sup> Occhi, “Wobbly Aesthetics, Performance, and Message: Comparing Japanese Kyara with Their Anthropomorphic Forebears,” 113; “Japanese Mascots: The Yuru-Chara Guide,” DeepJapan, January 17, 2016, <http://www.deepjapan.org/a/4289>.

<sup>688</sup> Occhi, “Wobbly Aesthetics, Performance, and Message: Comparing Japanese Kyara with Their Anthropomorphic Forebears,” 111, 113.

<sup>689</sup> “Japanese Mascots.”

sleeping sea urchin, a drooling jellyfish, and a bowtie-wearing starfish. Also, surprisingly, a mole, the only mammal in the group—an animal that lurks underground instead of underwater, but a lurker nonetheless. [Figure 3] The dissonance at play here is that, although Nakatsuji’s characters look *yurui*, they do not heal, but destroy, like any form of “digital pollution,” prompting the Ika-tako virus to vacillate between cuteness and aggression, friendliness and antagonism.

The media responses to the Ika-tako virus demonstrate the ease with which it slips into negative and racialized realms beyond its scope as a simple piece of malware. For instance, in *The Colbert Report*,<sup>690</sup> the popular American host Steven Colbert remarked that the Ika-tako virus was surprising because “believe it or not, these Japanese squid drawings are not pornographic.”<sup>691</sup> Another blogger proclaimed that “Cthulhu attacks Japan’s file-sharers,” stating that the “Ikatako virus... replaces files with pictures of the great squid-god, Cthulhu” and labeling it a “Tentacle Attack.”<sup>692</sup> The fact that, in the western collective imagination, mentions of “squid” and “Japanese” evoke extravagant tentacle erotica and Lovecraftian monstrosity, is also observable in an (in)famous short sketch of the American adult animated sitcom, *Family Guy*.<sup>693</sup> [Video 1] After Stewie corrects Brain that *tai chi* is of Chinese origin, not Japanese, he adds that “the Japanese have a whole other thing going on.” In typical *Family Guy* fashion, the scene cuts abruptly to a Tokyo street where two Japanese men stand talking to each other. The following scene takes place:

Japanese guy 1: Hey, you wanna see a movie?

Japanese guy 2: Nah we’re Japanese, let’s go watch a schoolgirl bang an octopus!

Both: [While high fiving] Yeah!

[An anime octopus slides onto the screen]

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<sup>690</sup> *The Colbert Report* was an American talk and news satire television show hosted by Stephen Colbert. The *The Colbert Report* is said to have had a large cultural impact on American society and culture. “The Colbert Report,” in *Wikipedia*, April 21, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The\\_Colbert\\_Report&oldid=837615783](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Colbert_Report&oldid=837615783); “Cultural Impact of The Colbert Report,” in *Wikipedia*, January 9, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Cultural\\_impact\\_of\\_The\\_Colbert\\_Report&oldid=819526461..](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Cultural_impact_of_The_Colbert_Report&oldid=819526461..)

<sup>691</sup> Jim Hoskinson, TV show, *The Colbert Report* (United States: Comedy Central, August 23, 2010).

<sup>692</sup> “Cthulhu Attacks Japan’s File-Sharers,” *News.3Yen*, August 22, 2010, [news.3yen.com/2010-08-22/cthulhu-attacks-japans-file-sharers/](http://news.3yen.com/2010-08-22/cthulhu-attacks-japans-file-sharers/).

<sup>693</sup> *Family Guy* is an American animated sitcom created by created by Seth MacFarlane for the Fox television network. *Family Guy* is the target of copious criticism and controversy due to its dark humor, sexual themes, and racial jokes. “Criticism of Family Guy,” in *Wikipedia*, May 14, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Criticism\\_of\\_Family\\_Guy&oldid=841247992..](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Criticism_of_Family_Guy&oldid=841247992..)

Octopus: Oide dakishimete ageruyo, suction cup feel goooooo!

[An anime schoolgirl slides onto the screen while the octopus goes after her]

Schoolgirl: [high-pitched] Hiiiiiiiiiii !

Octopus: HmMMM Ha ha haayy...

The sketch feeds off the racial stereotype of Japanese men as sexual deviants with bizarre fetishes. Nevertheless, the fact that the production team chose to shift its regular animation and art style to accommodate the anime octopus and schoolgirl is highly suggestive. The octopus talks and moves around, but his body is still except for the jerky movements of his mouth and tentacles. The schoolgirl, a generic female character reminiscent of *Sailor Moon*, is entirely static, sliding through the screen rather than walking. The scene's perversion is emphasized by the octopus's appearance—a giant, energetic purple cephalopod with plump tentacles, large sparkling eyes, and a coy “:3”-shaped smiley face, closer to a friendly Superflat mascot than to Hokusai's famous *shunga*<sup>694</sup> octopus. In this way, the sketch parodies what is perceived as markers of “Japaneseness” in anime. On the one hand, its limited animation,<sup>695</sup> i.e., the technique of “moving drawings” instead of “drawing movements,”<sup>696</sup> that often characterizes anime on a formal level; on the other, its perverted cuteness, in which the aesthetics of the *kawaii* functions as an ambivalent symbol of innocence and deviancy. In general, the leniency of Japanese comics and animation towards sexually suggestive contents has raised many eyebrows, both internationally and domestically. For instance, series like *Crayon Shin-chan*<sup>697</sup> are targeted initially at a *seinen* (“young adult men”) demographic but are broadcasted in children's television networks and shows in Japan and around the world. As such, Shin-chan “has delighted Japanese children, and infuriated their parents, for more than

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<sup>694</sup> *Shun-ga* (春画, “spring pictures”) is a form of erotic art from Japan. Most *shun-ga* were color woodblock prints (*ukiyo-e*) featuring nudity and explicit sexual content, with a playful and humorous approach to sexuality. Hokusai's *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife* (1814) is one of the most famous *shun-ga*. Zuzanna Stanska, “All You Must Know About Japanese Erotic Art, Shunga (18+),” *DailyArtMagazine*, February 16, 2017, <http://www.dailyartmagazine.com/must-know-japanese-erotic-art-shunga/>.

<sup>695</sup> Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 316.

<sup>696</sup> Thomas Lamarre, “From Animation to Anime: Drawing Movements and Moving Drawings,” *Japan Forum* 14, no. 2 (January 1, 2002): 329–67.

<sup>697</sup> Justin McCurry, “Japanese Children's Cartoon Crayon Shin-Chan Branded Pornography,” *The Guardian*, September 24, 2014, sec. World news, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/24/japanese-children-cartoon-crayon-shin-chan-pornography-indonesia>.

two decades” and continues to raise complaints and restrictions in countries like Portugal and Indonesia.<sup>698</sup>

The connection between monstrous tentacles and cuteness is not limited to Western views on anime, being found in Japanese shows, usually played for comedic effect. As example is the popular manga series *Shinryaku! Ika Musume* (“Invade! Squid Girl”) by Anbe Masahiro, the protagonist is an adorable anthropomorphized girl with hair shaped like blue tentacles. [Figure 4] Although *Ika Musume* is a slice of life comedy with an environmental message—the Squid Girl seeks revenge on humankind for polluting the ocean—the series is no stranger to tentacle rape (in Japanese, *shokushu goukan*) allusions, both in the show and in the works of fans. For instance, the entry for “Squid Girl” in the satirical website *Encyclopedia Dramatica* features various pornographic illustrations of Squid Girl assaulting other female characters with her tentacles. [Figure 5] The fear that octopuses and squids, no matter how cute they appear on the surface, will turn sexually aggressive, speaks to a lineage of tentacle erotica in *ero-manga* and anime pornography—commonly known as “*hentai*” in the West—arguably initiated in in 1814 by Hokusai Katsushika’s famous erotic woodblock print *Tako to Ama* (“Octopuses and shell diver,” known as *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife*). [Figure 6]

As scholar Laura Ettenfield points out, in the West, octopus-like monsters also have a history of association with unrestrained, primitive female sexuality, for instance, in Victor Hugo’s novel *Les Travailleurs de la Mer* (*Toilers of the Sea*, 1866).<sup>699</sup> Nevertheless, because of how pervasive tentacle erotica is in Japanese comics and animation in particular, the Ika-tako virus would be a completely different and arguably less interesting object had Nakatsuji used photographs or realistic drawings of tentacled creatures. It would still align with the broader oceanic terror, or thalassophobia, widespread in literary and popular culture—which has its most well-known representatives in Jules Verne’s giant octopuses in *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* (*Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, 1870) and H. P. Lovecraft’s tentacled abomination, Cthulhu—but the perverse connotations to Japanese animation would be lost. The same applies to the *Family Guy* sketch, whose pervertedness would be decreased had the

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<sup>698</sup> McCurry; Goreti Pera, “Série ‘Shin Chan’ só pode ser emitida após as 22h30. Assim delibera a ERC,” *Notícias ao Minuto*, May 16, 2017, [https://www.noticiasao minuto.com/n/794993/?&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=facebook.com&utm\\_campaign=buffer&utm\\_content=geral](https://www.noticiasao minuto.com/n/794993/?&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer&utm_content=geral).

<sup>699</sup> Laura Ettenfield, “The Octopussy: Exploring Representations of Female Sexuality in Victor Hugo’s *The Toilers of the Sea* (1866) and *The Laughing Man* (1868),” in *Beasts of the Deep: Sea Creatures and Popular Culture*, ed. Jon Hackett and Seán Harrington (Indiana University Press, 2018), 78.

show's standard art and animation been used to depict a "real" octopus and woman. The characters' cuteness is thus at the heart of the heightened sense of violation at play, whether it is sexual, in the case of *Family Guy*, or otherwise invasive, in the case of the Ika-tako virus, that penetrates computers to destroy data.

In these examples, the cute mascots are optimistic, goofy, and relaxed, giving off an impression of blissful innocence, as if unaware of the nefarious consequences of their actions. They are like naughty children, whose behavior, however disruptive, is—or should be, in our experience—fundamentally benevolent.<sup>700</sup> Indeed, Nakatsuji, the creator of the Ika-tako virus, channels this "naughty child" image himself. A graduate student from the Osaka Electro-Communication University, many news reports stressed that Nakatsuji was an unemployed techie in his late twenties, like the stereotypical *otaku* or NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) "parasite single," perceived to be socially or intellectually immature by Japanese society at large. Despite Cool Japan campaigns to rehabilitate the image of *otaku* in the eyes of the general public, *otaku* remain to this day an embodiment of Japan's postmodern afflictions,<sup>701</sup> resulting from the breakdown of discipline, work ethic, and other heteropatriarchal principles, linked in the Japanese memory to horrific events like Miyazaki Tsutomu's brutal child murders, or the recent Kyoto Animation arson attack. Like Murakami Takashi's "little boy"<sup>702</sup> figure, the *otaku* as lost/ infantilized man symbolizes the "displacement of progressive social and political ideals and involvement, and withdrawal into the selfish and conformist middle-class domesticity and material comfort of privatized family life."<sup>703</sup> This regressive movement, as Nakatsuji's actions seem to demonstrate, breeds its own streak of pent of resentment and frustration, eventually manifesting in antisocial behaviors and destructive actions against the social and technological structures of post-industrial society.

Significantly, the Ika-tako virus incident was not the first time that Nakatsuji was arrested for a cybercrime. In 2008, he had been detained in relation to coding and distributing

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<sup>700</sup> Gary Cross, *The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children's Culture* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>701</sup> J. Keith Vincent, "The Genealogy of Japanese Immaturity," in *Nihon-teki sozoryoku no mirai: Kuru japonorōjii no kanosei [The Future of the Japanese Imagination: The Potential of Cool Japanology]*, ed. Hiroki Azuma (Tokyo: NHK Books, 2010), 15–46.

<sup>702</sup> Murakami, *Little Boy*.

<sup>703</sup> Yoda, "The Rise and Fall of Maternal Society: Gender, Labor, and Capital in Contemporary Japan," 246.

the Harada virus, one of Japan's "Big Three" virus at the time,<sup>704</sup> named after an acquaintance of Nakatsuji's called Harada.<sup>705</sup> [Figure 7] Nakatsuji also distributed a Harada subspecies that replaced data with stills from the cult anime series *Clannad*, showing the heroine walking amidst falling cherry blossoms.<sup>706</sup> [Figure 8] Other subspecies of the Harada virus used *moé* characters from shows like *Haruhi Suzumiya*, *Lucky Star*, and *Kanon*. The pictures were captioned with digitally superimposed phrases admonishing the users of Winny for their illegal file-sharing activities.<sup>707</sup> [Figure 9] Such a controversy was brewing in Japan, as Winny's developer Kaneko Isamu was fined and arrested in 2004 for encouraging users to copy and distribute movies, games, and other contents illegally (although the Osaka High Court overturned the decision and acquitted him in 2009).<sup>708</sup> During the trial, Nakatsuji argued that "If movies and animated films are illegally downloaded, TV networks will stop showing these programs in the future." And added: "My hobby is to watch recorded TV programs, so I was trying to stop that."<sup>709</sup> At the time of Nakatsuji's detention, Japan lacked laws against malware creation and distribution. As a result, Nakatsuji was sentenced to two years in prison and a three-year suspended sentence for the copyright infringement of *Clannad* and defaming another student (presumably, Harada).<sup>710</sup>

Nakatsuji's justifications for his actions, namely, his statement that he was trying to save the Japanese culture industry from piracy by creating and distributing a computer virus, grant him the aura of a "naughty child" with his heart in the right place but questionable means. In the same vein, Nakatsuji told the police that he did not think that he would be arrested for

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<sup>704</sup> Yuri Kageyama, "Japanese Police Arrest Alleged Spammer," *msnbc.com*, January 25, 2008, [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/22841443/ns/technology\\_and\\_science-security/t/japanese-police-arrest-alleged-spammer/](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/22841443/ns/technology_and_science-security/t/japanese-police-arrest-alleged-spammer/).

<sup>705</sup> "Japanese Police Arrest Inventor of Computer Virus," *Scoop News*, February 1, 2008, <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/WL0802/S01351/cablegate-japanese-police-arrest-inventor-of-computer-virus.htm>.

<sup>706</sup> Duncan Geere, "Japanese Virus Replaces Files with Pictures of Squid," Japanese virus, *WIRED UK*, August 16, 2010, <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/japanese-virus>.

<sup>707</sup> "Kyou Is a Virus ...," こねこね倶楽部, August 5, 2010, <http://minkara.carview.co.jp/userid/362842/blog/19150873/>; Jerad Moya, "Japanese Man Behind P2P Virus Receives Suspended Sentence," *ZeroPaid.Com*, May 19, 2008, [http://www.zeropaid.com/news/9502/japanese\\_man\\_behind\\_p2p\\_virus\\_receives\\_suspended\\_sentence/](http://www.zeropaid.com/news/9502/japanese_man_behind_p2p_virus_receives_suspended_sentence/).

<sup>708</sup> "Winny Developer Kaneko Dies at 42," *The Japan Times Online*, July 8, 2013, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/07/08/national/winny-developer-kaneko-dies-at-42/>.

<sup>709</sup> "Japanese P2P Virus Writer Convicted, Escapes Jail," *Government Technology*, May 16, 2008, <http://www.govtech.com/security/Japanese-P2P-Virus-Writer-Convicted-Escapes-Jail.html>.

<sup>710</sup> Egan Loo, "Clannad Malware Creator Gets Two Years in Prison," *Anime News Network*, May 16, 2008, <http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/news/2008-05-16/clannad-malware-creator-gets-two-years-in-prison>.

the Ika-tako virus, as he had created the squid and octopus drawings himself.<sup>711</sup> When questioned about the Ika-tako virus, Nakatsuji also claimed that “I wanted to see how much my computer programming skills had improved since the last time I was arrested.”<sup>712</sup> These declarations align Nakatsuji with what Sharon Kinsella calls the “little rebellion”<sup>713</sup> of Japanese cuteness, as opposed to the more conscious and aggressive stances that often characterize Western countercultures. Although Nakatsuji’s words are not openly confrontational, they make a mockery out of petty copyright laws and the absurd fact that he was first arrested for violating intellectual property instead of his actual cybercrime. Indeed, Japan’s bill against cybercrime was only approved and revised in 2011, one year after Nakatsuji was sentenced, this time around, for property damage caused by the Ika-tako virus—another workaround used by the Japanese authorities at the time to punish malware developers in the absence of specific laws.<sup>714</sup> Likewise, Nakatsuji’s drive to do his best in malware creation jabs at Japan’s culture of *ganbaru* (“perseverance”), whose ubiquitousness rivals that of the *kawaii*, and that many Japanese consider oppressive.<sup>715</sup>

All in all, the Ika-tako virus could be said to have a nostalgic quality, resembling “the cute computer viruses of the past.”<sup>716</sup> As Rich McCormick puts it in an article for *The Verge*, there was an earlier, more earnest period in computer history when flashy malware set out to destroy a computer, pure and simple, instead of mining for credit card information and other exploitable data.<sup>717</sup> The website *Malware Museum* offers an online archive of these computer viruses from the 1980s and 1990s, that operated in MS-DOS. The viruses have been neutralized, removing their harmful code and leaving only the colorful, playful visuals that can be downloaded by *Museum*’s visitors. Some of these old viruses, like “Mars Land,” appeal to the poetic beauty of the medium, showing a digital landscape of red dunes with the tagline “coding a virus can be creative.” [Figure 10] Others take a more straightforward approach, like

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<sup>711</sup> Geere, “Japanese Virus Replaces Files with Pictures of Squid.”

<sup>712</sup> Geere.

<sup>713</sup> Sharon Kinsella, “Cuties in Japan,” in *Women, Media, and Consumption in Japan*, ed. Lise Skov and Brian Moeran (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 243.

<sup>714</sup> Masayoshi Someya, “Japan Outlaws Creating Malware,” *TrendLabs Security Intelligence Blog*, June 22, 2011, <https://blog.trendmicro.com/trendlabs-security-intelligence/japan-outlaws-creating-malware/>.

<sup>715</sup> Colin P. A. Jones, “Too Much ‘Ganbaru’ Could Push Anyone over the Edge,” *The Japan Times Online*, June 8, 2015, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2015/06/08/language/much-push-anyone-edge/>.

<sup>716</sup> Rich McCormick, “The Malware Museum Shows the Cute Computer Viruses of the Past,” *The Verge*, February 8, 2016, <http://www.theverge.com/2016/2/8/10935080/malware-museum-computer-virus-internet-archive>.

<sup>717</sup> McCormick.



that “one piece of nefarious code that simply displays the word ‘ha!’ in flickering ASCII characters.”<sup>718</sup> [Figure 11] The Ika-tako virus may be less spiteful in tone, but still pushes the boundaries of naughtiness, naivety, and spontaneity, threading into a territory of negativity where *kawaii* visuals, race, sexuality, and cybercrime conflate.

While computer viruses and cuteness may seem like an odd pairing, their history interlocks from their onset. The Cookie Monster program from MIT Multics, often credited as the world’s first computer virus, was named after “a heavily-aired cereal commercial of the time [that] featured a ‘Cookie Bear,’ after which the annoying behavior of this program was patterned.”<sup>719</sup> The original program was a harmless prank coded by an IBM computer operator at Brown University in the late 1960s, who manually activated it to tease unsuspecting students.<sup>720</sup> In 1970, an MIT freshman, Seth Stein, created an automated version of the Cookie Monster, that “spread from its birthplace... to practically every Multics site in the world,”<sup>721</sup> including the Pentagon—even though, unlike later viruses, the Cookie Monster did not replicate itself, thus having to be transferred manually from site to site via magnetic tape.<sup>722</sup> The Cookie Monster ran in the background, occasionally blocking the computer processes to display a message requesting a cookie. After a few minutes, if no action took place, it flashed the message “I didn’t want a cookie anyway” and disappeared.<sup>723</sup> If users typed in the word “cookie,” the “Cookie Monster” flashed “thank you” and went to sleep, unblocking the computer.<sup>724</sup> [Video 2] Rumors have it that writing the word “oreo” would remove the virus entirely.<sup>725</sup> In popular culture, the program came to be associated with the Cookie Monster from *Sesame Street* (who only debuted in 1969, after the creation of the virus), mostly, because of the 1995 film *Hackers*, which included a fictitious rendition of the Cookie Monster virus featuring the famous muppet. [Video 3]

The playful nature of the Cookie Monster virus highlights how cuteness’s phenomeno-poetics are tied to the idea that, as historian Gary Cross puts it, “the cute can steal cookies from

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<sup>718</sup> McCormick.

<sup>719</sup> Christopher Tavares, “Origin of the Cookie Monster,” *Multics*, March 13, 1995, <http://www.multicians.org/cookie.html>.

<sup>720</sup> Tavares.

<sup>721</sup> Tavares.

<sup>722</sup> Tavares.

<sup>723</sup> Laura Fitzpatrick, “The Biggest Pranks in Geek History,” *Time*, September 8, 2008, [http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1839579\\_1839578\\_1839526,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1839579_1839578_1839526,00.html).

<sup>724</sup> Fitzpatrick.

<sup>725</sup> Talainia Posey, “When Viruses Attack,” *TechRepublic*, February 25, 2000, <https://www.techrepublic.com/article/when-viruses-attack/?tag=content%3Bsiu-container>.

the cookie jar but do it without real malice or greed.”<sup>726</sup> Ironically, it was this naughty but innocuous child, the Cookie Monster, that opened Pandora’s box of malware, as similar programs began to be used to steal passwords from computer users.<sup>727</sup> In fact, more recently, a malware called Rensenware took the “cuteness” of Cookie Monster-like viruses to new, sadistic extents. Instead of asking for bitcoins like ransomware usually does,<sup>728</sup> Rensenware demanded that victims played *Touhou Seirensen~ Undefined Fantastic Object* (2009), the twelfth installment of the cult series of Japanese bullet hell<sup>729</sup> shooter videogames, *Touhou Project*. *Touhou Project* (東方 Project) is a *dōjin* (self-published) game by the one-person Japanese game developer Ōta Jun'ya, under the pseudonym ZUN, whose first installment, *Highly Responsive to Prayers*, was released in 1996 for NEC’s PC-9801. The series, featuring cute graphics and music in anime style, revolves around a shrine maiden who fights *yōkai* (a type of Japanese folkloric monster) while dodging waves of projectiles covering the entire screen. When Rensenware is activated, a pop-up window appears showing a picture of the character Murasa Minamitsu—a boss from *Undefined Fantastic Object* who is a female spirit in a sailor suit—requiring that victims not only beat the game but do so in maximum difficulty (“Lunatic”) and reaching 200 million points. [Figure 11] The task is virtually impossible, as even the perfect playthroughs available online, displaying incredible levels of gaming skill, fail to get the 200 million mark. [Figure 4] Thus, while at first glance, Rensenware was kind enough to grant its victims a chance to regain control over their computers, they were in for an incredibly frustrating ride. Gone are the days where “cookies” and “Oreos” were enough to appease an annoying, but mostly harmless program.

Rensenware, as it turned out, was also the work of a prankster. According to *Kotaku*, its creator was a Korean undergraduate student who wrote Rensenware as a joke because he

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<sup>726</sup> Cross, *The Cute and the Cool*, 44.

<sup>727</sup> Rob Wentworth, “Computer Virus!,” *Up All Night Robotics*, July 1996, <http://uanr.com/articles/virus.html>.

<sup>728</sup> “Ransomware,” a portmanteau of “ramson” and “malware,” is malicious software “used to mount extortion-based attacks that cause loss of access to information, loss of confidentiality, and information leakage” A. Young and Moti Yung, “Cryptovirology: Extortion-Based Security Threats and Countermeasures,” in *Proceedings 1996 IEEE Symposium on Security and Privacy* (1996 IEEE Symposium on Security and Privacy, Oakland, CA, USA: IEEE Comput. Soc. Press, 1996), 159.

<sup>729</sup> “Bullet hell,” also called *danmaku* (弹幕, “barrage”), are a subgenre of vertically-scrolling shoot ‘em up videogames from the early 1990s, where players must dodge an overwhelming number (hundreds or thousands) of bullet-like projectiles, arranged in intricate patterns “Bullet Hell,” *TV Tropes*, accessed September 28, 2018, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BulletHell>; “Shoot ‘em Up,” in *Wikipedia*, August 16, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Shoot\\_%27em\\_up&oldid=855111497..](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Shoot_%27em_up&oldid=855111497..)

was bored.<sup>730</sup> He fell asleep after uploading Rensenware to *GitHub* (an online software development platform for computer code), realizing the next morning that it had spread. After that, he uploaded an “antidote” software accompanied by an apology to those who were affected by the virus.<sup>731</sup> “I made it for [a] joke,” he wrote. “And just laughing with people who like *Touhou Project Series*.”<sup>732</sup> Like the Cookie Monster, the cuteness of the Ika-tako and Rensenware viruses, resulting in both cases from their use of animanga visuals, reflects the nature of their creators as “naughty children” who wreak havoc out of boredom or earnest, if misplaced, intentions. While these microphenomena are fascinating in and of themselves, such cute aggression suggests a broader impact in the realm of digital pollution: a mixture of candor and *detournement*—literally, “rerouting” or “hijacking,” which is what malware does, by seizing or eliminating computer data. The “weird materialities”<sup>733</sup> resulting from the entanglement of cuteness and digital disgust may be counterintuitive, but they are surprisingly widespread, impacting how humans relate to technical artifacts and navigate the advanced capitalist world of the twenty-first century.

(See also “Creepypasta” and “Red Toad Tumblr Post”)

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<sup>730</sup> Cecilia D’Anastasio, “Anime Malware Locks Your Files Unless You Play A Game,” *Kotaku*, July 4, 2017, <https://kotaku.com/anime-malware-locks-your-files-unless-you-play-a-game-1794120750>.

<sup>731</sup> D’Anastasio.

<sup>732</sup> D’Anastasio.

<sup>733</sup> Parikka, “Medianatures,” 96.

# It Girl\*

On September 30, 2014, American superstar singer and producer Pharrell Williams dropped the official music video for “It Girl,”<sup>735</sup> the fifth single and closing track of his studio album *G I R L* released earlier that year.<sup>736</sup> [Video 1] After Williams’s participation in Robin Thicke’s controversial “Blurred Lines,” which triggered an outpouring of outrage for its blatantly misogynistic lyrics and music video, [Figure 1] *G I R L* was hailed as a feminist comeback, “an audacious, almost-concept album celebrating women and aiming to highlight society’s gender imbalance.”<sup>737</sup> [Figure 2] Williams’s redemption through newfound feminism was short-lived, though, as it became apparent that his good intentions did not have the desired results. Indeed, Williams’s tribute to womanhood is undermined by objectifying lyrics and not-so-emancipatory gender stereotypes, leaving critics to oscillate between cynicism and lamentation over a man with his heart in the right place but little understanding of the feminist movement.

Although the music videos for *G I R L* singles such as “Marilyn Monroe,” “Come Get It Bae,” or “Gust of Wind” feature women from different races and ages, they are all conventionally attractive and seemingly under forty, despite the ostentatious red text claiming that “BEAUTY HAS NO EXPIRATION DATE” at the beginning of “Come Get It Bae.” [Video 2] The mixed message is that Williams’s sexual appreciation of women—not the women themselves—is the protagonist in these songs and videos that depict groups of female dancers as props in bodycon outfits, performing raunchy poses and choreographies to a camera that tirelessly pans and fixates on their bodies. In “Come Get It Bae,” the women openly perform for Williams, as he either watches from a director’s chair, aided by a Panopticon-like set of giant mirrors surrounding the dancers from the sides, or films them himself, holding a

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\* This entry is an abridged version of my longer article “Against Teleology: Nostalgia and the Vicissitudes of Connectedness in Pharrell Williams’s Music Video *It Girl*,” published in the peer-reviewed academic journal *Mechademia: Second Arc* (University of Minnesota Press), specializing in Japanese popular culture (Ana Matilde Sousa, “Against Teleology: Nostalgia and the Vicissitudes of Connectedness in Pharrell Williams’ It Girl Music Video,” *Mechademia: Second Arc* 1, no. 1).

<sup>735</sup> *It girl*, directed by Mr. and Fantasia Utamaro and produced by Murakami Takashi (Tokyo, New York: NAZ, Kaikai Kiki), released September 30, 2014.

<sup>736</sup> Pharrell Williams, *G I R L*, New York: i am OTHER and Columbia Records, 2014, CD, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPZDBF0kei0> (accessed November 12, 2017).

<sup>737</sup> Michael Cragg, “First Listen: Pharrell’s G I R L,” *The Guardian*, February 21, 2014, sec. Music, para. 1, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/feb/21/first-listen-pharrell-girl-2014-album>.

hand camera while circulating the women to capture their forms from various angles.

Against this backdrop, the music video for “It Girl” added insult to injury, as a disturbed Internet crowd discovered that, if beauty has no expiration date, it has no lower limit either. More than any other video from the album, *It Girl* elicited scandalous headlines with the repeated use of adjectives such as “creepy” and “pedophilic.” All because the video’s it-girl is no ordinary human, but a character out of Japanese animation that looks too young to be the target of Williams’s titillating verses. *It Girl* follows a blue-eyed blonde teenybopper called Yoshi ♪(ch)!! and her group of girlfriends—Hatsume, Hiromi, Ponite, Honda, and Juri—as they enjoy day and night activities at a paradisiacal beach resort. [Figures 3 & 4] The overall enthusiasm for the video’s spectacular anime- and videogame-inspired visuals was not enough to deter concerns over Williams’s flirtation with a jailbait character. As stated by one commentator, “With so much pedophilia on the Internet, it seems strange that one of the most popular artists in the world, Pharrell Williams, would embrace the theme.”<sup>738</sup> Statements like this indicate that, while Williams’s song would ordinarily go unnoticed in any mid-afternoon MTV tale of male desire for beautiful women, the issue in *It Girl* goes well beyond the prevalent sexism in mainstream culture to acquire pathological contours.

There was also a great deal of confusion over the video’s aesthetic, with those unfamiliar with the subtleties of animanga imaginaries grabbing onto the closest identifiable reference they could find, like “Pokémon-inspired”<sup>739</sup> and “Sailor Moon-like anime.”<sup>740</sup> Although the roots of orientalism in Western music run deep, “It Girl” is a mainstream song whose music video taps into a subcultural specificity beyond the science fiction, animanga characters, and kana pastiches most familiar to general Western audiences. Despite its clickbaity headline, journalist Matt Alt’s article titled “Pharrell Williams’s *Lolicon* Video” shed some light on the *It Girl* controversy, painting a more nuanced picture and introducing two key terms into the discussion: *lolicon* and *moé*. Alt also identifies the “culprits” who codirected *It Girl* as a “pseudonymous pair of Japanese artists: the textile designer Fantasista

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<sup>738</sup> Joseph Mackin, “Hating Pharrell’s Creepy ‘It Girl’ Lolicon Video,” *2Paragraphs*, October 16, 2014, para. 1, <http://2paragraphs.com/2014/10/hating-pharrells-creepy-it-girl-lolicon-video/>.

<sup>739</sup> Nick Murray, “Watch Pharrell’s Anime, Pokemon-Inspired ‘It Girl’ Video,” *Rolling Stone*, September 30, 2014, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/videos/watch-pharrells-anime-pokemon-inspired-it-girl-video-20140930>.

<sup>740</sup> Dave Lewis, “Pharrell Williams Gets Even Weirder in Creepy Anime Video for ‘It Girl,’” *HitFix*, September 30, 2014, [http://www.hitfix.com/video/overlay/alvin-and-the-chipmunks-the-squeakuel?player\\_id=HypxEiJS&referrer=](http://www.hitfix.com/video/overlay/alvin-and-the-chipmunks-the-squeakuel?player_id=HypxEiJS&referrer=).

Utamaro and the secretive painter known only as Mr.”<sup>741</sup> [Figure 5a, b] Secretive is hardly the case: Mr., art name of Iwamoto Masakatsu, is not only Murakami Takashi’s former-protégé-cum-righthand-man and an established artist in his own right, but has been the subject of numerous interviews, art books, high-profile brand collaborations, and even owns an Instagram account where he shares his daily life and artistic process in detail. Still, Alt successfully contextualizes *It Girl* as part of the broader strategy of “re-packaging edgy Japanese pop culture for unwitting foreign audiences.”<sup>742</sup>

*It Girl* indeed encapsulates what Iwabuchi Kōichi calls the “culturally odorless” or “stateless” (*mukokuseki*) quality of many animanga products,<sup>743</sup> weaving together the Japanese pop-cultural sphere with playful references to American graffiti, street fashion, fast food, and iconic monuments like Mount Rushmore. Utamaro’s colorful pop patterns blend seamlessly with the vibrant cuteness of Mr.’s paintings and sculptures inspired by the closeted fantasies of *otaku*, now transposed to the medium of animation. [Figure 6] While the contemporary acceptance of “*otaku*” is *grosso modo* similar to that of the Western “geek” or “nerd,” and both are traditionally associated with “failed masculinity,”<sup>744</sup> the *otaku* have become entangled with the *shōjo* through their perceived adhesion to an infantilized and feminized consumer lifestyle.<sup>745</sup> Nowhere is the *otaku-shōjo* entanglement more visible than in Lolita complex genres like *lolicon* and *moé* that, as argued by Patrick Galbraith, attest to a toonphilic gaze rather than a pedophilic one. As he puts it, the historical development of *lolicon* suggests that it “was not necessarily about attraction to young girl characters, let alone real children, but rather an attraction to cute, cartoony, manga/anime style characters.”<sup>746</sup> Psychologist Saitō Tamaki, who has explored the sexual and romantic attraction to animanga characters, argues that *otaku*’s toonphilia does not stem from the inability to distinguish reality from fantasy (as it is often presumed) but rather a longing for the fictional *shōjo* herself. In other words, “*Otaku* realize that the object of desire is fiction, and desire it precisely because it is fiction.”<sup>747</sup> *Lolicon* has been the subject of various controversies in Japan, including the “nonexistent youth bill”

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<sup>741</sup> Matt Alt, “Pharrell Williams’s Lolicon Video,” *The New Yorker*, October 15, 2014, para. 2, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/pharrell-williamss-lolicon-girl>.

<sup>742</sup> Alt, para. 11.

<sup>743</sup> Iwabuchi, *Recentring Globalization*, 27–28.

<sup>744</sup> Galbraith, “‘Otaku’ Research’ and Anxiety About Failed Men,” 1–34.

<sup>745</sup> Galbraith, “Lolicon,” 87.

<sup>746</sup> Patrick W. Galbraith, “‘The Lolicon Guy’: Some Observations on Researching Unpopular Topics in Japan,” in *The End of Cool Japan: Ethical, Legal, and Cultural Challenges to Japanese Popular Culture*, ed. Mark McLelland (Routledge, 2016), 113.

<sup>747</sup> Galbraith, “Lolicon,” 106.

that sought to legalize manga with child-pornographic contents (defeated in the Japanese parliament and replaced by the milder Bill 156 in 2010). [Figure 7a, b] This bill sparked a wave of protests by well-known artists, including Murakami Takashi's photographic series in the fashion magazine *POP* of American singer Britney Spears in dresses and poses referencing Matsuyama Seiji's *lolicon* manga *Oku-sama wa Shōgakusei* ("My wife is a primary school student"), one of the censorship targets. [Figure 8]

The 2D complex is the point in *It Girl*, but unleashing the video on Williams's international audiences erases such subtleties. This explains why *It Girl* has been wrongly categorized as *lolicon*, when it is, in fact, a full-on incursion into *moé* territory. *Lolicon* entails sexually explicit, or at least suggestive, depictions of underage characters, and whereas a few shots in *It Girl* can be taken as lightly erotic (especially of the cast's more voluptuous girls), the video does not include such materials. Considering the "moé turn" in Mr.'s oeuvre, this is not surprising. In the late 2000s and 2010s, the artist has moved away from his earlier, more risqué imagery inspired by *lolicon*, toward a greater emphasis on cuteness and the fantasy worlds of *moé*. [Figure 9] The frequency with which the word "lolicon" appears in discussions about *It Girl* could have had anyone fooled, though. In a substantial pool of articles, most mention the words "lolicon" or "pedophilia," while only a few use the term "moé." One plausible reason for such discrepancy is that, while *lolicon* is a simple enough concept to understand and (negatively) react to, *moé* is a polysemic concept characterized by being difficult to describe.

As a slang word, "moé" (萌え) is thought to have emerged online in Japanese textboards like *2channel* in the late 1990s, referring to the *otaku*'s passion for fictional characters.<sup>748</sup> The term encompasses an etymological duplicity: the verb "moeru," from which the noun "moé" derives, is pronounced the same whether it refers to 燃える, meaning "to burn" or "to get excited about," or 萌える, meaning "to bud" or "to sprout."<sup>749</sup> It is said that Japanese word processors would mistakenly convert one into the other.<sup>750</sup> Significantly, the rise of "moé" as slang coincided with a shift in animanga aesthetics from *lolicon* and *bishōjo*

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<sup>748</sup> Patrick W. Galbraith, "Moe and the Potential of Fantasy in Post-Millennial Japan," *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*, October 31, 2009, <http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/articles/2009/Galbraith.html>.

<sup>749</sup> Patrick W. Galbraith, "Introduction: Falling In Love With Japanese Characters," in *The Moe Manifesto: An Insider's Look at the Worlds of Manga, Anime, and Gaming* (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2014), 5.

<sup>750</sup> Galbraith, 5.

(“beautiful girl”) to a new type of character known as *loli*—rounder, cuter, and removed from the “blatant sexuality [that] would destroy the illusion of innocence that is part of the *moé* appeal.”<sup>751</sup> Although *lolicon* and *moé* share more than a few gray zones, *moé* provides a safe(r) place for male *otaku* to express tenderness for child characters as one does for a daughter (*musume*) or little sister (*imōto*), in slice of life or fantasy settings like magical girls. In general, the visual and behavioral infantilization of *loli*, who tend to look pubescent or pre-pubescent regardless of how old they are diegetically, results in a decrease of *moé*’s artistic age.

Unlike the shapely, long-legged girls who resemble calendar models typical of *bishōjo* aesthetics, the *loli* emphasizes curved lines and overall body proportions that make characters look young and petite. While female protagonists in male-oriented media are by and large hypersexualized women (e.g., videogames such as *Tomb Raider* or *Bayonetta*), the main characters in many *moé* series are short-for-their-age, flat-chested girls, with the large-breasted ones occupying supporting roles. Other traits include large, soft puppy-dog eyes and almost nonexistent noses, rendered as dots rather than the traditional L- shape of manga iconography. Compare, for instance, the protagonists of two iconic magical girl series with a twenty-year age gap: Tsukino Usagi from *Sailor Moon* (1991) and Kaname Madoka from *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (2011). Both series feature heroines who, according to their descriptions, are about the same age and height (14 years old, 150 cm), yet Usagi’s *bishōjo* design makes her appear significantly taller and more “womanly” than Madoka’s childish frame. [Figure 10]

Despite the proliferation of *loli* characters associated with the “*moé* turn” in *otaku* culture, the connection between these two concepts remains contested. Galbraith, the author of *The Moé Manifesto* (2014), has long since maintained that *moé* is an action—one feels *moé* for someone or something—rather than a language or vocabulary (visual or otherwise), arguing that *moé* “should be understood as a response, and thus as an issue of reception” unassociated with “a specific style, character type or relational pattern.”<sup>752</sup> *The Moé Manifesto* is based on that premise, explaining why Galbraith is surprised by the aversion that *moé* generates inside and outside the animanga fandom.<sup>753</sup> By situating *moé* unilaterally in humans reacting to

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<sup>751</sup> Thompson, “Moe: The Cult of the Child.”

<sup>752</sup> Patrick W. Galbraith, “Moe: Exploring Virtual Potential in Post-Millennial Japan,” in *Researching Twenty-First Century Japan: New Directions and Approaches for the Electronic Age*, ed. Timothy Iles and Peter Matanle (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2012), 343.

<sup>753</sup> “After all this time, I still can’t quite understand the position of the anti-*moé* camp, which calls certain fans ‘*moé* pigs’ or worse. Why should it matter so much if someone is in love with a character and wants to share that love with others? Such actions aren’t harming anyone... Love is never an easy thing to understand, and it can be embarrassing to watch the silly things that people do when they are



characters and not in the characters themselves, Galbraith fails to account for the fact that, as it stands, two meanings coexist in the word “*moé*”: a love for characters located in specific individuals (*otaku*) and an aesthetic traceable in certain character types, settings, and tropes, revolving around “cute girls doing cute things.” Ironically, a cursory look through *The Moé Manifesto*, richly illuminated with dozens of full-color *loli*, is enough to get a solid grasp on the type of characters associated with the phenomenon. As such, one should not dismiss *moé*’s etymological duplicity as the overblown result of a typo, but as a core—semantic, but also political and aesthetic—ambivalence at the heart of the concept.

The fact that *moé* is considered the spiritual successor of *lolicon* has elicited many sociological and anthropological interpretations for its current popularity. One common view is that *moé* reflects the longing for fatherhood by single, childless *otaku* with limited family-building prospects, in an aging Japan where young women seem inclined to renounce their traditional role as wives and mothers.<sup>754</sup> Critics like Jason Thompson have highlighted the problematic implications of *moé* as a “daughter syndrome” fueling reactionary fantasies of female infantilization and domesticity.<sup>755</sup> These arguments are the reason why the *moé* debate cannot be reduced, as Galbraith suggests, to whether one embraces love or condemns it. Instead, *moé* is prone to intellectual deadlocks, often resolved by grossly oversimplifying matters as parties hasten to polarize the discussion into pro and anti-fields. As a result, for instance, nonconformative *moé* audiences are disregarded, that are neither male nor straight (gay men, straight women, lesbians, and so on) and whose motivations cannot be explained away by internalized misogyny.

*It Girl* deploys different strategies to insert Williams into the video’s girl-centric narrative without disturbing its *moé* authenticity. Namely, Williams’s body, like Yoshi ㇀ (ch)!!’s and the other girls,’ is exposed to multiple transformations throughout which his trademark features, like the hat and bow, remain mostly constant. Williams first appears as a color-changing watercolor silhouette dancing over a pattern of girls, national flags, letters, characters, and other disparate floating pop elements. [Figure 11] Then, he transforms into a cute *chibi* caricature of himself, with an oversized head and cocky expression and poses. [Figure 12] From there, Williams becomes a 16-bit videogame character evocative of Nintendo

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in love, but I for one think we should embrace love rather than condemn it.” Galbraith, “Introduction: Falling In Love With Japanese Characters,” 21.

<sup>754</sup> Thompson, “Moe: The Cult of the Child.”

<sup>755</sup> Thompson.

platforms, side-scrolling along the seashore while jumping over obstacles like bonfires and crabs, and collecting special items. Still in retro computer animation, he returns with a letterboxed close-up of his face in a more realistic style, exhibiting the “shining eye of determination”—a Japanese visual trope indicating firm resolve, here directed at the girls—while parodying the old-school technique of action anime, where a still shot slides across the screen for added drama.

In *It Girl*'s most controversial sequence, Williams observes the girls from afar using binoculars, like a stalker or voyeur, as the group takes advantage of a napping Yoshi ♪(ch)!! and her friend to make sand constructions over their sleeping bodies. Significantly, these superimposed sculptural forms mimic the stereotypical appearance of a voluptuous and a pregnant woman. [Figure 13a, b] This comical vignette is enclosed by the ominous “OO” shape of Williams’s binoculars, highlighting that what is desired is not the *loli* per se, but everything that she does *not* signify: a reproductive adult embedded within the social order. This explains why, unlike the self-inserts in *Come Get It Bae* and *Marilyn Monroe*, Williams’s relationship with Yoshi ♪(ch)!! in *It Girl* is always indirect—after all, *lolicon* are structurally alone, as they “will never be able to hold the object of .... true affection.”<sup>756</sup> By putting Williams in the shoes of the “pedophilic *otaku* pervert,”<sup>757</sup> the fantasy of the successful man who gets the girl is returned as delusional, narcissistic, and disconnected from reality. Likewise, the parodic insertion of Mr., Williams, Murakami, and Murakami’s pet dog Pom as solemn faces on Mount Rushmore, or Mr.’s self-portrait as a ditzy 16-bit character hiding behind a palm tree while fanboying over Yoshi ♪(ch)!! and taking selfies, come off as a mockery of patriarchal authority, represented as inert or thoroughly unreliable in its patheticness. [Figure 14]

Another scene, whose potential for obscenity might have been lost on many Western viewers, shows Williams flirting with Yoshi ♪(ch)!! through the interface of a dating simulator. [Figure 15] Dating sims are a subset of videogames originating in Japan where players pursue romantic relationships with fictional characters, ranging from platonic love to hardcore sex, depending on the game. Williams selects Yoshi ♪(ch)!! from a title screen featuring all six girls, offering her different *yukata* until he settles for one patterned after Mr.’s

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<sup>756</sup> Tamaki Saitō, “The Ethics and Creativity of Moe,” in *Mr.* (Paris; Tokyo: Galerie Perrotin; Kaikai Kiki, 2011), 119.

<sup>757</sup> Thompson, “Moe: The Cult of the Child.”

paintings, accessorized with a cute bunny bag. “You are so sweet, Pharrell!!” reads a text box on the screen, as Yoshi ♪(ch)!!’s eyes shine with excitement at the gift. Other text boxes provide flavorful dialogs and profile information, letting us know that the it-girl is a Virgo born in Saitama (the city where Mr. is based) who enjoys Japanese chess (*shōgi*). While less obvious than the binoculars scene, the dating sim reference is just as incriminating, attesting that Williams is in fact, as feared by the video’s anti-*lolicon* critics, courting a fictional underage girl. It also serves as a reminder of the tainted roots of *moé*, that first emerged in 1990s adult dating sims like *To Heart* (1997), before morphing into its present, desexualized form.<sup>758</sup>

The negativity embedded in such scenes comes full circle in *It Girl*’s adherence to the “beach episode” format. A common type of filler episode in Japanese animation, beach episodes usually have no relevance for the story’s overarching meaning, as their primary purpose is to provide gratuitous fanservice, mainly of erotic nature, to please viewers. *It Girl* checks many boxes of the archetypal beach episode, like the volleyball match providing acrobatic shots of the characters’ bodies in bathing suits, [Figure 16] the *suikawari* (watermelon splitting game), water sports, *matsuri* (traditional Japanese festival), *hanabi* (fireworks), and promenade melancholy by the sea. Eventually, *It Girl* renounces the slice of life “realism” of its first half, giving way, in the latter (instrumental) half of William’s song, to typical Mr.-esque psychedelia of glittering skies cluttered with *kawaii* paraphernalia and endless flower fields shining like diamonds. [Figure 17] At the video’s climax, the girls board a dolphin spaceship to fight a magical battle against floating *nigiri*, hiragana characters, miniature Tokyo towers, and giant *loli* heads, while striking vintage *tokusatsu* action hero poses.

*It Girl*’s insistence on the antiteleological temporalities stemming from *moé*—the retro, the filler, the escapist—echoes what literary critic Marcos Natali calls the “bad politics” and “bad history” of nostalgia. Because nostalgia evades the modern ideology of historical perfectibility, it is infused with an “accusatory energy”<sup>759</sup> pertaining to improper relations with the past experienced by imperfectly modernized Others; a position that the Japanese have long since occupied, as demonstrated by General Douglas MacArthur’s (in)famous declaration that Japan was “like a boy of twelve” compared to mature Western nations. The flip side of the

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<sup>758</sup> Satoshi Todome, “A History of Eroge,” trans. kj1980, “To Heart (1997),” <http://archive.is/HD0Z#selection-27.110-27.116>.

<sup>759</sup> Marcos Natali, “History and the Politics of Nostalgia,” *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2004): 11.

*kawaii* characters in *It Girl*, inhabiting a regressive and inaccurate “Japanese” playscape of pristine Okinawan nature, *matsuri* festivals, graffiti, and magical girls, are the pitiful or pathetic (*kawaisō*) men who misdirect their adult sexuality at children. Their presence ruins the fun for other people, making the mood turn sour, and it is in this quality of self-deprecating comic reliefs that *lolicon* often appear in the “safe, charming, and incorrupt”<sup>760</sup> worlds of *moé* animanga, where male bodies are mostly absent. [Figure 18]

Nevertheless, many find the portrayal of pedophiles as harmless losers instead of sexual predators disturbing, with good reason. Ironically, what pushes *It Girl* into overt *lolicon* territory are Williams’s verses like “When you bite on my lip/ And hold my hand, and moan again/ I’m a hold that ass,” superimposed on otherwise chaste *moé* girls. In an interview, Mr. comments on this perverse effect, stating that “I thought that combining the (*otaku*-tinged) Japanese image of girls with the respect that Pharrell was trying to express for femininity would produce something interesting.”<sup>761</sup> Perhaps inadvertently, that “something interesting” not only exposes the shortcomings of Williams’s feminism but the crumbling linearity of Cool Japan narratives of global success.

Considering that *It Girl* was preceded by the hugely popular single “Happy,” the debasement of Williams as a benevolent pop star with his heart in the right place generated much unhappiness. Remarks along the lines of “He looks like a pedophile stalking little girls”<sup>762</sup> multiply on the video’s *YouTube* comment section. Others express their disappointment at Williams, complaining: “This is the anime I stayed away from,” or “Dude, you’re ruining anime for people.”<sup>763</sup> One commentator vehemently states: “This is actually disgusting. And please STOP with the ‘how do you know it’s an underage girl!!’ . . . This is gross and I don’t see how anyone can support it. Ewww,”<sup>764</sup> while another goes as far as declaring: “I wish I never watched this weeaboo cancer video.”<sup>765</sup> The word “weeaboo” recurs time and time again in *It Girl*’s *YouTube* comments to attack the video’s American-Japanese

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<sup>760</sup> Gullette, “The Exile of Adulthood,” 216.

<sup>761</sup> Hannah Stamler, “Murakami Protégé Mr. Invites You into the Dark Depths of Neo-Pop,” *The Creators Project*, February 23, 2015, para. 12, <http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/blog/murakami-protége-mr-invites-you-into-the-dark-depths-of-neo-pop>.

<sup>762</sup> Audrey Akcasu, “Some Fans Love Pharrell’s ‘It Girl’ Video; Others Call Him a Pedophile,” *Japan Today*, October 2, 2014, <http://www.japantoday.com/category/entertainment/view/some-fans-love-pharrells-it-girl-video-others-call-him-a-pedophile>.

<sup>763</sup> Akcasu.

<sup>764</sup> Akcasu.

<sup>765</sup> Warden Dios, *YouTube* comment, *Pharrell Williams - It Girl*, September 30, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPZDBF0kei0>.

parentage. First surfacing in the early 2000s but gaining significant momentum in the 2010s, “weeaboo” (from “Wapanese” or “Wannabe Japanese”) is an Internet slur describing a non-Japanese person, often from the Western world and living outside of Japan, obsessed with all things Japanese, especially animanga, idols, and videogames.<sup>766</sup> In the West, the contempt elicited by weeaboos has surpassed that of *otaku*, who in comparison to the former’s racial fetishism and loud, uncritical adherence to anime and manga products, are “regular” geeks or nerds. The abject status of weeaboos is symptomatic of what some scholars have called “the end of Cool Japan.” [Figure 19]

The discontentment towards Cool Japan—“a concept, movement, or government policy that proposes Japan as a world trendsetter for entertainment, technology, art, fashion, music, and contemporary culture”<sup>767</sup>—had been brewing for a long time. Not least in the sectors of the *otaku* industry that, after being scorned for decades, were suddenly deemed “cool” by top-down governmental policies seeking to refashion them as capitalizable icons of Japaneseness in recessionary times.<sup>768</sup> Increasingly, however, the discontent stems also from the outside. Already in 2011, sociologist Adrian Favell’s controversial *Before and After Superflat: A Short History of Japanese Contemporary Art, 1990–2011* claimed that Superflat’s “naive celebrations of bizarre Japanese pop culture or futuristic Neo Tokyo”<sup>769</sup> were no longer sustainable in the face of fresh human and environmental tragedies like the 2008 financial crisis or the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Echoing this view, topical publications like *The End of Cool Japan: Ethical, Legal, and Cultural Challenges to Japanese Popular Culture* (2016) signal a growing visibility of discourses concerned with the many “transnational transgressions”<sup>770</sup> of Japanese pop culture and their possible harmful effects on foreign audiences and industries, from copyright violations to sexual and violent situations involving underage characters in animanga.<sup>771</sup>

Even as benign mascots like Son Goku or Sailor Moon are turned into official ambassadors of the 2020 Olympics, “not safe for work” anime and manga accumulate a

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<sup>766</sup> “Weeaboo,” *Know Your Meme*, accessed August 3, 2016, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/weeaboo>.

<sup>767</sup> Galbraith, *The Otaku Encyclopedia*, 49–50.

<sup>768</sup> Ryotaro Mihara, “‘Cool Japan’ and Its Discontents,” January 31, 2013, [https://www.academia.edu/19989776/\\_Cool\\_Japan\\_and\\_Its\\_Discontents\\_English\\_](https://www.academia.edu/19989776/_Cool_Japan_and_Its_Discontents_English_).

<sup>769</sup> Favell, *Before and after Superflat*, 223.

<sup>770</sup> Yano, “Flipping Kitty: Transnational Transgressions of Japanese Cute.”

<sup>771</sup> Mark McLelland, ed., *The End of Cool Japan: Ethical, Legal, and Cultural Challenges to Japanese Popular Culture* (Routledge, 2016).

mounting number of criminal convictions both in Japan and the West. As such, the “end” of Cool Japan does not refer to a winding down of existing corporate and government attempts to capitalize on Japan’s international appeal, much less to any lack of global enthusiasm for Japanese popular culture, that, if anything, is cooler than ever. Instead, this “end” conveys a loss of innocence toward the transgressive mystique of Cool Japan tolerated *because* of its “wacky” exotic and erotic charm,<sup>772</sup> materialized in a series of rivaling discourses mushrooming in the 2010s. The famous 2015 Internet meme “Anime Was a Mistake,” a troll quote misattributed to animation guru Hayao Miyazaki bitterly vocalizing his disdain for anime and its fans—stating that “Anime was a mistake. It’s nothing but trash,” [Figure 20 a, b] or that “Those who identify as ‘otaku,’ they sicken me deeply”—encapsulates the collective uneasiness toward celebratory “cool Japaneseness” in our contemporary mediascape.

The “end” of Cool Japan is also related to the rise of call-out culture in intersectional and networked feminism, the latter referring to a prospective fourth wave revolving around the mobilization of social justice activists on websites such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Tumblr*.<sup>773</sup> In addition to the moral disgust elicited by weeaboos, problematic genres like *lolicon*, *hentai*, or *moé* are getting scrutinized and challenged to an unprecedented extent, in many cases, by individuals with good levels of familiarity with *otaku* culture, animanga, and feminist theory, leading to vicious exchanges among supporters of contrasting points of view. Yet it would be too easy to say that these genres are contested because they are misunderstood.<sup>774</sup> In the age of *Google Translate*, Japan is all the more wondrous but not as *Lost In Translation* as immortalized in Sofia Coppola’s 2003 masterpiece of Western ennui in Orientalized wonderland. Even if the full subtlety of meaning is preserved in the process of intercultural communication, certain cultural-aesthetic regimes remain incommensurable. In other words, transposing *lolicon* from its subcultural proportions into the mainstream—for instance, by converting American superstar Pharrell Williams into a “pedophilic *otaku* pervert”—will uncover a monstrous disjuncture between the two.<sup>775</sup>

Arguably, *It Girl* is at its best when tripping and falling against the Cool Japan discontent it engenders, and its authors are perhaps all too aware of this. On several occasions,

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<sup>772</sup> Favell, *Before and after Superflat*, 45.

<sup>773</sup> Ealasaid Munro, “Feminism: A Fourth Wave?,” The Political Studies Association, accessed July 28, 2016, <https://www.psa.ac.uk/insight-plus/feminism-fourth-wave>.

<sup>774</sup> Susan Kozel, “The Diabolical Strategy of Mimesis: Luce Irigaray’s Reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” *Hypatia* 11, no. 3 (1996): 114.

<sup>775</sup> As Derek Woods puts it, “[M]edia and aesthetic forms may be limited to particular scale domains.” Derek Woods, “Scale Critique for the Anthropocene,” *Minnesota Review* 83, no. 1 (2014): 136.

Yoshi っ(ch)!! and her girlfriends become standard-bearers in a worldwide greeting, waving back at Williams’s international fans with national flags. These are not mono-national flags, however, but juxtapositions of many smaller national flags, forming a seamless, evermoving rainbow-colored pattern of nationalities. [Figure 21] After playing around with perilous themes like the *otaku*’s Lolita complex, this internationalist utopia feels a bit *too* disarming in its naivety, reinforcing *It Girl*’s status as a “happy object”<sup>776</sup> designed to alienate viewers who do not partake of the joys of *moé*. In the end, the fact that the it-girl herself was given an absurd name which is impossible to translate—“Yoshi っ(ch)!!” is an unpronounceable amalgamation of Romanized Japanese, a small “っ” hiragana character, and punctuation marks reminiscent of manga onomatopoeias—suggests that such jabs at the vicissitudes of global connectedness might be less accidental than the video’s outwardly clueless “cool Japaneseness” lets on.

(See also “CGDCT,” “Metamorphosis” and “Gaijin Mangaka”)

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<sup>776</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2010).

# Metamorphosis

September 2012, New York: a colossal centerpiece stands at the center of Lehmann Maupin, a gallery located in the Chelsea neighborhood. [Figure 1a, b] The piece calls to mind what scholar Patricia Yaeger once called an “apotheosis of trash,”<sup>777</sup> consisting of a considerable collection of plastic bags, televisions, computer screens, Christmas lights, cardboard boxes, packages, bottles, discarded clothes, blankets, towels, comic books, magazines, hangers, fans, and so on. The garbage pile seems to form the shape of a caterpillar or a cocoon, loosely. Or of a whale, washed up on the beach. In turn, this garbage caterpillar is surrounded by paintings of anime girls, drawings, photographs of everyday objects—food, cityscapes, selfies—miscellaneous furniture, and graffiti painted directly on the gallery’s walls. [Figure 2] The overall impression is not that of a typical “white cube,” but a messier space that both captures the viewer’s attention and threatens to fall and crush them under the mountain of debris.

This memorable scene is from *Metamorphosis; Give Me Your Wings* (September 13–October 20, 2012), an exhibition by the Japanese artist Iwamoto Masakatsu (b. 1969), better known by the pseudonym Mr., as well as by his association with Murakami Takashi’s Kaikai Kiki collective. According to Mr., the garbage caterpillar symbolizes the death and rebirth of Japan in a “process of metamorphosis that never seems to be complete.”<sup>778</sup> In this sense, it is both scatological and eschatological, alluding to Japan’s many disintegrations: first vaporized by the atomic bomb, then again reduced to floating debris by the earthquake and tsunami of 2011, joining the gyres of marine pollution such as the Great Pacific garbage patch. [Figure 3] As Kris Scheifele puts it, in *Metamorphosis*, the “water and human hubris play some role in creating the chaos; our dangerous love affair with stuff—and lots of it—enhances the devastation.”<sup>779</sup> *Metamorphosis*’s *horror vacui*, i.e., its fear of the empty, means that there are all kinds of stuff propped up on the walls and scattered around the floor. [Figure 4a, b] Cardboard and plastic boxes, clothes, and crumpled fabrics, eating and drinking utensils, balloons, mats, furniture (shelves, cabinets, chairs, benches, small tables, screens), tangled

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<sup>777</sup> Yaeger, “Editor’s Column,” 321.

<sup>778</sup> Mr. *Metamorphosis: Give Me Your Wings*, LM Artist Video Series (New York: Ra/oR Media, 2012), [http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/exhibitions/2012-09-13\\_mr/press\\_release/0/video](http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/exhibitions/2012-09-13_mr/press_release/0/video).

<sup>779</sup> Kris Scheifele, “The Financial Crisis and Other Natural Disasters, A Tour in Three Parts,” *Hyperallergic*, September 20, 2012, <http://hyperallergic.com/57110/thomas-hirschhorn-mr-matthew-lusk/>.



power cables, endless stacks of newspapers, books, and manga magazines. At one point, there is an enormous photograph of a plate with remnants of sauce and food. [Figure 5] There are small sketches everywhere. [Figure 6] Huge graffiti faces of animanga characters decorate the walls, along with hiragana and katakana tags mixed with the Roman alphabet, for example, the painted word “Ikebu < 厩,” referring to the Tokyo district known as a hotspot of otaku culture.

On the gallery’s walls, there is a series of five paintings featuring Mr.’s trademark moé girls, their wind-tossed hair and skirts rendered in minute detail. [Figure 7a, b] The characters’ beauty in the wind is reminiscent of Hokusai’s *A Sudden Gust of Wind*, capturing the effects of invisible natural forces on the human body. The girls are rendered against abstract backgrounds with polka dots and other patterns, immersed in a storm of cute clutter: petals, musical notes, stars, candy, school supplies, and colorful Japanese characters. Their world is magical, never-ending, contrasting with the clogged reality of the exhibition space. On canvas, the natural forces of wind and storm are reimagined as telekinetic powers of magical idol singers, surrounded by a fancy goods extravaganza.

Mr.’s windswept girls are a statement “On Being Light and Liquid,” like Zygmunt Bauman’s preface to *Liquid Modernity* (2000). Bauman’s concept of “liquid modern” describes our time as the chaotic or deregulated continuation of modernity, marked by volatile identities, tailored towards the global flows of neoliberalism. Nomadic, provisional, shifting. There is something “liquid” about Mr.’s girls, too. Their bodies are kaleidoscopic, shattered into an endless profusion of lace, bracelets, rings, scarves, hats, ties, hooks, fabric patterns, and hair arrangements. Against this fluidity, the garbage caterpillar, resting at the center of the gallery space, is an uncomfortable presence conditioning the viewing experience by physically impairing the circulation of visitors. We can see this in the video recordings of the opening of the exhibition.<sup>780</sup> [Figure 8a, b] The visitors squeeze into two lines going in opposite directions, forcing some people to awkwardly bend away from the objects that stick from the main structure, like thorns. As they walk, the assorted paraphernalia captures the visitors’ attention, prompting them to stop, examine, and photograph its details, resulting in pauses, impairments, and human “traffic jams.” *Metamorphosis* thus underlines the paradoxical process by which fluidity sometimes produces hindrances, both in nature and in capitalist globalization, in the age of “liquid modernity.”

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<sup>780</sup> The video is available at Lehmann Maupin’s website at <https://web.archive.org/web/20181229055841/https://www.lehmannmaupin.com/exhibitions/mr3/videos>

Mr.'s affinity with waste dates to the early years of his career. As an art student, Mr. produced conceptual works out of the garbage that he collected. He was influenced by Arte Povera and the Italian Transvanguardia, as well as Mono-ha (もの派, "School of Things"),<sup>781</sup> a Japanese art movement from the late 1960s and early 1970s whose practices included the juxtaposition of unaltered natural and industrial materials. Much like *Metamorphosis's* distribution of elements in space, Mono-ha artists focused as much on the materials as such as on the interdependency among themselves and the surrounding space.<sup>782</sup> Moreover, Mr.'s first Superflat works were drawings of anime girls "on store receipts, takeout menus, and other scraps of transactional detritus," maintaining a continuity with the poetics of waste and precarity.<sup>783</sup> In *Journey*, a painting and collage on canvas built over three years from 2003 to 2006, Mr.'s animanga children and quirky *kawaii* monsters are buried in layers of dirt, [Figure 9] resembling the artworks of Neo-Pop precursor, Shinro Ohtake. Also, in 2008, Mr. built several large-scale dioramas mimicking the vernacular "architecture" of *otaku* rooms, presented in his solo exhibition *The World of "Nobody Dies"* at Kaikai Kiki Gallery in Tokyo. [Figure 10] The rooms were cramped and disordered, with stuff everywhere, including manga magazines, crumpled futons, anime posters, discarded items, and electronic appliances, along with artworks such as drawings and photographs, seemingly caught red-handed in their natural material (and psycho-sexual) environment.

In Mr.'s work, cuteness is the enantiodromiac opposite of chaos and self-abjection, the superabundance of the former inevitably changing into its shadow opposite, and vice-versa. But the expression of "trash" is not necessarily fixed upon the literal usage of garbage and debris. As Mr. explains,

I remember thinking that I am the embodiment of garbage, of the delusions of the post-war Japanese. And so the reason I continue to expose myself by making these amateurish paintings of cute girls is because this, too, might be a form of Arte Povera, the expression of spiritual poverty... Once I reached that

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<sup>781</sup> Mr, I eat curry one day and fish another, interview by Melissa Chiu, Book section of "Mr.," 2011, 4; Stamler, "Murakami Protégé Mr. Invites You into the Dark Depths of Neo-Pop"; "Mr. - Metamorphosis: Give Me Your Wings" (Lehmann Maupin, September 13, 2012), [http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/exhibitions/2016-06-23\\_mr#2](http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/exhibitions/2016-06-23_mr#2).

<sup>782</sup> Artists associated with the Mono-ha movement included Nobuo Sekine, Lee Ufan, Katsuro Yoshida, Susumu Koshimizu, Koji Enokura, Kishio Suga, Noboru Takayama, and Katsuhiko Narita Ashley Rawling, "An Introduction to 'Mono-Ha,'" September 8, 2007, para. 1-3, <http://www.tokyoartbeat.com/tablog/entries.en/2007/09/an-introduction-to-mono-ha.html>.

<sup>783</sup> "Mr. - Metamorphosis: Give Me Your Wings."

conclusion, that no matter how much work I put in I was still making garbage, I no longer felt the need to use actual trash in my work.<sup>784</sup>

Since 2011, Mr. has begun to reincorporate actual trash in his work, as in the beginning of his career. In *Sunset In My Heart*, a more recent solo show at Lehmann Maupin (June 23–August 12, 2016), Mr. presented a series of eleven new paintings over distressed canvases. [Figures 11 & 12] As stated in the press release, “Mr. prepares the canvases by burning them, walking over them, and leaving them on his studio floor to collect dirt and debris,”<sup>785</sup> a practice “directly connected to the artist’s early interest in the 1960s Italian art movement Arte Povera.”<sup>786</sup> The blurb also introduces at length the theme of hope and spirituality in a post-disaster scenario:

These new characters represent positive beacons of strength that overcome all adversity. This reflects the artist’s creative impetus to embrace pleasure and beauty in diverse forms, instead of giving in to the personal and national despair that emerges after catastrophic loss and destruction, as it has in Japan since 2011. The title, *Sunset in My Heart*, reflects the simultaneous yet conflicting feelings of melancholy and hope, which also encompass the complicated nature of the human condition.<sup>787</sup>

Both *Metamorphosis; Give Me Your Wings* and *Sunset In My Heart* exemplify a trend to infuse Superflat artists’ discourse and work with a newfound gravitas after the 3/11 disasters, moving away from commercialism towards more practical or spiritual concerns. However, whereas *Metamorphosis* was generally well received, *Sunset* gathered no such acclaim. Probably because, for many art critics, the less Superflat it looks, the better, and *Metamorphosis* certainly deviates more thoroughly from the Superflat *status quo*. For instance, the paintings in *Metamorphosis* are pushed into the background, with even the biggest canvas in the exhibition—a mural-sized painting of a magical idol singer occupying the whole bottom wall—serving as a wallpaper for the garbage caterpillar. [Figure 13] The latter resembles Pistoletto’s enormous piles of clothes, [Figure 14] while the exhibition’s space doubles as an installation channeling the pervasive influence of Scatter Art since the 1990s.

On the contrary, *Sunset* presents a return to order: just paintings, neatly arranged within the gallery’s white cube: the trash is, once again, integrated with (not separated from) the

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<sup>784</sup> Stamler, “Murakami Protégé Mr. Invites You into the Dark Depths of Neo-Pop.”

<sup>785</sup> “Mr. - *Sunset in My Heart*” (Lehmann Maupin, June 23, 2016), [http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/exhibitions/2016-06-23\\_mr#2](http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/exhibitions/2016-06-23_mr#2).

<sup>786</sup> “Mr. - *Sunset in My Heart*.”

<sup>787</sup> “Mr. - *Sunset in My Heart*.”

cuteness. As such, *Sunset*'s stylistic changes are less noticeable, and the medium of painting, as opposed to installation, perceived to be less radical. This "return to order" substantiates the suspicion that, despite the artists' claims, the destiny of post-3/11 Superflat is less a rebirth than a zombification, in a struggle to rescue the movement from irrelevance. Indeed, reviewing *Sunset*, critic Michael Wilson points to this contradiction, writing that,

The Japanese artist known only as Mr. claims that the 2011 Tohoku earthquake exercised a deep impact on his practice, prompting him to move away from a preoccupation with the sexualized aspects of manga culture toward a more nuanced emotional and political approach. But there's little evidence of any such let's-get-serious reappraisal in Mr.'s latest New York outing, which the artist — dressed as a uniformed schoolgirl—launched with a discordant bout of sake-fueled karaoke. In 11 new paintings, Mr. stirs his familiar saucer-eyed cuties into a multicolored abstract and typographic stew that suggests a continued escape into pubescence.<sup>788</sup>

Wilson's review suggests that not only is Mr.'s work *too* Superflat ("familiar saucer-eyed cuties" over a "multicolored abstract and typographic stew") but the artist, himself, *too* Japanese. In fact, in Wildon's view, Mr.'s homage to Arte Povera seems to be the single redeeming quality of *Sunset In My Heart*: "While [Murakami Takashi] is known for the Koonsian slickness of his ultra-high-end productions, Mr.'s work is distinguished by the use of dirty, distressed canvases, patched together in homage to Arte Povera and its veneration of the everyday."<sup>789</sup> The notion that the cute, painterly, and Japanese parts of Superflat are tolerated insofar as the un-cute, un-painterly, and un-Japanese parts imbue the works with a proper psychological and artistic depth, is not an uncommon theme in art reviews of Superflat shows. This "dark cute" rhetoric is also promoted by the artists themselves, as attested by Murakami's artist books-cum-manifestos, *Superflat* (2000) and *Little Boy* (2005), that draw a direct line between the spread of the *kawaii* and what historian Harry Harootunian calls "Japan's long postwar."<sup>790</sup> While certainly not all the ramifications of Superflat's juggling of Western expectations over Japanese artists are deliberate, Murakami and Mr. have nevertheless built an aesthetic corpus conducive to such a cat-and-dog game of fakeness and authenticity, stereotyping and "strategic essentialism" (Gayatri Spivak), which impair the flowy circulation of transcultural dialogues.

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<sup>788</sup> Michael Wilson, "Mr., 'Sunset in My Heart,'" *Time Out New York*, May 18, 2016, <https://www.timeout.com/newyork/art/mr-sunset-in-my-heart>.

<sup>789</sup> Wilson.

<sup>790</sup> Harootunian, "Japan's Long Postwar: The Trick of Memory and the Ruse of History."

For instance, Kris Scheifele, in her analysis of *Metamorphosis*, makes sense of Mr.'s work by recognizing that “the super cute, Superflat works infuse the accumulation with the deep wounds inflicted by World War II”<sup>791</sup> while also taking the installation medium to prove that “Mr. is clearly... immersed in his source material”, as “viewers are permitted to walk around a... dense collection of clutter in his installation.”<sup>792</sup> One suspects that Mr. deliberately wallows in the fact that the Western art world seems to crave a radical materialism insofar as artists and works fit within the mold of the “colonized copy,”<sup>793</sup> e.g., using the familiar vocabulary of Arte Povera and Scatter Art, while other kinds of “radical materialism,” like karaoke and crossplay, are readily discarded as “Wacky Japan.”<sup>794</sup> Indeed, the title of Mr.'s recent exhibition at Perrotin Hong Kong (September 14 – October 20, 2018) feels like a provocation targeted at such prescriptive identities afforded to Japanese artists: *PEOPLE MISUNDERSTAND ME AND THE CONTENTS OF MY PAINTINGS. THEY JUST THINK THEY ARE NOSTALGIC, CUTE, AND LOOK LIKE JAPANESE ANIME. THAT MAY BE TRUE, BUT REALLY, I PAINT DAILY IN ORDER TO ESCAPE THE DEVIL THAT HAUNTS MY SOUL. THE SAID DEVIL ALSO RESIDES IN MY BLOOD, AND I CANNOT ESCAPE FROM IT NO MATTER HOW I WISH. SO I PAINT IN RESIGNATION.*<sup>795</sup>

Mr. has continued to explore the formats of *Metamorphosis* and *Sunset* in other recent exhibitions. For instance, *Tokyo, The City I Know, at Dusk: It's Like a Hollow in My Heart* (Perrotin Seoul, 2016) and his art intervention the Yokohama Triennale in 2017. [Figure 15] *Tokyo* is a “total installation” transforming the gallery into an immersive environment, with graffiti, paint scrapes, and debris defacing the entirety of the white, including ceiling and floor, as if the damage inflicted to the paintings in *Sunset* now overflows the canvas' boundaries, exploding into the expanded field of a “rubbish ecology”<sup>796</sup> of *kawaii* culture and aesthetics. These environments expand on the *otaku* room dioramas in *The World of “Nobody Dies”*

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<sup>791</sup> Scheifele, “The Financial Crisis and Other Natural Disasters, A Tour in Three Parts.”

<sup>792</sup> Scheifele.

<sup>793</sup> Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, 7.

<sup>794</sup> Wagenaar, “Wacky Japan.”

<sup>795</sup> Masakatsu Iwamoto and Galerie Perrotin, “People Misunderstand Me and the Contents of My Paintings. They Just Think They Are Nostalgic, Cute, and Look like Japanese Anime. That May Be True, but Really, I Paint Daily in Order to Escape the Devil That Haunts My Soul. The Said Devil Also Resides in My Blood, and I Cannot Escape from It No Matter How I Wish. So I Paint in Resignation. | PERROTIN,” Perrotin, 2018, <https://www.perrotin.com/exhibitions/mr-people-misunderstand-me-and-the-contents-of-my-paintings-they-just-think-they-are-nostalgic-cute-and-look-like-japanese-anime-that-may-be-true-but-really-i-paint-daily-in-order-to-escape-the-devil-that-haunts-my-soul-the-said-devil-also-resides-in-my-blood-and-i-cannot-escape-from-it-no-matter-how-i-wish-so-i-paint-in-resignation/6482>.

<sup>796</sup> Yaeger, “Editor’s Column.”

(2008), that resembled Mr.'s own house and studio in the outskirts of Tokyo. As seen in the tour for the website *The Selby*, Mr.'s *otaku* room is filled with manga magazines, idol books, improvised futon, studies for paintings, drawings, cup noodles, merchandise, and clothing. [Figure 16] In drawing from the private and collective space management of the *otaku*, who for decades were the pariahs of Japanese society, Mr.'s work aligns with a lineage of installations like those of artist Hélio Oiticica, who drew from the vernacular architecture of the Brazilian favelas in his environments from the 1960s such as *Tropicália* (1967). [Figure 17a, b, c, d] Significantly, the *otaku* environments in Mr.'s works are not represented merely as the result of overconsumption, but also as a hub of creation, true to the nature of the *otaku* subculture as a historical site of “produsage” (e.g., user-led content creation, such as fan illustrations, fan manga, and fan fiction).

There is also an unresolved tension between painting and installation at work in *Metamorphosis* and other Mr. exhibitions. Is the installation a setting for painting, or are paintings like props within the installation? Such duality problematizes the spatial contradictions for which the *otaku* are known in the collective imagination. While the *otaku* often take obsessive care in organizing and safekeeping their collections of figures and books, the prioritizing of fantasy over basic human needs for comfort and space results in rooms filled with garbage and scattered goods. In old-school media representations of *otaku* rooms, these overlap with compulsive hoarding and other disordered states, like the bachelor pad: a messy man cave with clothes and trash on the floor and rotten food in the fridge. [Figure 18] These dirty spaces are also a reflection of the *otaku*'s “polluted” libido, fueled by an underlying *Lolita* Complex that taints even supposedly desexualized genres like *moé*, and seems to extend spatially to the advertising overload displayed outside and inside buildings in Tokyo's district of Akihabara (known as the *otaku* Mecca).

Nevertheless, in Mr.'s environments one gets the impression that the *otaku*'s apparently dysfunctional and “polluted” management of space can become a valuable survival skill for the advanced capitalist jungle—along with that of other marginalized groups, like the numerous homeless living in tent villages, unacknowledged by the official rhetoric of classless Japan. [Figure 19] In fact, 24-hour Internet or manga cafés (*mangakissa*) are a shared space among the *otaku* and the homeless. [Figure 20] These coffeehouses, offering comics and Internet for an affordable hourly fee (some even providing showers, underwear, snack/beverage vending

machines),<sup>797</sup> have given rise to a new class of homeless known as “net café refugees” or “cyber-homeless.”<sup>798</sup> These tent and cyber refugees exhibit a nomadic quality akin to that of Mr.’s garbage caterpillar in *Metamorphosis*, a strange caravan moving towards our dystopian futures.

Mr.’s *Metamorphosis* captures the “dream scenes” of *otaku* rooms. According to Claire Bishop, “the idea of the ‘total installation’ offers a very particular model of viewing experience—one that not only physically immerses the viewer in a three-dimensional space, but which is psychologically absorptive too.”<sup>799</sup> In the *otaku* room, however, despite its absorptiveness, it is not uncommon for figures and other the collectibles to be stored in glass cabinets or kept inside their packages, protected from human contact. Engulfed by fantasy, the *otaku* remains separated from it as if by an invisible veil, always to some extent impenetrable. In this sense, *Metamorphosis* also calls to mind Ilya Kabakov’s 1985 installation *The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment*,<sup>800</sup> in which Kabakov recreated the room of a fictional artist, filling the walls with Soviet propaganda. [Figure 21a, b] Inside the cabin, Kabakov’s fictional artist built a catapult that, judging by the hole in the ceiling, had propelled him into outer space. “He didn’t want to wait until the whole of the rest of society was ready for utopia,” Boris Groys writes. “He wanted to head off for utopia there and then.”<sup>801</sup> Mr. is less interested in science fiction—after all, space sagas like *Uchū Senkan Yamato* (*Space Battleship Yamato*) and *Gundam* are the turfs of the first-generation *otaku*, before the “moé-fication” of *otaku* culture in the 2000s. But significantly, in both *Metamorphosis; Give Me Your Wings* and *The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment*, the dream scene is overlapped with the *crime* scene.

On the one hand, Kabakov’s artist is a rogue cosmonaut unsanctioned by the authorities. On the other, *Metamorphosis*, in adhering to the cramped, but absorptive spatiality of *otaku* rooms, evokes the specter of the *otaku* murder, Miyazaki Tsutomu, a serial killer who brutally murdered four girls. Miyazaki’s tiny room crammed with thousands of VHS tapes and manga

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<sup>797</sup> “Manga Café,” *Only in Japan*, accessed September 27, 2018, <https://us.jnto.go.jp/blog/manga-cafe/>.

<sup>798</sup> “Net Cafe Refugee,” in *Wikipedia*, May 23, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Net\\_cafe\\_refugee&oldid=842555421](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Net_cafe_refugee&oldid=842555421).

<sup>799</sup> *Installation Art*, 14.

<sup>800</sup> *The Man Who Flew Into Space from his Apartment* was made in Moscow in 1985, but first shown to the public in New York in 1988, after Kabakov left the Soviet Union.

<sup>801</sup> *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* (London: Afterall Books, 2006), 1.

magazines became an icon of the *otaku*'s deviancy in Japanese society; one that, despite over a decade of Cool Japan campaigns, never entirely faded from the Japanese collective consciousness. Is the dream scene's potential to turn nightmarish—even, diabolical—what, in Mr.'s words, haunts his blood and his soul? Or its uncanny capacity to devour us, to dilute one's sense of self in the muddled, if spectacular, boundaries of fantasy and reality? Ultimately, *The Man Who Flew into Space* and *Metamorphosis* represent the ruins and remnants left behind in humanity's quest for utopia at a time of looming disaster, when, as Fredric Jameson first put it in *Seeds of Time*, "It seems to be easier for us... to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism."<sup>802</sup> Respectively, the techno-scientific utopia of the Soviet space program, and the emotional utopia of *moé*'s 2D "love revolution,"<sup>803</sup> i.e., the ability to adore and fall in love with idealized fictional characters in stress and anxiety-free (no longer intersubjective, but interobjective) relations.

(See also "Gesamtpcutewerk" and "It Girl")

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<sup>802</sup> *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xii.

<sup>803</sup> Patrick W. Galbraith, "Introduction: Falling In Love With Japanese Characters," in *The Moe Manifesto: An Insider's Look at the Worlds of Manga, Anime, and Gaming* (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2014), 8.



# Paradog

In the anime series *Jinrui wa Suitai Shimashita* (“Humanity Has Declined,” AIC, 2012), the seventh and eighth episode compose a time-traveling arc, “The Fairies’ Time Management” (*Yōsei-san-tachi no, Jikan Katsuyō Jutsu*),<sup>804</sup> recounting the story of how the series’ main character, the Heroine, came to meet the Assistant (*joshu-san*). The Assistant is a silent boy in a Hawaiian shirt, who helps the Heroine in her (mis)adventures with the mysterious race of creatures known as “fairies”—tiny gnome-like creature possessing advanced technology similar to magic. “The Fairies’ Time Management” begins with the Heroine being sent by her Grandfather to pick up a new helper, a feral child from an extinct ethnic minority. On her way to the village, a fairy approaches and offers her a suspicious banana. [Figure 1] After meeting with the female doctor who is in charge of the child, the Heroine learns that they have wandered off. While searching for them in a nearby forest, she comes across an unfamiliar girl who looks exactly like herself (although, at first, the Heroine does not seem to realize it). [Figure 2] As they reach a glade with a tile oven at the center, [Figure 3] the Heroine slips on a banana peel and is sent back to earlier that morning, in *Groundhog Day* fashion. [Figure 4] She repeats the day’s events and meets herself over and over in a spiral of *déjà vu*. Soon, the Heroine realizes that the fairies are manipulating time to get her clones to bake sweets—their favorite snack—resulting in a tea party packed with hundreds of the Heroine’s doppelgangers (or *watashi-tachi*, meaning “us”). [Figure 5] The banana is time-traveling biotechnology produced by the fairies, of which new models are presented throughout the episode. Eventually, the Heroine arrives at the village to find the central plaza crowded with dogs, [Figure 6] and finally glimpses a boy in a Hawaiian shirt: the Assistant. [Figure 7]

During one loop, the Heroine asks the doctor how she might identify the assistant, as they have not met before. The doctor admits that, despite having his medical data (“height, weight, blood type, heart rate, blood pressure”), she has no memory of him. “He must not have a strong personality,” the Heroine suggests. “It’s worse, though. He has no real personality whatsoever,” the doctor says. “We remember others by their individual traits, right? If someone has no personality at all, nobody will be able to remember that person.” Somewhere between the fourth and fifth loop, a “bug” in the banana accidentally sends the Heroine into the faraway

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<sup>804</sup> *Jinrui wa Suitai Shimashita*, episode 7 and 8, “*Yōsei-san-tachi no, Jikan Katsuyō Jutsu*,” directed by Kishi Seiji, produced by AIC A.S.T.A., aired August 13 and 20, 2012. Based on the light novels by Tanaka Romeo.

past. There, she meets an excitable and somewhat lecherous lad with a cowboy hat and a holster calling himself Ringo Kid, who she thinks is the Assistant but is, in fact, her Grandfather's 13-year-old self. [Figures 8 & 9] Finally, by the sixth time loop, the Heroine meets the real Assistant, who has used her doubles' opinions to build his personality. [Figure 10] In the end, the Assistant takes home a "time paradog"—that is, a dog created by the universe to cancel out paradoxes and restore space-time continuum by giving it the shape of a dog. Thus, "The Fairies' Time Management" explores nonlinear parallel worlds and metafiction, in which the Assistant comes to signify a particular type of "alternativeness."

As a blank canvas devoid of any essential individual nature, the Assistant becomes anybody's desire, giving a Lacanian twist to the penchant for nurture over nature in alternate history fiction. On the one hand, the belief that "the exact same genetic material results in different individuals, depending on the milieu in which they live"<sup>805</sup> is emphasized by the doctor's conversation with the Heroine, in which the former admits that all the medical data is not enough to define the Assistant. On the other hand, drawing on Lacan's formula that "man's desire is the desire of the Other,"<sup>806</sup> the character of the Assistant implies that everyone is already an alternate version of themselves, as we are all a product of Other's desire and, therefore, one possible outcome out of many.

The three versions of the Assistant shown during the arc illustrate this point. The first version is the Grandfather's desire—a macho Assistant, following his belief that "young men are meant to be buff." The third and prevailing version originates from the tea party, a phantasmatic space of feminine desire made of the Heroine's fairy-generated doubles. Spoken in the language of girl talk, complete with the occasional giggles, this is the Heroine's ideal partner: "Sweet. Quiet. Gentle. Well-mannered. Soft hair. But for some reason... he wears fancy shirts. Reliable. But occasionally... bold!" Finally, the second version is Ringo Kid, named after an old Western hero from Marvel Comics. While he is technically the Heroine's Grandfather, Ringo Kid also functions as the Assistant's mirror image, a "what if" Assistant. He is excitable instead of gentle, loud instead of quiet, lecherous instead of well-mannered. Yet, at some point, the Heroine finds herself daydreaming that, even if she never liked that type, "maybe it isn't so bad." She immediately snaps out of it and reproaches herself for thinking such a thing. This incursion into an unfrequented mental place suggests that Ringo

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<sup>805</sup> Aris Mousoutzanis, "Apocalyptic SF," in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Mark Bould et al. (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), 457.

<sup>806</sup> Sophie de Mijolla-Mellor, "Alienation," in *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Alain de Mijolla (Detroit: Macmillan Library Reference, 2004), 43.

Kid is the Heroine’s “bastard” desire, a deviant fantasy that she cannot admit even to herself, complicated by its incestuous implications.

The paradog represents the multiple (im)possibilities of human desire, “characteristic of an animal at the mercy of language.”<sup>807</sup> Significantly, “paradog” itself is a wordplay between “paradox” and “dog,” and the only word spoken by the Assistant during the entire show—in the voice of the famous anime voice actor Fukuyama Jun, known for his roles such as *Code Geass*’s Lelouch, thus reinforcing the importance of this moment within the series. Besides allowing for the wordplay, man’s best friend stands for a sense of bonhomie, the placidness of these large hounds evoking the millennia-long process of domestication and companionship between dogs and humans. [Figure 12] But also, their hollow purple eyes, and the fact that they are all exact copies of each other filling the entire town, wraps the paradogs in a sense of unfamiliarity, as if they are a “weird entity... [that] should not exist *here*”<sup>808</sup> (emphasis added), in that time and place. [Figure 13a, b] The paradog activates what Lacan calls *extimité*, “extimacy,” i.e., an intimate externality at our core, where the human sense of self dissolves “in the rhythms, pulsions and patternings of non-human forces,”<sup>809</sup> striking an aporetic in-betweenness, or vacillation, between tameness and eeriness. This eeriness—or even, the underlying horror—is present in other instances throughout the “The Fairies’ Time Management,” such as in the scene in which the Heroine barely discerns a group of fairies playing with another fairy’s severed head as if it were a ball.

As the Assistant, the paradogs are quiet and aloof, but they are connected by more than simple anachronism. Rather, as Mark Fisher puts it, “the time travel paradox plunges us into the structures that Douglas Hofstadter calls ‘strange loops’ or ‘tangled hierarchies,’ in which the orderly distinction between cause and effect is fatally disrupted.”<sup>810</sup> Indeed, both the Assistant and the paradog are the result of different, if connecting, forms of intimate externality. In Lacanian terms, the Assistant’s journey of self-discovery ultimately “finds its meaning in the other’s desire, not so much because the other holds the keys to the desired object, but because his first objective is to be recognized by the other.”<sup>811</sup> The Assistant mangles the hierarchies of causality when, having no one around to teach him words and speech, he seeks

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<sup>807</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 525.

<sup>808</sup> Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 15.

<sup>809</sup> Fisher, 11.

<sup>810</sup> Fisher, 40.

<sup>811</sup> Mijolla-Mellor, “Alienation,” 43.

out “a sense of self, a discernible character” through time travel, taking advantage of the fairies’ technology, which carries an almost slapstick tone in its reference to the slipping banana comedy peel gag. The paradogs, in turn, serve as an outlet for the unassimilable psychosocial remainder that results from this extreme operation of longing for the Other.

Additionally, the Heroine’s own experience of time travel is one where her “self” becomes massively distributed in time through an accumulation of cycles; at the end of the episodes, there are hundreds of Heroines at the tea party. Her selves are sedimented and eroded, accumulating over each other like stratified layers that fade but shape the Heroine’s “present” memories. It is no coincidence that, at the beginning of “The Fairies’ Time Management,” the Heroine is offered a wrist sundial by her Grandfather (much to her dismay, as she preferred a mechanical watch). [Figure 14] After all, the arc is all about the Heroine’s personal “geology” and an exploration of the deep time of human desire through her interactions with the Assistant, the Grandfather, the doctor, and the fairies who play the role of catalysts. The fact that, on her way to town, the Heroine is interrupted by the Grandfather wearing a Roman helmet while riding on a chariot pulled by a horse called Deimos, further entangles these desires within the fabric of ancient civilizations and the human-technological systems that mediate our realities. [Figure 15] From “muscular” technology (chariots were used by Roman to armies to transport battle equipment, hunting, and racing) to techniques of thought and people management, like religion, as Deimos was the Greek god of terror—perhaps also alluding to fairies and their levity in messing with humans and the inviolable time-space continuum for the sake of snacks and laughs.

This kind of *mise-en-abyme* is present in classic Japanese animations such as *Shinseiki Evangelion* (*Neon Genesis Evangelion*, 1995-96)<sup>812</sup> or Miyazaki Hayao’s *Howl no Ugoku Shiro* (*Howl’s Moving Castle*, 2004). In *Evangelion*’s case, as with *Jinrui*, it also relates to the broader theme of the *kyara* and its propensity for derivation, distribution, and “viscosity.” *Evangelion* is originally a twenty-six-episode anime series produced by studio Gainax and written and directed by Anno Hideaki. Although, technically, *Evangelion* fits into the *mecha* anime category, i.e., a type of anime about giant anthropomorphic robot weapons and the pilots who ride them (pioneered by Nagai Go’s *Mazinger Z* and Tomino Yoshiyuki’s *Mobile Suit Gundam* in the 1970s), it defies categorization, being credited with reviving the 1990s anime

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<sup>812</sup> *Shinseiki Evangelion*, 26 episodes, written and directed by Hideaki Anno and produced by Gainax, aired from October 4, 1995 to March 27, 1996, on TV Tokyo.

industry.<sup>813</sup> The story's main characters are the protagonist Ikari Shinji, a boy pilot, two iconic *sentō bishōjo* ("beautiful fighting girls"), taciturn Ayanami Rei and hot-headed Soryu Asuka Langley, and their military strategist, a young adult woman named Katsuragi Misato. They belong to a mysterious organization called NERV and struggle to defend the city of Tokyo 3 from the relentless attacks of polymorphous creatures called Angels, about which they know very little. One of *Evangelion*'s most memorable moments is the last two episodes, representing what is called, within the series, the Human Instrumentality Project.

In episode 26, titled "*Sekai no chuushin de 'ai' o sakenda kemono*,"<sup>814</sup> the series' narrative fabric begins to fall apart. Indeed, the title, translated as "The Beast that Shouted 'I' at the Heart of the World," is a pun on the *The Beast that Shouted Love at the Heart of the World*, a 1968 sci-fi short story by Harlan Ellison (in Japanese, the word for "love," "ai," 愛, is pronounced the same as the English word "I"), famous for its experimental, non-sequential narrative. In the episode, the viewer is presented with a short anime within the anime. The episode recreates a parallel world in which Shinji is just an average high school student who lives with his parents, Asuka is his best childhood friend, Rei is a lively transfer student, and Misato is their teacher. This completely different story is full of trite anime tropes, including the Toast of Tardiness (Rei runs late to school while munching a toast) and a Crash Into Hello (Rei and Shinji bump into each other).<sup>815</sup> [Figure 17] Confronted with this alternate version of himself and others, Shinji eventually remarks: "I see, this is another possibility. Another possible world. This Self is the same way, it's not my true Self. I can be any way I wish to be," coming to terms with the desessentialization of his identity, and its embeddedness in situated (i.e., time and space-specific) worlds. [Figure 18]

While this moment corresponds to Shinji's understanding that the reality that he inhabits is just one among many possibilities, there is a meta-level to his epiphany. According to philosopher Azuma Hiroki, "Hideaki Anno (the director of *Evangelion*) anticipated the appearance of derivative fan works in the Comiket, one of the world's largest comic conventions, mostly dedicated to amateur manga parodies of commercial shows. As such, from

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<sup>813</sup> Hiroki Azuma, "Anime or Something Like It: Neon Genesis Evangelion," *InterCommunication*, 1996, [http://www.ntticc.or.jp/pub/ic\\_mag/ic018/intercity/higashi\\_E.html](http://www.ntticc.or.jp/pub/ic_mag/ic018/intercity/higashi_E.html).

<sup>814</sup> *Shinseiki Evangelion*, episode 26, "*Sekai no chūshin de 'ai' o sakenda kimono*," written and directed by Hideaki Anno and produced by Gainax, aired March 27, 1996, on TV Tokyo.

<sup>815</sup> "Toast of Tardiness," *TV Tropes*, accessed August 3, 2019, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ToastOfTardiness>; "Crash-Into Hello," *TV Tropes*, accessed August 3, 2019, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/CrashIntoHello>.

the beginning, Anno set up various gimmicks within the original to promote those products.”<sup>816</sup> Indeed, according to Azuma, many “high school alternate universe” (or AU, for short) fan works, in which a series’ cast is transplanted into a different world where they are high school students, were already circulating by the time of this episode’s original broadcast in March of 1996.<sup>817</sup> Therefore, this high school AU within *Evangelion* is not only a self-conscious parody but a reaching out from the creator towards the Others’ (the fans’) desire—an acceptance that derivation, even in its banalizing dimension of original authorial works, is the inevitable fate of any original within the postmodern logic of *otaku* culture. More recently, Anno himself has been participating in this continuous process of derivation with an ongoing movie tetralogy called *Rebuild of Evangelion*,<sup>818</sup> in which he takes the building blocks of the original series, its *kyara* and settings, and remixes them into a whole different shape. [Figure 19] Arguably, every time a fan creates a derivative work (fan fiction, fan art, fan comics, etc.), a paradox emerges to make up for the “disjunctures and incommensurable differences among [the] scales”<sup>819</sup> and hierarchies of creative and affective networks.

This self-conscious play with the *kyara*’s “viscosity” (i.e., a character’s capacity to bind together a high number of variations and related works across different media) has become a popular device in animanga shows since *Evangelion*, used in both serious and lighthearted ways. For instance, in *Mahō Shōjo Madoka Magika (Puella Magi Madoka Magica*, Shaft, 2011),<sup>820</sup> a ground-breaking magical girl anime that put a horror and psychological twist on the genre, the character Akemi Homura travels relentlessly into the past, remaking the same events time after time to avoid the death of the protagonist, Kaname Madoka. [Figure 20] At the end of the series, the viewer is shown glimpses of the multiple timelines in which Homura fails to save Madoka, with various bad endings. In a similar vein, the series opening credits feature Madoka in a plethora of outfits and comical situations that never actually take place in the show, whose tone is dark and deconstructive. [Video 1] Moreover, after each failure, Homura returns to a “saved” point in time, as if she was in a videogame. It is significant to note that

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<sup>816</sup> Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*, trans. Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 38.

<sup>817</sup> Azuma, 38.

<sup>818</sup> Presently, the *Rebuild of Evangelion* consisting of 2007’s *Evangelion: 1.0 You Are (Not) Alone*, 2009’s *Evangelion: 2.0 You Can (Not) Advance*, and 2012’s *Evangelion: 3.0 You Can (Not) Redo*.

<sup>819</sup> Woods, “Scale Critique for the Anthropocene,” 135.

<sup>820</sup> *Mahō Shōjo Madoka Magika*, 12 episodes, directed by Shinbo Akiyuki, written by Urobuchi Gen, and produced by Shaft, aired from January 7 to April 21, 2011, on MBS, TBS, and CBC.

*Madoka*'s writer, Urobuchi Gen, is a celebrated author of visual novels with tragic settings and bold plot twists.<sup>821</sup>

Eventually, the snowballing synergy of these entangled time travel loops, of which *Madoka* is the affective core, modifies not only Homura's *kyara*, who shifts from a shy "shrinking violet" to a full-fledged *tsundere* character with fierce fighting skills, but also *Madoka* herself, prompting her transformation into an über-magical girl at the climax of the series. As media theorist Marc Steinberg puts it, when it comes to the *kyara*, "each material incarnation... effectively transforms the abstract character image, and this tingeing or layering of each of the characters' incarnation compounds or snowballs."<sup>822</sup> These time and material entanglements are represented visually in the show by evocative shots of Homura and *Madoka* hanging from several threads, while the wheels of a clock turn behind them (moreover, their position, similar to Christ on the cross, echoes the Christian imagery of messianic sacrifice). [Figure 21a, b] Thus, while in *Jinrui*, the Assistant is shaped by the Heroine's desire, *Madoka* becomes the product of her "assistant" Homura, a role reversal that subverts the audience's expectation of the protagonist as the "chosen one" who autonomously exerts their messianic force on the world and saves the day. Nevertheless, all these shows recognize and highlight the entanglement of characters and their intra-actions<sup>823</sup> with each other, their worlds, and their audiences, questioning the deterministic assumptions that separate the canon narrative from its alternatives.

On a more lighthearted note, another anime, *Free! Iwatobi Swim Club* (Kyoto Animation, 2013),<sup>824</sup> a sports anime about a group of high school boys in a swimming club, and its sequel *Free! Eternal Summer* (Kyoto Animation, 2014),<sup>825</sup> which became immensely popular among female anime fans, also plays with these mechanics. *Free!*'s original series and sequel feature two ending credits that became the target of endless Internet memes, due to their blatant use of "alternate universe" to stimulate the fan's imagination. The first ending is an

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<sup>821</sup> "Gen Urobuchi (Creator)," *TV Tropes*, accessed July 11, 2017, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Creator/GenUrobuchi>.

<sup>822</sup> Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix*, 84.

<sup>823</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2007).

<sup>824</sup> *Free! Iwatobi Swim Club*, 12 episodes, directed by Utsumi Hiroko, written by Yokotani Masahiro, and produced by Kyoto Animation, aired from July 4 to September 26, 2013, on Tokyo MX, TVA, ABC, BS11, and AT-X.

<sup>825</sup> *Free! Eternal Summer*, 13 episodes, directed by Utsumi Hiroko, written by Yokotani Masahiro, and produced by Kyoto Animation, aired from July 2 to September 24, 2014, on Tokyo MX, TVA, ABC, BS11, AT-X, NHK G Tottori.

Arabian AU in which the swim club boys appear dressed in sexy Arab costumes; the second is an AU where they have alternative professions—chef, policeman, fireman, astronaut—showing snippets of their daily lives and interactions. [Video 2] In both cases, it did not take long for fan art, fan fiction and other types of fan labor like cosplay, to emerge based on the character variations and alternative worlds featured in *Free!*'s endings.

In *Evangelion*'s case, the original television series has spawned an abnormal plethora of manga, anime, novels, and videogames that differ from the original television series sometimes subtly, sometimes radically. These introduce semi-alternative or entirely alternative universes, exploring non-canonical romantic relations between characters, telling previously unseen side stories, or, in *Rebuild of Evangelion*, re-imagining the conflicts from the original anime. Some spin-offs change the series' original sci-fi genre into a high school romantic comedy, like *Angelic Days* (2003-2005); or "whodunit" murder mysteries, like *Shinji Ikari's Detective Diary* (2010); [Figure 22] or cutesy-styled parodies like *Petit Eva: Evangelion@School* (2007-2009). In the videogame *Ikari Shinji Ikusei Keikaku* (*Shinji Ikari Raising Project*, 2004),<sup>826</sup> the player "raises" the protagonist, Shinji, by deciding on his life options such as career and romantic partner.<sup>827</sup> Shinji, whose "profession" in the original anime series is to pilot a giant anthropomorphic robot, can thus become a basketball player, a university student, a cello player, a teacher, an artist, a novelist, and so on. He can also pursue romantic relationships with the series main girls, such as Rei, Asuka or Misato, and even a gay "boys'love" relationship with the enigmatic "beautiful boy" (*bishōnen*) Nagisa Kaworu (who, despite his short screen time in the original series, became one of the most popular 1990s male anime characters, and features extensively in merchandise and spinoffs.)<sup>828</sup> In another game, *Ayanami Ikusei Keikaku* (*Ayanami Raising Project*, 2001),<sup>829</sup> the player looks after Rei, balancing her weekly schedule of education, work, and leisure, in a mix of digital pet and dating simulation gameplay.<sup>830</sup> In such products, the continuity in terms of content with the original series is extremely weak. [Figure 23a, b]

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<sup>826</sup> *Ikari Shinji Ikusei Keikaku*, developed and published by Gainax, 2004.

<sup>827</sup> "Neon Genesis Evangelion: Shinji Ikari Raising Project," in *Wikipedia*, February 1, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Neon\\_Genesis\\_Evangelion:\\_Shinji\\_Ikari\\_Raising\\_Project&oldid=763178360](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Neon_Genesis_Evangelion:_Shinji_Ikari_Raising_Project&oldid=763178360).

<sup>828</sup> "Kaworu Nagisa," in *Wikipedia*, January 10, 2014, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Kaworu\\_Nagisa&oldid=779746933](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Kaworu_Nagisa&oldid=779746933).

<sup>829</sup> *Ayanami Ikusei Keikaku*, developed by Gainax and BROCCOLI, published by Gainax, 2008.

<sup>830</sup> "Neon Genesis Evangelion: Ayanami Raising Project," in *Wikipedia*, February 27, 2013, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Neon\\_Genesis\\_Evangelion:\\_Ayanami\\_Raising\\_Project&oldid=540904157](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Neon_Genesis_Evangelion:_Ayanami_Raising_Project&oldid=540904157).



Nevertheless, both the original and the “related goods” are avidly sought-after by fans. More than the work’s authorship or message, then, *kyara* have become the binding glue of the many ramifications of the *Evangelion* franchise, whose outputs are often not contiguous among themselves, changing radically in terms of plotline, characters’ personalities, and even art style and general aesthetics.<sup>831</sup> As such, while time and space are engrained within any artwork’s experience (as artist and writer Walter F. Isaacs’s words, “Life experience is a ‘space-time’ experience, and so is that of every work of fine art”),<sup>832</sup> the above works problematize in a direct manner the narrative deep time and the massive distribution of “commodity-events.”<sup>833</sup> The medium of painting, however, is equally suitable for perceptualizing these paradogs, especially when the superposition and sedimentation of layers are made on all fours, i.e., “against the axis of the human body,”<sup>834</sup> of which Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings are the ultimate example. [Figure 24] Isa Genzken’s (b. 1948) wall-based assemblages are another such instance, suggesting a time-space against the human axis. Like Pollock’s canvases, Genzken’s paintings aggregate pictures from books and magazine together with unorthodox materials like adhesive tape, lacquer and spray paint, in a gesture whose radical “sensation of wrongness”<sup>835</sup> shocks the viewer’s sensorium. [Figure 25a, b] In forcing us to make *sense* of a realm beyond everydayness, Genzken’s works bring into view the vitality of these supposedly non-painterly materials of mass-cultural, commodified origin.

In Japanese art, Ohtake Shiro’s (b. 1955) works, such as his scrapbooks, aptly fit into this tradition. Influenced by Pop Art, Ohtake made his first scrapbook in 1977, during a trip to London, “filling it with his own sketches and photographs but also bus tickets and torn scraps of packaging” in an “archaeology of another consumer culture.”<sup>836</sup> In these scrapbooks, composed of up to eight hundred pages painted and glued with found objects, newspaper clippings, and other mementos, the picture gains a sculptural breath, raising from its flat confines into a tridimensional arena where it unfolds almost like a biological organism. [Figure 26a, b] Aggregated in this way, the pop-cultural fragments in Ohtake’s scrapbooks reveal not only the prolonged span of the artistic gesture over the scope of nearly 40 years, but the deep

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<sup>831</sup> Azuma, *Otaku*, 48.

<sup>832</sup> Walter F. Isaacs, “Time and the Fourth Dimension in Painting,” *College Art Journal* 2, no. 1 (1942): 3.

<sup>833</sup> Lamarre, “Introduction,” ix.

<sup>834</sup> Krauss and Bois, *Formless*, 94.

<sup>835</sup> Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 15.

<sup>836</sup> Nick Compton, “Collecting Memories: Shinro Ohtake Debuts His First UK Solo Multimedia Show at Parasol Unit,” *Wallpaper\**, October 14, 2014, para. 4, <https://www.wallpaper.com/art/collecting-memories-shinro-ohtake-debuts-his-first-uk-solo-multimedia-show-at-parasol-unit>.

mediatic time of their genealogies—and geographies, and geologies—impressed on the pages. Tellingly, the scrapbooks are “measured” not only by the number of pages but also by their weight, negating the lightness, flatness, and thinness associated with drawing and paper, and linking them with natural phenomena like gravity involved in physical objects. The paralog is an appropriate framework for digging into these works, as the “scale disjuncture”<sup>837</sup> of their Pop Art imagery add an element of humor, sometimes even cuteness, to their weirdness. For instance, Ohtake’s scrapbooks often reference the infantile, featuring children’s cartoon characters or a myriad of doll plastic eyes. In one case, an amalgamation of toy eyeballs seemingly rises from the deep to the surface of the book’s cover, like a makeshift Cthulhu, unsettling and silly in equal measure. [Figure 27] In the end, these various instances of art and pop culture suggest that time-space paradoxes and alternative universes require “non-cartographic concepts of scale [that] are not a smooth zooming in and out but involve jumps and discontinuities with sometimes incalculable scale effects.”<sup>838</sup> Such residue, the “incalculable effect” of our ever-shifting becoming, is embodied by the paralog as a metaphor for the unassimilable, unmeaning excess on which both life and art fundamentally thrive.

(See also “Fairies” and “Red Toad Tumblr Post”)

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<sup>837</sup> Woods, “Scale Critique for the Anthropocene,” 135.

<sup>838</sup> Timothy Clark, “Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change, Vol. 1,” ed. Tom Cohen, *Critical Climate Change*, 2012, “Introduction: Scale Effects” para. 4.

# Pastel Turn

Millennial pink, also called *Tumblr* pink, is an indefinable “grapefruit shade of apricotty salmon”<sup>839</sup> hailed by several reports from the fashion and design world as the color of the 2010s. [Figure 1] An article in *The Guardian*, titled “‘Millennial pink’ is the color of now – but what exactly is it?” asserts that despite being so *en vogue*, “no one can agree on the actual color. Or the name...” According to the fashion blog *The Cut*, millennial pink is an “ironic pink, pink without the sugary prettiness. It’s a non-color that doesn’t commit, whose semi-ugliness is proof of its sophistication”<sup>840</sup> It is also said to be “timeless, yet very now.”<sup>841</sup> As such, millennial pink embodies a fundamental off-ness, the uncanny sense of time “out of joint”<sup>842</sup> that haunts the commodity nostalgia of Internet microgenres embedded in ironic meme cyberculture, like *vaporwave*, in which millennial pink features prominently. Like every pink color, millennial pink relates to cuteness and femininity, but unlike other shades, it evokes the affective and “political equivocality”<sup>843</sup> of the lacking and the fading, or the otherwise not-quite-there. Millennial pink is a narrow shade of pink, existing on a threshold of illegibility and doubt. Therefore, it is a suitable ambassador for the *pastel turn*, i.e., the gravitation of pop-cultural aesthetics in the 2010s towards the light, desaturated “baby” colors with a soft, milky or washed out feel.

The millennials, a generation of people born in the 1980s and 1990s, who came of age in the 2000s,<sup>844</sup> are known for their categorical dissolutions. A dissolution or changeability of genders: a cursory *Google* search returns dozens of articles characterizing millennials as the “Queerest, Least Binary Generation Yet”<sup>845</sup> (significantly, the transgender pride flag is

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<sup>839</sup> “‘Millennial Pink’ Is the Colour of Now – but What Exactly Is It?,” *The Guardian*, March 22, 2017, sec. Art and design, para. 3,

[https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/shortcuts/2017/mar/22/millennial-pink-is-the-colour-of-now-but-what-exactly-is-it?CMP=Share\\_AndroidApp\\_Gmail](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/shortcuts/2017/mar/22/millennial-pink-is-the-colour-of-now-but-what-exactly-is-it?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Gmail).

<sup>840</sup> Véronique Hyland, “Is There Some Reason Millennial Women Love This Color?,” *The Cut*, August 2, 2016, para. 3, <http://nymag.com/thecut/2016/07/non-pink-pink-color-trend-fashion-design.html>.

<sup>841</sup> “‘Millennial Pink’ Is the Colour of Now – but What Exactly Is It?,” para. 2.


<sup>842</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Philip Edwards, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>843</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>844</sup> Michael Dimock, “Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins,” *Pew Research Center*, January 17, 2019, para. 5, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>.

<sup>845</sup> Marykate Jasper, “Millennials Are America’s Queerest, Least Binary Generation Yet,” *The Mary Sue*, April 1, 2017, <https://www.themarysue.com/millennials-queerest-generation/>.

composed of baby blue, baby pink, and white stripes, while the genderqueer flag features a lavender stripe to represent androgyny; both reinforce the association of pastelness and nonbinarism<sup>846</sup>). But also, the dissolution of traditional social classes in the form of an emerging “precariat”<sup>847</sup> and a “boomerang generation”<sup>848</sup> (i.e., impoverished “middle-class” adults who are forced to return to their parent's houses in their 20s or 30s, after having lived independently) marked by economic instability well into adulthood. And, more broadly, a dissolution of “all the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate”<sup>849</sup> and of the “human” itself, amid the radical critiques of nature, technology, and anthropocentrism in the face of looming social-environmental catastrophes.

The *pastel turn* also connects to the affective and political properties of cuteness, nostalgia, and ambiguity, which are a crucial component in contemporary mediatic milieus marked by “retromania.”<sup>850</sup> Particularly, Internet-bred microgenres like vaporwave, seapunk, slimepunk, icepunk, soft grunge, and pastel goth share a fetishist nostalgia for 1980s and 1990s technology and pop culture, as well as a preference for “desaturated” motion and tempos: loopy, slow, suspended. As music critic Simon Reynolds puts it, “time itself seemed to become sluggish, like a river that starts to meander and form oxbow lakes.”<sup>851</sup> American live-action series like *Miami Vice*, cartoons like *Care Bears*, *My Little Pony*, and *Jem*, or anime like *Sailor Moon*, have contributed to the “pastelization” of the music, fashion, and visuals filed collectively under the umbrella term “A E S T H E T I C.” Pioneered by vaporwave album covers like Macintosh Plus’s 2011 *Floral Shoppe*, featuring a millennial pink background and title in *katakana*, [Figure 2] the term “A E S T H E T I C” originated from Savvy J’s *YouTube* video , uploaded in November 2013. [Video 1] The video (now gone due to Savvy J’s account having been terminated) was a montage of excerpts from Disney’s Japanese crossover videogame series *Kingdom Hearts*, overlaid with GeoCities GIFs and the classic Windows 95 logo screen saver. Throughout the video, Sora, the protagonist of *Kingdom*

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<sup>846</sup> “The History of the Transgender Flag,” *Point 5cc*, April 23, 2015, <http://point5cc.com/the-history-of-the-transgender-flag/>.

<sup>847</sup> Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London; New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

<sup>848</sup> Sarah Marsh, “The Boomerang Generation – and the Childhood Bedrooms They Still Inhabit,” *The Guardian*, March 14, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2016/mar/14/the-boomerang-generation-and-the-childhood-bedrooms-they-still-inhabit>.

<sup>849</sup> Mark Fisher, “What Is Hauntology?,” *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2012): 16.

<sup>850</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012).

<sup>851</sup> Reynolds, x.

*Hearts*, sinks in slow motion into the ocean or looks longingly at the sky, accompanied by a nostalgic piano melody and slow beats. Sora himself is an embodied “transnational transgression,”<sup>852</sup> being a 3D anime character based on Mickey Mouse, with his white gloves, red shorts, and giant yellow shoes, reflecting the “liquidization”<sup>853</sup> —or even, the “vaporization”<sup>854</sup>—of cultural commodities in the Internet era.

The diminutiveness of A E S T H E T I C microgenres has led to much online debate regarding their legitimacy; often, they are dismissed as jokes or trolling by opportunistic Internet users capitalizing on meme appeal. An example of this perplexity-inducing quality of A E S T H E T I C is the Internet meme “I still don’t know what soft grunge means.” [Figure 3] The phrase, written in 3D computer fonts and pastel gradients, highlights the contradictory meanings of “soft” and “grunge”—the abrasive, angst-filled music style of bands like Nirvana, Soundgarden, Alice In Chains or Pearl Jam. The look originated on *Tumblr* microblogs circa 2010,<sup>855</sup> with photographs of “heroin chic” models accompanied by depressive soundbites like “☹️ sad teens with happy faces 😊” or “I believe in hate at first sight.” The typical soft grunge dress code includes dip-dyed hair in pastel colors like turquoise, ash violet or baby pink, colored lips, cute glittering textures, cat-themed accessories, and flower crowns,<sup>856</sup> used in tandem with thrift store clothing. [Figure 4] According to the *Urban Dictionary*’s top definition, soft grunge is,

A term generally used to describe modern-day teenagers, typically girls between the ages of 14-18, who like create a “hardcore” persona on Tumblr by reblogging pictures of inverted crosses, dip-dyed hair, ying-yang symbols and toilets. They like to pretend that they listen to grunge music by wearing stylish Nirvana tees that match their \$200 pair of Doc Martens. If you were to ask them who the Misfits were, they'd probably say anyone who isn't sporting spikes this season.<sup>857</sup>

This description shows that unlike the authentic messy-girly look of kinderwhore icons like Courtney Love or Kat Bjelland, [Figure 5] soft grunge is perceived to be a bowdlerization

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<sup>852</sup> Christine R. Yano, “Flipping Kitty: Transnational Transgressions of Japanese Cute,” in *Medi@sia: Global Media/Tion in and Out of Context*, ed. T. J. M. Holden and Timothy J. Scrase (London u.a.: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>853</sup> Reynolds, *Retromania*, 122.

<sup>854</sup> Tanner, *Babbling Corpse*, 55.

<sup>855</sup> “Soft Grunge,” *Urban Dictionary*, October 10, 2012, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Soft%20Grunge>.

<sup>856</sup> Pernille Kok-Jensen and Els Dragt, *Always Be Yourself. Unless You Can Be a Unicorn, Then Always Be a Unicorn: A Snapshot of the Weird and Wonderful World of the Tumblr Generation* (Amsterdam: Bis Publishers, 2014), 51.

<sup>857</sup> “Soft Grunge.”

of 1990s grunge, mollified through commodity nostalgia for the consumption of teenyboppers. The instability and flexibility of contents, identities, and styles often associated with a softening of their critical edge through nostalgic use is consistent with the substances that classify other A E S T H E T I C microgenres, like “vapor,” “sea,” “slime,” or “ice.”

One can recognize the contemporary obsession with the liminal and the amorphous in seemingly unrelated phenomena, like the “global slime craze”<sup>858</sup> that spread through social media in 2017 in the form of do-it-yourself slime tutorials and stimming/sensory ASMR blogs and videos. Initiated by a group of Thai teenagers in 2016<sup>859</sup> and popularized by *Instagram* and *YouTube* celebrities like Talisa Tossell, Wengie, Gillian Bower, Nim C, Karina Garcia, and others, the slime trend (much like soft grunge’s relation to “real” grunge) is not about Matthew Barney-esque mucus or disgusting *Alien* secretions. Instead, Internet slime’s bubble-gummy, fluffy, rainbowy, unicorny, glittery, holographic, buttery, and cotton candy textures appeal to viewers for their cuteness, prettiness, and playability. [Figure 6] And, like soft grunge, slime is a girl-dominate turf: “Teenage girls, who serve both as the trendsetters and the businesswomen slinging their top goo mixtures for roughly \$7-10 per tub, almost exclusively run the slime market.”<sup>860</sup> However mercantiled, the slime craze, in its glamorizing primordial soupness and drive towards the haptic appeal of things against mechanized mass production, echoes Bruno Latour’s claim that “we have never been modern.”<sup>861</sup>

In Japan, the pastel turn has been visible in the mid-2010s with the rise of styles like *neo gyaru* (“neo gal”) and genderless *kei* through *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *Tumblr*. Fashion designer, model, and DJ Alisa Ueno popularized the *neo gyaru* trend influenced by soft grunge, seapunk, and vaporwave, to create a style described as “part Americana, part Tokyo, and lots and lots of bleach,”<sup>862</sup> in which neon pastels feature prominently. [Figure 7] In turn, Genderless Kei is characterized less by a specific fashion style than by genderfluidity. In the case of male practitioners, this translates into a cutification of masculinity through clothes, hair,

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<sup>858</sup> Elle Hunt, “Global Slime Craze Sparks Safety Warnings after Borax Blamed for Burns,” *The Guardian*, January 5, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/may/01/global-slime-craze-sparks-safety-warnings-after-borax-blamed-for-burns>.

<sup>859</sup> Cara Rose DeFabio, “Why Teens around the World Are Freaking out about Thai Slime,” *Splinter*, para. 3, accessed June 15, 2019, <https://splinternews.com/why-teens-around-the-world-are-freaking-out-about-thai-1793860133>.

<sup>860</sup> Staff in Life, “Why Is the Internet Obsessing over Slime?,” *Highsnobiety*, June 15, 2017, “Slimey Money” para. 1, <https://www.highsnobiety.com/2017/06/15/slime-trend/>.

<sup>861</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>862</sup> Brian Ashcraft, “Japan’s Next Big Trend Could Be ‘Neo Gals,’” *Kotaku*, May 6, 2014, para. 1, <http://kotaku.com/japans-next-big-trend-could-be-neo-gals-1586450677>.

makeup, and traditionally female-oriented *Instagram* or *Snapchat* filters.<sup>863</sup> [Figure 8] Although *neo gyaru* and genderless *kei* have been hailed as the next big thing in Japanese street fashion, according to writer Ashley Clarke these trends are *Instagram*-centered, appearing primarily on social media platforms rather than on the streets.<sup>864</sup> In the real-life district of Harajuku, Tokyo's world-famous street fashion hub, Clark states that apart from lolita fashion practitioners, "Normcore has replaced that stereotypical aesthetic wildness as the dominant trend on Japanese streets."<sup>865</sup> Online, some commentators question "Where have all the 'gyaru' gone?"<sup>866</sup> while others ironize that "Japan's wild, creative Harajuku street style is dead. Long live Uniqlo,"<sup>867</sup> mourning the loss of louder, eccentric styles like *ganguro*, *yamanba* or *decora* in favor of mass-market fashion. The impression that Harajuku style is dead was reinforced in 2017 when, after 20 years of fieldwork, the iconic street fashion *FRUiTS Magazine* printed its final issue, stating that "there are no more cool kids left to photograph."<sup>868</sup> although some suggest that a multitude of factors is behind the end of *FRUiTS*, unrelated to a shortage of models.<sup>869</sup>

The perceived decline of Harajuku may also be related to the "pastelization" of Japanese street fashion in the late 2000s, resulting from trends like fairy *kei*, *mori kei*, dolly *kei*, and Cult Party *kei*. This "pastelization" is physical, relating to an increase of people dressed in desaturated shades, and metaphorical, signaling the toning down of Harajuku's extremeness. In Shibuya, the Tokyo neighborhood with department stores like 109, known for being the hub of the *gyaru* subculture, the *gyaru* style has suffered a similar process of "pastelization." With

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<sup>863</sup> Ashley Clarke, "Genderless Kei: Harajuku's Online Fashion Revival," *I-D*, February 23, 2016, [https://i-d.vice.com/en\\_gb/article/genderless-kei-harajukus-online-fashion-revival](https://i-d.vice.com/en_gb/article/genderless-kei-harajukus-online-fashion-revival); i-D, *I-D Meets: Tokyo's Genderless Youth*, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrYJE1sFVd8>.

<sup>864</sup> Clarke, "Genderless Kei," para. 2.

<sup>865</sup> Clarke, para. 1.

<sup>866</sup> Preston Phro, "Where Have All the 'gyaru' Gone?," *Japan Today*, April 2, 2015, <https://japantoday.com/category/features/where-have-all-the-gyaru-gone>.

<sup>867</sup> Marc Bain, "Japan's Wild, Creative Harajuku Street Style Is Dead. Long Live Uniqlo," *Quartz*, February 22, 2017, <https://qz.com/909573/japans-wild-creative-harajuku-street-style-is-dead-long-live-uniqlo/>.

<sup>868</sup> Ashley Clarke, "What the Closure of Fruits Magazine Means for Japanese Street Style," *I-D*, February 6, 2017, para. 1, [https://i-d.vice.com/en\\_au/article/ywvz3g/what-the-closure-of-fruits-magazine-means-for-japanese-street-style](https://i-d.vice.com/en_au/article/ywvz3g/what-the-closure-of-fruits-magazine-means-for-japanese-street-style).

<sup>869</sup> Tokyo Fashion, "Panic on The Streets: No, The End of FRUiTS Magazine Is Not The End of Harajuku Fashion," *Medium*, March 2, 2017, paras. 14-18, <https://medium.com/@TokyoFashion/panic-on-the-streets-no-the-end-of-fruits-magazine-is-not-the-end-of-harajuku-fashion-c3692761a507>.

the emergence of *agejou*<sup>870</sup> and *himegyaru*,<sup>871</sup> *gyaru* ditched the deep tans of *ganguro* for lightly tanned or fair skins that conform to traditional Japanese beauty standards, and generally wear lighter, fancier, and sexier clothes in white, beige, and baby pink. [Figure 9] The late 2000s also saw the mainstream rise of *yuru-nachu* (“relaxed natural”) in Japan. Shifting away from *gyaru*-style bodycon clothing and plastic-fantastic street styles like *decora*, *yuru-nachu*’s “relaxed silhouettes, muted colors, and layering organic textiles”<sup>872</sup> emphasize environmental responsibility and loose, laid-back everydayness. [Figure 10] According to some commentators, *yuru-nachu* reacts against what “Benjamin Noys calls the ‘malign velocities’ of contemporary capitalism,”<sup>873</sup> by drawing from the anti-capitalist fashion trends of bohemian and hippie movements: “There are many theories that sluggish economies coincide with lower hemlines, and certainly, *yuru-nachu* has come into the market at a time of deep economic insecurity, especially amongst young people... The laid-back, ‘soft’ style fits perfectly with the general post-materialist tone of Generation Y in Japan: ‘relaxed’ and ‘safe’ trump ‘edgy’ and ‘risky.’”<sup>874</sup>

*Yuru-nachu* was a mainstream trend, but the “relaxed natural” *zeitgeist* reached to Harajuku. In the 2010s, new styles like *pop kei*, *fairy kei*, *mori kei*, *dolly kei*, and *Cult Party kei* emerged that adopted *kawaii* aesthetics in a more subdued way, neither garish like *ganguro* or *decora* nor rococo like lolita fashion. These discrete trends share an overall preference for the soft, dreamlike cuteness of gelato and earthy tones, coupled with layered A-line silhouettes. The practitioners of *pop kei* (also called *Spank!*) and *fairy kei* have been called “the pastel princesses of Japan,”<sup>875</sup> and the trend is often associated with the broader aesthetic of *yume*

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<sup>870</sup> *Agejou* is *gyaru* sub-style which emphasizes glamour, femininity, and sex appeal, often incorporating lingerie elements such as fancy bras, garter stockings, and corset lacing. The style was popularized by the magazine *AGEHA*, which promotes sexy-cute fashion aimed at young women and the *hostess* industry “Agejo,” in *Gyaru Wiki*, para. 1, accessed March 19, 2019, <https://gyaru.fandom.com/wiki/Agejo..>

<sup>871</sup> *Himegyaru* (“princess gal”) is *gyaru* sub-style. According to the *Gyaru Wiki*, “A lot of himegal have that puffy beehive-style hair, but it’s not a requirement, any girly style is fine as long as it looks very fancy. Clothes include long, cocktail dresses or short dresses in mainly red, white, pink, blue and black, as well as leopard and floral print. Empire line tops and dresses are very popular and so are denim jackets, in summer” “Himegyaru,” in *Gyaru Wiki*, para. 1, accessed March 19, 2019, <https://gyaru.fandom.com/wiki/Himegyaru..>

<sup>872</sup> W. David Marx, “Japanese Women | From Luxury to Yuru-Nachu,” *The Business of Fashion*, July 29, 2008, para. 9, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/intelligence/japanese-women-from-luxury-to-yuru-nachu>.

<sup>873</sup> Joshua Paul Dale et al., eds., *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 6.

<sup>874</sup> “Yuru-Nachu,” MEKAS, July 23, 2008, <http://mekas.50mm.jp/en/trends/300.xhtml#1>.

<sup>875</sup> Yutaka, “Fairy Kei – The Pastel Princesses Of Japan,” *WA*, October 13, 2016, <https://yutaka.london/WA/2016/10/13/fairy-kei-the-pastel-princesses-of-japan/>.



*kawaii* (“dream cute”). While the typical Pop *kei* practitioner strives to look like a 1980s pop sweetheart, [Figure 11] and fairy *kei* is more about the slumber party look, [Figure 12] both fashions embrace frilly, glittery, and fluffy textures, magical girl accessories, childlike patterns of unicorns, rainbows, and kittens, and prints of cartoon characters like *Care Bears*, *My Little Pony* or *Jen*. In turn, *mori kei* (*mori* meaning “forest” in Japanese) and *dolly kei* aim for a different type of nostalgia: not so much for childhood as for a more primitive state of human society, i.e., the rural life, preindustrial life, speckled with the fairytale-ish atmosphere of Scandinavian cottages and European countryside girls. *Mori kei* practitioners should have an air of pure childlikeness about them,<sup>876</sup> evoking the Danish and Norwegian *hygge* mood of “coziness” and “comfortable” with shawls, long skirts, fabric layers, fur, and embroideries in “natural” colors. [Figure 13] *Dolly kei* is more inspired by vintage dolls, favoring the ethnic flavor of Middle Ages and Eastern Europe folk costumes, Grimm's tales, and a bohemian style.<sup>877</sup> [Figure 14]

Cult Party *kei* is at the intersection of these “pastelization” trends, combining the antique look of *mori* and *dolly kei* with the pop vibes of *yume kawaii*. It is not uncommon in Japanese street fashion that shops singlehandedly initiate entire subcultures, using their staff as influencers who form “a unique community of employees hired to be brand ambassadors, models, and de facto ‘faces’ of the brands they work for.”<sup>878</sup> Indeed, Cult Party is the name of a resale boutique in Harajuku—previously known as Religion Party, now renamed Virgin Mary—with a “shabby chic” concept, from which the style first stemmed. Cult Party *kei* aims for a dreamy-creamy look in off-white, cream, and beige tones (although gothic variations exist in which black is the primary color), mixing vintage clothes with ballerina wear and sleepwear: “babydolls, bloomers, lacy lingerie, and garters, but also cute pajama pants and large pajama-shirts.”<sup>879</sup> Cute stuffed toys, magical girl merchandise from series like *Sailor Moon* and *Pretty Cure*, Christian crosses and Marian iconography, along with hand-sewn tote bags decorated with lace and yarn, seashells, dried or fake flowers, doll parts, and paint, complete the look.<sup>880</sup>

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<sup>876</sup> Miss Kellie, “Guide to Mori Kei {Forest Girl Style},” *Dear Miss Kellie*, November 22, 2013, para. 6, <http://dearmisskellie.blogspot.com/2013/10/guide-to-mori-kei-forest-girl-style.html>.

<sup>877</sup> Kirsten, “What Is Dolly Kei?,” *Strange Girl*, December 14, 2010, para. 1, <http://strangegirlblog.blogspot.com/p/what-is-dolly-kei.html>.

<sup>878</sup> Ashley Clarke, “The Tokyo Shop Workers Shaping the Future of Japanese Fashion,” *I-D*, August 30, 2016, para. 1, [https://i-d.vice.com/en\\_au/article/9kbjvk/the-tokyo-shop-workers-shaping-the-future-of-japanese-fashion](https://i-d.vice.com/en_au/article/9kbjvk/the-tokyo-shop-workers-shaping-the-future-of-japanese-fashion).

<sup>879</sup> Jiji Ningyomocha, “~ Cult Party Kei ~,” *POPkakumei* ☆, February 3, 2013, para. 6, <http://pop-kakumei.blogspot.com/2013/03/cult-party-kei.html>.

<sup>880</sup> Ningyomocha, paras. 7–12.

Red crosses, in particular, became the trademark motif of Cult Party *kei*, with entire outfits coordinated around the aesthetics of nurse uniforms. The overall impression is one of whiteness with red, purple, and dark pink accents,<sup>881</sup> distinct from other pastel aesthetics like fairy *kei* and dolly *kei*, that dabble in a broader range of neon and earthy pastel hues. [Figure 15]

Cult Party *kei* hair abides by the same chromatic rationale, dyed grey, ash blonde and brown, black or cherry red; and makeup-wise, pink blush is worn high on the cheekbones and under the eyelids, making the practitioners look like tired, sad dolls (sometimes amplified by wearing circle contact lenses to make the eyes appear more prominent).<sup>882</sup> [Figure 16] As blogger Jiji Ningyomocha suggests, “a slightly ‘off’ look fits well with the style”<sup>883</sup> of Cult Party *kei*, therefore the allure of “flawed” handmade and customized items. In this sense, Cult Party *kei* reflects on a bodily precarity, on uncertainty and tiredness, blurring the states of consciousness between being awake or asleep, alive or non-living. Other 2010s street fashion trends, like health goth (a mixture of goth and sportswear), also incorporate medical imaginaries, but whereas health goth tends towards a transhumanist aesthetics of fitness and urban combat, [Figure 17] Cult Party *kei* is contrary to such bodily and mental athleticism. Instead, it promotes the weakness and inactivity of sleep and sickness, on both physical and emotional levels. Its biopolitics is also weirder and more ambiguous than the retro or antique inclinations of fairy, *mori*, and dolly *kei*, presenting a unique blend of *kawaii* fashion tropes, such as doll faces and frilly clothes, with red and Christian crosses, which are icons of humanitarian relief and faith healing.

The trend of *yami-kawaii*, or “sick-cute,” serves as a broader backdrop for Cult Party *kei*’s adherence to the “consuming and consumable pleasures”<sup>884</sup> of cuteness and nostalgia. In 2018, a specific trend of *yami-kawaii*, known as *menhera kei* (“mental illness style”), captured the attention of Western media for its growing popularity in Harajuku. As a street fashion, *yami-kawaii* mixes dream pop elements from pop and fairy *kei* with medical, grotesque or antisocial motifs, including syringes, hangman’s nooses, wrists bandages, band-aids, blood splatters, homicidal or suicidal slogans, and swearwords.<sup>885</sup> [Figure 18a, b] The style is associated with Ezaki Bisuko, an illustrator from *Pixiv* who created the character and manga

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<sup>881</sup> Ningyomocha, para. 4.

<sup>882</sup> Ningyomocha, paras. 16–17.

<sup>883</sup> Ningyomocha, para. 9.

<sup>884</sup> Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, 10.

<sup>885</sup> Refinery29, *The Dark Side Of Harajuku Style You Haven’t Seen Yet*, Refinery29, accessed March 18, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Wsk3Oa\\_3F8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Wsk3Oa_3F8).

*Menhera-chan* in 2014, a girl who transforms into a magical heroine by cutting her wrists.<sup>886</sup>

[Figure 19]

However, the *yami-kawaii* combination of cuteness and sickness has long roots in Japan. One could trace it back to postwar manga, but closer antecedents can be found in the 1990s, for instance, in the work of Japanese artists like Neo Pop painter Nara Yoshitomo and Mizuno Junko, author of the manga *Pure Trance* (1996–98), both of whom mix adorable, round characters with disturbing mental themes and gore in their works. [Figures 20 & 21] Kuwahara Masahiko (b. 1959) is another established Japanese artist whose paintings align closely with the pastel aesthetics of Cult Party *kei*. According to Kuwahara’s biography available at Tomio Koyama Gallery’s website, he “leads a secluded life and does not own a computer or television, but receives his news from the world via newspapers and fliers.”<sup>887</sup> In the 1990s, Kuwahara became known for his cute although eerie paintings, where characters “appear variously despondent, deformed, and isolated, referencing themes of estrangement in contemporary life.”<sup>888</sup> For instance, in *The Exchange* (1998), there is a barely formed hybrid pig-bird holding a dripping tomato, its mouth and wing stained with red liquid, making it unclear whether it is vegetable juice or blood. [Figure 22] In *Clean Meat* (1996), Kuwahara paints two cylindrical lengths in which one sports the face of a pig, while the other has had its face neatly sliced off and is now showing its ham-like interior. [Figure 23] *Cornea (artificial world)* (1996) consists of two half-rabbits joined at the stomach. [Figure 24] These works exemplify the “cute aggression” in Kuwahara’s paintings, where smiling animals are submitted to bodily injuries, reflecting the unseen violence behind the glossy images of advertisement and science (e.g., intensive animal farming, animal testing, etc.).

In retrospect, Kuwahara’s early paintings fit perfectly into the aesthetics of *yami-kawaii*, which, as mentioned above, was being practiced in the mid-1990s by various Japanese artists. More recently, however, Kuwahara’s show *Fantasy Land* (2017) at Tomio Koyama displays a full incursion into the lighter end of the pastel spectrum. The paintings in *Fantasy Land*, mostly acrylics on canvas of small or medium dimension, resemble white nowhere lands inhabited by doodle-like creatures, nondescript objects, and buildings reduced to bear

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<sup>886</sup> Mai Nguyen, “When Dark and Cute Meet: Yami Kawaii with Bisuko Ezaki,” *Asia Pacific Arts*, July 13, 2018, <https://asiapacificarts.org/2018/07/13/bisukoezaki/>; Amy, “The Yamikawaii World Of Ezaki Bisuko ♡ Menhera-chan,” *Lafary*, December 4, 2018, <https://www.lafary.net/english/44870/>.

<sup>887</sup> “Masahiko Kuwahara,” 19-09-2013, *Artsy*, para. 1, accessed May 8, 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/artist/masahiko-kuwahara>.

<sup>888</sup> “Masahiko Kuwahara,” para. 1.

architectonic structures. Like the painting themselves against the whiteness of the gallery's walls—so white that, at first glance, it would appear that the room is empty—these elements seem about to dissolve and fade into the backdrops, unable to muster the physical or mental strength to maintain their formal integrity. [Figure 25a, b] In smaller paintings of animals it is unclear if they are living or merely stuffed toys, creating an uncanny impression accentuated by Kuwahara's use of scale (is that a girl on a stage, or a porcelain figure on a tabletop? Are those objects on a window display, or miniatures in a candy box? A real animal, or a teddy bear on a shelf?). [Figure 26] While the paint is evenly distributed, Kuwahara's rough brush strokes leave subtle thinner areas and cloggy impastos that, along with his misshapen figures, give the paintings a deliberately amateurish look, akin to Cult Party *kei*'s fascinations with DIY imperfection. [Figure 27]

In Kuwahara's paintings from the mid-2000s, there are young women with pale skin and light hair, resembling characters from a fairy tale, often in their underwear, nightgowns or ballerina leotards. [Figure 28] In the 1990s, his figures' contours also tended to be more precise. Kuwahara's progression from the clearer outlines of earlier works to childish scribbles in later paintings is less about the modernist admiration for children's freedom or outsider art, than what appears to be a dumbing down or numbing of the artist's own motor faculties. The "anti-auric, anti-cynical tedium"<sup>889</sup> that these paintings exude is neither hypnotic, nor transcendent, nor ironic. Kuwahara's lack of chromatic content seems to enforce a lack of time and space, like a faraway memory of a pre-industrial world or a pre-adult life—an empty, ever silent fantasy land that, as Marilyn Ivy puts it, is "shot through with not only the impossibility but also the ultimate unwillingness to reinstate what was lost."<sup>890</sup> This "unwillingness" to reinstate the past despite one's adoration for it is a characteristic identifiable in nostalgic expressions more broadly, with which the pastel turn often aligns, but there is a more profound tension at work in Kuwahara's paintings.

His characters and landscapes radiate a genuinely benign feeling: they are cute and pretty, comfortable and safe—even effortless, or *yurui*. In many ways, they can be thought of as visions of a classless world, reenacting a Rousseauian "state of nature," i.e., the mythical existence of humans, animals, and things before social hierarchies came into existence. At the same time, Kuwahara seems to self-consciously reinsert this Arcadia of looseness and

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<sup>889</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 278.

<sup>890</sup> Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, 10.

relaxation into the processing machine of a “cuteness-industrial complex,”<sup>891</sup> the same that mass produces Hello Kitty-like dolls, stationery, and other fancy goods. There is a “soft” violence that thoroughly underlines the commodification of bodies in Kuwahara’s world, which is why the inhabitants of his paintings are ambiguous icons of in-betweenness, making it impossible to tell whether they are living subjects or inanimate objects, dead or alive. In short, Kuwahara’s “utopia... is nowhere, literally,”<sup>892</sup> as placeless, nostalgic visions of unspoiled idyll always are.

(See also “Dark Web Bake Sale,” “Hamster” and “Poppy.”)

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<sup>891</sup> Ehrlich, “From Kewpies to Minions,” para. 2.

<sup>892</sup> Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, 121.

# Poison Girls

The popularity of *moé* in twenty-first-century *otaku* aesthetics has translated into a boom of *iyashikei* or “healing” *anime*—slice of life comics and animation with minimal tension, meant to have a calming, even therapeutic impact on audiences.<sup>893</sup> But not all character archetypes blossoming within the *moé* fandom are about healing. On the contrary, *yangire* and *yandere* characters test the limits of cuteness: both are portmanteau words sharing the common prefix *yan*, from the Japanese verb *yamu* (病), meaning “to fall ill” or “to be ill,” therefore, the opposite of the healing qualities for which *moé* is known and celebrated. The *gire* in *yangire* comes from *kire*, meaning “slice,” whereas the *dere* in *yandere* comes from *dere*, an onomatopoeic word meaning “lovestruck” (*dere* is a common suffix in *moé* character types, e.g., *tsundere*, *kūdere*, *dandere*, *oujidere*, *himedere*, etc.). The final halves of the words (*gire* and *dere*) are what separates the *yangire* and the *yandere* in terms of motivation. A compulsion to slice with a knife drives the former; the latter is driven by feelings of love. To cut a long story short (pun intended), the *yangire* is a cute character prone to snapping into a bloodthirsty psychopath when irritated, frightened or otherwise stressed. In turn, the *yandere* is a cute character who turns different shades of brutal, obsessive and deranged over their romantic crush. The *yandere* is a crazy, overprotective stalker in sheep’s clothing, one who will hesitate at nothing (kidnapping, blackmailing, torture, assassination) to remove whatever obstacles stand in the way of their love. Even if that means, in extreme cases, “protecting” their loved one from themselves by maiming or killing them. **[Figure 1]**

The *yangire* and *yandere* fit broadly into the umbrella category of split personality tropes. Beware of the silly, nice, quiet ones, for under the façade of innocence, Mr. Hyde waits seething, ready to burst from their slumber in the form of violent mood swings and sudden outbursts of murderous rage.<sup>894</sup> Often, these are triggered by “berserk buttons,” a stimulus or set of stimuli that activate the violent reaction.<sup>895</sup> It is not unusual for these outbursts to physically transform the characters’ appearance by uncutifying them: eyes widen, irises shrink, an evil slasher smile distorts their adorable features. **[Figure 2]** The occasional male *yangire*-

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<sup>893</sup> “Iyashikei,” *TV Tropes*, July 10, 2011, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/Iyashikei>.

<sup>894</sup> “Beware the Silly Ones,” *TV Tropes*, accessed June 8, 2017, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BewareTheSillyOnes>.

<sup>895</sup> “Berserk Button,” *TV Tropes*, accessed June 8, 2017, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BerserkButton>.

*dere* exist in Japanese media, but unsurprisingly, these characters are almost always female, endorsing a longstanding tradition of uncontrollable emotional excesses by hysterical women. Stephen King's 1987 novel *Misery*, later adapted to a film starring Kathy Bates as the psychopathic Annie Wilkes, is perhaps the best-known example. [Figure 3] Unlike the typical *yangire-dere* character, though, whose appearance is indistinguishable from your everyday cute anime or manga girl, Annie is an "abhorrent admirer," an othered figure who falls outside conventional beauty standards for being ugly, overweight, and dirty.<sup>896</sup> What Annie and the *yangire-dere* characters in anime and manga do share is that they are not merely emotionally unstable women but *infantilized* women, in appearance or behavior or both. For instance, *yangire-dere* girls are often represented as child-like *loli* characters, while Annie uses nonsense words like "cockadoodie" and refuses to swear despite the extreme violence of her actions.

I now turn to some examples of *yangire-dere* characters in Japanese comics and animation. Gasai Yuno, from the series *Mirai Nikki* ("Future Diary," animated in 2011 from Esuno Sakae's manga),<sup>897</sup> [Figure 4] has become the *yandere* poster child, originating the Internet meme "Yandere Trance" or "Ecstatic Yandere Pose," also known as "Yuno face." Yuno is a cute, pink-haired girl in love with the boy protagonist Amano "Yukkii" Yukiteru, who has been forced to take part in a deadly battle royale. Yuno swears to protect Yukiteru by any means necessary, which in her mind include aggressive stalking and carnage. At the end of the first episode of *Mirai Nikki*'s anime adaptation (Asread, 2011-12), after a terrified Yukiteru learns of the dreadful fate awaiting him, he is reassured by Yuno, all crazy eyes and blushing, saying "Don't worry, Yukkii... I will (ahn~) protect you." [Video 1] The vocal performance by actress Tomosa Murata is not short on erotic undertones.

Along with the dramatic hand pose and eerie lighting, the scene became an exploitable image, with hundreds of fan parodies circulating on the Internet where male and female characters from all kinds of shows are "yanderized" using Yuno's girlish face as a template. [Figures 5 & 6] The popularity of the Ecstatic Yandere Pose reinforces the idea that, regardless of the character's biological sex, the affective meanings of the *yandere* are invariably femininized and infantilized. The *yandere* thus discloses the paradoxical anxiety we feel

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<sup>896</sup> "Abhorrent Admirer," *TV Tropes*, accessed June 8, 2017, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/AbhorrentAdmirer>.

<sup>897</sup> *Mirai Nikki*, 26 episodes, directed by Hosoda Naoto, written by Takayama Katsuhiko, and produced by Asread, aired from October 10, 2011 to April 16, 2012, on Chiba TV and TV Saitama. Based on the Esuno Sakae's *Mirai Nikki*, run in *Monthly Shōnen Ace* (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten) from July 26, 2006 to December 25, 2010.

towards extreme displays of love and cuteness. Because cuteness is an uncanny deviation from the “standard” human adult appearance, characters who are “too” cute may be perceptualized, at some level, as disturbing, unnatural and deceptive, echoing Mori Masahiro’s uncanny valley—a theory according to which the not-quite-human, as opposed to the nonhuman, evokes especially negative emotions of aversion in viewers.

Another aspect is that, as argued by Sianne Ngai, such marking of subjects as emotionally anomalous, whether by deficit or surplus, is, in fact, a long-running means of othering and disenfranchising those perceived to be outside the various spheres of social privilege (white, male, hetero-cis, abled, and so on). Ngai’s concept of “animatedness” (the state of being moved) effectively pinpoints the ideologically “ambiguous interplay between agitated things and deactivated persons,” “the passionate and the mechanical,”<sup>898</sup> often found in possessed female bodies within the horror genre. In *House of Psychotic Women*, a semi-autobiographical book on representations of female neurosis in horror and exploitation films, Kier-La Janisse compares her own experience of mental illness with cinema’s most notorious teenage girl possessed by the devil. “I felt like Regan in *The Exorcist*,” she writes, “emitting these crude and venomous insults while simultaneously feeling that the words were coming from somebody else.”<sup>899</sup> [Figure 7] The *yangire-dere* are also, among *moé*’s repertoire of stock characters, those most “possessed” by an emotional defectiveness, haunted by a sense of ventriloquism and manipulation of their voices and bodies as they alternate between innocence and monstrosity. For *yangire-dere* characters, their state of “animatedness”—that Ngai traces back to rudimentary technologies of animating pictures to which manga, anime, and videogames are tellingly related—reflects the terrifying prospect of being a puppet whose agency is compromised. As Grafton Tanner suggests, “Perhaps for humans, we fear not the mechanization and loss of control so much as the fear of becoming Frankenstein’s monster—a babbling corpse, hollow yet able to run amok with machinelike skill.”<sup>900</sup> Such terror is valid for humans in general, but mainly for those coming from a subaltern viewpoint, who most vividly experience the violence of reification processes.

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<sup>898</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 91.

<sup>899</sup> Kier-La Janisse, *House of Psychotic Women: An Autobiographical Topography of Female Neurosis in Horror and Exploitation Films* (Godalming, Surrey: Fab Press, 2012), 136.

<sup>900</sup> Tanner, *Babbling Corpse*, 16.



One notable example of the *yangire-dere*'s link to puppeteering is the beginning of *Elfen Lied* (Arms, 2004),<sup>901</sup> an anime adapted from Okamoto Lynn's homonymous manga. The series focuses on the interactions between humans and a mutant species, the *diclonii*, whose appearance is similar to people except for two horns on their heads. *Elfen Lied*'s opening sequence is notorious for its use of graphic violence and "blood piñatas," i.e., characters whose sole purpose in the story is to be reduced to a pulp. As the main character, the *diclonii* known as Lucy—who, incidentally, is a cute pink-haired girl, like *Mirai Nikki*'s Yuno—makes her escape out of an experimentation facility, she uses her invisible telekinetic tentacle-arms to mutilate and kill her captors, leaving a blood bath in her wake. [Figure 8, Video 2] During this sequence, Lucy becomes both puppeteer and puppet, pulling strings with unseen hands while rendered mechanical and dehumanized by her unstoppable advance. The scene is memorable for the contrast between Lucy's naked body and the full metal mask engulfing her face, which symbolically inhibits her voice, making her silent during the whole sequence. Lucy's silence reinforces the automatized quality of the *diclonii*'s desensitization, who does not babble but runs amok like a vengeful spirit or ghost. Eventually, Lucy is shot in the head, causing her to develop the alternate persona, Nyu, an adorable, innocent, and clumsy feral child, who is taken in by a young man and woman, and named after the only word she produces ("nyu~"). In terms of physical appearance, Nyu is distinguished from Lucy by her zany *dojikko* ("clumsy" or "ditzy girl") body language, as well as her *tareme*, a kind of puppy-dog eyes dropped at the corners, typical of sweet and naïve animanga characters.<sup>902</sup> [Figure 9] This split between Lucy, the person of mass destruction, and Nyu, the ingénue, goes on to become one of the series' central plot points. But the opening sequence remains especially operative in its representation of the *yangire-dere*'s ambiguous agency: at once the most aggressively innervated, and the most possessed, of *moé*'s character types.

If "cuteness is an aestheticization of powerlessness,"<sup>903</sup> the *yangire* and *yandere* may be perceived as a revenge of the cutified subject, sadistically lashing out against their master's sadism. It is no wonder that the *yangire-dere*'s behavior is so often justified by past trauma, making them sufferers of physical and psychological abuse, in a circular logic where the victim becomes a perpetrator. This vicious circle is present in both *Mirai Nikki* and *Elfen Lied*, as

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<sup>901</sup> *Elfen Lied*, 13 episodes, directed by Mamoru Kanbe, written by Takao Yoshioka, and produced by Arms, aired on July 25, 2004, on AT-X. Based on Okamoto Lynn's *Elfen Lied*, run in Weekly Young Jump (Tokyo: Shueisha) from June 6, 2002, to August 25, 2005.

<sup>902</sup> "Tareme Eyes," *TV Tropes*, November 3, 2009,

<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TaremeEyes?from=Main.Tareme>.

<sup>903</sup> Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 2012, 64.

Yuno was physically harmed and starved by her parents after failing to live up to their expectations, and the *diclonii*'s violence is hinted to be the result of abuse by humans. The experience of abjection, of being cast off and reduced to a state of helplessness, pitifulness, and despair, is pivotal in the portrayal and development of many of these characters.

Another example is Ryūgū Rena, an iconic *yangire* from the best-selling media franchise *Higurashi no Naku Koro ni* (“When the Cicadas Cry,” 2002–2014).<sup>904</sup> [Figure 10] Scarred by her parents’ divorce, Rena, who is a sweet and friendly girl except when she is not, suffers from acute maternal and self-abjection. She hallucinates that her mother’s blood is filled with maggots and cuts herself in an attempt to remove it from her body. [Figure 11] Rena is also fascinated with the town’s illegal dumping site, where she passes her time treasure-hunting for “cute” things, often odd and discarded items that appeal only to herself, suggesting that cuteness, both for Rena and the audience who loves her, is in the eyes of the beholder. [Figure 12] Rena becomes remarkably violent when she is angry and carries around a Japanese gardening hatchet (*nata*) found in the trash heap, that she uses as her trademark item and weapon. [Figure 13] Although love interests do not define her neurosis, Rena has her *yandere* moments, such as the famous door sequence in *Higurashi no Naku Koro ni*'s anime adaptation (Studio Deen, 2006)<sup>905</sup> where she attempts to force her way into the protagonist’s, Maebara Keiichi, house. [Video 3] When Keiichi offers a ragged excuse for refusing to let her in, Rena, who due to her parents’ divorce hates being lied to by the people close to her, screams at him “YOU’RE LYING.” After that, she proceeds to describe in detail Keiichi’s movements that day, suggesting that she had been stalking him all along, and forcefully shakes the door chain. Terrified, Keiichi shuts the door in an attempt to keep her away, brutally crushing Rena’s fingers in the process.

In real life, the genealogy of the *yandere* can be traced back to the Sada Abe Incident of 1936. Abe was a prostitute and murderess who erotically strangled her lover to death, castrated his corpse, and carried the genitalia in her handbag around the streets of Tokyo for days until her arrest. [Figure 14] When asked why she did it, her reply could hardly be more *yandere*-ish: “I loved him so much I couldn’t stand it, so I decided that I wanted him all to

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<sup>904</sup> Initiated by the videogame *Higurashi no Naku Koro ni: Onikakushi-hen*, developed and published by 07th Expansion, released August 10, 2002.

<sup>905</sup> *Higurashi no Naku Koro ni*, 26 episodes, directed by Kon Chiaki, written by Kawase Toshifumi, and produced by Studio Deen, aired from April 4 to September 26, 2006, on Chiba TV, Kansai TV, and Tokai TV.

myself.”<sup>906</sup> Abe’s actions and personality captured Japan’s public imagination and fueled the artistic movement known as *ero-guro nonsense*. As the police investigation advanced, relevant details about Abe’s life came to light. It was discovered, for instance, that Abe had been a victim of acquaintance rape, which at the time sentenced girls at an early age to the marginality of unmarried women perceived as “damaged goods.” This event precipitated a series of tragic results in her life. Abe became a runaway misfit and, as punishment, was forced into prostitution by her father. Maltreatment by pimps marked her days as a sex worker, contracting syphilis, financial desperation, imprisonment in geisha houses, and eventually becoming a fugitive prostitute. Abe herself acknowledged that her actions were, to some extent, motivated by gender and class disempowerment, resorting to murder and mutilation to gain sexual equality with man.

Still, as scholar Christine Marran points out, the coeval pre-war discourses on Abe were mostly naturalized and cautionary, depoliticizing her claims by framing Abe as an instinctual killer driven by primal bodily desires, repeatedly described as infantile, insect- and animal-like, primitive and regressive.<sup>907</sup> Her tale of psychosexual deviancy became a warning against the dangers of unregulated sexual maturation in females, (ab)used to validate an agenda of gender oppression.<sup>908</sup> As such, Abe came to embody, the *dokufu*, the “evil” or “poison woman,” an archetype aligning female criminality with the potential for havoc in every woman’s libido.

**[Figure 15]**

In a surprising turn of events, Japanese post-war pulp fiction and 1970s films refashioned Abe as an icon of emancipation. **[Figure 16]** Although, according to Marran, this shift had less to do with women’s struggle than with the emergence of the “male masochist” as a new counter-discourse of masculinity “through which masculine totalitarian politic and cultural values are explored and critiqued.”<sup>909</sup> Indeed, because male *otaku* are perceived to be lacking in the traditional predatory qualities of machismo, they are often caught up in debates about “new masculinities” in Japan, associated with phenomena such as the “herbivore men” (*sōshoku-kei danshi*, young bachelors with no interest in sex and marriage). Arguably, *yandere* characters like *Mirai Nikki*’s Yuno also reflect an uneasiness towards the dissolution of

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<sup>906</sup> Christine L. Marran, *Poison Woman: Figuring Female Transgression in Modern Japanese Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 163.

<sup>907</sup> Marran, *Poison Woman*, 128.

<sup>908</sup> Marran, 134–135.

<sup>909</sup> Marran, *Poison Woman*, 136.

“manliness,”<sup>910</sup> cautioning well-intentioned young men that they can become easy prey for the femme fatale feeding off their gentle nature. As the series progresses, we realize that Yuno is not an entirely flat character—that she is fighting her own demons—but *Mirai Nikki* nevertheless remains a narrative primarily centered on Yukii, thus inheriting the male masochism and grotesque tone of *ero-guro* works.

*Yangire* and *yandere* characters are sensationalistic and shock-based, combining otherwise benign *moé* characters with the negatively charged transgressiveness of the “poison woman.” Such lurid combination sets series like *Mirai Nikki* and *Elfen Lied* apart from more profound, more considerate and complete portraits of insanity and depression in anime and manga (for example, series like *Neon Genesis Evangelion*). “Poison girls” are bad (identity) politics: they maintain harmful myths about female mental illness, turning psychopathological women into distorted caricatures, more revealing of male fears than anything else. But their broader value might perhaps be found elsewhere—in the realm of abject aesthetics, beyond the good (socially progressive) representation of femininity and female bodies.

Take, for instance, Akira Kogami from *Lucky Star* (Kyoto Animation, 2007),<sup>911</sup> a quintessential *moé* anime based on Kagami Yoshimizu’s *yonkoma* manga (“four-panel comic strip”). [Figure 17] Akira is a 14-year-old idol who, along with her male assistant Minoru, co-hosts “Lucky Channel,” a short infomercial at the end of every episode of *Lucky Star*, that—supposedly—promotes the main show’s characters. Akira has pink hair (see a pattern?), wears a sailor suit with oversized sleeves, and exhibits an energetic “cute on steroids” persona. However, this is a cover-up for the hardboiled misanthrope lurking underneath the surface. The real Akira is not above resorting to verbal and physical abuse to enforce her will. As episodes go by the joke is that, despite her assistant’s best efforts, Akira’s toxic personality invariably diverts “Lucky Channel” away from its original purpose as a fan corner. Instead, she turns it into a self-contained black comedy of the duo’s increasingly abusive and violent work relationship. Mind you: in typical “poison girl” fashion, the violence is almost entirely female on male.

“Lucky Channel” differs from the actual show not only by breaking the fourth wall but also in tone. Whereas *Lucky Star* is a “healing” slice of life show, “Lucky Channel” is dark,

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<sup>910</sup> Masahiro Morioka, “A Phenomenological Study of ‘Herbivore Men,’” *The Review of Life Studies* 4 (September 2013): 1–20.

<sup>911</sup> *Lucky Star*, 24 episodes, directed by Yutaka Yamamoto and Yasuhiro Takemoto, written by Machida Tōko, and produced by Kyoto Animation, aired from April 8 to September 16, 2007, on Chiba TV, KBS Kyoto, SUN-TV, and Tokyo MX.

innervated, cynical. Additionally, Akira’s “yangireness” is openly framed as a labor issue, presenting her neurosis as the result of early enrolment at age three into the highly competitive *tarento* (“television celebrity”) industry. Among other gritty details, we learn that her parents are divorced and that her mother takes charge over Akira’s money, allegedly using it to buy herself branded goods while giving her daughter a puny allowance. Akira is represented as a slave to the wage, bitter over the pressure and expectations of an exploitative industry, family, and public alike, yet obsessed with career advancement, power, and prestige. Like a reverse-Regan, her body is possessed by a labor-intensive cute persona, which easily crumbles into unladylike and unchildlike poses and gestures like crotch-scratching and chain-smoking, squinty eyes, and a harsh voice. [Video 4]

Moreover, because Akira perceives her being relegated to the other side of the “wall” as a status inequality, she becomes petty and paranoid, resenting the protagonists for their popularity. She longs to be in the main show and envy overcomes her, an emotion that, as Ngai points out, is historically feminized and proletarianized—with the infamous concept of “penis envy” in the eye of the storm.<sup>912</sup> As a result, Akira bullies her subordinate, Minoru, who plays a minor role in the main show and whose mobility irritates her the most, in remarkably cruel ways ranging from verbal humiliation to escalating forms of physical violence, including an ashtray thrown at his face. [Figure 5a, b] Akira’s own repeated attempts at entering the main show are always frustrated. At various occasions, she abruptly falls ill on the day of her debut, is given a karaoke room instead of a concert hall, and stopped short in her song. The message is clear: Akira is not allowed into *Lucky Star*’s fictional world, inhabited by students and workers unaffected by work’s toll on the body and soul of the workforce. In the end, Akira’s poisonousness brings upon the destruction of the “Lucky Channel” itself. After being sent on a life-threatening mission to collect drinking water from the springs of Mount Fuji, which Akira ends up spitting for not being sufficiently cool, Minoru is pushed beyond his breaking point and goes on a rampage that destroys the “Lucky Channel” set. [Video 6]

The *yangire-dere* potentially embody this destructive cycle of abuse in a transgressive but not progressive way, aiming for outright negativity rather than realism or proper representation. They express our fear of the repressed, whether the psychological or social-economical repressed, resembling Jung’s principle of enantiodromia, that extremes transmogrify into their shadow opposites. The cuter and more domesticated the girl, then, the

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<sup>912</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*.

darker and wilder her poison, explaining why many *yangire and yandere* characters have pink hair or other explicit markers of cuteness and conventional femininity. Furthermore, these “poison girls” draw our attention to the invisible threads weaving together issues of gender, intimacy, agency, and violence in media and commodities. They suggest that the reverse of the Shakespearean saying that there is a method to the madness is just as accurate: that there is a madness to the method. In doubt, take a stroll down your nearest Ikea or Muji store, where the sheer superabundance of order and utilitarianism is enough to drive anyone crazy. [Figure 18] Indeed, the exhaustive partitioning of the private and domestic spaces traditionally assigned to femininity demonstrates that, as Judith Fryer argues, “The structures that contain—or fail to contain—women are the houses in which they live, the material things of their lives.”<sup>913</sup>

The value of *yangire* and *yandere* characters is, precisely, that their madness is a result of the systemic violence unfolding from the commodification of female and infantile bodies, in this case, in the form of a “cuteness-industrial complex.”<sup>914</sup> Characters like Yuno, Lucy, Rena, and Akira are scary because, despite their cuteness, they are intelligent and resourceful; they stalk, attack, and murder methodically. An excellent example of this trope in Western media is *Gone Girl*, a 2012 novel by Gillian Flynn, adapted to a film directed by David Fincher in 2014. In it, the female protagonist Amy Elliott Dunne is also “infantilized” by her serving as inspiration for the popular *Amazing Amy* children’s book series, written by Amy’s exploitative parents, and traumatized by their emotionally absent relationship to her. When Amy’s marriage disintegrates, she carries out an extraordinarily intricate and carefully executed plan to frame husband Nick for her own murder, to get back at his neglect and adultery. The plan includes, among other things, a meticulously fabricated diary detailing Amy’s isolation and fear, taking a urine sample from a pregnant neighbor to fake a pregnancy test, draining her blood to plant evidence of violent injuries around the house, [Figure 19] and raising her life insurance so it seems like Nick killed her for the money. Such dangling on the thin line separating reason from the insanity, the lovable from the horrific, is also valid for many over-sentimental dialogues and displays of romantic love in women-oriented products like *shōjo manga* that, if taken out of context, could easily pass for *yandere* scenarios of a dangerous obsession. [Figure 20]

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<sup>913</sup> Judith E. Fryer Davidov, *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

<sup>914</sup> Ehrlich, “From Kewpies to Minions,” para. 2.

The procedural aspect of the *yangire* and *yandere*'s madness is the subject of a popular videogame, the *Yandere Simulator* ([yanderesimulator.com](http://yanderesimulator.com)), presently in development by American fan creator YandereDev since 2014. **[Figure 21]** With the subtitle “Don’t Let Senpai Notice You,” a pun on the Internet meme “I Hope Senpai Will Notice Me,”<sup>915</sup> YandereDev describes the *Yandere Simulator* as “a stealth game about stalking a boy and secretly eliminating any girl who seems interested in him, while maintaining the image of an innocent schoolgirl.” The player controls a Japanese high school student named Aishi “Yan-chan” Ayano, who must eliminate her love rivals one by one. To do this, she uses an extensive collection of methods, from slaughter to staging accidents to social sabotage, while dealing with practical concerns such as disposing of corpses, cleaning up blood or destroying evidence. In a promotional video, the narrator stresses that the “Yandere Simulator is not a dating sim. It’s not about romancing *senpai*, it’s about being a stalker. And it’s about sabotaging his love life from the shadows.”<sup>916</sup> **[Figure 22]** If Yan-chan becomes noticeable by insisting on pursuing her love interest face to face, or if he catches Yan-chan acting suspicious, she will be met with accusations of being “weird,” “creepy” or “crazy,” and her *senpai* will scream at her to stay away. “Senpai is a nice person,” the narrator says, “however, everyone has their limits.” The fact that Yan-chan’s love interest must not notice her contradicts every rule of typical romance narrative. Like *Lucky Channel*’s Akira, it is as if Yan-chan is too corrupt for the world of romance and dating sims in which she wants in. Unsurprisingly, the *Yandere Simulator* is rendered in cute animanga visuals, with the game logo and the intro screen painted in bright pink with hearts serving as decorative elements. What is more, the *Yandere Simulator* development blog, in which YandereDev details the process of feature building, debugging, and fan feedback involved in constructing the game, is in and of itself a window into the exhaustive method involved in building the *yandere*’s madness.

The seemingly infinite elasticity of what can be considered “cute” in Japanese popular culture has originated characters in which “psycho” traits substitute *moé*’s healing qualities. But the sensationalism of *yangire* and *yandere* tropes does not stop them from becoming remarkably opaque at times, appealing to both radical and reactionary readings. Between the

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<sup>915</sup> In Japanese, a “senpai” is a senior at work or an upperclassman at school. “Senpai,” in *Wiktionary*, accessed June 10, 2017, <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/senpai>. The meme “I Hope Senpai Will Notice Me” originated on *Tumblr*, playing to the cliché scenario of unrequited love common in anime and manga set in high school. “I Hope Senpai Will Notice Me,” *Know Your Meme*, accessed June 17, 2019, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/i-hope-senpai-will-notice-me>.

<sup>916</sup> Yandere Dev, *Don’t Let Senpai Notice You!*, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luEaqII\\_VOc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luEaqII_VOc).

extreme oppositions of cuteness and horror, reason and madness, submission and domination, is a gap in which reverberate visions of female and male trauma. Indeed, while most *yangire-dere* characters come off as bad representations of feminized and infantilized subjects, there is often an experience of disenfranchisement at the root, indexing both a fear and a desire that subaltern subjects will rebel against the oppressive forces that shape their affective-aesthetic milieu. As such, the “poison girls” in manga, anime, and videogames also stage a broader tension perceived to exist between the regulation and commodification of the spheres traditionally assigned to women and children, the home and family, and their shadow opposite: out of control violence. Above all, *yangire* and *yandere* characters express the everlasting conflict between Eros and Thanatos, the drives towards life-love and death, in a concentrated way that probes into our deep-seated feelings of suspicion towards anything that is exceedingly *nice*.

(See also “Absolute Boyfriend” and “She’s Not Your Waifu; She’s an Eldritch Abomination”)



# Poppy

Poppy (Moriah Rose Pereira, b. 1995) is an American singer and YouTube celebrity based in Los Angeles who has been producing, in collaboration with director Titanic Sinclair (Corey Michael Mixter, b. 1987), a series of short promotional videos for the *thatPoppyTV* channel (<https://www.youtube.com/user/thatPoppyTV/videos>). Their first video, uploaded on November 4, 2014, shows Poppy eating cotton candy for one minute and 22 seconds, evoking Andy Warhol's 1963 experimental films (*Sleep, Kiss, Eat*). [Videos 1 & 2] In most videos, Poppy, with long platinum blonde hair and huge brown eyes, speaks to viewers in a sweet voice as she stares expressionlessly at the camera, framed by white backgrounds and a soundtrack of ethereal yet ominous synthesizers. Some videos feature special effects, introducing magically appearing and disappearing objects, small animations, or distorted voices parodying the slanders of Internet haters (*They Say Mean Things*, June 18, 2017). Titanic lifted the basic Poppy formula from *Grocerybag.TV* and *Computer Show*, a website and web series (respectively) done in collaboration with his former partner, Mars Argo (Britanny Sheets). The degree to which Poppy's videos and persona infringe on Mars Argo's intellectual property was the subject of a notorious lawsuit, filed in April 2018 by Sheets, which also accused Mixter of abuse.<sup>917</sup>

Although the case ended with a settlement,<sup>918</sup> the incident impacted Poppy's reputation and originated a wave of backlash on her *YouTube* channel, including negative comments and hashtags like #imcopy, #justiceformars, and #sinkthetitanic. The Mars Argo lawsuit sheds a sinister light on how the qualities that draw us to artworks can reflect their creators' darkest side. For instance, the idea that Poppy was being held captive against her will by Titanic had been a recurring joke in *thatPoppyTV*, with some of her videos' descriptions containing hidden messages (e.g., "HELP ME"). Moreover, it is ironic that the deconstruction of "authenticity" is a recurring theme in Poppy's videos and that now, in the eyes of many netizens, she has herself become a mockup of the original Mars Argo.

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<sup>917</sup> The entire lawsuit is available at [http://tmz.vo.llnwd.net/o28/newsdesk/tmz\\_documents/Mars-Argo%20-ThatPoppy-Lawsuit-01.pdf](http://tmz.vo.llnwd.net/o28/newsdesk/tmz_documents/Mars-Argo%20-ThatPoppy-Lawsuit-01.pdf).

<sup>918</sup> Andrew Trendell, "Poppy and Collaborator Titanic Sinclair Settle Lawsuit with Mars Argo," *NME*, January 8, 2019, para. 8, <https://www.nme.com/news/music/poppy-and-manager-titanic-sinclair-settle-lawsuit-with-mars-argo-2428225>.

Poppy's brand has been perfected over time from its amateurish early stages in *Poppy Eats Cotton Candy* to its current more consistent and professionalized form. Presently, Poppy's "media franchise" includes three studio albums, two of which are pop albums, *Poppy.Computer* (2017) and *Am I a Girl?* (2018), and one an ambient album made in 2016 with Sinclair and a crew of polysomnographic technicians from the Washington University School of Medicine, *3:36 (Music to Sleep To)*. Beyond these, Poppy has spawned a *YouTube Premium* web television series, *I'm Poppy* (2018), the website *Poppy.Church* (<https://poppy.church/>), and a graphic novel titled *Genesis I*, about Poppy's origin story, published in 2019 by Z2 Comics. Additionally, Poppy has become the face of Japanese company Sanrio's "Hello Sanrio" collection.

Despite her popularity, *thatPoppyTV* remains faithful to its original spirit: short clips of post-Internet video art, expressing a technological "stuplime" (Sianne Ngai) full of physical and mental fatigues. Like Warhol, Poppy seems to want to be a machine, but this girl who calls herself a "*kawaii* Barbie child"<sup>919</sup> is cuter, but also more sinister, than the guru of Pop Art. Currently, Poppy has over 400 videos available on her *YouTube* channel, millions of views, and a dedicated fan base that searches her videos for overarching meanings and hidden messages. The influence of Andy Warhol, David Lynch, and Tim Burton<sup>920</sup> is felt in Poppy's fascination with the strangeness of consumer society, in all the splendor of its lustrous, sometimes surreal, comical or chilling banality. [Figure 1] Moreover, the Internet culture of self-branding and micro-celebrity with its dehumanizing effects on the body (notably, female bodies) is represented through Poppy's repetition of a limited set of actions and words, collapsing the human into the commodity, and identity into the brand. For example, in *I'm Poppy* (January 6, 2015), one of *thatPoppyTV*'s most popular videos (over 12 million views), Poppy repeats the phrase "I'm Poppy" for 10 minutes and two seconds, standing in different positions. [Video 4] The shots range from a close-up of her mouth to Poppy kneeling on the floor, in a stance reminiscent of Britney Spears's iconic *Baby One More Time* cover. The obsessive quality of this video is representative of the biopower at work in Poppy's videos, i.e., an invisible hand that seems to regulate and control her body, actions, and words.

Another defining aspect of Poppy's videos is their engagement with the pacifying but oppressive speech of religions. The idea that Poppy and Sinclair belong to a cult under the

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<sup>919</sup> Hey, Beauti, *Official Interview with Singer That POPPY*, YouTube video, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_8XSVIDkhPQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8XSVIDkhPQ).

<sup>920</sup> Eliza Brooke, "Parsing the Aesthetics of That Poppy, Pop Singer and Internet Enigma," *Racked*, April 11, 2016, para. 8, <https://www.racked.com/2016/4/11/11394848/that-poppy-interview>.

Illuminati is fueled by fans and themselves in multiple videos and complementary products, such as the website and online game *Poppy.Church* (with the tagline “Are you ready for your salvation?”) and the fanzine *Gospel of Poppy*, composed of passages from the Bible in which the word “God” is replaced by “Poppy.” [Video 5] In *I Am Not In A Cult* (February 27, 2017), Poppy assures her viewers that she is not in a cult while holding her hands in a praying position and bowing before a giant logo with a triangle and a “P” held by mysterious figures in white spandex bodysuits. [Video 6] Poppy’s insistent denials throughout the video that neither she nor Titanic are in a cult, despite the visible cultish activities going on around her, align with the eeriness of religious and state propaganda, in its deadpan “post-truth” handling of the real.

Just as crucial to Poppy’s videos is the *kawaii* aesthetic of Japanese *aidoru*, and the pervasive and “symbiotic relationship between fashion and celebrity”<sup>921</sup> they embody. Poppy and Sinclair have not only affirmed their interest in Japanese popular culture on multiple occasions but have traveled to Japan to record Poppy’s second studio album, *Am I a Girl?* (2018). In particular, Kyary Pamyu Pamyu is a significant influence on Poppy,<sup>922</sup> [Figure 2] the quirky Japanese *aidoru* who has conquered an international audience through her viral videos and attention-grabbing clothes inspired by Harajuku street fashion. Fashion is also one of Poppy’s most distinctive features, exhibited in her impeccably coordinated, pastel-colored outfits, including avant-garde dresses and hats with strange shapes and bold patterns. These range from hipster and vintage clothes to haute couture and Japanese street fashion styles, like lolita, *decora* or Cult Party *kei*. [Figure 3] But there is an uncanny impression that Poppy is *being dressed*, like a doll, by an ulterior force that controls her (They” or “Them,” in Poppy’s universe), and that the variability of her clothes is inversely proportional to the changelessness of her body, poses, and expressions. Indeed, as Karen de Perthuis and Rosie Findlay put it, concerning the phenomena of fashion influencers on social media, “the body is subject to the authority of fashion, limitations to the autonomy of the body such as gravity or aging are absent, and the figure is imbued with possibility and mutability, even as it freezes a momentary state of perfection.”<sup>923</sup> Poppy’s videos reflect this—in *I Am Up Here* (June 20, 2017), Poppy literally

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<sup>921</sup> Helen Warner, “Fashion and Celebrity Culture, by Pamela Church Gibson,” *Celebrity Studies* 4, no. 2 (July 1, 2013): 258.

<sup>922</sup> Patrick ST Michel, “The Queen of Kawaii: Kyary Pamyu Pamyu Reflects on Her Reign,” *The Japan Times*, November 15, 2018, para. 19, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2018/11/15/music/queen-kawaii-kyary-pamyu-pamyu-reflects-reign/>.

<sup>923</sup> Karen de Perthuis and Rosie Findlay, “How Fashion Travels: The Fashionable Ideal in the Age of Instagram,” *Fashion Theory* 0, no. 0 (February 14, 2019): 1.

hangs in the air, with only her legs visible, and repeatedly asks if anyone can help her get down (“I’m stuck up here! Can someone come get me down?” she asks, “I don’t want this”). [Video 7] The “empowered” gravity- and age-defying body of neoliberal feminism is staged as something *being done* to Poppy against her will, as if she was a guinea pig or experimental prototype.

Poppy’s body, thus managed through fashion, is embedded with an Internet identity in which “good looks, good living and conspicuous consumption (through artfully composed images of outfits, makeup, meals, holiday resorts, etc.) warrant adoration and emulation”<sup>924</sup> but bear little relationship to everyday human experiences. According to Susie Khamis, Lawrence Ang, and Raymond Welling, the promise of wealth and fame that social media holds for ordinary people<sup>925</sup> is at the core of such self-branding practices, requiring a constant inflow of “contents” in the form of communication and interaction with a target audience of potential consumers. Indeed, many Poppy videos are *YouTube* videos about *YouTube* videos,<sup>926</sup> parodying the phatic quality of “contents” whose primary goal is to harvest likes, shares, followers, and comments.<sup>927</sup> For instance, Poppy insistently utters sentimental social media stock phrases like “I’ve learned a lot of things this year” and “I’m having a lot of fun in my life” (*I’m Glad You Understand Me*, March 6, 2017), or tells us that “I love my fans” and “Thank you for encouraging me to believe in myself” (*I Love My Fans*, March 30, 2016; *Thank You For Encouraging Me*, January 4, 2017). These videos mock the “the concerted and strategic cultivation of an audience through social media with a view to attaining celebrity status”<sup>928</sup> by bloggers and influencers. Poppy also addresses issues like politics (*Poppy Loves Politics, Famous Politician*), apologies (*My Apology*), her past or accomplishments (*My Past, I Have Such Good News*), while avoiding to express her political opinions, what she is apologizing for, her life story, or what the good news is. In other videos, Poppy says that “I look at myself while I apply the make-up” while applying make-up, or that “I’m wearing a pink suit” while wearing a pink suit. All these exemplify the tautological logic of instagramable lifestyles and the hollowness of its categories.

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<sup>924</sup> Susie Khamis, Lawrence Ang, and Raymond Welling, “Self-Branding, ‘Micro-Celebrity’ and the Rise of Social Media Influencers,” *Celebrity Studies* 8, no. 2 (April 3, 2017): 9.

<sup>925</sup> Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 4.

<sup>926</sup> Gita Jackson, “Pop Star YouTuber Captures The Hell That Is Being Online,” *Kotaku*, April 18, 2017, para. 3, <http://kotaku.com/pop-star-youtuber-captures-the-hell-that-is-being-onlin-1794419255>.

<sup>927</sup> Khamis, Ang, and Welling, “Self-Branding, ‘Micro-Celebrity’ and the Rise of Social Media Influencers,” 7.

<sup>928</sup> Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 6.

At the height of tautology is *Hey YouTube* (April 16, 2017), in which Poppy utters nothing but standard vlogger greetings—“Hi YouTube!” “Hi guys!” “How’s it going, guys?” “How are you, YouTube?”—until these overlap in an indescribable, continuous echo. [Video 8] On other occasions, Poppy fills her videos with onomatopoeias like ehhhhhhhhhhhhh, hmmmmmm, ooh! and oh, that seem to function as abstract intensity points devoid of real emotion. Sometimes, Poppy asks her viewers questions à la out-of-context *Buzzfeed* questionnaire (“What percentage are you?”), [Figure 4] or silently performs everyday actions like blinking, taking a selfie, painting a picture, crawling, or tying the laces of her high boots for five minutes. *Is this the Internet* (December 26, 2016) [Video 9] consists of a single close shot of Poppy’s face, delivering a speech mixing *YouTube* medium specificity with a diffuse appeal to an intimate exchange, as often happens between influencers and their followers:

Hi internet. You clicked my video. Thank you for clicking my video. There’re so many videos to watch on the internet. You’re watching my video. What made you watch my video? What will happen in this video? Do you trust me? I wanna trust you. Is this the Internet?<sup>929</sup>

In other videos, Poppy encourages viewers to join in on her performance through *YouTube*’s comment system, as vloggers often do to grab their audience’s interest within a fierce attention economy. In *I’m on the Floor* (December 10, 2016), she tells us, “Hello. Today I’m on the floor. If you want me to stay on the floor, leave a comment that says ‘floor.’” [Figure 5] Or, more absurdly, in *I Can’t See Your Comments* (April 8, 2017), “Leave a comment below that says ‘I can see this’ if you can see your comment. Leave a comment below that says, ‘I cannot see this’ if you cannot see your comment.”

Poppy also draws from topics and practices dear to her millennial target audience (i.e., people entering adulthood in the 2000s<sup>930</sup>), namely identity politics and outrage culture. In *No More Genders* (May 7, 2017), Poppy tells us that “In the future, there are a lot more computers and no more genders,” while *You’re Racist!* (June 28, 2017) is a six-second clip in which Poppy in points at the camera and says, “You’re racist!” [Video 10 & 11] There is an absurdist quality to both these videos, highlighted by Poppy’s poses and elaborate dresses—reclining on the floor in glamorous loungewear and standing in a floral dress with a transparent umbrella with a butterfly pattern, respectively. In *Famous Politician* (January 15, 2017), Poppy mocks the

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<sup>929</sup> Poppy, *She Is Lying!*, accessed June 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TtaKiPAkK8M>.

<sup>930</sup> Dimock, “Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins,” para. 5.

moral gratification obtained from slacktivism<sup>931</sup>: “I’m offended by something a famous politician said. I’ve chosen to use the internet to express my opinion about it. My beliefs were challenged, and I will stand up for myself. I will mock the famous politician that I do not agree with on *Twitter*.” [Figure 6] In *Outrage* (January 16, 2019), Poppy commands the viewer to argue on *Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram*, stating that “My favorite thing about the internet is the arguments” and wondering about “What should I be outraged at today?” These videos suggest that there is a ritualistic ecstasy at play in the experience of calling out a celebrity (“We’re having fun on the internet and I’m outraged”), a subsemiotic jouissance which flattens even the more “vehement passions”<sup>932</sup> to Internet mannerisms and buzzwords.

Poppy’s videos arise irritation, discomfort, and impatience, but also boredom. One can see this in Poppy’s appearances in several *mise en abyme*-esque episodes from the popular *React* series on *YouTube*: KIDS REACT TO POPPY, POPPY REACTS TO KIDS REACT TO POPPY, KIDS REACT TO POPPY REACTS TO KIDS REACT TO POPPY, and Kids React Cast MEETS Poppy For The First Time. [Videos 12, 13, 14 & 15 ] In KIDS REACT TO POPPY, the children complain, among other things, that “You don’t wanna listen to the same thing over and over, it gets so annoying,” that Poppy sends “chills down my spine,” and that her videos resemble a “murder scene.”<sup>933</sup> In POPPY REACTS TO KIDS REACT TO POPPY, Poppy does not react at all but stares at the screen or the camera with a straight face, and mimics her own words, finally leaving the studio when the lights go out, and ominous music begins to play.<sup>934</sup> In the next episode, KIDS REACT TO POPPY REACTS TO KIDS REACT TO POPPY, 8-year-old Lucas and Dominick ask, “Did you allow her to go into this studio or something?” and “She came here? And sat on this chair?” while 9-year-old Gabe protests, they do not want to get “Poppy-itis.”<sup>935</sup> These reactions call to mind literary critic Sianne Ngai’s formulation of the “stuplime” ( “stupor” + “sublime”), i.e., “a concatenation of boredom and astonishment—a bringing together of what ‘dulls’ and what ‘irritates’ or agitates.”<sup>936</sup> The children’s despair at Poppy’s prolonged reactionlessness (“No! Stop saying the exact same

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<sup>931</sup> Slacktivism is the practice of supporting a cause by means involving little effort or commitment, for instance, through social media and online petitions. Stylus Pub LLC and UNAIDS, *UNAIDS Outlook Report July 2010* (World Health Organization, 2010), 142–43.

<sup>932</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 10.

<sup>933</sup> FBE, *KIDS REACT TO POPPY*, YouTube video, REACT, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQkYgw52PnE>.

<sup>934</sup> FBE, *POPPY REACTS TO KIDS REACT TO POPPY*, accessed March 5, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xqH3KaW25AA>.

<sup>935</sup> FBE, *KIDS REACT TO POPPY REACTS TO KIDS REACT TO POPPY*, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lg3hHaSzz08>.

<sup>936</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 271.

thing! Actually react!” cries 9-year-old Sydney) and the suspicion that she is somehow contagious (Poppy-itis) perfectly encapsulates the crux of Ngai’s stuplimity.

More specifically, Poppy’s videos seem to capture a *technological* “stuplime,” to pun on Jennifer Slack and John Wise’s definition of “the technological sublime... [that] refers to the almost religious-like reverence paid to machines.”<sup>937</sup> Unlike the awe at mechanical power emerging from the Industrial Revolution, however, Slack and Wise argue that nowadays the “mini-sublime”<sup>938</sup> of cool gadgets, often triggering a cultish behavior in consumers,<sup>939</sup> has replaced the grand narrative of civilizational “progress.” Poppy’s videos capture the entanglement of mini-sublime and micro-celebrity in twenty-first-century mediaspheres, namely, new forms of emotional labor driven by the compulsion to “post, share and like [that] effectively creates a highly curated and often abridged snapshot”<sup>940</sup> of the humans behind the technology. Indeed, Poppy’s unwillingness to break the character in public appearances—for instance, replying to an interviewer asking “You’re from Nashville?” she answers “I’m from the Internet”; when asked “How is Poppy different from Moriah Rose Pereira?” she replies that “I don’t know who that is”<sup>941</sup>—creates the uncanny impression of an “always-on work mode”<sup>942</sup> that transforms and masters the body through techno-affective authoritarianism. In this sense, Poppy’s videos may fit into the movement of post-Internet art—which, unlike Internet art emerging in the late 1990s, post-internet art is not medium-specific—referring to art whose design, production, dissemination, and reception reflect an “Internet-esque state of mind.”<sup>943</sup>

[Figure 7]

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<sup>937</sup> *Culture and Technology: A Primer* (New York: Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 2014), 22.

<sup>938</sup> Slack and Wise, 24.

<sup>939</sup> Mark Milian, “Apple Triggers ‘religious’ Reaction in Fans’ Brains, Report Says,” *Digital Biz*, May 19, 2011, paras. 2-3, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/TECH/gaming.gadgets/05/19/apple.religion/index.html>.

<sup>940</sup> Khamis, Ang, and Welling, “Self-Branding, ‘Micro-Celebrity’ and the Rise of Social Media Influencers,” 6.

<sup>941</sup> Raining, *Is Poppy Acting? Interview with Poppy & Titanic*, YouTube video, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=diuagVWalYQ..>

<sup>942</sup> Khamis, Ang, and Welling, “Self-Branding, ‘Micro-Celebrity’ and the Rise of Social Media Influencers,” 13.

<sup>943</sup> Paddy Johnson, “Finally, a Semi-Definitive Definition of Post-Internet Art,” *Art F City*, October 14, 2014, para. 3, <http://artfcity.com/2014/10/14/finally-a-semi-definitive-definition-of-post-internet-art/>.

In Poppy's videos, the "homo interneticus"<sup>944</sup> arises from the recognition that the social media has originated not only a redistribution of cultural power,<sup>945</sup> but an entanglement of human, social, mechanical, and digital agencies that both gnaws at the "human" as a stable category and impacts the environments which we inhabit. Significantly, in addition to Poppy, the cast of *thatPoppyTV* includes solely nonhuman characters: among others, the plastic mannequin Charlotte with a text-to-speech voice, a cynical Skeleton, and a speaking basil Plant. The latter first appears on *A plant* (August 1, 2016), being interviewed by Poppy in a confessional style. [Video 16] The Plant tells Poppy that "I often get down on myself because of the way I look. I find myself wish I was born a human," to which Poppy—in a cheery disavowal of human exceptionalism—replies that "plants and human beings aren't that different!" Moreover, the nonhuman agencies in Poppy's world are far from harmonious. As hinted above, the Plant sometimes suffers from (physical, psychological) depression and is bullied and manipulated by the other characters. Moreover, even as it defends Poppy from Skeleton's insinuations that she has changed since becoming "one of those Hollywood people" (*Poppy Changed*, December 1, 2016), the Plant reluctantly confesses to Charlotte that it has been neglected by Poppy, as she is "very busy" since becoming famous (*I Am Your True Friend*, January 21, 2017).

Charlotte, [Figure 8] in turn, is a morally ambiguous character whose interactions with Poppy get increasingly strained and confusing over time, as she confronts Poppy, telling her that "You're just a puppet of them" and "You're as fake and plastic as all Hollywood girls." Charlotte is also the protagonist of some videos on *thatPoppyTV*, including a series of clips in which she imitates Poppy's videos, mimicking her clothes, poses, words, and shots. In the last video of this series, *I Am Not* (October 19, 2017), Charlotte emulates Poppy's video *Sports* (October 4, 2017) as she repeatedly insists, "I am not copying Poppy." [Video 17] In newer videos (*She Is Lying!*, December 8, 2018), Charlotte discusses her career as a DJ with Poppy, stating that "deep down I am an authentic artist and being authentic is very important." [Video 18] Charlotte performs a subversive inversion of her relationship of alterity to Poppy, her resolute denials of the obvious fact that she is "fake," i.e., a Poppy copy, manifesting Charlotte's drive to usurp the originality of the human referent. Ironically, although as Hal

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<sup>944</sup> Michael Goldhaber, "The Mentality of Homo Interneticus: Some Ongian Postulates," *First Monday* 9, no. 6 (June 7, 2004); Molly Milton, "Homo Interneticus?," *The Virtual Revolution* (BBC, February 20, 2010).

<sup>945</sup> Khamis, Ang, and Welling, "Self-Branding, 'Micro-Celebrity' and the Rise of Social Media Influencers," 7.



Foster puts it, “the mannequin is the very image of capitalist reification,”<sup>946</sup> Charlotte does not come off as less human than Poppy. If anything, Charlotte’s “ugly feelings” (Ngai) of envy, irritation, anxiety, and paranoia,<sup>947</sup> compensate for Poppy’s lack of real emotion. Likewise, Charlotte’s unkempt hair and appearance, as well as her history of drug addiction (more on this shortly), contrast with Poppy’s perfect image as the product of the Hollywood dream factory, whose body serves as a mannequin for beautiful clothes. Charlotte and the Plant thus seem to be as traumatized by humans as their uncanniness alienates humans. They are victims of anthropocentric biopolitics, leading to the internalized speciesism of nonhumans and infecting them with the same petty-bourgeois neuroses of the *homo interneticus*.

It is important to note, however, that Poppy’s belonging to humankind is likewise all too dubious. Because Poppy is an ideal personification of social media’s affective labor, she evokes the eroticized (but not necessarily sexualized) gynoid tradition, i.e., the robot in female form. While Poppy’s robotic nature is mostly implicit, it can become explicit in videos such as *Me Getting Ready* (May 14, 2017), in which Poppy performs machinelike movements with superimposed creaking sounds. [Video 19] In other videos, such as *The Poppy VR180 Experience* (June 23, 2017, using the *YouTube* VR180 format), a nebulous and stereoscopic Poppy asks viewers if they will “Stay with me in this new dimension?” presenting herself as the native inhabitant of a dreamlike, techno-playscape. [Video 20] Alluding to humanity’s vaporization in the online “cloud” from which it is increasingly difficult to detach ourselves, Poppy’s videos align with Peter Haff’s “technosphere” hypothesis. According to Haff, large-scale communication, financial, bureaucratic, etc. systems that serve as an interface between humanity and the planet, have reached a state of autonomy that it escapes human control.<sup>948</sup> The idea is portrayed, for example, in *I Have Ideas* (September 2, 2015), where Poppy states that “I breathe new life into my telephone with every charge. My telephone defines me. When it is dead, so am I.” [Video 21] This authoritarian technosphere suggests a post-human imaginary, one in which humans have become a mere gear in a technospheric apparatus, and takes a toll on the body and mind of Poppy and those around her.

Indeed, while the Internet’s entropy but an impression of emotional unrest in Poppy’s cute, decluttered world—a white cube where nothing gets in or out—there is a recurring suggestion that Poppy is sick or broken. In *Am I okay?*, Poppy recites reassuring phrases like

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<sup>946</sup> Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1995), 21.

<sup>947</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 2.

<sup>948</sup> Peter Haff, “Humans and Technology in the Anthropocene: Six Rules,” *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 2 (August 1, 2014): 127.

“It’s going to be okay” and “Don’t worry, you’ll be fine,” until she eventually bleeds from the nose at the end of the video. [Video 22] As we have seen, nonhumans suffer, too. In *I Am Not Sick* (April 1, 2017), [Video 23] Poppy tells Charlotte that the mannequin is very sick and needs help after she develops a pill addiction over a series of disturbing videos (*Mommy Are You Okay*, March 2, 2017; *These Are Mommy’s*, March 11, 2017; *I Need to Buy More*, March 25, 2017). The unwellness extends to the cinematographic device itself, like in *Why Is It This* (January 24, 2017), in which the camera gets sick, refusing to focus on Poppy’s face, who asks in an anguished voice “Can you see me?” “What’s happening?” and “Why is it like this?” [Video 24] *Oh* (April 10, 2017), in turn, is a video composed of failed beginnings, in which Poppy gets systematically stuck at “Hi. I’m-” without ever being able to pronounce her name. [Video 25] This video is exemplary of Poppy’s engagement with “constative exhaustions.”<sup>949</sup>

Such plays on vitality and devitalization, fleshing out and defleshing, bring forth the complex “political ecology of things”<sup>950</sup> at the heart of Poppy’s videos. In *The Return of Plant*, after a long absence from Poppy’s videos, the Plant tells her that it has been busy developing itself, and Poppy, complimenting its healthy-looking leaves, asks if she can have one. The Plant awkwardly agrees, and Poppy, chewing on a leave, states that “Sometimes it’s ok to eat your friends.” [Video 26] In *I’m Out Of Here* (January 6, 2019), the Skeleton contemptuously tells Poppy that “I’m dead and there’s nothing you can do to change that.” [Video 27] In these videos, Poppy is seemingly unaware of the Plant’s and the Skeleton’s self-consciousness towards their nonhuman (or no longer human, in the Skeleton’s case) condition—perhaps because, for Poppy, one’s self-brand, not one’s physical existence, is the common denominator of intersubjective and interobjective relationships. Poppy’s world is mediated by an increasingly vaporized and decentralized experience of the Internet and social media, in which creative contents function within a logic of indexation, rather than as “authentic” or “genuine” self-expression. The *kawaii* aesthetics of her videos are paradoxically disconcerting and sinister in their representation of twenty-first-century mini-stuplime and the cultish appeal of micro-celebrities, exploiting their hazardous repercussions on the human psyche. The introduction of characters like Plant, Charlotte, the mannequin, or Skeleton, as well as the recurring suggestion that Poppy is a robot or clone controlled by invisible forces, negotiate playful biopolitics that

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<sup>949</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 255.

<sup>950</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2010).

obscures the limits of the human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic, individual and collective.

In short, it threatens us with the terrifying possibility that we are all Poppy.

(See also “Grimes, Nokia, Yolandi,” “Hiro Universe” and “Pastel Turn.”)

# Red Toad Tumblr Post

The Red Toad *Tumblr* post is a chain post from the microblogging platform *Tumblr*. [Figure 1] *Tumblr* allows users to repost or “reblog” posts from their dashboard (a scrolling interface displaying posts from all the blogs one has subscribed on the website) to their blogs, adding new pictures or text as they go.<sup>951</sup> This device sometimes originates a long chain of posts, in which various users reblog one another. The Red Toad *Tumblr* post, in particular, begins with a post from *Tumblr* user discwars, the original poster (“OP”), chronicling their search for photographs of a red toad on *Google*. The first image is a screen grab from the OP’s *Google* search for “images of red toad.” Instead of photographs of real red toads, the first four results on *Google* are illustrations of Nintendo’s fictional character Toad, an anthropomorphized mushroom. The screengrab is accompanied by the OP’s indignant remark, “what the fuck is this bullshit.” In the following post, the OP tries again, this time using the search words “REAL RED TOAD.” This second search still returns Toad as the first result, followed by real red toads. Outraged, the OP comments, “HES STILL THERE.” In their final attempt, the OP searches for a “red toad ACTUAL TOAD LIKE REAL LIFE TOAD.” This time not only do all top results show different pictures of Nintendo’s Toad, but the very first result is a blue version of Toad, with blue spots on their mushroom cap and a blue jacket. “THAT ONES NOT EVEN RED,” writes the OP, exasperated. [Figure 2a]

After that, another *Tumblr* user, curepimmy, reblogs and reacts to the OP’s posts, writing that “This reminds me of the time I was having trouble drawing fists, like,” followed by screen grabs of their own *Google* searches. The first search for “knuckles” returns only pictures of Sega’s character Knuckles the Echidna, from the *Sonic the Hedgehog* video game series. Curepimmy’s comment accompanies the screengrab: “No shit I mean like on a PERSON.” On a second try, curepimmy searches for “human knuckles,” which returns only manga-style fan art drawings of Knuckles the Echidna as a sexy, red-haired man. Also, the last thumbnail visible in the screen grab is an illustration of human Knuckles romancing human Rouge the Bat, a supporting female character in the *Sonic the Hedgehog* franchise. Curepimmy offers no further comment, seemingly stunned into silence by such “disastrous” results. [Figure 2b]

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<sup>951</sup> David Nield, “What Does It Mean to Reblog on Tumblr?,” para. 1, accessed September 27, 2018, <https://smallbusiness.chron.com/mean-reblog-tumblr-61882.html>.

The repeated appearance of Nintendo's Toad and Sega's Knuckles on *Google Images* is what drives the comic effect of the Red Toad *Tumblr* post, which gets more and more frustrating with each failed attempt to retrieve "real" toads and knuckles. As global icons of "pink globalization," i.e., "the spread of goods and images labeled cute (*kawaii*) from Japan to other parts of the industrial world,"<sup>952</sup> Toad and Knuckles not only attest to the pervasiveness of Japanese pop culture in the real and virtual worlds, but they are fundamentally associated with fun and play (originating, as they do, from videogames). However, their presence in the Red Toad *Tumblr* post becomes irritating and obtrusive, short-circuiting a simple educational *Google* search for images of red toads or human knuckles. OP's use of expletives, capitalization (which is netiquette for screaming), and heated remarks, demonstrate their disgust at the persistence of Toad and Knuckles. In fact, there is a borderline slapstick quality to the whole thing: one could easily imagine the sequence of screen grabs and comments playing out accompanied by some plucky silent film score. The Red Toad *Tumblr* post thus perceptualizes the many ways in which the natural world, and our human capacity to learn about and apprehend it, are corrupted by their intricate ties to capitalist simulacra. As these extra layers of "reality" are laid over the world, new (corporate) entities arise to replace the original forms of nature.

Even the fact that Toad is not actually a toad, but a mushroom, exposes the gap between reality and hyperreality in all its absurd and awkward glory. This is further reinforced by the nonsensical appearance of a blue Toad, despite the OP's frantic attempts to access photographs of real red toads ("red toad ACTUAL TOAD LIKE REAL LIFE TOAD"). In the context of the Red Toad *Tumblr* post, the loss of even this residual chromatic connection to the OP's search words is like adding insult to injury. It feels deliberately mocking, a *coup de grâce* to our collective illusions of transhumanist progress resulting from the Digital Revolution. At the end of Oshii Mamoru's 1995 cyberpunk masterpiece *Ghost In The Shell*, cyborg "child" Kusanagi Motoko, reborn after she merged with the Puppet Master, tells the viewers that "the net is vast and infinite," but over a quarter-century later, the net seems to have shrunk. [Video 1] Like a sea creature in a ghost net, we have become stuck in endless information loops from which we cannot escape. Indeed, the Red Toad *Tumblr* post becomes even more outlandish when the second *Tumblr* user, curepimmy, searches for "knuckles" and "human knuckles," only to get official and derivative art of the character Knuckles the Echidna. The *Google* search engine's resoluteness in returning dozens of fannish illustrations of Knuckles as a pretty boy,

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<sup>952</sup> Yano, *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific*.

without so much as an actual human hand in sight, has a delightfully perverse ring about it. Curepimmy's contributions to the Red Toad *Tumblr* post are thus a fitting conclusion to an irritating streak.

The lulz (Internet laughs) also result from a sudden transition, in the last screengrab of the Red Toad *Tumblr* post, from mainstream pop culture—Nintendo and Sega's classic videogame mascots, Toad and Knuckles—to the subcultural regime of online fandoms. Within the *Sonic the Hedgehog* fandom, it is a widespread practice to turn the franchise's funny animals (hedgehogs, foxes, echidnas, bats, birds) into *bishōnen* ("beautiful boy") and *bishōjo* ("beautiful girl") characters. [Figure 3] This specific trope requires an understanding of the trends of anthropomorphism in *otaku* subcultures and fan art. As such, the Red Toad *Tumblr* post provides an unwanted glimpse into the deep Internet, contrasting with the straightforward search words used by the posters ("red toad," "human knuckles"). Japanese cuteness becomes a form of digital pollution, resulting in a series of "bad encounters"<sup>953</sup> which (as demonstrated) elicits negative reactions from the posters: shock, irritation, exhaustion. In the Red Toad *Tumblr* post, the Western "detached ocularity,"<sup>954</sup> whose scientific gaze permeates wildlife photography of the National Geographic variety, is thus overwritten by its negative counterpart, i.e., sentimental illustrations of corporate cool-*kawaii* mascots from Japan. What is more, the agents of this boycott are adorably round, cartoonish, and *positive* about it. Toad smiles their candid smile; Knuckles flashes his cool grin. They are both blissfully unaware of the trail of negativity in their wake. After all, this is the foundation on which cute culture has been built: the "naughty child" who, as historian Gary Cross puts it, takes us "to the edge of the acceptable, even across the line of self-control, to a playful, unserious anarchic moment."<sup>955</sup>

In the Red Toad *Tumblr* post, this "unserious anarchic moment" is a result of *détournement*, which means "rerouting" or "hijacking," in this case, through the *Google* search engine that rewrites our mental associations of nature. Turning the online learning revolution on its head, Toad and Knuckles disinform and mislead us. Interestingly, this subversive vein is not new to Toad's character. Toad—or Kinopio, in the original version, from the Japanese word *kinoko*, "mushroom," and Pinocchio, suggesting an ambiguous "animatedness" (Siane Ngai's term for the basic condition of being moved or innervated),<sup>956</sup> or even an association to lying

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<sup>953</sup> Parikka, "Medianatures."

<sup>954</sup> House, "Machine Listening," 5.

<sup>955</sup> Gary Cross, *The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children's Culture* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 44.

<sup>956</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 91.

and deception akin to Geppetto's puppet—first appeared in *Super Mario Bros.*,<sup>957</sup> released in 1985 by Nintendo. [Figure 4] There, Toad uttered what would become one of the most famous videogame lines of all time: “Thank you Mario. But our princess is in another castle!”<sup>958</sup> [Figure 5, Video 2] According to *Know Your Meme*,

The player takes on the role of the main protagonist of the series, Mario, whose objective is to race through the Mushroom Kingdom, survive the forces of the main antagonist, Bowser, and save Princess Peach Toadstool. The final stage of each world takes place in a castle where Bowser or one of his decoys are fought. When Mario defeats one of Bowser's decoys for the first time in World 1-4, Mario runs through the end with the intent of finding the kidnapped princess. However, he is greeted by a Toad, who says: “Thank you Mario! But our princess is in another castle!” This event gets repeated in every single castle in the game (except of the World 8-4 castle, which is the final stage in the game), causing anger and disappointment to the player (and possibly to the main protagonist).<sup>959</sup>

The phrase “But our princess is in another castle!” (or the template, “Sorry X, but your Y is in another Z”) is used as a reply to someone who is searching for something in the wrong place,<sup>960</sup> and also became a popular meme in image macros and parodies around the Internet. Toad's revelation that Princess Peach is in another castle after the end of each level literally reroutes Mario by causing him to change his course or direction, which in turn causes “anger” and “disappointment” in players. This constant rerouting puts Toad in an ambiguous position where, on the one hand, they are an agent of order or progress, necessary for the game's progression; and, on the other, a vehicle of chaos and frustration, preventing the accomplishment of Princess Peach's rescue by Mario. Each step forward in the game feels like a step back, considering Toad's *detournement* from castle to castle. From an affective viewpoint, Toad remains just as impenetrable. Is Toad mocking Mario and the player? Do they take pleasure in being a source of irritation in *Super Mario Bros.*? Unlike the unambiguous villain Bowser, it is hard to believe that Toad, cute as a button, has any malicious intentions. But maybe Toad is a bit of a naughty child or an oblivious trickster, made more irritating by their apparent honesty.

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<sup>957</sup> *Super Mario Bros.*, directed by Miyamoto Shigeru and produced by Nintendo, released September 13, 1985.

<sup>958</sup> “Toad (Character),” *Nintendo Wiki*, accessed May 2, 2018, [http://nintendo.wikia.com/wiki/Toad\\_\(character\)](http://nintendo.wikia.com/wiki/Toad_(character)).

<sup>959</sup> “But Our Princess Is in Another Castle!,” *Know Your Meme*, “Origin” para. 1, accessed May 1, 2018, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/but-our-princess-is-in-another-castle>.

<sup>960</sup> “But Our Princess Is in Another Castle!,” “About” para. 2.

Another reason why Toad is such a destabilizing character in the *Mario* franchise is that, unlike other famous characters (Mario, Luigi, Princess Peach, Bowser), the Mushroom People, or Toads, are mostly anonymous and indistinguishable from one another. According to the *Nintendo Wiki*, “it’s hard to tell whether or not a Toad is the character from the previous games or just another member of the species due to his generic appearance.”<sup>961</sup> Contrary to social expectations, Toads do not have names, nor do they exhibit individual, racial, or ethnic diversity.<sup>962</sup> Like their famous line (“Thank you Mario. But our princess is in another castle!”) repeated at the end of each level of *Super Mario Bros*, the Toads themselves are an ontological ditto, the same entity stated again and again. In this sense, although Mario is Nintendo’s mascot, Toad is the one character who is corporate to the core. Toads are Nintendo’s bubbly version of conformity, the “drones” of the peaceful Mushroom Kingdom, ruled by Princess Peach who, unlike her nameless subjects, is irreplaceable. [Figure 6] On the contrary, Toads are interchangeable, and such interchangeability—if not in our eyes, at least before *Google’s* algorithm—is key to the Red Toad *Tumblr* post. Toad “hijacks” the real red toads because being interchangeable is what Toad *does*. Toad can replace or change places with anything as long as they maintain a residual connection to it, as shown in the third screenshot in the Red Toad *Tumblr* post—the one causing the OP to complain that “THAT ONES NOT EVEN RED.”

What is more, Toad’s (hostile?) takeover of reality echoes the anxieties that often surround the notion of Japaneseness itself. East Asian people are constructed as robotic by Western orientalism, with the racist Identical-Looking Asians trope often played for comedy in television and film.<sup>963</sup> This trope expands from the level of individuals to the level of ethnicity when East Asian people are lumped together as if they were a single culture.<sup>964</sup> While this trope is not exclusive to Asia, applying to other non-Western, non-White peoples and nations (e.g., *Africa Is a Country*),<sup>965</sup> as argued by Iwabuchi Kōichi, the “ability to be transportable and translatable is considered to be a marker of Japaneseness”<sup>966</sup> in the global market. This notion is at the heart of many techno-orientalist dystopias, like *Blade Runner*,

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<sup>961</sup> “Toad (Character).”

<sup>962</sup> Although this is generally true, there are exceptions. Toads have names in the role-playing video games in the *Mario* franchise. In the primary series, however, only prominent Toad characters have names, like Toadsworth in *Super Mario Sunshine*. “Toad (Character).”

<sup>963</sup> “Identical-Looking Asians,” *TV Tropes*, accessed May 3, 2018, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/IdenticalLookingAsians>.

<sup>964</sup> “Interchangeable Asian Cultures,” *TV Tropes*, accessed May 3, 2018, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/InterchangeableAsianCultures>.

<sup>965</sup> “Mistaken Nationality,” *TV Tropes*, accessed May 3, 2018, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MistakenNationality>.

<sup>966</sup> Sharp, “Superflatworlds,” 98.



where dehumanization, totalitarianism, ruthless megacorporations, and environmental disasters are associated with the globalization of Japaneseness. [Figure 7] While *Blade Runner*, released in the early 1980s, rendered this Japaneseness in grim and gritty tones, in the twenty-first century Japan is less a “robot nation”<sup>967</sup> than the nation of cute—the birthplace of *kawaii* superstars like Hello Kitty and Pikachu. Accordingly, the anxieties of techno-Orientalism have been transferred to the actors of “pink globalization” and their cybercapitalist entanglements. Such change can be observed, for instance, in cyberpunk anime from the 2010s, like Urobuchi *Gen’s Psycho-Pass* (2012), where a totalitarian society enforces the law via cute mascots called Komissa-chan [Figure 8]. In the Red Toad *Tumblr* post, Toad becomes both the target and executor of the paranoia that *kawaii*’s unvanishing, ever-returning commodity form can no longer be extracted from nature (the “real” red toad), threatening to eclipse it completely.

However, it is not just Toad’s pervasiveness that makes the Red Toad *Tumblr* post disturbing, but all of Toad’s *variations*. To survive the OP’s repeated attempts to eradicate them in searches for “red toads,” Toad reappear by mutating in whimsical, intricate ways. In the *Tumblr* post, not only does Toad appear mounted on a red Yoshi, itself a derivation on the original (green) Yoshi, but a Blue Toad (first introduced in *New Super Mario Bros* for the Wii, in 2009) shows up as the first result of the OP’s most emphatic search for “red toad ACTUAL TOAD LIKE REAL LIFE TOAD.” This search also returns one of the post’s most startling results: a picture of Toad without his mushroom cap, revealing a bald head underneath. [Figure 9] The image is a screengrab from *The Super Mario Bros. Super Show!*, an American television series produced by DiC Animation in the late 1980s and 1990s. This television series is not canonical by Nintendo’s standards, as according to Koizumi Yoshiaki, the producer of *Super Mario Odyssey*, Toad’s mushroom cap is indeed their head, not a hat.<sup>968</sup> Nevertheless, the picture has gained viral traction among fans<sup>969</sup> for the way that Toad looks in it: grabbing their mushroom cap like a lifeline, Toad stares at Mario with an expression full of regret, three short hairs sticking up from their bald head. All of a sudden, Toad is no longer Nintendo’s cute super-mascot but a sad, abject thing. As such, bald Toad makes a mockery of the OP’s frustration, of

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<sup>967</sup> Larissa Hjorth, “Odours of Mobility: Mobile Phones and Japanese Cute Culture in the Asia-Pacific,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 26, no. 1–2 (February 1, 2005): 39–55.

<sup>968</sup> Matthew Hayes, “Nintendo Confirms That Toad’s Hat Is Actually His Head, and the Internet Loses It,” WWG, February 5, 2018, <http://comicbook.com/gaming/2018/02/05/nintendo-toad-head-hat-reactions/>.

<sup>969</sup> Matt Wales, “Nintendo Finally Confirms the Truth about Toad’s Head,” *Eurogamer*, February 5, 2018, <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-02-05-nintendo-finally-confirms-the-truth-about-toads-head>.

their desperate request for the “ACTUAL RED TOAD,” by showing an exposé of Toad’s “true,” pitiful nature.

Finally, it is noteworthy that Toad and Knuckles are supporting characters which evoke the heroes of their respective franchises, Mario and Sonic the Hedgehog, [Figure 10] but they are not the protagonists themselves. Other characters in the Red Toad *Tumblr* post are even more obscure: red Yoshi, blue Toad, bald Toad, and Rouge the Bat. [Figure 11] The fact that these lesser characters still manage to wreak havoc on *Google* dramatically contributes to the funny and frustrating effect of the Red Toad *Tumblr* post. Because Mario and Sonic are taken-for-granted icons of the contemporary mediatic milieu, it would not be at all surprising to find them in searches related to “plumber” or “hedgehog.” But darker undertones lurk in Toad and Knuckles’ impertinence, manifesting in a refusal to sink to the bottom of the digital ocean, making us much more aware of how pervasive the tentacles of global capitalism. In the context of the Red Toad *Tumblr* post, Toad and Knuckles are not just naughty children—their cuteness and smiles take up an obscene, mocking quality.

To be sure, in the second screengrab, “REAL RED TOAD,” the Toad appearing as the first *Google* result has a carnivalesque, almost riotous, pose. “Haters gonna hate,” Toad seems to tell us, confident that they cannot be stopped. Significantly, the images in the Red Toad *Tumblr* post feature variations not just in the characters but in kind, from official corporate illustrations to fan art and obscure licensing mistakes: Nintendo’s Toad, Sega’s Knuckles, Human!Knuckles, *The Super Mario Bros* cartoon. As such, the Red Toad *Tumblr* post offers us a glimpse into what Thomas Lamarre calls “not the inertia of a commodity-object but the stirrings of a commodity-life.”<sup>970</sup> As the worlds unfolding from commodities become increasingly complex, they rival, even usurp, the complexity of “real” life. In the face of the contemporary entanglements of nature and commodities, who knows what the “REAL RED TOAD” is? Rerouting. Hijacking. Our princess, after all, is in another castle.

(See also “Creepypasta” and “Ika-Tako Virus”)

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<sup>970</sup> “Introduction,” in *Mechademia 6: User Enhanced*, ed. Frenchy Lunning (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xii.

# Zombiefat

(To be used as concluding remarks)

“On March 11th 2011, a little after 3 pm in the afternoon, Cool Japan was—along with many lives and a large part of the Northern Japan coastline—swept away by a devastating earthquake and tsunami that irrevocably changed Japan once again.”<sup>971</sup> Sociologist Adrian Favell’s words encapsulate a growing sentiment that Cool Japan has overstayed its welcome in a post-global financial crisis, post-tsunami, post-Fukushima world—or, more generally, a post-disaster world, including such tragedies as the Kyoto Animation arson attack in 2019, a deep blow to Japanese animation and fandom. By extension, the art of Cool Japan, Superflat, is also dead; or, as the title of Favell’s book suggests, there is a *before* and *after* Superflat was intellectually (if not financially) relevant to Japanese contemporary art. [Figure 1]

The more recent publication of *The End of Cool Japan: Ethical, legal, and cultural challenges to Japanese popular culture* set the death sentence in stone. [Figure 2] The volume, edited by historian Mark McLelland, includes essays by experts of Japanese pop culture such as Laura Miller, Sharalyn Orbaugh, and Patrick W. Galbraith. On the book’s cover, there is the photograph of a crying Yotsuba figure—the child protagonist of Azuma Kiyohiko’s beloved moé manga Yotsuba&!—dismembered and put away inside a card box along with other toys, her innocence lost. Whether or not the claim that Cool Japan ended with Fukushima holds up, its aftershocks have produced a noticeable shift in the discourse of Superflat artists. As is widely known, the term “super flat” was engineered by visual artist, theorist, and art impresario Murakami Takashi to brand a movement of Japanese postmodern art inspired by the global dissemination of anime, manga, videogames, and the kawaii. According to Favell, the art world’s love affair with artists like Murakami, Nara Yoshitomo, or Mori Mariko, was fueled by the rise of Cool Japan’s soft power in the 1990s and 2000s, creating a favorable *zeitgeist* that drew to close by the late 2000s, as the Western gaze moved to “new” oriental locations, like China or India.<sup>972</sup> After 2011, Superflat’s “naïve celebrations of bizarre Japanese pop culture or futuristic Neo Tokyo were going to look tasteless”<sup>973</sup>; Cool Japan was but a walking

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<sup>971</sup> Favell, *Before and after Superflat*, 222.

<sup>972</sup> Favell, 13.

<sup>973</sup> Favell, 223.

corpse, feeding off the eye candy that kept Western markets hooked, but devoid of any genuine countercultural pull.

As Superflat lost steam, however, new rhetorics emerged around a concept of “rebirth.” The rebirth of Superflat attests to the artists’ struggle to survive in a world that has changed significantly over the last two decades. This shift is also consistent with the attempted revitalization of Superflat artists’ careers: Murakami’s “reluctant homecoming”<sup>974</sup> for a show at the Mori Art Museum, after 14 years away from Japanese museums; Chiho Aoshima’s first solo exhibition in Japan; Mariko Mori’s first major museum shows in New York and London in over a decade (2013). Even if their styles have not changed significantly, the events of 2011 have triggered some soul-searching in their private lives and art alike—or, at least, the artists are reacting to the expectations that they should have. Murakami, Nara, Mori and other key Superflat artists like Mr., Takano Aya, and Aoshima Chiho, have laced their discourse with themes of hope, rebirth and higher spirituality. They are supposedly more down-to-earth, more grounded. For instance, in an interview titled “Yoshitomo Nara Seeks Lasting Art After Japan’s Tsunami,” Nara claims that “I have become more serious than before.”<sup>975</sup> In *Stars* (2015), a solo show at Pace Gallery in Hong Kong, Nara engages with the ambiguous “notion of the star as both a symbol of hope as well as foreboding.”<sup>976</sup> [Figure 3] The press release states that Nara’s newfound interest in painting over stitched burlap and jute mounted on wood “distinguishes itself from the layering of diaphanous and airy pigments that characterize much of his work, yet finds precedent in his earlier billboard paintings.”<sup>977</sup> The phrasing hints at Nara’s return to a rawer expression, to his earnest early carrier as a cult artist, before stardom transformed him into a businessman and cultural icon.

The blurb from Mori’s exhibition *Rebirth* (2013), at the Japan Society in New York is titled “A Star Is Reborn,” a pun on Mori’s iconic photograph *A Star is Born*. An interview conducted by critic Michael Miller headlines that “Mariko Mori Comes Back Down to

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<sup>974</sup> Andrew Lee, “Takashi Murakami: A Reluctant Homecoming,” *The Japan Times*, 2016, <http://features.japantimes.co.jp/murakami/>.

<sup>975</sup> Yoshitomo Nara, Q&A: Yoshitomo Nara Seeks Lasting Art After Japan’s Tsunami, interview by Wei Gu, May 13, 2015, <http://blogs.wsj.com/japanrealtime/2015/03/13/qa-yoshitomo-nara-seeks-lasting-art-after-japans-tsunami/>.

<sup>976</sup> Nastia Voynovskaya, “On View: Yoshitomo Nara’s ‘Stars’ at Pace Gallery,” *Hi-Fructose Magazine*, April 3, 2015, <http://hifructose.com/2015/04/03/on-view-yoshitomo-naras-stars-at-pace-gallery/>.

<sup>977</sup> “Yoshitomo Nara ‘Stars,’” *Pace Gallery*, February 5, 2015, <http://www.pacegallery.com/exhibitions/12716/yoshitomo-nara>.

Earth,”<sup>978</sup> while the curator Tezuka Miwako suggests that “*Rebirth* reflects Mori’s shift away from a preoccupation with Japanese pop culture and consumerism toward the creation of contemplative and participatory spaces, and a vision of art and technology as essential parts of the broader ecology.”<sup>979</sup> Indeed, *Rebirth* and other exhibitions like *Cyclicscape* (2015) convey an eco-friendly shift towards Zen circles and gaianistic new religions, more than anime and cyber-geishas. [Figure 4 & 5] Nevertheless, this updated neo-Y2K aesthetic is rather cute and rendered in smooth gradients and flowing curves, not a sharp edge in sight, hinting that Mori has not shifted away from her usual concern with the Japanese commodity form, as much as she changed her focus to the exploration of minimalist “bobject aesthetics,”<sup>980</sup> equally in vogue in our global consumer markets.

In turn, Takano Aya asserts that she now drinks less, wakes up early, does yoga, converted to vegetarianism, meditates, and no longer reads science fiction, preferring to delve in real science.<sup>981</sup> A review of her show *Heaven is Inside of You* (2012) accordingly states that “the Japan tsunami of 2011 triggered a philosophical tsunami within Aya Takano,”<sup>982</sup> establishing a direct link between the post-disaster *zeitgeist* and Takano’s personal changes. [Figure 6] Still, Takano’s latest show at Galerie Perrotin in Paris, *The Jelly Civilization Chronicle* (2017), moves little away from her girly science fantasy scenarios. The press release states that “Preferring oil paint, which is more natural, to acrylic paint, for example, Aya Takano seems to pursue a new artistic quest ... influenced by a unique interest in science and guided by an absolute respect for nature and human life.”<sup>983</sup> [Figure 7] The claim that oils are “more natural” is debatable: while acrylic paint is indeed a petroleum-derived polymer, oil paint still requires the use of paint thinners like turpentine or mineral spirits, which are just as

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<sup>978</sup> Michael H. Miller, “It Came From Outer Space! Mariko Mori Comes Back Down to Earth,” *Observer*, November 16, 2011, <http://observer.com/2011/11/it-came-from-outer-space-mariko-mori-comes-back-down-to-earth/>.

<sup>979</sup> “Rebirth: Recent Work by Mariko Mori - Press Release,” Streaming Museum, September 11, 2013, <http://streamingmuseum.org/rebirth-recent-work-by-mariko-mori/>.

<sup>980</sup> Arkenberg, “Cuteness and Control in Portal,” 63.

<sup>981</sup> Elizabeth Leigh, “Superflat Artist Aya Takano’s Sea Change, Post-Tsunami,” *BlouinArtinfo*, November 29, 2012, <http://hk.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/843909/superflat-artist-aya-takanos-sea-change-post-tsunami>.

<sup>982</sup> Leigh.

<sup>983</sup> “Aya Takano ‘The Jelly Civilization Chronicle’” (Galerie Perrotin, March 16, 2017), [https://static.perrotin.com/presse\\_expo/CP\\_06751\\_3225\\_583.pdf](https://static.perrotin.com/presse_expo/CP_06751_3225_583.pdf).

threatening to the environment.<sup>984</sup> But again, the blurb reinforces Takano’s rebirth as someone who is more sustainable as a human being and an artist.

About Aoshima Chiho’s *Takaamanohara*, the centerpiece of her traveling exhibition *Rebirth of the World* (2016), [Video 1] a blurb declares that “following natural disasters such as a tsunami and volcanic eruption, the viewer witnesses the return of life and exuberant growth”<sup>985</sup> depicted on a quasi-mythical scale. Made in collaboration with New Zealander animator Bruce Ferguson, *Takaamanohara*—a Buddhist concept signifying “the plain of high heaven” where the gods reside—reimagines the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in a 10-meter-long, 2,5-meter-high projection of a looped 7-minute animation. [Figure 8] The narrative, complex and detail-packed, “demands that you spend the same time you would on a feature film to feel you have seen it once.”<sup>986</sup> While critics praised *Takaamanohara* for “having reached a level of perfection beyond any of the artist’s past work,”<sup>987</sup> the piece is a parade of Aoshima’s trademark tropes, observed on similar terms in previous works: the playful back-and-forth between recognizable Eastern and Western conventions and spirituality, Japanese *emakimono*<sup>988</sup> scrolls and intricate Boschian hellscapes; her bright *Adobe Illustrator* graphics used to create otherworldly gardens of biotechnical delights, reminiscent of electronic media and mass-produced commercial forms like billboards and vector motion graphics. If anything, by addressing the idea of rebirth in Buddhist spirituality and referencing a recent tragedy, instead of the older WWII trauma cited in Murakami’s *Superflat* (2000) and *Little Boy* (2005) manifestos, Aoshima imbues *Takaamanohara* with a gravitas adjusted to a new post-2011 sensibility.

Murakami, of course, is no exception to the Superflat discourse of rebirth. Interviewed about his New York show *In the Land of the Dead, Stepping on the Tail of a Rainbow* (2014), Murakami explains that the events of 2011 “definitely shifted, on a fundamental level, my

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<sup>984</sup> “Artists Paints - Is Oil or Acrylic Friendlier to Environment?,” *Consumer Action*, May 23, 2010, [http://www.consumer-action.org/articles/article/artists\\_paintsis\\_oil\\_or\\_acrylic\\_friendlier\\_to\\_environment](http://www.consumer-action.org/articles/article/artists_paintsis_oil_or_acrylic_friendlier_to_environment).

<sup>985</sup> Kaikai Kiki, “Chiho Aoshima Solo Exhibition: Rebirth of the World,” *Kaikai Kiki Gallery*, 2016, <http://en.gallery-kaikaikiki.com/>.

<sup>986</sup> Jen Graves, “Big Screen, Big Scream,” *The Stranger*, July 1, 2015, <http://www.thestranger.com/visual-art/features/2015/07/01/22469995/big-screen-big-scream>.

<sup>987</sup> Kaikai Kiki, “Chiho Aoshima Solo Exhibition: Rebirth of the World.”

<sup>988</sup> *Emakimono* are painted horizontal handscrolls crafted during the eleventh to sixteenth centuries in Japan, used to illustrate epic tales, like *Genji monogatari*, or for social satyr “Emakimono,” *Asia Society*, accessed September 25, 2018, <https://asiasociety.org/education/emakimono..>

position as an artist.”<sup>989</sup> The show moves away from Murakami’s pop culture-inspired work, focusing on the role of religion in post-disaster scenarios.<sup>990</sup> [Figure 9] Murakami himself claims to have had an epiphany of sorts, as he stopped worrying about the competitive contemporary art market.<sup>991</sup> “It feels a little bit more pure,”<sup>992</sup> he says. In the recent retrospective exhibition, *Murakami by Murakami* (2017) at Oslo’s Astrup Fearnley Museet, the museum’s main hall is dedicated to Murakami’s new works featuring Buddhist and Zen motifs like Arhats (Buddhist saints), Daruma, and *ensō* circles.<sup>993</sup> In discourse, these works are framed as a direct response in the aftermaths of Japan’s 2011 crisis. The curator, Therese Möllenhoff, remarks about the 30-metre-long painting *727 - 272: <Emergence of God at the Reversal of Fate>* (2006-2009) that “this richly detailed painting appears to be almost a mini-retrospective of Murakami’s artistic development, ranging from neo-pop, Superflat and manga-inspired characters to his recently renewed interest in traditional Japanese artistic models and Buddhist motifs.”<sup>994</sup> [Figure 10] Möllenhoff’s choice of words corroborates a Superflat teleology in which *otaku* pop culture and consumerism are shed like a skin, and artists return to purer, rawer, more spiritual expressions, symbolized by a renewed interest in Japanese tradition and the environment.

Many critics and audiences do not buy into this Superflat Renaissance. While Murakami’s *In the Land of the Dead* was generally well-received as “a welcome return to a more disturbing style,”<sup>995</sup> critics pointed out that “Murakami’s working some new angles, but he’s still up to his old tricks.”<sup>996</sup> And that, despite Murakami’s spiritual aspirations, “money—

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<sup>989</sup> Takashi Murakami, "Takashi Murakami on Making Art After the Tsunami," interview by Jay Caspian Kang, *The New York Times Magazine*, December 5, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/07/magazine/takashi-murakami-on-making-art-after-the-tsunami.html>.

<sup>990</sup> Murakami.

<sup>991</sup> Murakami.

<sup>992</sup> Murakami.

<sup>993</sup> Therese Möllenhoff, *Murakami by Murakami* or “exhibitions within the exhibition” at Oslo’s Astrup Fearnley Museet, interview by Arterritory, February 24, 2017, [http://www.artterritory.com/en/news/6383-murakami\\_by\\_murakami\\_or\\_exhibitions\\_within\\_the\\_exhibition\\_at\\_oslos\\_astrup\\_fearnley\\_museet/](http://www.artterritory.com/en/news/6383-murakami_by_murakami_or_exhibitions_within_the_exhibition_at_oslos_astrup_fearnley_museet/).

<sup>994</sup> Möllenhoff.

<sup>995</sup> Jason Farago, “Takashi Murakami Review: A Welcome Return to a More Disturbing Style,” *The Guardian*, November 11, 2014, sec. Art and design, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/nov/11/takashi-murakami-review-gagosian-gallery-fukushima>.

<sup>996</sup> Ben Davis, “Takashi Murakami Enters His Skull Period,” *Artnet News*, November 13, 2014, <https://news.artnet.com/market/takashi-murakami-enters-his-skull-period-at-gagosian-166219>.

and the grandiose art it can buy—seems to be the only religion that matters here.”<sup>997</sup> Although in a gentler tone, Mori’s *Rebirth* was also mocked for its naivety. “Mori’s work is just too precious, too pretty, too orderly, too damned nice,”<sup>998</sup> one critic teases. Unless you are into New Age and ecovillages, “Mori and her work may annoy you... Consider yourself warned.” Jabs at the broader movement often accompany compliments about the works of Superflat artists, as when one critic praises *Takaamohara* for transcending “boring”<sup>999</sup> Japanese neo-pop.

In this context, the Superflat Renaissance comes across as an expression of Jungian enantiodromia, the principle according to which the superabundance of any psychic force inevitably changes into its shadow opposite. The Superflat artists’ discourse of rebirth attempts to compensate for the zombification of a now “morally disgusting” movement—as philosopher Aurel Kolnai explains, “By ‘moral’ here we understand not ‘ethical’ in a strict and narrow sense, but rather: mental or spiritual, albeit more or less with reference to ethical matters, in contrast to physical.”<sup>1000</sup> For instance, while political and socially engaged art is trending in artworld events like the dOCUMENTA and the Venice and Whitney Biennales, Superflat is easily perceived to feed off the same corrupt cultural and economic system responsible for tragedies like the Lehman Brothers collapse, the Fukushima nuclear disaster, and the presidential election of Donald Trump. To be sure, the art market still loves Murakami and Nara; indeed, their total auction sales after 2008 have exceeded the pre-financial crisis numbers, and Murakami is increasingly popular among Asian collectors.<sup>1001</sup> But for most critics, Superflat seems to evoke what Kolnai calls a “disgust by satiety,” i.e., the aversion derived from having had enough of something.<sup>1002</sup> This disgust by excess connects the *zombification* of Superflat to another abject legacy: Greenbergianism, and the birth of Zombie Formalism.

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<sup>997</sup> Howard Halle, “Takashi Murakami, ‘In the Land of the Dead, Stepping on the Tail of a Rainbow,’” *Time Out New York*, December 19, 2014, <https://www.timeout.com/newyork/things-to-do/takashi-murakami-in-the-land-of-the-dead-stepping-on-the-tail-of-a-rainbow>.

<sup>998</sup> Charles Darwent, “IoS Visual Art Review: Mariko Mori: Rebirth, Royal Academy, London,” *The Independent*, December 16, 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/reviews/ios-visual-art-review-mariko-mori-rebirth-royal-academy-london-8420229.html>.

<sup>999</sup> Graves, “Big Screen, Big Scream.”

<sup>1000</sup> As Kolnai explains, “By ‘moral’ here we understand not ‘ethical’ in a strict and narrow sense, but rather: mental or spiritual, albeit more or less with reference to ethical matters, in contrast to physical.” Kolnai 2003, 62.

<sup>1001</sup> Yee and Kinsella, “Why Collectors Love Takashi Murakami, Part 2.”

<sup>1002</sup> Kolnai, *On Disgust*, 2003.



According to Florence Rubinfeld, “Clembashing” (i.e., the bashing of Clement Greenberg) is a phenomenon that “by the late 1970s... had become the art world’s favorite indoor sport.”<sup>1003</sup> Flatness in painting went from mourning the impossibility of representation to “constantly risk inconsequence or collapse”<sup>1004</sup> in the form of Superflat’s brandification of art (e.g., a Superflat monogram on a Louis Vuitton bag) or the shabby chic look of Provisional Painting and The New Casualists—one could say, first as tragedy, then as farce. Likewise, the trend of provisional painting might be considered “cute” in defying the aesthetic grandeur traditionally expected from artworks. According to critic Sharon L. Butler, “There is a studied, passive-aggressive incompleteness to much of the most interesting abstract work that painters are making today,” reflected in “a broader concern with multiple forms of imperfection: not merely what is unfinished but also the off-kilter, the overtly offhand, the not-quite-right.”<sup>1005</sup> A few examples of American New Casualists are Lauren Luloff, Cordy Ryman, Amy Feldman, [Figure 11] and Joe Bradley, but it is a widespread tendency, with European artists such as Julia Haller and David Ostrowski [Figure 12] as two, among many, practitioners. Ironically, while Greenberg rejected art’s connection to kitsch and consumer culture, flatness is now faulted for its kitschiness. Walter Robinson, who coined the term “Zombie Formalism,” tells us:

With their simple and direct manufacture, these artworks are elegant and elemental, and can be said to say something basic about what painting is – about its ontology, if you think of abstraction as a philosophical venture. Like a figure of speech or, perhaps, like a joke, this kind of painting is easy to understand, yet suggestive of multiple meanings. ([Jacob] Kassay’s paintings, for example, are ostensibly made with silver, a valuable metal that invokes a separate, non-artistic system of value, not unlike medieval religious icons, which were priced by both their devotional subjects and by the amount of gold they contained.) Finally, these pictures all have certain qualities—a chic strangeness, a mysterious drama, a meditative calm—that function well in the realm of high-end, hyper-contemporary interior design.<sup>1006</sup>

Drawing from Japanese philosopher Azuma Hiroki, “flatness” seems to have become a *moé* element for the Western art world: like the databased parts of cute anime and manga

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<sup>1003</sup> Robinson, “Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism.”

<sup>1004</sup> Raphael Rubinstein, “Provisional Painting,” *Art in America*, May 1, 2009, <https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/provisional-painting-raphael-rubinstein/>.

<sup>1005</sup> Sharon L. Butler, “ABSTRACT PAINTING: The New Casualists,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 3, 2011, <https://brooklynrail.org/2011/06/artseen/abstract-painting-the-new-casualists>.

<sup>1006</sup> Robinson, “Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism.”

characters, flatness has a consumption-triggering effect on contemporary art audiences.<sup>1007</sup> According to some critics, the Zombie Formalism bubble has already burst,<sup>1008</sup> but the notion nevertheless resonates with deep-seated fears that art has been “led into a dead-end where its options are to satirize the arts of the past or to aestheticize the material of everyday life.”<sup>1009</sup> This zombification is particularly interesting in relation to painting, which among the arts is the one that has most often died and been brought back to life. Painting has a long list of premature burials, starting as early as 1839 when Paul Delaroche first laid eyes on a daguerreotype and stated that “from today, painting is dead.”<sup>1010</sup> For many critics, painting keeps coming back from the dead, not so much as a Fenix but as a walking corpse. As Tom Lubbock wrote over a decade ago, in response to Saatchi’s exhibition *The Triumph of Painting* (2005):

Whenever you hear about a revival of painting you should be suspicious. Modern painting is rather like modern religion. It is continually being declared dead and then suddenly it’s reviving. Painting today is pretty well kept going by the question of its disputed mortality. Every few years, another twitch. But are these twitches signs of life? Or are they terminal spasms, or post-mortem effects, or even the symptoms of a strange, “undead,” zombie half-life? That’s the big, ongoing, unanswerable question. (Personally I incline to the last option.)<sup>1011</sup>

While Zombie Formalism is often presented as a rift between abstraction and figurativism, the issue of zombification pertains more thoroughly to what postmodern art and literature critic Andreas Huyssen calls the Great Divide between high art and the market: “a powerful imaginary insisting on the divide while time and time again violating that categorical separation in practice.”<sup>1012</sup> Writer Jason Farago notes that even extensive queries into the status of contemporary painting often leave out the taboo of painting’s promiscuous relation to the art market: according to him, “the big question surrounding the rude health of the medium.”<sup>1013</sup> Thus, despite their apparent differences—Superflat tends towards maximalist, figurative, and minutely planned art, while Provisionalism (or Casualism) looks minimalist, abstract, and

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<sup>1007</sup> Azuma, *Otaku*, 39–47.

<sup>1008</sup> Goldstein, “I Survived the Zombie Formalism Apocalypse.”

<sup>1009</sup> Joseph J. Tanke, “What Is the Aesthetic Regime?,” *Parrhesia*, no. 12 (2011): 77.

<sup>1010</sup> Jason Farago, “Is Painting Dead?,” *BBC*, February 18, 2015,

<http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20150217-is-painting-dead>.

<sup>1011</sup> Tom Lubbock, “The Triumph of Painting? That’s a Pretty Rich Claim,” *The Independent*, January 25, 2005, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/the-triumph-of-painting-thats-a-pretty-rich-claim-488171.html>.

<sup>1012</sup> Huyssen, “High/Low in an Expanded Field.”

<sup>1013</sup> Farago, “Is Painting Dead?”

improvised—Superflat and Provisionalism are two poles in the scale of zombified art, indexing the anxiety that painting, in particular, has become a product of the art world’s lingo and discourses. One whose works, as one critic harshly puts it, “are simply the literary equivalents of making a five-star meal out of leftover McDonalds.”<sup>1014</sup>

Murakami’s manifestos in the form of a trilogy of books and exhibitions, including *Superflat* (2000) and *Little Boy* (2005), occupying enormous buildings at the heart of the art world in Los Angeles and New York (the MOCA Gallery at the Pacific Design Center and the Japanese Society in Manhattan, respectively), have done little to quell these fears, elevating “trashy” *otaku* culture to the level of “high art.” [Figure 13 & 14] Again, what is at stake is disgust by satiety: Superflat spectacularizes the modernist appreciation for medium specificity and two-dimensionality until it is just *too* much. And because Superflat simultaneously “reinforces the Western construction of Japan as a culture of surfaceness,”<sup>1015</sup> the notion of zombification itself becomes a racialized marker of Japaneseness. As anthropologist Marilyn Ivy points out, despite being a technological powerhouse, the West still perceives Japan as culturally nonmodern,<sup>1016</sup> a “colonized copy” by “adept mimics... lacking originality.”<sup>1017</sup> Murakami consciously steps into this stereotype, claiming such things as that “all my works are made up of special effects”<sup>1018</sup> or talking with honesty about the acrobatics of profit and celebrity he has had to perform in both the Western and Japanese art worlds.<sup>1019</sup>

In this context, Superflat’s relentless obsession with the seemingly anachronistic medium of painting, despite the movement’s close association with the Internet-driven, multimedia-sensitive, post-human-friendly subculture of *otaku*, becomes a provocation. Superflat deliberately values the skills unacknowledged by the dominant modernist rhetoric, mostly for their association with mass cultural zombification (i.e., its brainlessness and automaticness): copying, illustrating, decorating, and so on. Indeed, compared to Andy Warhol and his Factory studio, Murakami’s practices have more in common with a Japanese animation company, “a particularly harsh industry, even by Japanese standards,”<sup>1020</sup> than the bohemian

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<sup>1014</sup> Alan Pocaro, “Provisional Painting, Three Hypotheses,” *Abstract Critical*, February 18, 2014, <https://abstractcritical.com/note/provisional-painting-three-hypotheses/>.

<sup>1015</sup> Sharp, “Superflatworlds,” 178.

<sup>1016</sup> Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, 2.

<sup>1017</sup> Ivy, 7.

<sup>1018</sup> Murakami, “All my works are made up of special effects.” 27.

<sup>1019</sup> Favell, *Before and after Superflat*, 49–51; Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World* (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 198.

<sup>1020</sup> Brian Ashcraft, “Being an Animator in Japan Is Brutal,” *Kotaku*, September 3, 2015, <http://kotaku.com/being-an-animator-in-japan-is-brutal-1690248803>.

lifestyle of Warhol superstars.<sup>1021</sup> Murakami's *Instagram* account often shares photographs of assistants rendering his creations into dozens of canvases, or erasing silkscreen marks for an extra smooth surface. [Figure 15] Murakami's protégée Mr. also owns an *Instagram* account where he can be seen replicating computer illustrations like paint-by-numbers. [Figure 16a, b] In Murakami's comments section, it is not uncommon for netizens to leave critical messages, like "art of who?" and "wonder how much of your art is even yours anymore," while others rush to his defense. Thus, Murakami's "quest to imbue works with a true soul"<sup>1022</sup> through the aura of his author-name—which is also a brand, encapsulated in the ubiquitous quality stamp © MURAKAMI—is, in and of itself, an affirmation of "the modernity of the geographically 'non-modern.'"<sup>1023</sup> That is, by putting the same care into producing a painting, a print, or a stationary item for sale in the corrupt netherworld of the museum shop, Murakami's perceptualizes his contention that the distinction between "high art" and mass entertainment does not operate in Japan as it does in the West.<sup>1024</sup> [Figure 17]

The cuteness of Superflat is a constant reminder of its entanglement with the commercial exploitation of merchandisable characters, and thus resists any attempts at spiritual "rebirth" despite what artists claim. Moreover, Superflat's cuteness strikes a chord with the West's art-historical inseparableness from the processes of commodification *and* cutification. After all, the rise of European easel painting in the Early Modern period steered art away from large-scale palaces and churches, making painting portable and "cuter" to fit the homes of the rising commercial bourgeoisie, sometimes as a cheaper alternative to wall tapestries.<sup>1025</sup> Literary critic Sianne Nagi argues that such diminutiveness cast a long shadow over art's political agency, recalling Theodor Adorno's words on the taming of the avant-garde's "autarchic radicalism"<sup>1026</sup> into the insular rhetoric of high modernism. For, as Adorno put it, "Absolute color compositions verge on wallpaper patterns. Now that American hotels are decorated with abstract paintings... and aesthetic radicalism has shown itself to be socially affordable, radicalism itself must pay the price that it is no longer radical."<sup>1027</sup> [Figure 18] It is not hard to imagine such jabs about contemporary painting's promiscuity with wallpaper

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<sup>1021</sup> Favell, *Before and after Superflat*, 54; Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World*, 186.

<sup>1022</sup> Murakami, "All my works are made up of special effects.," 27.

<sup>1023</sup> Huyssen, "High/Low in an Expanded Field," 364.

<sup>1024</sup> Sharp, "Superflatworlds," 193.

<sup>1025</sup> Neil De Marchi and Hans J. Van Miegroet, "The History of Art Markets," in *Handbook of the Economics of Art and Culture*, ed. Victor A. Ginsburg and David Throsby, vol. 1 (Elsevier, 2006), 70.

<sup>1026</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Berg Pub Ltd, 2013), 48.

<sup>1027</sup> Adorno, 31.

aesthetics and textile design directed at Murakami's laughing flowers. [Figure 19] Or Nara's children, Mori's blobjects, and Takano and Aoshima's teenyboppers in pretty fantasy settings. Or even Aida's epic *Jumble of One Hundred Flowers* (2012), [Figure 20a, b] a painting over 17-meters-long where dozens of laughing girls disintegrate into confetti over an endless frieze of colorful pixels—"virtually bear[ing] down like characters in a zombie game,"<sup>1028</sup> encapsulating the threat that Japanese cuteness represents the ultimate form of zombification for art in general, and painting in particular.

(See also "Gakkōgurashi!" and "Metamorphosis")

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<sup>1028</sup> "Aida Makoto: Monument For Nothing - Press Release Vol. 2" (Mori Art Museum, September 27, 2012), [http://www.mori.art.museum/jp/press-re/pdf/aida\\_120927\\_en.pdf](http://www.mori.art.museum/jp/press-re/pdf/aida_120927_en.pdf).

# **PART II**

## **THREE PAPERS**

# Gaijin Mangaka\*

## The boundary-violating impulse of Japanized “art comics”

This paper investigates the artistic strategies of Japanized visual artists by examining the emerging movement of manga-influenced international “art comics”—an umbrella term for avant-garde/experimental graphic narratives. As a case study, I take the special issue of the art comics anthology *š!* #25 ‘Gaijin Mangaka’ (July 2016), published by Latvian comics publisher kuš! and co-edited by Berliac, an Argentinian neo-*gekiga* comics artist. I begin by analysing four contributions in ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ to exemplify the diversity of approaches in the book, influenced by a variety of manga genres like *gekiga*, *shōjo*, and *josei* manga. This analysis serves as a primer for a more general discussion regarding the Japanization of twenty-first-century art, resulting from the coming of age of millennials who grew up consuming pop culture “made in Japan.” I address the issue of cultural appropriation regarding Japanized art, which comes up even on the margins of hegemonic culture industries, as well as Berliac’s view of ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ as a transcultural phenomenon. I also insert ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ within a broader contemporary tendency for using “mangaesque” elements in Western “high art,” starting with Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno’s *No Ghost Just a Shell*. The fact that the link to Japanese pop culture in ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ and other Japanized “art comics” is often more residual, cryptic, and less programmatic than some other cases of global manga articulates a sense of internalized foreignness, embedding their stylistic struggles in an arena of clashing definitions of “high” and “low,” “modern,” “postmodern,” and “non-modern,” subcultures and negative identity.

### Introduction

*š!* #25 ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ (July 2016) is a special issue of the celebrated pocket-sized comic anthology *š!*, published by the Latvian comics publisher kuš!. [Figure 1] The volume was co-edited by Poland-based Argentinian comic artist Berliac, together with David Schilter, the regular editor of kuš!, and has an introduction by British journalist and comics critic Paul Gravett (author of *Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics*). In the span of its 164 pages, ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ features works by 15 contributors: Berliac

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\* This is an earlier version of the paper which was published in the peer-reviewed academic journal *Mutual Images*: No. 7 “Layers of aesthetics and ethics in Japanese pop culture” (2019), pp. 3-26. The final paper is available at <https://doi.org/10.32926/2019.7.sou.gaiji>.

(Argentina), Andrés Magán (Spain), Aseyn (France), Ben Marcus (USA), Daylen Seu (USA), Dilraj Mann (UK), GG (Canada), Gloria Rivera (USA), Hetamoé (Portugal), König Lü.Q. (Switzerland), Luis Yang (Spain), Mickey Zacchilli (USA), Nou (USA), Vincenzo Filosa (Italy), and xuh (Poland). Underlying this selection of authors is the awareness of an emerging movement of manga-influenced “art comics.” According to comics scholar and critic Pedro Moura, “art comics” is an umbrella term for a subset of alternative comics or alt-comics. These are united by an overall, if highly diversified and often situated and contextual, attitude of conflation between the mass and street-cultural field in which the medium of comics has historically thrived due to its target audience and modes of circulation, and “high” or experimental art.<sup>1030</sup><sup>1031</sup> Examples of comics authors fillable under this banner include the likes Christopher Forgues, Aidan Koch, Simon Hanselmann, Michael DeForge, Blaise Larmee, Margot Ferrick, Noel Freibert, or Leon Sadler, among many others. In this sense, the term “art comics,” while necessarily vague, ambiguous, and indeterminate, shares some similarities as an analytical handle with the “art film,” gesturing to a deviation from the conventions of the mainstream (and mainstream alternative) industry. Today, “art comics” have dedicated publishers like kuš! in Europe (since 2008) or 2dcloud in the United States, the latter founded in 2007 by artists Maggie Umberand and Raighne Hogan<sup>1032</sup><sup>1033</sup>.

The fact that the artists in *š! #25 ‘Gaijin Mangaka’* were all born between 1980 and 1995 suggests that this demographical cohort, labeled “millennials” by researches and popular media alike, may be relevant in understanding and contextualizing their works. Although narrower definitions enclose the millennials within 15 years ranging

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<sup>1030</sup> Pedro Moura, “Art Comics.,” *LerBD*, October 14, 2013, paras. 2-3, <http://lerbd.blogspot.com/2013/10/art-comics.html>.

<sup>1031</sup> The quotation marks in “high” will be used throughout this paper to signal that, following Andreas Huyssen, I am not alluding to any static or essentialist definitions of “high” and “low,” but to the highly contested “high art”/mass culture binary that has nevertheless been ‘a central conceptual trope and energizing norm of the post-World War II period that took hold in the context of Cold War cultural politics and the explosive acceleration of consumerist and television culture’ (Huyssen, “High/Low in an Expanded Field,” 367.) Moreover, the term “art comics” does not mean to revert to any discussion on the legitimacy of comics in general as an art form, which—even though the art historical canon continues to neglect them—should by now be a settled issue.

<sup>1032</sup> Madeleine Morley, “Minnesota Publisher 2dcloud Is Gaining Ground in U.S. Alt-Comics,” *Eye on Design*, January 31, 2017, para. 2, <https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/minnesota-publisher-2dcloud-is-gaining-ground-in-us-alt-comics/>.

<sup>1033</sup> Umber also runs the influential Tumblr blog *Altcomics*, showcasing the variety of sensibilities, visual/narrative approaches, and bridges with contemporary art in “art comics.”



from 1981 to 1996,<sup>1034</sup> the exact birth years vary and looser definitions describe them as “people reaching young adulthood in the early 21st century.”<sup>1035</sup> To be sure, categorizing culture by “generation” is not without its contradictions, as it glosses over the many diversities of class, gender, race, nationality, and other socio-economic and political divides that factor into the creation of individual and group identity.

Moreover, most artists generally published by *kuš!* were born from the late 1970s to the late 1990s, so ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ does not stand out much in this respect. Still, the exact coincidence of ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ artists with millennial years becomes more significant when put against the broader backdrop of the contemporary art world. The appearance of “mangaesque”<sup>1036</sup> and other Japanese pop-cultural elements in the works of Western artists is almost exclusively the turf of millennials, i.e., artists presently in their twenties and thirties (I will address the exception of Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno later in this paper).<sup>1037</sup> The reason is that millennials were the first group of children and adolescents outside Japan to witness the rise of Japanese pop culture to global soft power. As scholar Casey Brienza points out, manga did not significantly penetrate the American market until the late 1980s, and sales did not boom until well into the 2000s<sup>1038</sup> when millennials came of age. As manga, anime, Japanese videogames, and so on, began to seep into Western mediatic milieus and consciousness, increasing their presence on television, bookshelves, and the Internet, the cultural influence of Japan became capable of challenging the hegemony of the United States and Europe. Series like *Dragon Ball*, *Sailor Moon*, *Evangelion*, *Pokémon*, *Naruto*, *One Piece*, and many others imprinted the taste of 1980s and 1990s children all across the globe, from North and South America to Europe and Africa, brought together on an unprecedented scale by the Internet and social media.

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<sup>1034</sup> Dimock, “Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins,” para. 5.

<sup>1035</sup> “Millennial,” in *Oxford Dictionaries / English*, accessed May 20, 2019, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/millennial>.

<sup>1036</sup> Jaqueline Berndt, “The Intercultural Challenge of the ‘Mangaesque’: Reorienting Manga Studies after 3/11,” in *Manga’s Cultural Crossroads*, ed. Jaqueline Berndt and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (Routledge, 2014), 77–78.

<sup>1037</sup> Art historian Jaqueline Berndt uses the term “mangaesque” to describe “the amalgam of texts, discourses, institutional contexts, and audiences that gives rise to notions of ‘manga proper’—impelled less by critics than editors, and shared widely among consumers” and “including both positive and negative connotations” Jaqueline Berndt and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, “Introduction: Studying Manga across Cultures,” in *Manga’s Cultural Crossroads*, ed. Jaqueline Berndt and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (Routledge, 2014), 5..

<sup>1038</sup> Casey Brienza, “Books, Not Comics: Publishing Fields, Globalization, and Japanese Manga in the United States,” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (June 1, 2009): 103.

In this sense, millennial fans of Japanese pop culture illustrate the latest stage of what media theorist Iwabuchi Kōichi calls the “shifting meanings of Japanization from colonial contact zone to domestic indigenization to exportable glocalization,”<sup>1039</sup> marked by the emergence of soft power discourses and Cool Japan governmental policies. That is why, as argued by Yoda Tomiko, the “J-” in “Japanese pop culture” nowadays has a significant degree of separableness from the national, indexing a global subculture of fans centered around consumer commodities like manga, anime, videogames, and so on. As she puts it, “Rather than assuming that the Japanese popular culture today ultimately refers to some form of larger national frame, we may understand the prefix *J-* as inscribing the subculturation of the national.”<sup>1040</sup> This subcultural dimension of Japanization, connecting the social and self-identities of artists who are also generationally connected, is reinforced by the introductory blurb of ‘*Gaijin Mangaka.*’ It also introduces the idea that the increased accessibility of Japanese comics and animation translated into the discovery, by millennials in their early adulthood, of alternative kinds of manga such as the one that circulated in magazines like *Garo* and *Ax*,<sup>1041</sup> that helped sediment and evolve their childhood interests:

Imagine a parallel dimension in which a whole generation was raised on Sailor Moon for breakfast, and Akira was the first thing they saw on the comics rack. And just when they were about to grow out of it, in the space of a decade, they were bombarded by more alternative, adult-oriented manga—what connoisseurs call Gekiga—reaffirming their love for the devices and aesthetics of the comics medium in the Land of the Rising Sun. What a bunch of freaky hybrids would result!<sup>1042</sup>

The trend of manga-influenced “art comics” is in no way restricted to the artists in ‘*Gaijin Mangaka.*’ As Paul Gravett points out, “They are not alone—others include Lala Albert, Julien Ceccaldi, Gabriel Corbrera, Sasha Hommer, Hellen Jo, Jo Kessler,

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<sup>1039</sup> GARAGEMCA, *Transculturation, Cultural Inter-Nationalism and beyond. A Lecture by Koichi Iwabuchi at Garage*, 34'37".

<sup>1040</sup> Yoda, “A Roadmap to Millennial Japan,” 46.

<sup>1041</sup> Founded in 1964 by Nagai Katsuichi, *Garo* was a manga magazine specializing in alternative/underground/avant-garde manga. Artists associated with *Garo* include Katsumata Susumu, Sugiura Hinako, Yamada Murasaki, Shirato Sanpei, Maruo Suehiro, Nananan Kiriko, King Terry, Tsuge Yoshiharu, Tatsumi Yoshihiro, Nekojiro and Furuya Usamaru, among various others. *Garo* published its final issue in 2002 and was succeeded by *Ax*.

<sup>1042</sup> David Schilter, Berliac, and Sanita Muizniece, eds., *Gaijin Mangaka*, š!, 25 (Riga: Grafiskie stasti, 2016), 3.

Jonny Negron, Jillian Tamaki and Bastien Vivès to name but a few.”<sup>1043</sup> According to Gravett, this heterogeneous group of artists is “unanimous in their admiration for and inspiration from manga, but their own expressions in response are dynamically diverse and personal, and are all the stronger, and sometimes stranger, for this.”<sup>1044</sup> Indeed, a cursory look across the pages of ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ is enough to grasp the variety of artistic approaches and influences in the volume. From the alternative comics of *Garo* to mainstream *shōjo manga*, the contributions subvert, reinterpret, parody, or otherwise manipulate and employ the categories and culture of manga and Japanese pop culture. For a taste of such diversity, I offer a brief overview of the works in ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*,’ as well as of other parts of the book, such as its cover and artist biographies.

### Themes and styles in ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’

In this section, I address the contributions of ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ authors Berliac, Luis Yang, Nou, and Gloria Rivera. Berliac’s contribution, titled “Moriyama’s Dog” (12 pages), is rendered in the author’s trademark neo-*gekiga* style, heavily influenced by the *gekiga* and *seinen* traditions of “alternative manga” for mature audiences, popularized by Japanese comics artists like Tatsumi Yoshihiro. [Figure 2] It tells the story of an agoraphobic *mangaka* (manga artist) in a creative slump, forced to look after the dog of his upstairs neighbor, Mr. Moriyama, who has passed away. Although reluctant at first, the *mangaka* comes to believe that the dog enabled him to overcome his writer’s block and becomes obsessed with it. When the dog manages to escape the apartment, he desperately searches for it outside; only to end up brutally beat up by a gang of delinquents. Throughout the story, Berliac represents the dog as a pastiche of Moriyama Daido’s 1971 photograph of a stray dog. [Figure 3] Moriyama’s iconic picture alludes to the pariah status of renegades and rebels in Japanese society,<sup>1045</sup> echoing Berliac’s own experience as an outsider of the Argentinean comics canon for working in the language of manga. More broadly, the theme of pariahhood relates to the “foreignness” inherent to the concept of *gaijin mangaka*, which I will address in the next section.

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<sup>1043</sup> Paul Gravett, “A Constant Light: Intro by Paul Gravett,” in *Gaijin Mangaka*, ed. David Schilter, Berliac, and Sanita Muizniece, š!, 25 (Riga: Grafiskie stasti, 2016), 4, [http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/gaijin\\_mangaka](http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/gaijin_mangaka).

<sup>1044</sup> Gravett, 4.

<sup>1045</sup> Leo Rubinien, “Daido Moriyama: Investigations of a Dog,” *AMERICAN SUBURB X*, October 1999, para. 7, <https://www.americansuburbx.com/2010/06/theory-daido-moriyama-investigations-of.html>.

Berliac's contribution stands out in *'Gaijin Mangaka'* as one of the most clearly influenced by *gekiga*. Other contributors like Yang, Nou, and Rivera, gravitate more towards the style, and deconstruction, of *shōjo* aesthetics. Luis Yang's comic "Tabako" (14 pages) is a *kokuhako* or "love confession" story in a high school setting, narrating the blossoming love between a teenage girl called Rumiko and her upperclassman, a boy called Yamada. [Figure 4] Yang makes extensive use of pastiche elements from *shōjo* manga, rendering his story in the typical black and white style of Japanese comics, with copious amounts of starry screen tones, sailor and *gakuran* school uniforms (*seifuku*), and Japanese suffixes like *-chan* or *-senpai*. The character design is also deconstructive, parodying the commercial beautification of girl-oriented comics. For instance, Yang reduces the characters' sparkling eyes to ill-defined masses, their chins are overly long, and the linework is intentionally sketchy. Each page is divided into two panels, in which the bottom panels tell a relatively linear, clichéd love story—Rumiko-*chan* frets over Yamada-*senpai*'s request to meet on the rooftop, eventually confessing her feelings for him—and the upper ones portray a weirder, dream-like silent narrative with no dialogs. In the latter, Rumiko finds her classmates unconscious (dead?) inside the classroom, picks up a discarded cigarette from the floor, and smokes it. The juxtaposition of these timelines effectively unveils the haunting uncanniness of *shōjo* manga's reification of feelings into sentimental stock phrases and settings, that "Tabako" seems to both adore and poke fun at.

This uncanny experience is also central to Nou's "Ring Mark" (10 pages). "Ring Mark" is a wordless abstract story involving identical cute girls who are left blank or uncolored against colorful, flat environments populated with floral motifs—a recurring element in Nou's work, derived from her interest in botanical illustration and photography.<sup>1046</sup> [Figure 5] Depicted in Nou's bold *ligne claire*,<sup>1047</sup> the girls in the story fuse, mutate, and change scales among themselves and the flowers. Sometimes they cry, but it is unclear whether this is a result of genuine emotion, or if they are overflowing

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<sup>1046</sup> Nou, "Artist Interview: Nou," para. 4, <http://www.euzinefest.com/home/august-17th-2017>.

<sup>1047</sup> *Ligne claire* (French for "clear line") is a term coined by Dutch graphic designer Joost Swarte to describe a drawing style pioneered by and typically identified with Franco-Belgian comics authors such as Hergé (*Les Aventures de Tintin*) and the School of Bruxelles, consisting of uniform black lines, with no hatching or ink shading. Although with roots in black and white comics from the 1920s, the *ligne claire* is often combined with bright, flat colors, as in Hergé and his collaborators' do-overs of *Tintin*'s stories from the 1950s onwards (Kjell Knudde, "Hergé," *Lambiek Comiclopedia*, retrieved from <https://www.lambiek.net/artists/h/herge.htm>).

with material fluxes; the fact that the tears turn to pollen, blending with the flowers, points towards the latter. Nou depicts a queer ecology where the distinction between organism and environment threatens to disappear, and the gender/sexuality of these androgynous “girls” becomes as fluid as their surroundings. “Ring Mark” is the contribution in ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ most focused on pure formal play, rejoicing in the transformative beauty of metamorphoses represented in the medium of comics.

In turn, Gloria Rivera’s contribution “Domestic Scene” (12 pages) is about a lesbian couple and their emotionally loaded conversations about college memories, coming out, sexuality, and love. [Figure 6] Rivera renders the comic in a painterly style, whose murky ambiances in subdued pastel and brownish hues evoke the weightier subjects found in some *josei manga* (women’s comics), which Rivera cites as a significant influence.<sup>1048</sup> The contours of Rivera’s manga-style characters are sometimes barely defined, with the characters, their environment, and their words becoming a kind of melting patchwork, resonating with the couple’s dissolving and fragile relationship. Unlike Nou’s girls, who are more of a blank slate in permanent flux, Rivera’s characters are burdened with personal stories and memories, seemingly embedded in the deep stratigraphy of lines and paint that gives them shape.

Other contributions in ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ attest to the variety within the book. Vincenzo Filosa’s “Don’t Touch This Gamela” is finely detailed, contrasting with the brutalism of Ben Marcus’s “Fool of Memory,” whose figures are heavier and more concise. “Deep Shit Honey” by Aseyn is short and sweet, like a slice of life lullaby, while Mickey Zacchili’s revels in the cuteness of raw computer drawings. GG’s “Lapse” is quietly meditative and sophisticated, whereas xuh’s black-and-red imagery evokes the tradition of female gothic manga. Others, like Andrés Magán (“Day 57”), Dilraj Mann (“Everyday”) or Daylen Seu (“Codependent Cunt”), display an array of murkier influences resulting in idiosyncratic, eclectic works. My contribution, “Trance Dream Techno,” combines pictures, text, and *kaomoji* (Japanese emoticons) in a one-panel-per-page narrative; it also includes an *omake* (“extra”), playing with the popular *yonkoma* (“four-panel manga”) format. [Figure 7] As one reviewer points out because the artists’ engagement with the languages of manga varies greatly, ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ demonstrates, if anything, “the futility of taking ‘manga’ to mean anything other than a comic produced

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<sup>1048</sup> Gravett, “A Constant Light: Intro by Paul Gravett,” 6.

in Japan.”<sup>1049</sup> But, in today’s global market, even such clear-cut definitions are fated to be quickly troubled.<sup>1050</sup>

The inherent difficulties of tackling a global “Japanese” pop culture lends a tongue-in-cheek undertone to Berliac’s cover for ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*.’ [Figure 8] The cover features a collage of stereotypical Cool Japan elements, from *maneki-neko* and origami to noodles and schoolgirls, from *kinbaku* bondage to manga mascots and *ukiyo-e*, among other recognizable icons of Japaneseness. On the inside, however, there is no such nation branding, but a more diluted, diverse, and sometimes cryptic approach to Japanese comics. The diversity of influences is evident in the authors’ bios at the end of ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*,’ where contributors were asked what their favorite manga is. [Figure 9] The responses range from beloved hits like *Ranma ½* and *Captain Tsubasa* to cult classics like *Akira* and other works by Ōtomo Katsuhiro (*Speed*, *Domu*). From interwar manga like *Norakuro* to horror masters like Itō Junji (*Tomie*). From “golden age” *shōnen-ai* by Hagio Moto (*Thomas no Shinzō*, or *The Heart of Thomas*) to psychological *josei* manga by Okazaki Kyōko (*River’s Edge*). From light-hearted comedies like *Yotsuba&!* to underground comics by authors of *Garo* fame like Tsuge Tadao (*Burai Heya*), Tsuge Yoshiharu (*Muno no Hito*), and Hayashi Seiichi (*Sekishoku Erejii*, or *Red Colored Elegy*). And *seinen manga* ranging from Matsumoto Taiyō’s slice of life drama *Sunny* to Urasawa Naoki’s sci-fi thriller *Nijūseiki Shōnen (20<sup>th</sup> Century Boys)*, or Sonoda Ken’ichi’s action-packed *Gunsmith Cats*.

This kaleidoscope of influences and the examples of contributions presented above reveal that, not only are the artists in ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ not detached observers of Japanese pop culture but that they bring their familiarity with both mainstream and alternative manga into the field of “art comics” in a variety of expressions. This mixture poses important if complex questions concerning authenticity and artistic purity in a globalized age when the parameters of cultural membership are potentially more fluid but also more gatekept than ever. In the next section, I address the issue of manga

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<sup>1049</sup> Shea Hennem, “BoJack Horseman Producer Serves up Funny Food in Hot Dog Taste Test,” *The A.V. Club*, August 9, 2016, para. 7, [http://www.avclub.com/article/bojack-horseman-producer-serves-funny-food-hot-dog-240405?utm\\_source=Twitter&utm\\_medium=SocialMarketing&utm\\_campaign=Main:1:Default](http://www.avclub.com/article/bojack-horseman-producer-serves-funny-food-hot-dog-240405?utm_source=Twitter&utm_medium=SocialMarketing&utm_campaign=Main:1:Default)

<sup>1050</sup> Casey Brienza, “‘Manga Is Not Pizza’: The Performance of Ethno-Racial Authenticity and the Politics of American Anime and Manga Fandom in Svetlana Chmakova’s *Dramacon*,” in *Global Manga: “Japanese” Comics without Japan?*, ed. Casey Brienza, 2015, 106.

appropriation in ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ and argue that it manifests, and is aligned with, the “boundary-violating impulse” of art comics.

### ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*,’ appropriation, and transculturalism

According to scholar Casey Brienza, the term “global manga” describes “a medium which has incorporated requisite cultural meanings and practices from Japanese manga but does not otherwise require any Japanese individual or collective entity in a material, productive capacity.”<sup>1051</sup> In the context of global manga, Manfra (French manga), Euromanga (European manga), Amerimanga (American manga), and original English-language (OEL) tend to emulate the stereotypical style of mainstream *shōnen* or *shōjo* manga or negotiate a stylistic middle ground with Western indie comics. Other movements, like Nouvelle Manga, have joined artists from Europe (Frédéric Boilet, Vanyda) and Japan (Taniguchi Jirō, Nananan Kiriko, Hanawa Kazuichi), combining *bande dessinée* with “realistic” manga. Frédéric Boilet’s *L’épinard de Yukiko* (2002) and Vanyda’s *L’Immeuble d’en Face* (2005) are the two most celebrated non-Japanese works of Nouvelle Manga, while examples of OEL manga include Adam Warren’s *The Dirty Pair* (1988–2002) or Svetlana Chmakova’s *Dramacon* (2005–2007).<sup>1052</sup> [Figures 10 & 11] The title ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ thus carries an irony considering that what is typically associated with the expression “foreign comics creators” are global manga movements such as these—not the field of experimental comics. Nevertheless, what these various expressions have in common is the “appropriation” (between quotation marks, for reasons I will discuss shortly) of the language and culture of Japanese comics, in various senses and to different degrees.

The appropriation of culture, or “cultural appropriation,” can refer to a diverse set of phenomena that bring into play issues of “*misrepresentation, misuse, and theft* of the stories, styles, and material heritage of people who have been historically dominated and remain socially marginalized.”<sup>1053</sup> When applied to artworks, this involves the “use of artistic styles distinctive of cultural groups by non-members.”<sup>1054</sup> In the 2010s, the term “cultural appropriation” took on a life of its own in the social media, as part of the broader

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<sup>1051</sup> Brienza, “Manga without Japan?,” 5.

<sup>1052</sup> Svetlana Chmakova, *Dramacon, Volume 1* (Los Angeles: Tokyopop, 2017).

<sup>1053</sup> Erich Hatala Matthes, “Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism?,” *Social Theory and Practice* 42, no. 2 (August 19, 2016): 343.

<sup>1054</sup> Matthes, 343.

fourth-wave social justice movement and hashtag activism. While accusations of cultural appropriation tend to target the mainstream culture industry,<sup>1055</sup> alternative or underground art is also not immune. **Figure 12** shows a screenshot of a *Tumblr* user asking kuš!, the publisher of ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*,’ the following question: “do you not think that japanese people are going to find 'gaijin mangaka' deeply lame at least and a bit offensive at most? i love all of your other books but am finding this a bit gross.” [sic]<sup>1056</sup> The back-and-forth that followed among the editors of kuš!, co-editor Berliac, and the asker, illustrates how tense the debate around cultural appropriation can become even on the margins of mainstream culture industries, as is the niche of “art comics.” [**Figure 13**]

Cultural appropriation in art is a thorny issue which, ideally, involves acknowledging and balancing the “appropriative harms”<sup>1057</sup> of artworks while avoiding the trappings of cultural essentialism—that is, separating cultural insiders and outsiders on the basis of “criteria [that] construct ‘essential’ or ‘necessary’ boundaries with the propensity to falsely represent cultures as homogeneous, static, and monolithic.”<sup>1058</sup> In the case of manga, gatekeeping cultural membership based on the artists being or not being Japanese entails the “construction of Japan as an authentically discrete, ethno-racial category,”<sup>1059</sup> particularly problematic as it resonates eerily with nationalist myths of ethnic, racial, and cultural homogeneity. Indeed, various scholars and artists have pointed out that this manner of thinking risks replicating the logic of ownership and domination underlying the very power structures it seeks to resist.<sup>1060</sup> Moreover, as Iwabuchi Kōichi puts it, articulating “Japan” and “West” in binary terms presupposes that exchanges take place between two stabilized units, which “not only homogenizes the two cultural entities but also directs our attention away from the doubleness of the Japanese (post) colonial experience as a non-Western colonizer.”<sup>1061</sup> The latter troubles the straightforward assigning of Japan’s position to that of a dominated or marginalized subject.

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<sup>1055</sup> Salome Asega et al., “Cultural Appropriation: A Roundtable,” *Artforum*, Summer 2017.

<sup>1056</sup> stomachbees, “Do You Not Think That Japanese People Are Going To...,” *Kuš!*, August 2, 2016, <http://kushkomikss.tumblr.com/post/148358251863/do-you-not-think-that-japanese-people-are-going-to>.

<sup>1057</sup> Matthes, “Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism?,” 346.

<sup>1058</sup> Matthes, 355.

<sup>1059</sup> Brienza, “‘Manga Is Not Pizza’: The Performance of Ethno-Racial Authenticity and the Politics of American Anime and Manga Fandom in Svetlana Chmakova’s *Dramacon*,” 97.

<sup>1060</sup> Asega et al., “Cultural Appropriation: A Roundtable,” 2, 10; Matthes, “Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism?,” 346.

<sup>1061</sup> Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 61.



Also, it is well known that manga itself is “not stylistically or culturally ‘pure’ and free of non-Japanese influence,”<sup>1062</sup> but the product of a long process of cultural cross-pollination in a globalized market. Scholars like Iwabuchi have challenged the “Japaneseness” of manga and anime through the concept of *mukokuseki*—“stateless” or “culturally odorless” commodities. In Iwabuchi’s view, although anime characters may speak Japanese, attend *matsuri*, or sleep on *tatami*, their appearance and the worlds they inhabit are fundamentally “expressing non-nationality,”<sup>1063</sup> constructing “an animated, race-less and culture-less, virtual version of ‘Japan.’”<sup>1064</sup> Indeed, as Iwabuchi explains, the term *mukokuseki* was coined in the early 1960s to describe a series of Japanese parodies of Hollywood Westerns with a Japanese gunman,<sup>1065</sup> thus alluding to a product that manifests, more than anything, the “impurity” of such commodity forms. Moreover, Japanese pop culture has been actively deployed by the Japanese government as a form of soft power in nation branding campaigns like Cool Japan (Iwabuchi, “Pop-Culture”: 422–27), exploiting a nationalist euphoria for its distinctive “Japaneseness”<sup>1066</sup> in a globalized landscape more and more marked by the rise of non-Western cultural industries in Brazil, Egypt, India, Hong Kong, and Japan.<sup>1067</sup>

Lastly, if one considers that, as argued by scholars as Neil Cohn, manga is a visual language,<sup>1068</sup> learning its styles and conventions would be akin to learning how to speak and write Japanese, or any other language. Against this backdrop, it becomes exceptionally hard to pinpoint how manga can be “misused” or “stolen.” If there is a criterion for belonging to manga culture, it should not be an ethno-racial one, but that manga “belongs” to anyone who participates in manga culture to whatever degree as an artist, fan, critic, publisher, researcher, educator, and so on, independently of their nationality. As such, for Berliac, ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ is more adequately described by the term “transcultural.” As he puts it,

calling some of the artists in this issue ‘Hybrids’ is, in my opinion, a bit euphemistic. To me they seem more like artistically torn, schizoid... two

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<sup>1062</sup> Brienza, “‘Manga Is Not Pizza’: The Performance of Ethno-Racial Authenticity and the Politics of American Anime and Manga Fandom in Svetlana Chmakova’s *Dramacon*,” 109.

<sup>1063</sup> Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 105.

<sup>1064</sup> Iwabuchi, 33.

<sup>1065</sup> Iwabuchi, 215.

<sup>1066</sup> Iwabuchi, 30–31.

<sup>1067</sup> Iwabuchi, 48.

<sup>1068</sup> Neil Cohn and Sean Ehly, “The Vocabulary of Manga: Visual Morphology in Dialects of Japanese Visual Language,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 92 (January 1, 2016): 17.

or more artistic personalities at war with each other. ‘I wanna do this, but without quitting this.’ And that’s great, that’s what makes their work so interesting and unique... They make these stylistic struggles an artistic asset.”<sup>1069</sup>

The concepts of transculturalism and multiculturalism take on different meanings depending on the context. Berliac’s emphasis on the “stylistic struggles” of *gaijin mangaka* aligns with Jeff Lewis’s definition of “transculturalism [that] acknowledges the instability of all cultural formations, discourses and meaning-making processes,”<sup>1070</sup> highlighting a permanent negotiation of consonances and dissonances resulting from the lived experience of cross-cultural contamination. According to Lewis, this “may be good, bad or both,”<sup>1071</sup> depending on its implementation. Generally speaking, transculturalism appeals to critics of two central multiculturalist metaphors: the “salad bowl” metaphor where cultures mix but do not blend<sup>1072</sup> and the alternate “melting pot” theory of cultural homogenization. In Berliac’s view, the works in ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ represent a third-way alternative to both global manga that seeks to become “authentic” by erasing its non-Japaneseness and a multiculturalist hybridization aligned with the values of global free-market capitalism.<sup>1073</sup> In contrast, ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ strikes a perilous position in which the tension between the Japanese and the Japanized, the insider and the outsider, is neither resolved nor eliminated, but evolved into a messier form of artistic expression.

### **Japanized Western “art comics” and contemporary art**

What innervates the “stylistic struggles” in ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ and other Japanized “art comics” from authors such as Lala Albert, Julien Ceccaldi, or Jonny Negron, is their filiation within a broader trend of non-Japanese contemporary art incorporating Japanese pop-cultural elements alongside other twenty-first-century aesthetic novelties, like digital and Internet aesthetics. Nicole Shinn’s *Kiss Me* is an excellent example of this fusion, an artist’s book consisting of digital collages created from sets of virtual “paper dolls,” called

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<sup>1069</sup> Berliac and David Schilter, kuš! Aesthetics, interview by Josselin Moneyron, *The Comics Journal*, October 27, 2016, para. 21, <http://www.tcj.com/kus-aesthetics/>.

<sup>1070</sup> Jeff Lewis, *Cultural Studies - The Basics* (SAGE, 2002), 437.

<sup>1071</sup> Lewis, 137.

<sup>1072</sup> Lucia M. Grosu-Rădulescu, “Multiculturalism or Transculturalism? Views on Cultural Diversity,” *Synergy* 8, no. 2 (January 1, 2012): 109, <http://synergy.ase.ro/issues/2012-vol8-no2/06-lucia-mihaela-grosu-multiculturalism-or-transculturalism-views-on-cultural-diversity.pdf>.

<sup>1073</sup> Berliac, Berliac e la scena Gaijiin Manga dell’antologia Kuš! #25, interview by Valerio Stivé, *Fumetto Logica*, February 28, 2017, para. 6, <http://www.fumettologica.it/2017/02/berliac-intervista-kus-gaijin-manga/2/>.

Kisekai Set System or KiSS, prevalent in *otaku* fan communities during the Internet's early years.<sup>1074</sup> [Figure 14] Those same associations are present in the paintings, drawings, and videos of artists like Jon Rafman, Michael Pybus, Sven Loven, Lauren Elder, Rachael Milton, Sua Yoo, Yannick Val Gesto, or Bill Hayden, among others, in whose work the references to Japanese comics, animation, fandoms, and videogames emerge organically as part of their broader millennial identity. [Figure 15] Another example is the recent collaborative project *Still Be Here* by Laurel Halo, Mari Matsutoya, digital artists Martin Sulzer and LaTurbo Avedon, and choreographer Darren Johnson, a media performance and installation featuring the Japanese cybercelebrity Hatsune Miku, commissioned by the Transmediale/CTM Festival and first presented at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin in 2016.

Historically, Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno's *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999-2002)—the title is a pun on the iconic 1995 cyberpunk anime film *Ghost In the Shell*—was the first Western artworld project to employ “mangaesque” visuals, nearly 20 years ago, even though its modus operandi does not precisely align with that of ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ or the above-mentioned artists. [Figure 16] French artists Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno acquired the legal rights to a manga character called Annlee, and each produced an individual piece starring her: Parreno's *Anywhere Out of the World*, in 2000, and Huyghe's *One Million Kingdoms*, in 2001. They also commissioned others to use Annlee free of charge, gathering an impressive array of artists including Henri Barande, Francois Curlet, Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Pierre Joseph with Mehdi Belhaj-Kacem, M/M, Melik Ohanian, Richard Phillips, Joe Scanlan, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Anna-Léna Vaney. Notwithstanding the groundbreaking and artistic value of *No Ghost Just a Shell*, to some extent, it illustrates an outsider mentality that externalizes the viewer from Japanese pop culture. Huyghe and Parreno essentially propose to rescue Annlee from the Japanese mass-cultural environment, where, according to them, she would fade away and disappear, by entrusting her to the more capable hands of Western “high art.”

This outsidership is unsurprising, given that Huyghe and Parreno (born in 1962 and 1964) belong to a generation that, unlike the millennials, was not extensively exposed to anime and manga. Arguably, instead of a taste for Japanese animation per se, *No Ghost*

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<sup>1074</sup> Nicole Shinn, *Kiss Me* (New York: TXTbooks, 2016), [http://www.txtbooks.us/kiss\\_me/](http://www.txtbooks.us/kiss_me/).

*Just a Shell* stems from the artists' interest in the late 1990s *zeitgeist*, marked by the fascination with digitality, Japan, and anime. At the time, it was erupting everywhere in pop culture, from Wamdue Project's "King of My Castle" music video, which was also composed of *Ghost In the Shell* footage, to Playstation's famous "alien girl" commercial in 1999, that resembles Parreno's alienesque restyling of Annlee in *Anywhere Out of the World*. However, even now this externalizing discourse continues to be reproduced, for instance, in Haus der Kulturen der Welt's promotional blurb for *Still Be Here*, although it does not seem to reflect the thoughts and opinions of the artists' involved<sup>1075</sup>. In the blurb,<sup>1076</sup> the phrasing attributes special deconstructive abilities to the Western "high art" performance while seemingly erasing a decade's worth of deconstruction, transgression, and appropriation of Hatsune Miku by the Japanese fan community.

On the other hand, Japanized Western "art comics" and contemporary art differ from the incorporation of manga and anime visuals by Murakami Takashi, Nara Yoshitomo, and other Japanese artists associated with the Superflat and Neo-Pop movements, from which the element of "gaijiness" (foreignness in relation to Japan) is naturally absent. Moreover, while the negative identity of being not-Japanese is a defining element for artists practicing what Casey Brienza calls "manga without Japan,"<sup>1077</sup> an additional layer of negativity is at stake when Western "high art" references Japanese pop culture. In the West, twentieth-century modernism was shaped by what art and literary critic Andreas Huyssen famously called "the Great Divide"<sup>1078</sup> between "high art" and mass culture. Emerging in nineteenth-century Europe, this divide was not only challenged and destabilized as soon as it surfaced—by the historical avant-garde and postmodernism from the 1960s onwards—but rests on hypocritically "insisting on the divide while time

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<sup>1075</sup> Charlie Robin Jones, "Crowd-Sourced Stardom: Mari Matsutoya and Hatsune Miku," *ssense*, September 14, 2017, <https://www.ssense.com/en-us/editorial/culture/crowd-sourced-stardom-mari-matsutoya-and-hatsune-miku>.

<sup>1076</sup> The blurb reads as follows: "*Still Be Here* explores Hatsune Miku as the crystallisation of collective desires, embodied in the form of a teal-haired virtual idol, forever 16. In watching the deconstruction of this perfect star, the audience comes to the uncanny realisation that Miku is simply an empty vessel onto which we project our own various fantasies. In this void, the topology of desire within a networked community becomes tangible and Miku becomes an allegory of the commodified female body as governed by corporate regulation and normative social etiquette. The performance critically deconstructs this body and speculates on opportunities to transgress it through means of appropriation" "Still Be Here," *CTM Festival – Festival for Adventurous Music and Art*, February 6, 2016, [http://www.ctm-festival.de/archive/festival-editions/ctm-2016-new-geographies/specials/still-be-here/..](http://www.ctm-festival.de/archive/festival-editions/ctm-2016-new-geographies/specials/still-be-here/)

<sup>1077</sup> Brienza, "Manga without Japan?," 1.

<sup>1078</sup> Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, viii.

and time again violating that categorical separation in practice.”<sup>1079</sup> Regardless, as Huyssen points out, “the opposition between modernism and mass culture has remained amazingly resilient over the decades,”<sup>1080</sup> to the point that today’s artists, critics, and institutions continue to struggle and shape their practices in relation, and opposition, to that paradigm.

Japan occupies a particular position in this respect, as the country became a sort of postmodern symbol, both in the eyes of the West and domestically. For instance, Roland Barthes memorably called Japan the *Empire of Signs* (1970), while Alexandre Kojève, in a famous 1968 footnote to *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, claims that Japan is a “totally formalized” society whose encounter with the West will “lead not to a rebarbarization of the Japanese but to a ‘Japanization’ of the Westerners.”<sup>1081</sup> Murakami Takashi’s “The Super Flat Manifesto” also taps into such portrayals of depthless Japan by Western philosophers, opening with a promise-threat that “The world of the future might be like Japan is today—super flat.”<sup>1082</sup> This line echoes both the techno-orientalist dystopias of science fiction films like *Blade Runner*, in which Japan appears “as an almost comforting figure of danger and promise,”<sup>1083</sup> and the country’s “complicit exoticism”<sup>1084</sup> in the construction and commodification of Japaneseness—not least *postmodern* Japaneseness, or the Japaneseness of postmodernity. Indeed, according to anthropologist Marilyn Ivy, “postmodernism” itself became a widely circulated informational commodity in 1980s Japan, propelled by the boom of “new academicians” or “postacademicians” like *Structure and Power* (1983) author Akira Asada.<sup>1085</sup> The popularity of postmodernism in Japan implicitly celebrated “the nation’s triumph over modernity and over history,” from which the country had been denied “a full-fledged subject position and historical agency.”<sup>1086</sup>

Going back to ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*,’ even if (as argued in the previous section) manga cannot be culturally appropriated, paradoxically, the adoption of “mangaesque”

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<sup>1079</sup> Huyssen, “High/Low in an Expanded Field,” 367.

<sup>1080</sup> Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, xvii.

<sup>1081</sup> *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 162.

<sup>1082</sup> Murakami, *Superflat*, 5.

<sup>1083</sup> Ivy, “Critical Texts, Mass Artifacts: The Consumption of Knowledge in Postmodern Japan,” 21.

<sup>1084</sup> Iwabuchi, “Complicit Exoticism.”

<sup>1085</sup> Ivy, “Critical Texts, Mass Artifacts: The Consumption of Knowledge in Postmodern Japan,” 26–33.

<sup>1086</sup> Yoda, “A Roadmap to Millennial Japan,” 34.

elements in “art comics” still does, in my view, indicate a “boundary-violating impulse”<sup>1087</sup> in which the transgression of ethno-racial and national boundaries overlaps with an avant-gardist or experimental ethos. Because “art comics” in general tend not to stick to the conventions of mainstream comics, Japanese or otherwise, most of the works in *‘Gaijin Magaka’* have more intricate or subtle links to the “mangaesque” than a typical work of Euromanga or OEL manga. In conflating with notions of “high” (i.e., experimental, avant-garde, arthouse, etc.) art, “art comics” necessarily engage with the historical “baggage” of contestation that this category carries. As such, while manga and anime may generally operate as *mukokuseki* commodities in globalized mass culture, concerning the modernist “anxiety of contamination”<sup>1088</sup> that shaped and continues to shape definitions of “high” and “low,” they remain the Other of taste and the West. Especially so, given that Japan was posed and posed itself as a postmodern antidote to Western history and modernity. Much like Pop Art in the 1960s, Japanese pop culture in the West today has become—along with digital aesthetics, Internet culture, and 1990s and 2000s subcultural trends, which often appear mixed in artworks—a “synonym for the new lifestyle of the younger generation.”<sup>1089</sup> Japanized millennial artists adopt a negative identity toward Western modernism by identifying instead with the postmodernity or “modernity of the geographically ‘non-modern.’”<sup>1090</sup> Moreover, the statelessness or odorlessness of much Japanese pop culture renders these cultural commodities even more menacing by disavowing a superficial inscription in the continuum of traditional, reassuring Japan. A menace that, for instance, Murakami Takashi, in view of maximizing Superflat’s entrance into the Western art market, attempted to mitigate by inserting Superflat into a lineage of “eccentric” Japanese artists from the Edo period.<sup>1091</sup>

In Kristevian terms, one may say that the works in *‘Gaijin Mangaka’* and other Japanized “art comics,” because of their insiderness to “high art,” somewhat apart from other expressions of global manga, engage more powerfully with the ‘inside/outside boundary, and... the threat [that] comes no longer from the outside but from within’<sup>1092</sup>. In other words, such works problematize, in multiple or even contradictory ways, the phantasmal leakage of linguistically and geographically contained Japaneseness into the

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<sup>1087</sup> Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 17.

<sup>1088</sup> Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, vii.

<sup>1089</sup> Huyssen, 141.

<sup>1090</sup> Huyssen, “High/Low in an Expanded Field,” 364.

<sup>1091</sup> Murakami, *Superflat*, 9–15.

<sup>1092</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 114.

Western consciousness and art canon. They, therefore, replace the pacifying and cooptable discourse of hybridism<sup>1093</sup> with an abject phenomeno-poetics of internalized foreignness. That is why, for Berliac, the *gaijin* in ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*’ must be de-essentialized from its national frame:

Gaijin (‘foreign’) Mangaka (such as the artists in *š!* #25), are not such for the country they were born in, but rather in a broader, philosophical and artistic sense: they don’t feel at home in their own bodies of work, therefore they’re always in transition, always walking the thin line of ‘not this/not that’ and ‘this and simultaneously that.’<sup>1094</sup>

In this light, Berliac’s case is particularly impressive. Among the works in ‘*Gaijin Mangaka*,’ “Moriyama’s Dog” is the one that does not fit into the category of “art comics,” as it straightforwardly adopts the visual language of *gekiga*. However, a look at Berliac’s background troubles this straightforwardness, as he is the author of *Playground* “~~Una novela gráfica. Un documental. Un cómic~~” (in English, “~~A graphic novel. A document. A comic~~”),<sup>1095</sup> a highly acclaimed work of “art comics” based on John Cassavetes’s *Shadows*, itself an iconic work of experimental cinema.<sup>1096</sup> [Figure 17a, b] After publishing *Playground* in 2013 with Ediciones Valientes, Berliac abruptly shifted his style from the language of “art comics” to one heavily influenced by *gekiga*, as if shedding his skin to reveal a truth hidden beneath it. In *Seinen Crap 2*, a zine published 2015, Berliac wrote—not without controversy<sup>1097</sup>—that “to begin making manga was to me the artistic (that is, existential) equivalent of ‘coming out of the closet,’” entailing “a rejection towards my previous self.”<sup>1098</sup> Regardless of one’s opinion on the

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<sup>1093</sup> Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 219; Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 2013), 43.

<sup>1094</sup> Berliac, *Berliac e la scena Gaijin Manga dell’antologia Kuš!* #25, para. 6.

<sup>1095</sup> Berliac, *Playground. Una Novela Gráfica. Un Documental. Un Cómic*. (Valencia: Ediciones Valientes, 2013).

<sup>1096</sup> Frank Santoro, “South American Spotlight: Berliac,” *The Comics Journal*, October 23, 2014, <http://www.tcj.com/south-american-spotlight-berliac/>; Jesús Játiva, “Playground,” *Zona Negativa*, July 1, 2016, <https://www.zonanegativa.com/playground/>.

<sup>1097</sup> Berliac’s text started a polemic with writer and artist Sarah Horrocks (“Psychic Driving,” *Psychic Driving*, April 21, 2015, <https://trulyunpleasant.tumblr.com/post/117040149893/mercurialblonde-berliac-mercurialblonde>), which led to the abrupt cancelation of Berliac’s *Sadbōi*, a graphic novel about the immigrant experience—coincidentally, a different iteration of the “inside/outside” boundary—by Canadian publisher Drawn & Quarterly in 2017 (Drawn & Quarterly, “AN APOLOGY,” *Drawn & Quarterly*, June 2, 2017, <https://www.drawnandquarterly.com/blog/2017/06/apology>.)

<sup>1098</sup> Berliac, “Gay-Jin: Manga Is Not a Genre. It’s a Gender.,” in *Seinen Crap 2* (Berlin, 2015), 16.

appropriateness of Berliac's comparison, it effectively conveys how works such as "Moriyama's Dog," which on the surface are "simply" global manga, were in fact constituted in a negative relation to Western notions of "high art."

## Conclusion

The comic anthology *š! #25 'Gaijin Mangaka'* is a thought-provoking collection of transnational graphic narratives, posing important if complex questions concerning authenticity and artistic purity in a globalized age. It is also symptomatic of the Japanization of millennials—the first Western generation to grow up immersed in a mediatic milieu where anime and manga proliferated on television, bookshelves and the Internet. No longer discrete observers of Japanese pop culture, these young visual artists now bring their familiarity with anime, manga, and other Japanese pop-cultural forms into the various media in which they work, including "art comics."

In the first part of this paper, I discussed four '*Gaijin Mangaka*' contributions (Berliac's "Moriyama's Dog," Luis Yang's "Tabako," Nou's "Ring Mark" and Gloria Rivera's "Domestic Scene") to exemplify the diversity of approaches in the book, influenced by a wide range of manga genres like *gekiga*, *shōjo* and *josei manga*. I argued that the cover and title of the book establish a tongue-in-cheek relation to both the nation branding elements of Cool Japan, and other types of global manga like Manfra, Euromanga, Amerimanga, and OEL manga. As co-editor Berliac explains, the "foreignness" in *gaijin mangaka* refers less to the countries of origin than to the struggles of transcultural art.

In the second and third part of the paper, I took a closer look at the question of appropriation and transculturalism regarding global manga, in general, and Japanized "art comics," in particular. I argued that, while one should not dismiss the issue of cultural appropriation, it is questionable whether any appropriative harms take place when it comes to manga: an ever-evolving transcultural visual language that has been actively exported to enhance Japan's soft power in the global market. I also inserted the '*Gaijin Mangaka*' phenomenon within the broader scope of Japanized visual arts in the twenty-first century, in which references to "mangaesque" imaginaries increasingly appear in "high art" contexts. In the end, the "gaijinness" of '*Gaijin Mangaka*,' in its multiplicity and contradictions, articulates a three-fold sense of internalized foreignness. On the one hand, even if one admits that manga is *mukokuseki*, global manga is always somewhat at odds with the phantasm of "genuine" (Japanese) manga. On the other hand, non-Japanese



and non-Japan-based manga artists can experiment an estrangement in relation to their countries' national canons (e.g., Argentine or Franco-Belgian comics). Finally, Japanized "high art" mobilizes a foreignness from within the Western art canon to deliberately forefront the categorical instability of "high" and "low," "modern," "postmodern," and "non-modern," of subcultural and negative identities.

(See also "Grimes, Nokia, Yolandi" and "Hiro Universe")

# Nothing that's really there

## Hatsune Miku's challenge to anthropocentric materiality

Hatsune Miku is a Japanese virtual idol and an avatar for *VOCALOID*, a cutting-edge voice synthesizer. Since released in 2007, Miku became a hub for massive collaboration among various types of amateur creators, relying on feedback operations among software network and stage. Her repertoire, almost entirely generated by fans, manifests in an array of multimedia formats, from individually used applications to holographic “live” concerts. Miku’s phenomenon raises important questions concerning alternative modes of authorship and spectatorship in our contemporary mediasphere, presenting a challenge to anthropocentric views on human intentionality and materiality. Timothy Morton’s concept of “hyperobject” can help us make sense of the dissonant relationship between Miku’s stereotypically corporate femininity and the deep mediatic time emanating from her massively distributed collection of objects, affects, and flows. Albeit counterintuitively, Miku’s “weird materialities” resonate with the political project of new materialist feminist epistemologies.

### Introduction

With a visionary name announcing the “first sound of the future,” Hatsune Miku (*hatsu*, “first”; *ne*, “sound”; *miku*, an alternative reading *mirai*, “future”) is a virtual idol hailing from Japan who has become a worldwide phenomenon. She is the most popular mascot of Yamaha’s software *VOCALOID* (vocal + android), a text-to-speech voice synthesizer that uses recorded phonemes by human speakers<sup>1099</sup> to create “vocal fonts.” By entering syllables into an editor, allocating them musical notes, and modulating the voice through options like “timing, dynamics, vibrato, breaths, and vocal stops,”<sup>1100</sup> *VOCALOID* end users can generate realistic singing clips. In short, Vocaloids are editable singers.<sup>1101</sup> Initially, Vocaloids were used as background voices for professional music

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<sup>1099</sup> House, “Machine Listening,” 2.

<sup>1100</sup> Thomas H. Conner, “Rei Toei Lives!: Hatsune Miku and the Design of the Virtual Pop Star” (University of Illinois at Chicago, 2014), 54, <http://hdl.handle.net/10027/11251>.

<sup>1101</sup> Alex Leavitt, Tara Knight, and Alex Yoshiba, “Producing Hatsune Miku: Concerts, Commercialization and the Politics of Peer Production,” in *Media Convergence in Japan* (Kinema Club, 2016), 200.

production.<sup>1102</sup> L♀LA and LE♂N, the two first Vocaloids to hit the market on January 2004 via the British company Zero-G Limited, were represented as generic human mouths, one female, one male<sup>1103</sup>; [Figure 1] while Zero-G Limited’s MIRIAM, a Vocaloid with the voice of pop singer Miriam Stockley launched in July, featured her realistic picture on the cover.<sup>1104</sup> The first Japanese Vocaloid, MEIKO, was introduced in November by Crypton Future Media (henceforth, Crypton), a company based in Sapporo.<sup>1105</sup> For MEIKO’s box art illustration, Crypton’s developers decided to go with an anime-style girl instead of faceless mouths or realistic portraits. MEIKO was well received by consumers,<sup>1106</sup> encouraging the company to invest in characters. Although Crypton’s first male Vocaloid, KAITO, was a commercial failure,<sup>1107</sup> his design foreshadowed the sci-fi flavor that came to characterize many Vocaloids developed by Crypton and other companies from that point on. [Figure 2]

It was not until August 31, 2007, and the seventh (third Japanese) VOCALOID, that the Miku revolution took place. The first *VOCALOID Character Vocal Series*, Hatsune Miku was more than a character printed on a package. She was an avatar with her own story, a 16-year-old “android diva in the near-future world where songs are lost,”<sup>1108</sup> complete with detailed profile information concerning physical, technical, and symbolic characteristics.<sup>1109</sup> Miku’s commercial success was immediate, unexpected, and unprecedented, so much so that Crypton was unable to keep up with the impossible demand for her software.<sup>1110</sup> Miku had moved beyond her original target audience of professional musicians to win over a crowd of amateur “producers”—“users turned

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<sup>1102</sup> Conner, “Rei Toei Lives!,” 57.

<sup>1103</sup> “LOLA,” *Vocaloid Wiki*, para.1, accessed June 9, 2019, <https://vocaloid.fandom.com/wiki/LOLA>; “LEON,” *Vocaloid Wiki*, para.1, accessed June 9, 2019, <https://vocaloid.fandom.com/wiki/LEON>.

<sup>1104</sup> “MIRIAM,” in *Vocaloid Wiki*, accessed July 7, 2016, <http://vocaloid.wikia.com/wiki/MIRIAM>.

<sup>1105</sup> “MEIKO,” in *Vocaloid Wiki*, para.1, accessed March 3, 2019, <https://vocaloid.fandom.com/wiki/MEIKO>.

<sup>1106</sup> “MEIKO,” “Marketing” para.1.

<sup>1107</sup> “KAITO,” in *Vocaloid Wiki*, “Sales” para.1, accessed March 3, 2019, <https://vocaloid.fandom.com/wiki/KAITO>.

<sup>1108</sup> “Hatsune Miku,” in *Vocaloid Wiki*, “Concept” para.1, accessed March 3, 2019, [https://vocaloid.fandom.com/wiki/Hatsune\\_Miku](https://vocaloid.fandom.com/wiki/Hatsune_Miku).

<sup>1109</sup> “About HATSUNE MIKU,” Crypton Future Media, accessed July 7, 2016, [http://www.crypton.co.jp/miku\\_eng](http://www.crypton.co.jp/miku_eng).

<sup>1110</sup> “Hatsune Miku,” “Series” para.1.

creators and distributors of content,”<sup>1111</sup> mostly anime-obsessed *otaku* backed by decades’ worth of self-publishing (*doujin*) fan culture with a high tolerance for copyright infringement.<sup>1112</sup> Despite her uncanny resemblance to William Gibson’s Rei Toei, from his novel *Idoru* (1996), Miku has less to do with futuristic prospects of technological singularity than with the renegotiations of the roles of author, work, and fan in present-day “participatory culture” and “spreadable media.”<sup>1113</sup>

This paper draws on a rapidly growing scholarship on Miku<sup>1114</sup> to investigate Miku’s “weird materialities”<sup>1115</sup> and appearance on screen(s). Miku poses a unique challenge from a feminist media perspective. On the one hand, she adheres to commodified stereotypical femininity, tapping into “various traits related to *manga* and anime characters... defined as desirable by *otaku*”<sup>1116</sup>—what Hiroki Azuma calls *kyaramoé* (“character consumption”). On the other, the Vocaloid ecosystem fundamentally differs from fandoms centered on the work of an individual or corporate author, which remain separated from fans by its centralized authority. I suggest that Timothy Morton’s concept of massively distributed “hyperobjects” can help us make sense of the weirdness

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<sup>1111</sup> Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Prodsusage* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2008), back cover.

<sup>1112</sup> The Comic Market, one of the largest comics conventions, is an otaku event dedicated to fan-made spoofs of commercial anime, manga, and videogames.

<sup>1113</sup> Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media*.

<sup>1114</sup> Mashiro Hamasaki, Hideaki Takeda, and Takuishi Nishimura, “Analysis of Massively Collaborative Creation on Multimedia Contents: Case Study of Hatsune Miku Videos on Nico Nico Douga,” *UXTV ’08 Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Designing Interactive User Experiences for TV and Video*, ACM International Conference Proceeding Series, 2008, 165–68; Linh K. Le, “Examining the Rise of Hatsune Miku: The First International Virtual Idol,” *UCI Undergraduate Research Journal XVI* (2013), [http://www.urop.uci.edu/journal/journal13/01\\_le.pdf](http://www.urop.uci.edu/journal/journal13/01_le.pdf); Conner, “Rei Toei Lives!”; Jelena Guga, “Virtual Idol Hatsune Miku,” in *Arts and Technology*, ed. Anthony Lewis Brooks, Elif Ayiter, and Onur Yazicigil, Lecture Notes of the Institute for Computer Sciences, Social Informatics and Telecommunications Engineering 145 (Springer International Publishing, 2014), 36–44; Sandra Annett, “What Can a Vocaloid Do? The Kyara as Body without Organs,” in *Mechademia 10: World Renewal*, ed. Frenchy Lunning (University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Leavitt, Knight, and Yoshiba, “Producing Hatsune Miku: Concerts, Commercialization and the Politics of Peer Production”; Thomas Conner, “Hatsune Miku, 2.0Pac, and Beyond,” *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Virtuality*, March 1, 2016; Louise H. Jackson and Mike Dines, “Vocaloids and Japanese Virtual Vocal Performance: The Cultural Heritage and Technological Futures of Vocal Puppetry,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Virtuality*, ed. Sheila Whiteley and Shara Rambarran (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2016), 101–10; Rafal Zaborowski, “Hatsune Miku and Japanese Virtual Idols,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Virtuality*, ed. Sheila Whiteley and Shara Rambarran (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2016), 111–28.

<sup>1115</sup> Parikka, “Medianatures,” 96.

<sup>1116</sup> Azuma, *Otaku*, 22.

and messiness of the worlds unfolding from Miku, hardly rivaled in contemporary media culture. With no original or dominant work, Miku's promise of an equal public sphere, however unrealized in practice, resonates deeply with the political project of new materialist feminist epistemologies,<sup>1117</sup> challenging normative notions of authorship and anthropocentric materialities.

### **Miku as screen, network, stage**

Unlike her predecessors, Miku became a full-fledged “affective technology”<sup>1118</sup> by appealing to *otaku* audiences through her *moé* style. *Moé* is a complex term denoting both a strong empathy or love for fictional characters<sup>1119</sup> promoting their excessive consumption (*kyara-moé*) and a specific type of cute animanga (anime + manga) caricature, usually “little sister” or “daughter” characters for which one can cheer. For Miku's voice, Crypton cast Saki Fujita, an anime voice actress with a “natural *Lolita* voice,”<sup>1120</sup> her high-pitched youthfulness differing from the more soul and mature trend of previous female Vocaloids. For Miku's image, they commissioned KEI, a competent *moé* illustrator, to create a character whose contemporary sensibility contrasted with MEIKO's plainness. [Figure 3] Miku's design features two long twin tails and headgear à la Sailor Moon of the digital age, making her instantly recognizable and easy to draw and adapt.<sup>1121</sup> Plus, a sci-fi flavored Japanese school uniform-cum-lolita outfit and *moé*-fitting silhouette proportions (one early Vocaloid hit song, CosMo's “The Rampage of Hatsune Miku,” describes these characteristics as *hoppeta punipuni*, *tsurupeta*, “soft cheeks, flat breasts”). Miku's getup retains the black-teal color scheme of Yamaha synthesizers, including details which directly evoke her graphical user interface (GUI): wireless headset microphone, sound meters rendered as colorful light tabs on her skirt

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<sup>1117</sup> Samantha Frost, “The Implications of the New Materialisms for Feminist Epistemology,” in *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science: Power in Knowledge*, ed. Heidi E. Grasswick (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2011), 69–83.

<sup>1118</sup> Amparo Lasén, “Affective Technologies. Emotions and Mobile Phones,” *Receiver* 11: 1, accessed June 3, 2019, [https://www.academia.edu/472410/Affective\\_Technologies.\\_Emotions\\_and\\_Mobile\\_Phones](https://www.academia.edu/472410/Affective_Technologies._Emotions_and_Mobile_Phones).

<sup>1119</sup> Galbraith, *The Moe Manifesto*, 7.

<sup>1120</sup> Yuji Sone, *Japanese Robot Culture: Performance, Imagination, and Modernity* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 141.

<sup>1121</sup> Kenshi Yonezu and ryo, Kenshi Yonezu/Hachi & supercell/ryo Interview: Miku's 10th, online [vgperson], trans. Natalie.mu, August 10, 2017, “What do you think is distinctive...” para.4, <http://vgperson.com/vocalinterview.php?view=hachiryonatalie>.

and sleeves, black piano keys as tie bars, “VOCALOID” name tag, and a tattoo with her character number (“01”) and name. [Figure 4]

Miku first went viral on *Niconico* (formerly *Nico Nico Douga*), a Japanese media-sharing platform similar to *YouTube* in many ways, with a distinctive feature: it allows comments to be embedded directly onto the video feed, enhancing the impression of a shared viewing experience by making the diachronic appear synchronic.<sup>1122</sup> The interactiveness of *Niconico*’s comment system, along with the website’s high picture quality and leniency towards copyright infringement and sexual content, has captivated the *otaku* with high levels of technology literacy and familiarity with self-publishing fan culture, explaining why its members spend twice the time there than the average user does on *YouTube*.<sup>1123</sup> One cannot overstate the co-evolution of *Niconico* and Vocaloids, as they have closely influenced each other’s development, distribution, and popularization. In fact, *Niconico* presently features a category dedicated exclusively to Vocaloid contents, “BOCANICO.”

Soon after Miku’s release, *Niconico* users started to upload thousands of music videos made with her software.<sup>1124</sup> As noted by Alex Leavitt, Tara Knight, and Alex Yoshiba, “early songs appeared with title cue cards, short animated sequences, lyrics, or static images of Miku,”<sup>1125</sup> with few exceptions by savvy users posting videos using various 3D software. *MikuMikuDance* (MMD), a freeware created by independent developer Higuchi Yu, overcame this limitation, allowing fans without knowledge of 3D animation to choreograph videos featuring Miku and other characters with relative ease. MMD brought about a democratization of 3D within the Vocaloid community, powered by the sharing of resources, numerous upgrades, and contests like the MMD Cup on *Niconico*. Sega’s launch of *Hatsune Miku: Project DIVA* in 2009, a series of three-dimensional rhythm videogames featuring Miku and other Vocaloids, reinforced this trend. *Project DIVA* also includes an Edit Mode, allowing players to create their

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<sup>1122</sup> Hamasaki, Takeda, and Nishimura, “Analysis of Massively Collaborative Creation on Multimedia Contents: Case Study of Hatsune Miku Videos on Nico Nico Douga,” 166.

<sup>1123</sup> Serkan Toto, “Video Comments The Japanese Way (Nico Nico Douga),” *TechCrunch*, July 22, 2008, para.5, <https://techcrunch.com/2008/06/22/video-comments-the-japanese-way-nico-nico-douga/>.

<sup>1124</sup> Hamasaki, Takeda, and Nishimura, “Analysis of Massively Collaborative Creation on Multimedia Contents: Case Study of Hatsune Miku Videos on Nico Nico Douga,” 166.

<sup>1125</sup> “Producing Hatsune Miku: Concerts, Commercialization and the Politics of Peer Production,” 207.

personalized music videos from predefined modules and parameters.<sup>1126</sup> The game became so popular that when searching for Vocaloid songs on *YouTube*, many top search results are *Project DIVA* clips, on par with or surpassing the original music videos.

At the same time, 2D videos continued to prosper with various degrees of sophistication, from static images to anime-like sequences, commonly created with digital visual effects, motion graphics, and compositing applications like *Adobe After Effects* or *AviUtl*. Japanese online communities like *Pixiv* (similar to *DeviantArt*) have amassed vast archives of (mainly digital) Vocaloid fanart. While songs, illustrations, and videos are usually perceived as “first-degree” works, the diversity of Vocaloid-related audiovisual formats far exceeds them. On *Niconico*, “second degree” works include human singers or instrumentalists performing Vocaloid songs, illustrators’ “drawn covers” of music videos, original dance covers, and alternative music videos; “third degree” works include translator-singers covering songs in foreign languages, alternative song arrangements by singers, bands’ live or recorded performances of Vocaloid songs, derivative dance covers, and MMD dance covers.<sup>1127</sup> One could add an array of other practices, such as cosplay, cosplay photography, or editing songs and videos into mixtapes and playlists.

Many Vocaloid music videos result from the collaboration of different types of creators, mainly amateurs linked through virtual networking, including composers, lyricists, illustrators, 3D animators, directors, and editors.<sup>1128</sup> New works often include hyperlinks to videos from which sounds, images, or other contents were cited.<sup>1129</sup> For instance, as demonstrated by Hamasaki Masahiro, Takeda Hideaki, and Nishimura Takuichi, at the time of their study, the music videos “Miku Miku ni Shite Ageru♪” and “Ievan Polkka” became focal points in a creative network of over 2000 creators and 4000 relations between them.<sup>1130</sup> Furthermore, their research revealed that “different categories of creators have different roles in evolving the network.”<sup>1131</sup> In general, more time- and resource-consuming endeavors like songs and music videos are fewer in number but

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<sup>1126</sup> “*Hatsune Miku: Project DIVA*,” in *Wikipedia*, March 19, 2019, “Gameplay” para.3, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Hatsune\\_Miku:\\_Project\\_DIVA&oldid=888491814](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Hatsune_Miku:_Project_DIVA&oldid=888491814).

<sup>1127</sup> “What Is Vocaloid?,” *VOCALOID×niconico -ボカニコ-*, accessed July 17, 2017, <http://ex.nicovideo.jp/vocaloid/about>.

<sup>1128</sup> Hamasaki, Takeda, and Nishimura, “Analysis of Massively Collaborative Creation on Multimedia Contents: Case Study of Hatsune Miku Videos on Nico Nico Douga,” 166.

<sup>1129</sup> Hamasaki, Takeda, and Nishimura, 167.

<sup>1130</sup> 167.

<sup>1131</sup> Hamasaki, Takeda, and Nishimura, 168.

trigger a great deal of speedier creative activities, such as fan illustrations.<sup>1132</sup> Songwriters tend to function as “key persons” in centered creative clusters, although sometimes illustrators take over this role, or there is no crucial person altogether, generating decentered clusters.<sup>1133</sup>

Groups like Supercell reproduce this modus operandi on a smaller scale. Supercell is a collective of 11 members led by composer and lyricist ryo, responsible for many iconic Vocaloid songs like “Melt” and “World Is Mine.” The remaining ten members provide illustrations, animations, design, and photography in album booklets, cases, and music videos, usually inspired by ryo’s creations.<sup>1134</sup> In some cases, the illustrations are the “original” source on which songs are based, e.g., “Black★Rock Shooter,” whose character became so popular it spawned its franchise including merchandise releases, a direct-to-video anime film, two videogames, three manga series, and an eight-episode TV series.<sup>1135</sup> In this sense, “one-person shows” are a rare (if not impossible) event in the Vocaloid ecosystem. Even when a creator single-handedly composes a song, designs characters, and makes a music video, it will be expanded upon by other authors. Such is the case of Deino, a 3D animator and songwriter known as the creator of the robotic-insectoid Miku derivative, Calne Ca. Calne Ca first appeared in the instrumental song “Machine Muzik” (2009) and has since been featured in non-Deino songs like Kanimiso-P’s “Bacterial Contamination,” as well as become a regular in fanart and cosplay.<sup>1136</sup>

“Derivatives,” i.e., alternative characters based on preexistent Vocaloids,<sup>1137</sup> are another prominent feature of this ecosystem. Crypton’s derivatives include corporate partnerships or seasonal variations (“Racing Miku,” “Snow Miku,” “Sakura Miku”). Fan-made derivatives play with visual, personality, gender, genre, or parodic differences that

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<sup>1132</sup> Hamasaki, Takeda, and Nishimura, 167.

<sup>1133</sup> Hamasaki, Takeda, and Nishimura, 167–68.

<sup>1134</sup> “ENGLISH | Supercell Official Web,” accessed June 9, 2019, <https://www.supercell.jp/english.html>; “Supercell (Band),” in *Wikipedia*, May 14, 2019, para.1, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Supercell\\_\(band\)&oldid=897063262](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Supercell_(band)&oldid=897063262).

<sup>1135</sup> “Black★Rock Shooter,” *Vocaloid Wiki*, accessed July 17, 2017, [http://vocaloid.wikia.com/wiki/%E3%83%96%E3%83%A9%E3%83%83%E3%82%AF%E2%98%85%E3%83%AD%E3%83%83%E3%82%AF%E3%82%B7%E3%83%A5%E3%83%BC%E3%82%BF%E3%83%BC\\_\(Black%E2%98%85Rock\\_Shooter\)](http://vocaloid.wikia.com/wiki/%E3%83%96%E3%83%A9%E3%83%83%E3%82%AF%E2%98%85%E3%83%AD%E3%83%83%E3%82%AF%E3%82%B7%E3%83%A5%E3%83%BC%E3%82%BF%E3%83%BC_(Black%E2%98%85Rock_Shooter)).

<sup>1136</sup> “Calne Ca,” in *Vocaloid Wiki*, accessed March 3, 2019, [https://vocaloid.fandom.com/wiki/Calne\\_Ca](https://vocaloid.fandom.com/wiki/Calne_Ca).

<sup>1137</sup> “Derivative,” *Vocaloid Wiki*, para.1, accessed July 17, 2017, <http://vocaloid.wikia.com/wiki/Derivative>.



reflect different aspects of the Vocaloid fandom. Crypton has officially “adopted” many fan-made derivatives—male Hatsune Miku, evil Zatsune Miku, heavy metal Hagane Miku, *tsundere* Akita Neru,<sup>1138</sup> whiny and untalented Yowane Haku (*yowane*, “complaints,” *haku*, “to spit up”), freakish Shiteyan’yo,<sup>1139</sup> Deino’s Calne Ca...—striking business deals with their creators to produce merchandise and include them in venues like *Project DIVA*. Among Miku’s derivatives, Hatchune Miku is perhaps the most well-known representative. *Niconico* users Otomania and Tamago produced a music video of a comically deformed “child” Hatsune Miku, waving a spring onion to the beat of a Vocaloid cover of “Ievan Polkka,” a Finish folk song sung by the a capella band Loituma. The format was based on the Internet meme “Leekspin” or “Loituma Girl,” a looping animation of a famous female character from the animanga series *Bleach*.<sup>1140</sup> Miku’s “Ievan Polkka” became so popular that the spring onion was officially acknowledged as Miku’s character item, representing participatory culture in its intricate, remixed, and unpredictable ways. [Figure 5, Video 1]

While the corporate rhetoric of empowered “prosumers” has been around since the introduction of the Web 2.0, companies have often struggled to accommodate or openly clashed with the audiences’ expectations of control over cultural production and distribution.<sup>1141</sup> With Miku, too, the balancing of “individual participation versus collective effort, local Japanese community versus global networked audiences, and fan-generated content versus corporate-controlled branding”<sup>1142</sup> is far from the seamless continuity that Crypton paints it to be. Still, by assuming the role of stewardship, supporting peer production and artists through royalty payment and enhancing the users’ means of expression, Crypton has gained the general trust of the Vocaloid community. For instance, Crypton has crafted a modified Creative Commons License allowing for

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<sup>1138</sup> Akita Neru is an officially recognized derivative emerging in reaction to an alleged anti-Miku campaign on Japanese media. Denialists would end their posts on *2channel* with phrases like “*Akita, neru*” (“Enough, going to bed”) or “*Neru, omera mo neru yo*” (“Going to bed, you should too”). “Akita Neru,” in *Vocaloid Wiki*, accessed March 3, 2019, [https://vocaloid.fandom.com/wiki/Akita\\_Neru](https://vocaloid.fandom.com/wiki/Akita_Neru).

<sup>1139</sup> Shiteyan’yo is an officially recognized derivative consisting of Miku’s head with the pigtailed serving as legs and feet. Her name comes from the lyrics of “Miku Miku ni Shite Ageru.” “Shiteyan’yo,” *Fanloid Wiki*, accessed June 19, 2019, <https://fanloid.fandom.com/wiki/Shiteyan%27yo>.

<sup>1140</sup> “Leekspin / Loituma Girl,” *Know Your Meme*, para.1, accessed June 9, 2019, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/leekspin-loituma-girl>.

<sup>1141</sup> Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media*, 52–54.

<sup>1142</sup> Leavitt, Knight, and Yoshiba, “Producing Hatsune Miku: Concerts, Commercialization and the Politics of Peer Production,” 200.

non-commercial uses of Miku's image (PiaPro, short for "Peer Production")<sup>1143</sup>; boosted the culture of Vocaloid derivatives with software extensions like *Append*, that provided different moods for Miku's voice (replaced with *Hatsune Miku V3* in 2015), and created PIAPRO, a collaborative website dedicated to Vocaloid, in which users share and remix their music, illustrations, lyrics, and 3D models.<sup>1144</sup> Crypton also released *Piapro Studio*, a digital audio workstation allowing users to use Vocaloids without purchasing the full software, that presently imports non-Crypton Vocaloid voicebanks, supplies virtual instruments, and supports all five VOCALOID languages.<sup>1145</sup> Additionally, Crypton owns an independent music label called KARENT, that facilitates Vocaloid producers to sell and distribute their songs in websites like *iTunes*.<sup>1146</sup>

The ultimate example of Crypton's strategy of support and enhancement is Miku's "live" concerts, since 2009. In these performances, prerecorded 3D animations of Sega's models running at high refresh rates are back-projected onto a suspended Dilad screen with special light diffusion characteristics, creating the illusion of images moving across the stage. Miku and other Crypton Vocaloids like Megurine Luka, Kagamine Rin/Len, Meiko, or Kaito sing, dance, and magically appear and disappear in different costumes before a roaring crowd, while flesh and blood guitarists, keyboardists, and drummers play live instruments on the sides. The result is "eversive," turning the cyberspace inside out to create an augmented or mixed reality where the screen's rectangular limits become elusive.<sup>1147</sup> In the stadium-like arenas of more recent performances, like *Magical Mirai* (since 2013), the wider holographic screen permits an extensive range of lateral movements that make up for the lack of depth, and is additionally topped and flanked by giant LED displays exhibiting complementary motion graphics, lyrics, or close-ups of Vocaloids, human performers and crowd. Ironically, this sophisticated post-cinematic apparatus tells the familiar narrative of Japanese *aidoru*—a "canned" Miku waves and talks to the masses, introduces band members, gets emotional over fan support—but stays within the perimeter of "virtual pop stars as vivid, engaging characters, with whom

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<sup>1143</sup> Zaborowski, "Hatsune Miku and Japanese Virtual Idols," 117.

<sup>1144</sup> "Piapro (Piapro)," accessed June 9, 2019, <https://piapro.jp/>.

<sup>1145</sup> "Piapro Studio," *Vocaloid Wiki*, accessed July 17, 2017, [http://vocaloid.wikia.com/wiki/Piapro\\_Studio](http://vocaloid.wikia.com/wiki/Piapro_Studio).

<sup>1146</sup> "KARENT: The World's Largest VOCALOID Record Label," KARENT, accessed June 9, 2019, <https://karent.jp/>.

<sup>1147</sup> Conner, "Rei Toei Lives!," 108–17.

interaction is thus far limited.”<sup>1148</sup> Nevertheless, by engendering a ritualized time-place where the dematerialized performer and the community physically meet, Crypton stroke a delicate balance between the company’s branding and the audiences’ *je sais bien mais quand-même* (following psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni’s famous formulation), i.e., the “meta-pleasure” of those who playfully and intentionally engage with Miku.<sup>1149</sup> [Video 2]

Other stage appearances choose to emphasize Miku’s cybernetic nature over a seamless “eversion” into the real world. One example is *Niconico ChoParty*, a grand-scale event starring *Niconico*’s users in multiple genres, including Vocaloid performances with a setup akin to Crypton’s concerts (although Vocaloids are rendered in *MMD*, mirroring the practices of *Niconico*’s community). In *Niconico*’s Vocaloid concerts, Miku’s centrality is diluted in favor of an extended Vocaloid cast, including other Crypton Vocaloids, non-Crypton Vocaloids (e.g., Camui Gackpo, Gumi, Otomachi Una, AI, Yuzuki Yukari, v flower...), and popular fan-made voicebanks called Utaloids (e.g., Terto). Moreover, unlike Crypton’s restrained use of supporting CGI graphics—mostly focused on tweaking Miku’s performance “through extremely fast costume changes or transitions that make her body explode into bits and sparkles”<sup>1150</sup>—they go all out in this department, making extensive use of dramatic narratives, changing backgrounds, interactions of Vocaloids with digital props and human singers, or even simulating the website’s recognizable comment system on stage with the help of supporting LED displays. The Vocaloids dance in large group choreographies (10+ characters), cover each other’s songs and collaborate in elaborate performances that stray from a “simple” concert look to achieve something closer to musical theatre. Unlike Crypton’s emphasis on the anonymous crowd (the only humans on stage being supporting musicians), *Niconico*’s concerts often feature on-stage appearances by creators. Such performances resonate with and reinforce the motion graphics, visual compositions, and interactive experience found in Vocaloid music videos on *Niconico*. Miku is still the protagonist but serves the broader agenda of a specific website that does not necessarily endorse Miku as the “default” or “neutral” idol, as promoted by Crypton’s concerts.

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<sup>1148</sup> Conner, 77.

<sup>1149</sup> Conner, 90.

<sup>1150</sup> Leavitt, Knight, and Yoshiba, “Producing Hatsune Miku: Concerts, Commercialization and the Politics of Peer Production,” 220.

A final venue to be considered are small, overseas fan-made gigs using basic structures and “comparatively blocky characters and jerky movements, definite slips into uncanny territory.”<sup>1151</sup> Attempting to replicate corporate concerts on tiny budgets, these often use single projectors and mosquito screens as light diffusers, employing software like *MMD* and *AniMiku* to render choreographies designed by collaborators, modeled after *Project DIVA*, or using motion files released by fans on *Niconico*. Music critic and scholar Thomas Conner has provided an in-depth analysis of the logistics, motivations, and frustrations involved in such enterprises,<sup>1152</sup> which raise essential questions concerning the politics of resource distribution, accessibility, and economic authority in the Vocaloid ecosystem.<sup>1153</sup> Indeed, the meta-pleasure of such “mosquito net” Vocaloid concerts stems from their underground legitimacy, resulting from “the part-time, after-hours labor of two to three people”<sup>1154</sup> as opposed to the high production values and the corporative environment in both Crypton’s and *Niconico*’s concerts. The fact that Miku looks like a clunky apparition brings them closer to the original amateur spirit of Vocaloid creations.

### **Miku as hyperobject**

The purpose of the previous section was to provide a brief glimpse into the intricacy of Miku’s “weird materialities.”<sup>1155</sup> These encompass—but are not limited to—sonicity, electromagnetism, light modulation, hard and software, complex topologies of relationality, affectivity, and interstitiality, semiotic and sub-semiotic elements, author-names, and other quantifiable and unquantifiable aspects, substances, and limits that shape what one may call her “Miku-ness.”<sup>1156</sup> Weaved together, these form a profound “relationship of co-responsibility and indebtedness”<sup>1157</sup> that holds but also exceeds human intentionality. In other words, songwriters shape Miku’s voice as much she shapes their songs—she owes them as much as they owe her.

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<sup>1151</sup> Conner, “Rei Toei Lives!,” 132.

<sup>1152</sup> Conner, 131–36.

<sup>1153</sup> Conner, 131–33; Leavitt, Knight, and Yoshiba, “Producing Hatsune Miku: Concerts, Commercialization and the Politics of Peer Production,” 224–26.

<sup>1154</sup> Conner, “Rei Toei Lives!,” 133.

<sup>1155</sup> Parikka, “Medianatures,” 96.

<sup>1156</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 6–12; Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, eds., *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a “New Materialism” through the Arts* (London ; New York: I.B.Tauris, 2013), 5–6.

<sup>1157</sup> Barrett and Bolt, *Carnal Knowledge*, 6.

Regardless, in the discourse of both critics and fans, Miku's "body" is often erased, even when the works themselves bring out the full vibrancy of her matters. The notion that Miku is not real or does not exist may result from the fact that the most crucial stereotype concerning women and technology is that "it is men who are in control of technology."<sup>1158</sup> Indeed, Miku is frequently portrayed as a hollow sign or a passive commodity onto which male fans project their fantasies, laced with pernicious gendered and racialized stereotypes about the "submissive Asian woman." Such interpretations do not consider Miku's "peculiar and distinctive kind of agency, one that is neither a direct nor incidental outgrowth of human intentionality but rather one with its own impetus and trajectory."<sup>1159</sup> In this sense, one's relationship to Miku is never unidirectional.

An example of this erasure is the promotional blurb released by the renowned Berliner institution Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) for *Still Be Here*, an hour-long media performance and installation featuring Miku, initiated and conceptualized by artist Mari Matsutoya, in collaboration with electronic musician Laurel Halo, choreographer Darren Johnston, virtual artist LaTurbo Avedon, and digital artist Martin Sulzer:

*Still Be Here* presents Hatsune Miku as the crystallization of collective desires, in the form of a teal-haired virtual idol, forever 16. In watching the deconstruction of this perfect star, the audience comes to the uncanny realization that Miku is simply an empty vessel onto which we project our own fantasies. In this void, the topology of desire within a networked community becomes tangible and Miku becomes an allegory of the commodified female body as governed by corporate regulation and normative social behavior.<sup>1160</sup>

Commissioned by the Transmediale/CTM festival and first performed at HKW in 2016,<sup>1161</sup> *Still Be Here* captures Miku's "weird materialities" with great beauty and depth—haunting melodies, twin tails that move about and bend as if they were extra limbs, a giant video triptych displaying austere virtual environments and documentary interviews with academics, fans, and developers. Nevertheless, HKW's blurb reduces Miku to "an empty vessel" and "void," simplistically equating her commodity form to passive femininity. While this does not seem to reflect the thoughts of the artists

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<sup>1158</sup> Liza Tsaliki, "Women and New Technologies," in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. Sarah Gamble (London: Routledge, 2002), 65.

<sup>1159</sup> Frost, "The Implications of the New Materialisms for Feminist Epistemology," 70.

<sup>1160</sup> "Still Be Here."

<sup>1161</sup> Two songs are available on *YouTube* as 360° videos.

involved,<sup>1162</sup> the blurb entirely disavows Miku's own agency. It also adopts a "savior" attitude towards the Vocaloid community, suggesting that audiences had not, up to that point, critically engaged with Miku—even though fans have been deconstructing, transgressing, and appropriating Miku ever since Crypton launched her.

The popularity of Miku among female illustrators and cosplayers, and the growing number of Vocaloid producers ("producer" being the term used for Vocaloid songwriters in the community) who are women, also makes it hard to explain away her phenomenon with the *otaku's* male gaze. While many Vocaloid producers on *Niconico* partake in an Internet culture of anonymity and therefore keep their gender private, many well-known producers using Miku and other Vocaloids are women: Kuroda Asin, Seiko-P, Anzu Ame, OSTER project, NicoNya, Miyum-P, Faye-P, Shokkidananohit, Hitoshizuku-P, Chanagi-P, Kanae Fujishiro, Yesi-P, Intro-P, Shinjou-P, Konki-P, Kaoling. Mayuko, 6410, Miako, yurahonya, mucha-P, empath-P, Yuni-P, or JevanniP, among others. Artists, educators, and researchers in Japan and abroad also identify potential in Miku and Vocaloid culture exceeding the limited scope of *otaku* culture. For instance, the case of a private Japanese all-girls' school that introduced *VOCALOID* classes and invited well-known female Vocaloid producers to foster creativity in young students.<sup>1163</sup> Not only that, but Miku has been added to music curriculums in Japanese universities<sup>1164</sup> and is the subject of various chapters in the *Oxford Handbook of Music and Virtuality* since 2016.<sup>1165</sup>

The musical style and lyrical content of Miku's songs are also more complex and varied than often given credit. While many Miku songs are indeed close to typical bubbly *aidoru* pop, some Vocaloid producers enjoy creating song series with intricate overarching plots, like Shizen no Teki-P's "Kagerou Project," or songs dealing with realistic themes, like "Balloon" by Tiara about "the struggle that young girls face growing

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<sup>1162</sup> Jones, "Crowd-Sourced Stardom."

<sup>1163</sup> Alexis Stephens, "I'm Every Woman: Hatsune Miku, Beyoncé and Digital Girl Power," *MTV Iggy*, January 14, 2014, para. 14, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140120094559/http://www.mtviggy.com/articles/im-every-woman-hatsune-miku-beyonce-and-digital-girl-power/>.

<sup>1164</sup> Jiji, "Music Educators Tapping Vocaloid," *The Japan Times Online*, April 1, 2014, sec. National, para. 3, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170204041900/http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/04/01/national/music-educators-tapping-vocaloid/>.

<sup>1165</sup> Conner, "Hatsune Miku, 2.0Pac, and Beyond"; Jackson and Dines, "Vocaloids and Japanese Virtual Vocal Performance: The Cultural Heritage and Technological Futures of Vocal Puppetry"; Zaborowski, "Hatsune Miku and Japanese Virtual Idols."

up”<sup>1166</sup> and “Rolling Girl” (wowaka) about bullying. Others, like “Senbonzakura” (Kurousa-P), feature cryptic lyrics about complex themes such as the westernization of Japan during the Meiji Restoration. There is also a cult following of gothic, industrial, and horror Vocaloid songs with dark lyrics such as “Bacterial Contamination” (Kanimiso-P) or songs by Machigerita-P, like “Broken Human Machine,” about prostitution and abortion. Parody songs like “+IMPALE” (rokurin, cilia) are so obscene that they got banned from the *Vocaloid wiki* for violating its terms of service. Crypton excludes overtly violent or sexual songs from their concerts, but the fact that all of these belong to the VOCALOID Hall of Fame (exceeding 100,000 views on *Niconico*) demonstrates that Miku as “author” can hardly be narrowed down to either one musical style or the heteronormative girlhood of *aidoru* groups like AKB48. Additionally, Miku’s repertoire includes arthouse projects like Keiichiro Shibuya’s *THE END* (2012), Hiroshi Tamawari’s *VOCALOID Opera AOI with Bunraku Puppets* (2014), or *Still Be Here*, which uncorset Miku from the standard formats of pop songs, pop singers, and pop concerts.

My point is that, more than sex-role stereotypes, Miku’s primary challenge is to anthropocentrism (of authorship, materiality). An excellent example are the two dedicated episodes from the popular *React* video series on *YouTube*: “Elders React to Vocaloids!” and “KIDS REACT to Hatsune Miku.” In both cases, seniors and children react to viral videos of Crypton’s “live” concerts, expressing bafflement and confusion over her “unreality.” In “Elders React to Vocaloids!” one participant inquires, “Is that a real artist? I don’t know,” while another exclaims “Wow, they love it! But what the heck is this thing?” In “KIDS REACT to Hatsune Miku,” one girl summarizes many of the participants’ (both old and young) anthropocentric views on materiality. “She’s not real!” the girl exclaims, exasperated. “How can you be a fan of her if she’s not real!?” An older woman, Vera, vividly describes the crux of both episodes: “So there’s nothing really there? And they actually go to a concert to watch nothing that’s really there? The world has gone insane,” she concludes. Vera’s expression “nothing that’s really there” perfectly encapsulates Miku’s “weird materialities.” It also highlights that the element of deep reciprocity that makes Vocaloid “live” concerts unique is mostly invisible or implied in Crypton’s concerts.<sup>1167</sup> The real game-changer in such shows is that unlike other

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<sup>1166</sup> Stephens, “I’m Every Woman,” para. 8.

<sup>1167</sup> Leavitt, Knight, and Yoshiba, “Producing Hatsune Miku: Concerts, Commercialization and the Politics of Peer Production,” 215.

“holographic” idols, who preserve the standard dynamics of centralized authorship, Miku sings user-generated hits, all of which at some point were uploaded and grew popular on *Niconico*, *Piapro* or other platforms, before being selected by Crypton from the Vocaloid Hall of Fame. While it is unlikely that concert-goers are ignorant about Vocaloid culture, the popularity of Crypton’s concerts on websites like *YouTube* increases the likelihood of encounters with unsuspecting viewers, creating a great deal of satire, sensationalism, and flattening of the phenomenon. [Videos 3 & 4]

Scholars from various backgrounds agree that the Vocaloid phenomenon entails going beyond existing paradigms about “person,” “character,” “recording” or “performance,”<sup>1168</sup> deploying complex concepts such as Gilles Deleuze’s “body without organs” to address new modes of audience participation and engagement. However, Miku is riddled with poles of organization, stratification, administration, and conflicting interests of production, circulation, and reception.<sup>1169</sup> The Vocaloid fandom itself is hugely diverse on every front, with many points of contention arising among fans. As such, I suggest that philosopher Timothy Morton’s concept of “hyperobject” (e.g., global warming) may be more productive in understanding Miku’s multifacetedness, particularly, concerning her being what Japanese critics since the 1990s have called a *kyara*. An abbreviation and transliteration of the English word “character,” the *kyara* is “a type of very stylized character... an icon with an easily recognizable name that lends itself to the most varied forms of marketing.”<sup>1170</sup> The *kyara*’s body is often aligned with the “cuteness-industrial complex,”<sup>1171</sup> designed to enhance their market penetration within the regime of “affective capitalism.”<sup>1172</sup> According to Marc Steinberg, the *kyara* wields an “immaterial force of attraction, and a material propensity for distribution”<sup>1173</sup> aligned with Morton’s definition of hyperobjects as entities that “undermine normative ideas of what an ‘object’ is in the first place.”<sup>1174</sup>

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<sup>1168</sup> Zaborowski, “Hatsune Miku and Japanese Virtual Idols,” 113.

<sup>1169</sup> Leavitt, Knight, and Yoshiba, “Producing Hatsune Miku: Concerts, Commercialization and the Politics of Peer Production,” 212–25; Stina Marie Hasse Jørgensen, Sabrina Vitting-Seerup, and Katrine Wallevik, “Hatsune Miku: An Uncertain Image,” *Digital Creativity* 28, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 326–28.

<sup>1170</sup> Pellitteri, *The Dragon and the Dazzle*, 78.

<sup>1171</sup> Ehrlich, “From Kewpies to Minions,” para.2.

<sup>1172</sup> Tero Karppi et al., “Affective Capitalism: Investments and Investigations,” *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* volume 16, no. 4 (November 2016): 1–13.

<sup>1173</sup> *Anime’s Media Mix*, 83.

<sup>1174</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 139.



For Morton, hyperobjects have four primary characteristics: they are “viscous,” “nonlocal,” “phased,” and “interobjective.” Viscous because they “‘stick’ to beings that are involved with them,”<sup>1175</sup> and nonlocal because hyperobjects are “massively distributed in time and space”<sup>1176</sup> and therefore impossible to grasp with human senses. Miku is particularly good at sticking to humans, at making an impression and compelling them to seek her out and proselytize. When William Gibson tweeted that “Hatsune Miku is clearly a more complex phenomenon than I initially assumed. Requires further study,”<sup>1177</sup> he echoed a common reaction among “acafans” (academic fans) who come into contact with her. For instance, Thomas Conner describes his first contact with Miku in a simulcast of a “live” concert as an arresting experience, filling him with insatiable curiosity.<sup>1178</sup> Filmmaker and scholar Tara Knight also writes about her documentary series *Mikumumentary* that “these films are both about the Miku community and my contribution to the community,”<sup>1179</sup> unseparating herself from Vocaloid fannish activities. Sandra Annett vibrantly recalls her first encounter with Miku as gripping her with a “strange, demanding passion.”<sup>1180</sup> Bound by Miku’s viscosity, such research activities are “just” another fan work.

The more you become immersed in Miku’s mediatic milieu, the more she discloses how ungraspable the “real” Miku is. According to Morton, because “any ‘local manifestation’ of a hyperobject is not directly the hyperobject,”<sup>1181</sup> we can only come into contact with “an indexical sign that is *metonymy* for the hyperobject,”<sup>1182</sup> a quality that Morton attributes to “phasing.” Every software, every song, every music video, every illustration, every videogame, every cosplayer, every derivative character, every big data visualization, every hologram, every item of merchandise, manifests Miku’s *kyara* but also belongs to a group of “objects [that] seem to contain more than themselves,”<sup>1183</sup> bringing forth her hyperobjective qualities. And while celebritydom is always virtual to

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<sup>1175</sup> Morton, 1.

<sup>1176</sup> Morton, 48.

<sup>1177</sup> Mark Oppenneer, “Seeking Hatsune Miku,” *Seeking Hatsune Miku*, 2011, <https://seekingmiku.wordpress.com/>.

<sup>1178</sup> “Rei Toei Lives!,” 4.

<sup>1179</sup> “Mikumumentary,” *Taraknight.net*, 2012, para.1, <http://taraknight.net/>.

<sup>1180</sup> Annett, “What Can a Vocaloid Do? The Kyara as Body without Organs,” 163.

<sup>1181</sup> *Hyperobjects*, 1.

<sup>1182</sup> Morton, 77.

<sup>1183</sup> Morton, 78.

some extent,<sup>1184</sup> Miku fundamentally differs from both human celebrities and virtual idols with a limited repertoire created by a few individuals. She is massively distributed in space and time—it is impossible for someone to know every Miku creation. It would be pointless even if they did, as countless more (potentially) appear at every moment of every day.

Miku, as a “multidimensional hyperobject [that] pulses in and out of the limited confines of human perception”<sup>1185</sup> thus becomes extremely hard to define. Simple definitions, like *Wikipedia*’s “a Vocaloid software voicebank developed by Crypton Future Media and its official *moé* anthropomorph, a 16-year-old girl with long, turquoise twin tails,”<sup>1186</sup> fail to account for Miku’s impossibly wide-range of user-generated content, from songs, videos, and illustrations to art installations and research papers. A look into any of her derivatives is like going down a rabbit hole, each having its constellation of products, producers, and sometimes derivatives of derivatives of derivatives. Miku is big data and diagrams, a social experience, a product of her “Japaneseness” and a global phenomenon. She is entangled in power asymmetries of corporately and peer managed contents, but also unmanageable—or, as Morton puts it “impossible to handle just right,”<sup>1187</sup> as every hyperobject is. Not only because of her massive scale and heterogeneity but because genuine participatory culture is always, to some extent chaotic, subversive, or inconvenient.

Moreover, if hyperobjects are not restricted to intersubjectivity but “give us the most vivid glimpse of interobjectivity,”<sup>1188</sup> Miku is also unparalleled in her sticking to things, not just to people, highlighting the “ecological interconnectedness”<sup>1189</sup> at her core. From viral videos on *Niconico* and *YouTube*, to Internet memes like “Loituma Girl” (even stealing the spring onion for herself); from the virtual building blocks of *Minecraft*—both

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<sup>1184</sup> Yo Zushi, “Crowd-Sourced Pop Singer Hatsune Miku Reveals the True Nature of Stardom,” *NewStatesman*, March 20, 2017,

<http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/observations/2017/03/crowd-sourced-pop-singer-hatsune-miku-reveals-true-nature-stardom>.

<sup>1185</sup> Stephen Muecke, “Global Warming and Other Hyperobjects,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, February 20, 2014, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/hyperobjects/>.

<sup>1186</sup> “Hatsune Miku,” in *Wikipedia*, May 28, 2019,

[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Hatsune\\_Miku&oldid=899260674](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Hatsune_Miku&oldid=899260674).

<sup>1187</sup> *Hyperobjects*, 67.

<sup>1188</sup> Morton, 85.

<sup>1189</sup> Morton, 32.

as statues<sup>1190</sup> and protest against the game’s creator anti-LGBT stances<sup>1191</sup>—to “real” LEGO plastic bricks<sup>1192</sup>; or the myriads of characters from manga, anime, and videogames, converted into *MikuMikuDance* models for use in other fandoms. As the first crowd-sourced virtual idol, Miku “sticks” to every other Crypton and non-Crypton Vocaloids, who partake in her hyperobjecthood. Her immense and immensely varied repertoire is not only unattainable by “real” (human) artists but determined by the *kyara*’s nonhumanness. Indeed, if hypothetically one were to substitute Miku’s synthetic voice with her donor’s Saki Fujita, the hyperobject would cease to function: only the *kyara*’s “dehumanized and superhumanized, abstract and inanimate”<sup>1193</sup> voice can accommodate all songs created with her voicebank under the umbrella of “a Hatsune Miku song,” regardless of how radically different their style or origins may be.

The same principle is at work visually. Rather than indulging in unnecessary strokes of authorship, KEI’s design mobilizes the tropes of *moé* cuteness to create a highly recognizable yet pliable template. One can observe this by way of a quick search for “Hatsune Miku” fanart in the popular imageboard *Zerochan*. When comparing the results to fanart of more “traditional” animanga or videogame characters, such as *One Piece*’s Luffy or *Touhou Project*’s Reimu Hakurei, despite the artists’ styles, results for Luffy and Reimu are reasonably uniform in terms of proportions, clothes, hair, and eye color. On the contrary, Miku’s depiction by fans is strikingly uneven, varying greatly in style, character design, colors, theme, and settings when compared to “normal” characters. Albeit counterintuitively, Miku’s samenessness<sup>1194</sup> of voice and her corporate image, when vastly deployed and manipulated by her fans, disrupts normative understandings of

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<sup>1190</sup> “Best Miku Minecraft Maps & Projects,” *Planet Minecraft*, accessed June 9, 2019, <https://www.planetminecraft.com/resources/projects/tag/miku/>.

<sup>1191</sup> N6TJA, “What’s up with People Saying Hatsune Miku Created Minecraft? [Discussion],” *Reddit*, May 19, 2019, [https://www.reddit.com/r/OutOfTheLoop/comments/bqblku/whats\\_up\\_with\\_people\\_saying\\_hatsune\\_miku\\_created/](https://www.reddit.com/r/OutOfTheLoop/comments/bqblku/whats_up_with_people_saying_hatsune_miku_created/).

<sup>1192</sup> Casey Baseel, “Amazing Lego Artist Spends Six Months Bringing Hatsune Miku into the Physical World,” *SoraNews24*, April 16, 2014, <http://en.rocketnews24.com/2014/04/16/amazing-lego-artist-spends-six-months-bringing-hatsune-miku-into-the-physical-world/>.

<sup>1193</sup> Pellitteri, *The Dragon and the Dazzle*, 80.

<sup>1194</sup> Zaborowski, “Hatsune Miku and Japanese Virtual Idols,” 126; Rafal Zaborowski, “Fans Negotiating Performer Personas: ‘Melt’ by Ryo Feat. Hatsune Miku,” *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 43, no. 2 (2018): 107.

the “materiality of authorship.”<sup>1195</sup> Indeed, Miku’s hyperobjective qualities—viscous, massively distributed, interobjective—make her “multiple as such, and not as a collective instance of the singular.”<sup>1196</sup>

Kaisa Kurikka, in her analysis of the work and persona of Finnish writer Algot Untola (1868-1918) addresses his female heteronym Maiju Lassila, a superficial 17-year-old girl interested in love, who also happens to be a famous author of idealistic novels traditionally penned by male philosophers. According to Kurikka, Maiju’s character mocks “the notions of literature as patriarchal self-expression.”<sup>1197</sup> Miku works like this to some extent, forcing both male and female authors through the apparatus of stereotypical girlhood, a process seldom as straightforward as the single drive to dominate and control a passive commodity. For instance, Supercell’s “World Is Mine” (2008), commonly regarded as Miku’s “anthem” and one of the most popular Vocaloid song ever, has a memorable chorus that goes “*sekai de ichiban ohime-sama*” (“I’m the number one princess in the world”). While this immediately refers listeners to conventional “pretty pink princess”<sup>1198</sup> culture, for songwriter ryo, a twenty or thirtysomething man in Japan, engaging with this kind of sentimental discourse is not without troubles. In an interview for *The Japan Times*, ryo describes the awkward beginning of his career as a Vocaloid producer, when friends would mock him for writing “feminine” lyrics, and he would think “Why am I writing this kind of stuff?!”<sup>1199</sup> Sometimes, this gender play leaves a linguistic footprint, namely, when Miku sings using the Japanese pronoun *boku*, generally reserved for young men—a trope known in the animanga fandom as *bokukko*, literally, “*boku* girl.”

In this sense, ryo’s belief that a teenage girl should sing about cuteness and romance,<sup>1200</sup> however regressive in and of itself, was instrumental to Miku becoming a hyperobject. Case in point: Supercell’s first hit song, “Melt,” launched on December 7,

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<sup>1195</sup> Kaisa Kurikka, “In The Name of The Author: Towards Materialist Understanding of Literary Authorship,” in *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a “New Materialism” through the Arts*, ed. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 115.

<sup>1196</sup> Steven D. Brown, “Michel Serres: The Angelology of Knowledge,” *The Sociological Review* 48, no. 1 (February 1, 2000): 148.

<sup>1197</sup> Kurikka, “In The Name of The Author: Towards Materialist Understanding of Literary Authorship,” 123.

<sup>1198</sup> Clara Moskowitz, “The Destructive Culture of Pretty Pink Princesses,” *LiveScience*, January 24, 2011, <https://www.livescience.com/11625-destructive-culture-pretty-pink-princesses.html>.

<sup>1199</sup> Daniel Robson, “Supercell’s Synthetic Pop Wins Real Fans,” *The Japan Times*, February 5, 2010, online edition, sec. Music, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2010/02/05/music/supercells-synthetic-pop-wins-real-fans/>.

<sup>1200</sup> Robson, para.12.

2007, whose centrality to the Vocaloid canon is attested by it serving as the closing song of 10th anniversary *Magical Mirai*, in 2017. During the first months following Miku's release, Vocaloid songs were mostly about Miku's status as a virtual idol, software, and commodity; "Melt," on the contrary, presented a quintessential scenario of high school animanga romance: sharing an umbrella with one's crush. While "Melt" is laced with self-reflexive irony,<sup>1201</sup> ryo's de-technologization of Miku by treating her as a "real" sixteen-year-old girl nevertheless had a transformative effect on the Vocaloid ecosystem, allowing it to evolve and grow into a more mainstream sensibility. Whether authors comply or deviate from Miku's "official" Crypton persona, then, she remains the template about which they are constructed, gain meaning, and are bound together in interobjective relationships. As Kurikka points out, just like Maiju's stereotypical femininity must be understood in relation to Untola's several heteronyms "by treating all... author-names as materially connected to each other,"<sup>1202</sup> so are Miku's songs and images "materially connected to each other" through her name—even if the process of heteronymity (one author, many names) is inverse to that of Vocaloid idols (many authors, one name).

## Conclusion

The unique nature of Hatsune Miku as an editable, crowd-sourced singer has shaped her as a hub for user-generated and network-based works. It the beginning, there was a voice and an illustration by Crypton Future Media, whose *moé* traits appealed to *otaku* self-publishing cultures on *Niconico*. From here, Miku spread towards a massive collaboration among various types of creators, inhabiting many commercial and noncommercial shapes, from GUI to music videos or illustrations, from 2D to 3D, from original works to derivative characters and (second, third degree). Miku's stage appearances change according to the organizers' agenda and audiences. Crypton's intention is advertising a singing synthesizer, so "holographic" concerts mimic J-pop shows, emphasizing the anonymous consumer crowd. *Niconico*'s Vocaloid concerts reiterate individual creativity and the interactive "*Niconico* experience." Fan-made Vocaloid gigs, low-quality and inadvertently uncanny, are closer to the DIY ethic of peer production.

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<sup>1201</sup> Zaborowski, "Fans Negotiating Performer Personas," 106–7.

<sup>1202</sup> Kurikka "In The Name of The Author: Towards Materialist Understanding of Literary Authorship," 122–23.

All these Mikus prompt us to rethink the dynamics of production, consumption, and diffusion in terms of “disjunctures and incommensurable differences”<sup>1203</sup> that evade smooth sailing between the individual and the network, grassroots audiences and corporate control, the localized “molecular” and overarching big data. There is dissonance or duplicity at play here: Miku’s perceived “flatness” as a stereotypically feminine corporate mascot is at odds with the complexity and deep (mediatic) time emanating from her as a massively distributed collection of objects, affects, relationships, and flows. In twenty-first-century *otaku* culture, nothing *but* a cute animanga girl with the right combination of *moé* traits could achieve such “viscosity” and become a hyperobject. This dissonance problematizes the “becoming a woman author [as] a threshold for becoming other”<sup>1204</sup> not just in relation to male subjects, but to humanity more broadly. Although all *kyara* tend toward hyperobjectivity, the fact that unlike “normal” characters from anime, manga, or videogames, Miku has no central author or work at her centre, forces us to engage with a material realm beyond the sovereignty of human matters and scales—“nothing that’s really there”—and reconsider how authorial agency is distributed in the creation of art. In the process, one may come to a deeper understanding that the “human itself is completely nonhuman... as a very dirty, messy and weirdly still functional thing.”<sup>1205</sup> Liberating Miku from her gendered commodity form would, therefore, deny the very best she has to offer to a feminist political and intellectual project: her emancipatory challenge to anthropocentric notions of authorship and materiality, increasingly important as we grow more and more entangled with the global technosphere.

(See also “END, THE” and “Gesamptcutewerk”)

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<sup>1203</sup> Woods, “Scale Critique for the Anthropocene,” 135.

<sup>1204</sup> Kurikka, “In The Name of The Author: Towards Materialist Understanding of Literary Authorship,” 123.

<sup>1205</sup> Jussi Parikka, *New Materialism and Non-Humanisation*: Jussi Parikka interviewed by Michael Dieter, interview by Michael Dieter, section of *Speculative Realities* (online), January 2013, 27, <https://v2.nl/archive/articles/speculative-realities-blowup-reader-6..>

# She's Not Your *Waifu*; She's an Eldritch Abomination\*

## *Saya no Uta* and queer antisociality in Japanese visual novels

*Saya no Uta* (“Song of Saya,” Nitroplus, 2003) is a Lovecraftian-Cronenbergian adult visual novel written and directed by Urobuchi Gen. It tells the story of Fuminori, a neurodivergent protagonist suffering from extreme agnosia, who sees the world covered in viscera and other humans as horrible monsters. Fuminori falls in love with Saya, an eldritch abomination shaped like a cute little girl, the only one who appears “normal” to his senses. Together, Fuminori and Saya rape, torture, and slaughter Fuminori’s friends and acquaintances—in the “best” ending, Saya gives birth to a mutagen that “cthulhuifies” every person on Earth. This paper explores *Saya no Uta*’s ludonarrative apparatus through the frameworks of Queer Game Studies and antisocial queer theory, e.g., Lee Edelman’s “reproductive futurism.” I argue that the queerness of Fuminori and Saya’s relationship does not do away with “reproductive futurism,” but corrupts it from the inside, gnawing at the nuclear family as a basic social unit. I also suggest that visual novels are a queer form of videogame, reviewing their techno-history from the beginning as pornographic games to elaborate melodramas, culminating in “crying” and “depressing games.” These not only challenge our preconceptions about “fun” in videogames but provoke us to question what a videogame is in the first place, including the tenets of player sovereignty and mimetic realism, by flirting with the territory non-human gaming. In *Saya no Uta*, the limits of sexuality/gender and medium specificity overlap, pointing towards a queer negativity that disavows the project of player, and human, emancipation.

### Introduction

Over fifteen years after its release in 2003 by the Japanese game company Nitroplus, *Saya no Uta* (沙耶の唄, “Song of Saya”)<sup>1207</sup> remains a crucial example of queer antisociality in videogames. Indeed, it is more relevant than ever in light of a burgeoning body of scholarship on what Bonnie Ruberg calls “play beyond fun,” i.e.,

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<sup>1207</sup> *Saya no Uta*, written and directed by Urobuchi Gen, developed and published by Nitroplus, released on December 26, 2003. North American release by JAST USA, on May 6, 2013.

games fostering “negative emotions that challenge how we imagine playing videogames can, does, and should feel.”<sup>1208</sup> This paper examines the significance of *Saya no Uta*, considering Game Studies frameworks and antisocial queer theory.<sup>1209</sup> The rise and current momentum of Queer Game Studies as a disciplinary field<sup>1210</sup> provides a timely opportunity to reevaluate challenging works like *Saya no Uta* that fall outside the struggle for better LGBT+ representation *sensu stricto*.<sup>1211</sup> Instead, such works merit our attention from a viewpoint “that seek[s] to understand videogames through the conceptual framework of queerness.”<sup>1212</sup> I have divided this paper into three sections. In the Introduction, I will contextualize *Saya no Uta* and provide a summary of its plot and endings, along with a brief explanation of Edelman’s “reproductive futurism,” *moé* and *loli* characters. The second and third sections focus, respectively, on *Saya no Uta*’s narratological and ludological elements. I do not purpose to compartmentalize any of these elements as discrete sides of the game, but to demonstrate how *Saya no Uta* weaves them together to challenge both the social teleology towards the legitimization of

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<sup>1208</sup> ‘No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games That Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt’, *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 2, no. 2 (2 July 2015): 121–122.

<sup>1209</sup> Antisocial queer theory has its roots in the work of the French philosopher Guy Hocquenghem, in the 1970s. The thought was energized by Leo Bersani’s *Is the Rectum a Grave?* in 1987, and *Homos* in 1995. In 2004, Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* became widely discussed for its “polemic against increasingly popular forms of lesbian and gay normativity such as marriage, parenting, and military service” (Tavia Nyong’o, “Do You Want Queer Theory (or Do You Want the Truth)? Intersections of Punk and Queer in the 1970s,” in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, ed. Donald E. Hall and Annamarie Jagose (London: Routledge, 2012), 224.) Other scholars, like Lauren Berlant and Lorenzo Bernini, have made important contributions to the field.

<sup>1210</sup> Since 2016, scholar Bonnie Ruberg has kept the webpage “Queer Game Studies 101: An Introduction to the Field + Bibliography” dedicated to introducing and divulging works in the field of Queer Game Studies (Bonnie Ruberg, “Queer Game Studies 101: An Introduction to the Field + Bibliography,” *Our Glass Lake*, 2016, <http://ourglasslake.com/queer-game-studies-101/>.) Recent entries include, for instance, the books *Queerness in Play* (October 2018) edited by Todd Harper, Meghan Blythe Adams, and Nicholas Taylor, and *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (Spring 2019) by Bonnie Ruberg, as well as special issues of journal, like *Games Studies’ Queerness and Video Games* (December 2018). According to Ruberg and Amanda Philipps, Queer Game Studies address a broad range of topics including representation, player and developer demographics, and player-avatar identification, as well as performing queer readings of “straight” games or exploring how game mechanics, interfaces, and narratives provide opportunities for non-normative play (Amanda Phillipps and Bonnie Ruberg, “Not Gay as in Happy: Queer Resistance and Video Games (Introduction),” *Game Studies* 18, no. 3 (December 2018): “Resistance in Action” para. 1, [http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips\\_ruberg.](http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg.))

<sup>1211</sup> Phillipps and Ruberg, “Special Issue -- Queerness and Video Games Not Gay as in Happy,” para. 1-2.

<sup>1212</sup> Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, eds., *Queer Game Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).



videogames<sup>1213</sup> and the technological teleology towards player sovereignty. The concepts of antisocial queer theory, developed by authors like Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman, become operative for resisting the notion that the endgame of queerness is its full assimilation into society's orthodoxy.

With artwork by Higashiguchi Chūō and a haunting soundtrack by ZIZZ STUDIO, *Saya no Uta* is a short 2-10 hours adult visual novel written and directed by Urobuchi Gen, a cult author who specializes in deconstruction and dark themes. [Figure 1] Urobuchi had previously worked with Nitroplus on several visual novels, but *Saya no Uta* raised him to cult status, earning him the moniker “Urobutcher,” for making characters suffer gruesome deaths or other horrible fates. As noted by *Kotaku* reviewer Richard Eisenbeis,<sup>1214</sup> *Saya no Uta* is “often called the single most fucked-up game ever released—and with good reason.”<sup>1215</sup> Eisenbeis writes that “*The Song of Saya* is a game with murder, filicide, kidnapping, cannibalism, rape, possible pedophilia, sex slavery, extreme body mutilation, and scores of gut-churning eldritch sights,” and continues: “To put it another way, *The Song of Saya* is not a happy story and is in no way, shape, or form, a game for everyone.”<sup>1216</sup> Even though *Saya no Uta* enjoyed a significant resurgence in popularity and sales in the 2010s, after Urobuchi wrote the widely acclaimed anime series *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (2011), the game has slipped under the radar of scholarship up to this point, apart from blog posts and reviews. One reason for this is that visual novels, in general, remain an overlooked subject in the study of Japanese popular culture and videogames alike. Another possibility is that *Saya no Uta*, as Eisenbeis's review suggests, is virtually *unredeemable*. From the very first scene, the game assaults players with levels of physical and moral disgust rivaling William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, which rely on the cosmic unknown and unknowable—who or *what* is Saya—as much as on body horror and gore. Moreover, its Lovecraftian-Cronenbergian love story follows in the tradition of eroge (“erotic games”) and utsuge (“depressing games”) with no happy endings and few interactive choices, uncondusive to players' feeling “properly” rewarded at the end of the game.

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<sup>1213</sup> Naomi Clark, “What Is Queerness in Games, Anyways?,” in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 11–13.

<sup>1214</sup> “*Saya No Uta — The Song of Saya: The Kotaku Review*,” *Kotaku*, May 21, 2013, <https://kotaku.com/saya-no-uta-the-song-of-saya-the-kotaku-review-509012142>.

<sup>1215</sup> Eisenbeis, para. 1.

<sup>1216</sup> Eisenbeis, para. 10.

Set in modern Japan, *Saya no Uta* tells the story of Sakisaka Fuminori (voiced by Midorikawa Hikaru), a neurodivergent male protagonist forced to undergo experimental brain surgery to save his life after a road crash. On waking up, Fuminori is plunged into a hellish reality: he sees the world covered in foul-smelling viscera and other humans as horrible monsters. [Figure 2] One night, at the hospital, he is visited by a little girl in a white dress, the only one who appears “normal” to his senses. The girl, named Saya (voiced by Takano Naoko), is surprised that Fuminori does not fear her and agrees to meet him every night. [Figure 3] When Saya reveals that she is looking for her missing father, the medical scientist Doctor Ōgai, Fuminori offers to help in exchange for her moving in with him. From this point on, Fuminori and Saya enter a codependent relationship and become lovers. To other humans, however, Saya is an eldritch abomination, of the kind that H. P. Lovecraft popularized in his seminal short story *The Call of Cthulhu*. The fact that, despite the story being narrated primarily from Fuminori’s viewpoint, every supporting character in the game gets a sequence from their point of view *except for Saya*, reinforces her externality to the diegetic world.

The first decision point in *Saya no Uta* happens almost two hours into the game after Saya decides to investigate Fuminori’s condition by experimenting on his neighbor, Suzumi Yōsuke. Yōsuke, a middle-aged, amateur artist and obsessive cleaner who lives next door with his wife and daughter, goes mad after Saya alters his brain to emulate Fuminori’s. He slaughters his family and rapes Saya until Fuminori shows up and kills him. Crying in Fuminori’s arms, Saya confesses that she has the power to alter organisms and offers to change Fuminori’s brain back to its neurotypical state. If Fuminori accepts, he is locked for life in a psychiatric hospital. Saya refuses to meet him in “person” and leaves to search for her father, never to return. Despite having the lowest casualty rate, the Back to Normal ending is essentially a game over, the undesirable result of a wrong choice with a swift conclusion.

If Fuminori refuses Saya’s offer, he leaps over the “moral event horizon”<sup>1217</sup> and, for Saya’s sake, knowingly engages in rape, murder, torture, betrayal, and cannibalism. The second and last decision point in the game is not Fuminori’s but Kōji’s, his best friend, who Fuminori shoves down a well to avoid interferences. Ryōko, Fuminori’s doctor at the hospital, rescues Kōji, and the latter breaks into his best friend’s house, only

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<sup>1217</sup> In pop-cultural tropes, the “moral event horizon” is “The first evil deed to prove a particular character to be irredeemably evil” (“Moral Event Horizon”, 2018).

to find his girlfriend Ōmi's remains in the fridge. Horrified, Kōji pulls out his phone to make a call, leading to two possible outcomes. If Kōji calls Ryōko, they face off against Fuminori and Saya. The confrontation results in the violent deaths of everyone but Kōji, who survives but is scarred by the horrors he witnessed (the game implies that he will kill himself). Despite the tragic outcome, they stop Saya and save the world. Therefore, the Humanity Wins ending is a bad ending with a story, distinct from the Back to Normal game over. If Kōji, instead, decides to call Fuminori, he faces off against him alone. He is killed and devoured by Saya, after which she collapses before Fuminori, revealing that she is pregnant and about to give birth to their "children." Saya blossoms ecstatically in her lover's embrace, releasing her final gift to Fuminori before she dies: an airborne mutagen who will infect every person on Earth, "cthulhuifying" humanity. Saya Wins is *Saya no Uta*'s One True End,<sup>1218</sup> i.e., the "best" possible ending in the game.

My argument is that *Saya no Uta* becomes meaningful by drawing together two trends apparently at odds: *moé* and antisocial queer theory. Namely, the Edelmanian epithet of "reproductive futurism" for whom the Child is like an ideological Möbius strip, seeking to disavow the conceptual space of a future-negating queerness by affirming life and the future as absolute values.<sup>1219</sup> In turn, the *moé* phenomenon is strongly associated with CGDCT ("cute girls doing cute things") and *iyashikei* ("healing" or "soothing") anime and manga, targeted at an audience of adult men craving a sneak-peek into idealized girlhood. Indeed, Saya, as she appears to Fuminori, ostensibly conforms to an overdetermined character type: the *loli*, a shorter and cuter version of the traditional *bishōjo* ("beautiful girl") for whom one cheers as if for a "little sister" or "daughter." The fandom slang waifu, coincident with the emergence of *moé*, encapsulates the blurred lines between "little sister" and "wife": *waifu* is the Japanese transliteration of the English word "wife," meaning "a fictional character from non-live-action visual media (typically an anime, manga or videogame) to whom one is attracted and, in some cases, whom one considers a significant other."<sup>1220</sup> Because, stereotypically, the *otaku*'s *waifu* is a *loli*, the *otaku*'s attraction to this type of character, supposedly removed from the "Blatant

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<sup>1218</sup> According to the *Visual Novel Database*, the concept of One True End applies when, "Even though [a] game has multiple endings, one of them is considered to be the true ending to the story. Sometimes this is evident from that ending being several times longer than others, sometimes it is the ending the sequel continues from, and sometimes this is later disclosed by the creators" "One True End," *The Visual Novel Database*, 2019, <https://vndb.org/g181..>

<sup>1219</sup> *No Future*, 2, 26.

<sup>1220</sup> "Waifu," in *Wiktionary*, accessed June 7, 2017, <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/waifu>.

sexuality [that] would destroy the illusion of innocence that is part of the *moé* appeal,”<sup>1221</sup> often reverts to “Lolita complex” or *lolicon* schema.<sup>1222</sup> As a personal anecdote, I once reblogged an image macro of Saya with the caption “SHE’S NOT YOUR WAIFU, SHE’S AN ELDRITCH ABOMINATION,” to which someone replied: “Nothing’s stopping her from being both.” [Figure 4] The comeback is stunningly accurate. The fact that Saya is both *waifu* and an eldritch abomination is not only the main plot point in *Saya no Uta* but problematizes the “queer indeterminacy”<sup>1223</sup> concealed by fixed identities, and the role these play in *Saya no Uta*’s play-beyond-fun.

### ***Saya no Uta*: queerness**

While according to Bonnie Ruberg’s<sup>1224</sup> “taxonomy of no-fun games,”<sup>1225</sup> *Saya no Uta* classifies as a game “that players experience as alarming, unsettling, or otherwise too uncomfortable to play,”<sup>1226</sup> it differs from games like *Custer’s Revenge* (Mystique, 1982), the *Grand Theft Auto* series (Rockstar Games, 1997) or *RapeLay* (Illusion, 2006), mainly because in these games, the objectionable content is disembodied from the game’s imagery. As Ruberg points out, “after players overcome the initial ethical hurdle... they quickly lose sight of the game’s problematic content.”<sup>1227</sup> On the contrary, in *Saya no Uta*, the moral disgust that players feel towards Fuminori and Saya’s actions (murder, rape, torture, pedophilia, and so on) reiterates the physical disgust triggered by the game’s visuals and narration, including Fuminori’s vivid descriptions of the “exposed interior of the body”<sup>1228</sup> and disgusting tastes, smells and sounds. This consonance contributes significantly to the artistic merit of play-beyond-fun in *Saya no Uta*.

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<sup>1221</sup> Thompson, “Moe: The Cult of the Child.”

<sup>1222</sup> *Lolicon* is a genre of pornographic anime, manga, and videogames where underage or underage-looking female characters engage in sexual acts. Due to the historically specific circumstances of Japanese otaku (“nerd,” “geek”) culture, the popularity of *lolicon* (that boomed during the 1980s) shifted, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, to *moé*, often regarded as the evolution of the former into a more palatable form.

<sup>1223</sup> Lorenzo Bernini, *Queer Apocalypses: Elements of Antisocial Theory*, trans. Julia Heim (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 32.

<sup>1224</sup> “No Fun.”

<sup>1225</sup> Ruberg, 117.

<sup>1226</sup> Ruberg, 119.

<sup>1227</sup> Ruberg, 120.

<sup>1228</sup> Kolnai, *On Disgust*, 2003, 61.

*Saya no Uta* also does not present players with the “dialogue-trees-to-pursue-romance”<sup>1229</sup> typical of Japanese *ero*ge (“erotic game”) and dating simulators. In fact, Fuminori and Saya have sex before the game’s first decision point, taking those stakes out of the player’s way. Instead, *Saya no Uta* constructs the romance in relation to Fuminori’s neurodivergent condition. The game gives players just enough to grasp who Fuminori was before the accident, and the role he played within the friend group. He was a medical student, a man of reason. Compared to his extroverted best friend Kōji, Fuminori appeared to be more diligent, serious, and sober. He was also, due to Kōji and his girlfriend Ōmi’s matchmaking, on track to date Yoh, a modest beauty who had long pinned after him. In short, he was utterly *straight*, in a position of hegemonic normalcy. After the accident, however, Fuminori experiences the feelings of estrangement suffered by queer and disabled people in society. He is isolated, emotionally traumatized, and lives in fear of his secret being found out by friends and doctors.<sup>1230</sup> Saya becomes Fuminori’s living emotional crutch and their home a “safe space” from the pretense of normality that Fuminori is forced to maintain on the outside world. Interestingly, when Saya first meets Fuminori at the hospital, she is playing scare pranks on psychiatric patients. “Even if they raise a big fuss, no one believes what mental patients say,” she tells Fuminori. Along with Fuminori’s belief that should the doctors learn of his condition, he will spend his life as a Guinea pig, such jabs at the medicalization of neurodivergence align with *Saya no Uta*’s imaginaries that resolutely oppose a sterile aesthetics of hospital and disease containment. Empathizing with Fuminori’s marginalized viewpoint, despite his villainy, is, therefore, one of the more powerful experiences in *Saya no Uta*.

Still, *Saya no Uta* complicates the victimization of Fuminori. For instance, the game’s opening sequence throws players in *media res* into a rendezvous between Fuminori and his friends, who are making plans for a skiing trip. From Fuminori’s perspective, it is a conversation among monsters. [Figure 5] This sequence conveys that Fuminori is the one who cannot tolerate his friends, despite their well-intentioned efforts to act normal around him and integrate Fuminori into their activities—except Ōmi, who thinks that Fuminori should have gotten over his trauma already and is increasingly

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<sup>1229</sup> Mitu Khandaker-Kokori, “NPCs Need Love Too: Simulating Love and Romance, from a Game Design Perspective,” in *Game Love: Essays on Play and Affection*, ed. Jessica Enevold and Esther MacCallum-Stewart (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2015), loc. 1669.

<sup>1230</sup> Mark Sherry, “Overlaps and Contradictions between Queer Theory and Disability Studies,” *Disability & Society* 19, no. 7 (December 1, 2004): 771–74.

impatient towards him, leading to her early demise in the game. Indeed, Ōmi and Yōsuke, who are intolerant towards Fuminori despite his ordeal, are the only characters who die in every ending. Ōmi invades the Sakisaka household to confront Fuminori, who has brutally rejected a love confession by Yoh but loses her sanity at sighting Saya's true form, seconds before she kills her. In Yōsuke's case, he fakes his concern and sympathy for Fuminori, only to imply that his unkempt yard is an eyesore for the neighbors. Fuminori's visceral disgust towards his friends-turned-abominations disavows the possibility of an assimilationist identity for him. As described in the previous section, the return to normalcy, one of the two choices offered to the player during *Saya no Uta*, is effectively a game over in which Fuminori accepts to be disciplined, pathologized and punished into place as a citizen. To avoid the game over, Fuminori must embrace the antisocial position, engaging in a vast array of abhorrent actions. Interestingly, his cruelty is not exactly predatory, as, for the most part, he does not exploit the weak, acting out of a desire to protect his love for Saya. Fuminori becomes, to borrow Leo Bersani's formulation, an "outlaw"<sup>1231</sup> on a Bonnie and Clyde journey with Saya, the Cthulhu, loving nothing but the Unassimilable itself.

Historically, the term "queer" has been employed to emphasize the indeterminacy of gender and sexuality as spectrums beyond essentialized male/ female, gay/ lesbian identities. Fuminori's extreme case of "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" not only highlights the relational or intersectional nature of desire but draws the player's attention to the absurdity of Saya's "little sister" or "daughter" façade. Indeed, while Fuminori at first assumes that Saya does not trigger his cognitive disorder, he soon realizes his mistake: "Everything appears wrapped to my eyes—only Saya looks normal. I thought that she was somehow unique. However, I was wrong. I see her just as I do everything else: as something completely different than what she really is. *Saya is who she is because of who I am*" (emphasis added). The tension between *loli*-Saya and eldritch-Saya is key to her queerness as a character, reflecting a paradox at the heart of *moé*: that the adorable "little sister" is but a product of databased cuteness, a technocratic entity composed of atomized character elements (e.g., "green hair," "cat ears") which, as philosopher Azuma Hiroki suggests, can even be percentified.<sup>1232</sup>

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<sup>1231</sup> Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 113.

<sup>1232</sup> Azuma, *Otaku*, 43–47.

It is noteworthy that, in the English animanga fandom, characters who are devoid of any distinctive features beyond a high percentage of *moé* elements are derogatorily called “*moé* blobs.”<sup>1233</sup> In a stroke of enantiodromia (Jung’s principle that extremes transmogrify into their shadow opposites),<sup>1234</sup> the *loli* screens Fuminori-player from *Saya no Uta* as a meaningless and formless “blob” by embodying “the most stereotypical view of womanhood—little mothers who cook and clean and aren’t as scary as real adult women,”<sup>1235</sup> and are sexually available to satisfy their partner’s fantasies. As such, *Saya no Uta* aligns with the tenets of antisocial queer theory insofar as it makes us realize that our desires are “invested with hopes, expectations, and anxieties that are often *experienced* as unbearable.”<sup>1236</sup> The fact that Fuminori commits to bearing the unbearable for *Saya*’s love translates on screen through the unrelenting bouts of physical and moral disgust that *Saya no Uta* inflicts upon players.

On the other hand, the taming of Cthulhu into a “little sister” attests to the remarkable ability of cute anthropomorphism (*moé gijinka*) to absorb the Other and anthropomorphize that which cannot be anthropomorphized. This transformative ability, not unlike *Saya*’s own, suggests that *Saya*’s cuteness itself is a form of horror. Edelman’s concept of “reproductive futurism,” i.e., the “terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations,”<sup>1237</sup> can help us make sense of this. Edelman compares “reproductive futurism” to a Möbius strip: whether you are on the political right or left, there is only a single side of futurity embodied by the Child.<sup>1238</sup> *Saya no Uta* undoes this by making a grotesque mockery out of the “family as socially blessed, closed unit of reproductive intimacy,”<sup>1239</sup> as Fuminori cuts out the middle woman and enters into a sexual relationship with the Child-cum-

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<sup>1233</sup> Japanese with Anime, “Types of Moe + Attributes, Relationships & Situations,” *Japanese with Anime*, “Moeblob,” accessed April 27, 2018, <https://www.japanesewithanime.com/2017/11/types-of-moe.html>.

<sup>1234</sup> Carl Jung’s principle of enantiodromia (“running counter to”) states that extremes transmogrify into their shadow or unconscious opposites. C. G. Jung, *Aspects of the Masculine* (Routledge, 2015), 294..

<sup>1235</sup> Thompson, “Moe: The Cult of the Child,” para. 13.

<sup>1236</sup> Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), xvii.

<sup>1237</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 2.

<sup>1238</sup> Edelman, 2.

<sup>1239</sup> Bernini, *Queer Apocalypses*, 52.

*waifu*. Indeed, players first encounter Saya as Fuminori's child bride, who cooks, helps him redecorate the rooms, washes his back and—despite her childlike looks and behavior—fulfills her role as a lover with copious amounts of sex while insisting on bearing Fuminori's children. Fuminori himself remarks that “Ever since Saya moved in, it's been like having a new wife.”

Furthermore, in *Saya no Uta*, the Child herself is alien, othered, inconceivable, breaking the “normative and normalizing logics of social legitimation and cultural intelligibility”<sup>1240</sup> that other characters represent. Like Lovecraft's creation, a mere look at Saya is enough to drive most humans insane; Fuminori's doctor Ryōko, who is paranoid and obsessed with destroying Doctor Ōgai's experiments, even mentions that before she learned of Saya, she was a law-abiding citizen who had never gotten a ticket. Only “mad scientist” Ōgai, occupying a liminal position between reason and insanity, is immune to Saya's effect on “straight” people, setting the plot in motion by summoning her into our dimension. In the Saya Wins ending, we learn that Saya possesses superintelligence, breaking algorithms no human or machine can solve. However, she was bored by mathematical exercises, and instead developed a passion for literature. Binge-reading novel after novel, Saya became bonded by the Möbius strip of human romance and because she wished to experience the emotion called “love,” she gendered herself female and acted like a “stereotypical” girl (stereotypical within the conventions of *moé*). From that point on, Doctor Ōgai and Saya called each other “daughter” and “father.” As a doting “father,” Ōgai's only wish was that his “daughter” found love, at the expense of his own life—Ōgai kills himself to protect Saya's secret existence— and, if necessary, the entire human race. In the Back to Normal game over, Saya's obsession with “love” actually saves humanity, as Saya gives up on her invasion plans due to heartbreak over Fuminori's rejection, suggesting that the game punishes any attempt at normalized love.

In the Saya Wins ending, Saya becomes pregnant, uniting with Fuminori in what Ryōko, in a poetic and Edelmanesque fashion, calls a “wedding to end all weddings.” Saya's “children,” in the form of “cthulhuifying” spores, not only defy what human offspring *should* look like, but undo the “human” itself as a viable category. It is significant that Doctor Ōgai writes in his research that “by witnessing Saya perform her operations on several rats, I have gained much confidence in my theory that her body is

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<sup>1240</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 103.



designed specifically to manipulate the biology of other organisms.” In other words, Saya is not just queer; she represents the operation of *queering* as an “attempt to undo... normative entanglements and fashion alternative imaginaries.”<sup>1241</sup> Perhaps this is why Saya’s “childbirth” stands out in the game as a scene of sublime beauty, a refreshing approach compared to the *vagina dentata* typically employed to represent female reproductive terrors within the horror genre.<sup>1242</sup> [Figure 6] Saya’s blossoming, anticipated by the game’s plant-shaped cursors, [Figure 7] also forefronts the uncanny dimension of planthood present in the etymology of the slang “*moé*,” said to have originated from Japanese word processors mistakably substituting the verb 燃える (*moeru*), “to burn” or “to get fired up,” with the homophone 萌える (*moeru*), “to blossom” or “to sprout.”<sup>1243</sup>

The collapse of the “normative and normalizing” social order is likewise present in Fuminori and Saya’s heterosexual domestic bliss, which is a Bizarro version where everything is the same, but horribly, gruesomely different. For instance, despite Saya’s best efforts at the beginning of their cohabitation, food tastes disgusting to Fuminori. This misstep arises not because she is a cute clumsy girl (*dojikko*) who comically messes up her cooking, but because Saya overlooks her lover’s newfound taste for human meat (the couple “fixes” this by resorting to cannibalism and storing their victims’ dismembered corpses in the fridge, e.g., Ōmi and Yōsuke). [Figure 8] On another occasion, Saya helps Fuminori make over the house to conceal the gore in his vision, but the walls and furniture end up covered in a disturbing array of colored paints, creating a “room full of crazy.” [Figure 9]

Moreover, perhaps motivated by the many tales of jealous women in literature and pop culture, Saya lures Yoh into their house, rapes her, and slowly and painfully “cthulhuifies” her as punishment for her lusting after Fuminori. This attack is one of Saya’s few acts of pure malice during the story, i.e., one not enacted for her or Fuminori’s preservation. When Saya offers Yoh up as a pet to Fuminori—who, thanks to Saya’s reshaping, now sees Yoh as the beautiful woman she was before his accident—they become a “family” (as Fuminori puts it) of three, composed of a madman, Cthulhu, and

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<sup>1241</sup> Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird, *Queering the Non/Human* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2008), 4.

<sup>1242</sup> Erin Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: Gynaehorror* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>1243</sup> Galbraith, “Introduction: Falling In Love With Japanese Characters,” 5.

their broken sex slave abomination. Under Saya's influence, Yōsuke, too, turns into a family annihilator, going from a gatekeeper of "reproductive futurism" who proudly leads his life "leisurely and absent of want," to raping the Child and eradicating the bourgeois nuclear household from *Saya no Uta*'s world as soon as the Möbius strip is undone.

Finally, the pornographic CGs in *Saya no Uta*, meaning "computer graphics," (i.e., unique illustrations that accompany specific scenes in the visual novel), amount to approximately one-fourth of the total CGs in the game. Therefore, although *Saya no Uta* does provide a mature content filter to censor the sex sequences, they are an important, if painful and problematic, part of the game's experience. As Richard Eisenbeis points out, "While such scenes are pretty much par for the course in Japanese visual novels... the story's implications as to who Saya is makes the sex anything but erotic despite its normal-seeming presentation."<sup>1244</sup> Indeed, *Saya no Uta* employs its pornography in ways akin to the anti-assimilationist "textual terrorism"<sup>1245</sup> of authors like Bersani and Edelman, the flurry of monstrous desires in the game (*lolicon*, tentacle rape, mind-controlled slavery,<sup>1246</sup> among others) guaranteeing its exclusion from the social legitimization that comes with good citizenship.<sup>1247</sup> Saya herself may index the helpless "Child whose innocence solicits our defense,"<sup>1248</sup> but she is no harbinger of futurity, committing unspeakable atrocities, including the gendered violence against Yoh. It is not a coincidence that the saving of Saya from Yōsuke's rape—a dramatic damsel-in-distress sequence, culminating in Saya crying in her savior's embrace—springs Fuminori beyond the "moral event horizon." It highlights that Fuminori's protective instincts towards his *waifu* do not result in the reinforcement of social structures. If Fuminori chooses "right" at the first decision point, he renounces his humanity, signaling the very implosion of reproductive futurism within the game.

## Queering the Game

Visual novels, or novel games, are a form of story-driven interactive fiction originated in Japan, typically involving branching storylines with different endings and a

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<sup>1244</sup> Eisenbeis, "Saya No Uta — The Song of Saya," para. 11.

<sup>1245</sup> Bernini, *Queer Apocalypses*, 77.

<sup>1246</sup> The game's final sex sequence is a threesome with Yoh, Saya and Fuminori of the *choukyou* ("training" or "breaking animals") variety, in which Yoh, wearing a pet collar and a leash, plays along enthusiastically because she is brainwashed beyond consent.

<sup>1247</sup> Bersani, *Homos*, 113.

<sup>1248</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 2.

passive “click-to-read” gameplay.<sup>1249</sup> Visual novels coevolved with pornographic *ero*ge (“erotic games”) and dating simulators called *bishōjo* games or *galge* (“girl games”). This coevolution often makes it difficult to establish clear-cut distinctions among these three types of videogames. The former emerged as an attempt to titillate audiences in the blossoming but competitive Japanese home computer market of the early 1980s.<sup>1250</sup> The first of its kind, *Night Life* (Koei, 1982), for NEC’s PC-9801, was a simple sex simulator, with schematic black and white drawings of a couple in different positions. Other companies followed in its footsteps, creating *ero*ge with anime-style graphics that fit the low capacity of displays and floppy disks.<sup>1251</sup> Many early *ero*ge were effectively rape games,<sup>1252</sup> like *177* (Macadamia Soft, 1986), in which players stalked and raped a woman, either getting arrested or married to her depending on whether they satisfied the victim.

Despite attempts to merge the *ero*ge with more sophisticated genres like the sword and sorcery, the plotless pornography became less appealing to consumers who could get similar contents in cheaper media.<sup>1253</sup> In 1992, *Dōkyūsei* (“Classmates”), released by Elf, introduced a solution to develop in-game relationships without sacrificing the number of sex scenes: the *bishōjo* game with “routes,” where players choose one heroine from a pool of available girls, and after completing her story, go back to the beginning to pursue a different girl, and so on.<sup>1254</sup> Each “route” is a dialogue-tree, creating a sense of progression as players make the correct choices to win over each girl, unlocking CGs that turn erotic or pornographic as a reward for growing intimacy.<sup>1255</sup> The dialogue-tree model, especially in games marketed as “dating” or “life simulation,” has been criticized for its problematic view on relationships. As Mitu Khandaker-Kokoris points out, “in order to pursue a romance with a non-player character, the process effectively becomes ‘press the correct sequence of buttons in order to get them to sleep with you.’”<sup>1256</sup> Nevertheless, *Dōkyūsei* upped the quality of *ero*ge with its “exquisite character designs,

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<sup>1249</sup> Azuma, *Otaku*, 76.

<sup>1250</sup> John Szczepaniak and Kobushi, “Retro Japanese Computers: Gaming’s Final Frontier,” *Hardcore Gaming 101*, October 16, 2010, para. 4, <http://www.hardcoregaming101.net/JPNcomputers/Japanesecomputers.htm>; Todome, “A History of Eroge,” “Chapter One” para. 4.

<sup>1251</sup> Todome, “A History of Eroge,” “Chapter One” para. 5.

<sup>1252</sup> Todome, “Chapter One” para. 6.

<sup>1253</sup> Todome, “Chapter One” para. 8.

<sup>1254</sup> Todome, “Dokyusei” para. 8.

<sup>1255</sup> Todome, “Dokyusei” para. 11.

<sup>1256</sup> Khandaker-Kokori, “NPCs Need Love Too: Simulating Love and Romance, from a Game Design Perspective,” loc. 1672.

detailed backgrounds, dynamic storylines, and beautiful music”<sup>1257</sup> that set it apart from previous ventures.

*Dōkyūsei* was still a point-and-click adventure game. Only in 1996 did the company Leaf coin the term “visual novel” with two horror *ero*ge, *Shizuku* (“Drip”) and *Kizuato* (“Scar”), which appropriated the “sound novel” format pioneered by the mystery-horror adventure game *Otogirisō* (Chunsoft, 1992).<sup>1258</sup> *Shizuku* and *Kizuato* had novel-like text narration superimposed on stationary backgrounds and character sprites that rotated to create different expressions. *Shizuku* also popularized the *denpa* (“electromagnetic wave”) horror subgenre, i.e., stories where ordinary people act strangely under the influence of outside forces like radio waves, demons, or others,<sup>1259</sup> a tradition of neurodivergent representation in which *Saya no Uta* fits loosely. In 1997, Leaf’s heart-warming high school romance *To Heart* was an unprecedented hit,<sup>1260</sup> with the supporting heroine HMX-12 Multi—a green-haired robot maid with mechanical ears and an earnest, hard-working personality—becoming “one of the founding principles of *moé*.”<sup>1261</sup> *Saya* shares certain similarities with HMX-12 Multi in appearance and character, as both are nonhuman “little wives” with green hair and a pet-like appearance, [Figure 10] which in *Saya*’s case is reinforced by Doctor Ōgai naming her after his beloved childhood pet.

The popularity of visual novels resulted in the gradual demise of point-and-click models in favor of more passive gameplay; moreover, *To Heart*’s demand led others to invest in visual novels with moving love stories and *moé* visuals.<sup>1262</sup> In 1998, Jun Maeda, a versatile writer and composer working for the company Tactics,<sup>1263</sup> developed *ONE*, a visual novel with branching storylines that introduced the simple but effective formula of

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<sup>1257</sup> Kiu Ho Kim, “Kakyuusei - Background,” *Kakyuusei*, 2002, para. 2, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080917123550/http://ho.ho.net/kakyuusei/background.html>.

<sup>1258</sup> Todome, “A History of Eroge,” “Chapter Two” para. 16.

<sup>1259</sup> Asceai, “Subarashiki Hibi ~Furenzoku Sonzai~,” 嗚呼、素晴らしきエロゲー世界, April 12, 2010, para. 27, <http://www.menhelmate.org/2010/04/subarashiki-hibi-furenzoku-sonzai.html>.

<sup>1260</sup> Todome, “A History of Eroge,” *To Heart*”.

<sup>1261</sup> Carlos Santos, “To Heart DVD 3,” Anime News Network, November 2, 2007, para. 2, <https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/review/to-heart/dvd-3>.

<sup>1262</sup> Todome, “A History of Eroge,” *To Heart*,” para. 5 “Chapter 3” para. 3; Azuma, *Otaku*, 76.

<sup>1263</sup> Alex Mui, “The Visual Novel Medium Proves Its Worth on the Battlefield of Narrative Arts,” *The Johns Hopkins News-Letter*, October 16, 2011, para. 6, <http://www.jhunewsletter.com/2011/11/16/the-visual-novel-medium-proves-its-worth-on-the-battlefield-of-narrative-arts-16068/>.

the *nakige* (“crying game”): “comedic first half + heart-warming romantic middle + tragic separation + emotional get together.”<sup>1264</sup> In the wake of *ONE*’s success, Key, the company co-founded by Maeda after leaving Tactics, released *Kanon* (1999), *Air* (2000) and *Clannad* (2004), considered the visual novel “holy trinity,”<sup>1265</sup> and most influential among scenario writers like Tanaka Romeo, Ryukishi and Urobuchi Gen. Azuma argues that the “melodramatic turn” in visual novels compensated for the technical limitations of 1990s home computers: because most PCs could not process complex animations and sounds, visual novels sought alternative means of conveying dramatic intensity.<sup>1266</sup> Sadness became *the* central affect of “crying games,” featuring sentimental characters and illustrations with which players could readily empathize.<sup>1267</sup> Similarly, to save time and space on CD-ROMs and floppy discs, elements like backgrounds, character sprites, text boxes, voice-overs, and soundtracks were always “recycled” into new scenes, where the same files acquired different meanings.<sup>1268</sup> [Figures 11 & 12] The use of clichéd scenarios and characters familiar to the *otaku* glued it all together, ensuring some degree of artistic integrity despite the visual novels’ fragmented structure.<sup>1269</sup>

Ironically, with the dissemination of the *nakige*, the pornography which was the primary “fun” factor in *bishōjo* games became increasingly diluted in the melodrama of stories,<sup>1270</sup> corrupting the “route” or “tree” model of escalating titillation. The importation of visual novels to consoles like Sega Saturn or Sony PlayStation, where explicit content is severely restricted, accentuated this trend.<sup>1271</sup> *Nakige* also spawned another variation, the *utsuge* (“depressing game”), that seeks to depress players with “no happy end, no help, no hope” scenarios.<sup>1272</sup> Nitroplus, the company behind *Saya no Uta*, specializes in *utsuge* including body horror, gore, rape, and depression—in short, as Clarisse Thorn puts it, games that are “not ‘fun’ in the way most people think about ‘fun,’ that’s for sure.”<sup>1273</sup>

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<sup>1264</sup> Todome, “A History of Eroge,” “ONE” para. 2.

<sup>1265</sup> Mui, “The Visual Novel Medium Proves Its Worth on the Battlefield of Narrative Arts,” para. 10.

<sup>1266</sup> Azuma, *Otaku*, 76.

<sup>1267</sup> Azuma, 76.

<sup>1268</sup> Azuma, 76.

<sup>1269</sup> Azuma, 76.

<sup>1270</sup> Azuma, 78.

<sup>1271</sup> Todome, “A History of Eroge,” “Chapter 4.”

<sup>1272</sup> “Utsuge,” *The Visual Novel Database*, para. 2, accessed July 12, 2017, <https://vndb.org/g693>.

<sup>1273</sup> Clarisse Thorn and Julian Dibbell, eds., *Violation: Rape In Gaming* (Lexington, KY: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012), 18.

Nevertheless, the most “depressing” aspect of all may be that the “player of novel games, unlike players of other kinds of games, is overwhelmingly passive.”<sup>1274</sup> Considering that visual novels are not a form of retrogaming, it is hard to account for the persistence of the visual novel’s gameplay in the age of open worlds, 3D, and virtual reality. While some contemporary visual novels feature novelties like multiple opening or ending movies, or even animated sequences, their core mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics<sup>1275</sup> remain mostly unaltered since the term was coined, even in releases by the best-known companies like Key, Type-Moon or Nitroplus. The reasonable conclusion is that these limitations are self-imposed to satisfy a desire shaped by the medium’s techno-history. Compared to Western adventure games, visual novels do not typically rely on solving puzzles, as players click the mouse to read texts and view illustrations, occasionally making choices at decision points. It is legitimate to ask, then, if visual novels should be considered games at all.

For Richard Eisenbeis, the answer is “yes”: “When it comes down to it, the only thing needed to make either a movie or novel into a game is a single interactive element—a single point where you, a person outside the game’s creation, can alter how it plays out.”<sup>1276</sup> Still, he vacillates in *Saya no Uta*’s review. “The number of interactive choices in the game is limited to only two, with only two possible options for each of these choices,” Eisenbeis writes. “While I have long advocated that even a single interactive choice is all you need for a game to be a ‘game,’ I understand that many may not agree.”<sup>1277</sup> Visual novels push at the medium specificity of videogames, encouraging players to ask themselves what a videogame is, and is not, in the first place. Or, more importantly, to bump into the limits of such exclusionary definitions. As Naomi Clark points out, questioning “the norms and conventions about how games, or specific game genres, are expected to function”<sup>1278</sup> is increasingly a concern of queer game creators (e.g., Anna Anthropy’s *Mighty Jill Off* and *dys4ia*). Although *Saya no Uta* hails from a very different (more mainstream) context, “it still manages to destabilize one of the rarely

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<sup>1274</sup> Azuma, *Otaku*, 76.

<sup>1275</sup> Robin Hunicke, Marc Leblanc, and Robert Zubek, “MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research,” in *Challenges in Games AI Workshop* (19th National Conference of Artificial Intelligence, San Jose: The AAAI Press, 2004).

<sup>1276</sup> Richard Eisenbeis, “All You Need Is a Single Choice to Make a Novel into a Game,” *Kotaku*, April 24, 2014, para. 4, <https://kotaku.com/5904561/all-you-need-is-a-single-choice-to-make-a-novel-into-a-game>.

<sup>1277</sup> Eisenbeis, “*Saya No Uta — The Song of Saya*,” para. 12.

<sup>1278</sup> Clark, “What Is Queerness in Games, Anyways?,” 4.

questioned tenets of what a game must have to be considered a game.”<sup>1279</sup> Visual novels are no strangers to even more “radical” experiences in non-interaction, in the form of kinetic novels, i.e., visual novels with only one route in which players do not interact with the story (e.g., Key’s *Planetarian*, 2004).<sup>1280</sup> Still, what is interesting about *Saya no Uta* is the *limitation* (not elimination) of the player’s agency to a couple of focal points, drawing our attention to the intersectional nature of videogames—the “shared boundary where the user wanting to fulfill a certain task meets the artifact or product enabling them to perform that task; that is, where the player meets the game.”<sup>1281</sup> **[Figure 13]**

That “shared boundary” is not limited to choices. In visual novels, the narrative itself is propelled forward by the minimal, repetitive, rhythmic brush of the player’s fingers against the computer.<sup>1282</sup> Clicking the button of a mouse or keyboard (or pressing a touchscreen, in the case of tablets) is what prompts each new sentence to appear within the text box or character sprites and backgrounds to rotate on the screen. This characteristic is of the utmost importance. It is the reason why, despite their supposedly passive gameplay, the experience of playing visual novels is not interchangeable with that of watching a recorded walkthrough, like one watches a movie. One must feel up the boundary between the bodily and the mechanical if one is to fully enjoy the antimimetic spectacle on the screen, advancing click after click. Characters mortified into stationary sprites and CGs, moans atomized into separate sound clips. Unlike other games, *Saya no Uta*’s ludonarrative apparatus exposes the visual novel as a medium that negates the “equating [of] the pleasures of sexual transgression with the expansion of democratic freedom”<sup>1283</sup>—present, for instance, in the idealization of sexual violence in Sadean literature.<sup>1284</sup> Instead, the visual novel’s blatant, often oppressive sense of ossification puts players (in *Saya no Uta*, as Fuminori) in a disenfranchised position. Visual novels are closer to what Gavriel Reisner calls a “dark Eros,”<sup>1285</sup> stemming from the players’

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<sup>1279</sup> Clark, 6.

<sup>1280</sup> The “radicality” of kinetic novels is only so constructed in relation to the videogame medium, as it essentially turns them back into books.

<sup>1281</sup> Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies* (New York London: Routledge, 2016), 68.

<sup>1282</sup> Franklin Melendez, “Video Pornography, Visual Pleasure, and the Return of the Sublime,” in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2004), 420.

<sup>1283</sup> Abigail Bray, “Merciless Doctrines: Child Pornography, Censorship, and Late Capitalism,” *Signs* 37, no. 1 (2011): 136.

<sup>1284</sup> Bray, 141.

<sup>1285</sup> Gavriel Reisner, “Revisioning the Death-Drive: The Compulsion to Repeat as a Death-in-Life,” *Psychoanalytic Review* 101, no. 1 (February 2014): 39–69.

surrender to a “repetitive destructive intimacy”<sup>1286</sup> that is central to the strangeness, the *queerness*, of our relationship with computers as viewers-turned-users.

As Anne Friedberg argues, “computer interfaces may have been designed to become dyadic partners in a metaphysical relationship, but complaints about the awkwardness of this liaison have targeted the interface.”<sup>1287</sup> *Saya no Uta* echoes such complaints by having Fuminori act like a broken or inversed interface, that fails to symbolize the formless entrails of meaning while fetishizing the eldritch into *loli*-Saya, i.e., the Child’s “petrified identity.”<sup>1288</sup> The excessive embodiment in *Saya no Uta*’s diegetic world is inversely proportional to the lack of bodily interactivity in visual novels or, more broadly, to the dematerialization expected from all digital media, however mythical that dematerialization may be.<sup>1289</sup> Fuminori’s viewpoint is akin to the exploding television in David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome* (1983), a screen that breaks and spills the unbound body, and whose rawness “disarticulates the narrativity of desire.”<sup>1290</sup> At face value, one finds this narrativity in Fuminori and Saya’s tale of love that conquers all. However, eldritch-Saya functions as an underlying stratum of “weird materiality inherent in the mode of abstraction of technical media.”<sup>1291</sup> The intersection between *Saya no Uta* and “antisocial” authors like Bersani or Edelman becomes clear: they all envision the sexual as an interface for the self-destructive, tragic, demonic unconscious. The game’s data and algorithms, experienced by the player as a force mastering them from within,<sup>1292</sup> leak from their inorganic netherworld into a state of disordered organicity. Philosopher Aurel Kolnai called it the disgust-inducing phenomenology of “life in the wrong place.”<sup>1293</sup> Or, by extension, play-beyond-fun, “fun that takes its pleasure in all the wrong places.”<sup>1294</sup>

Just as Fuminori accepts that Saya, as he sees her, is an illusion, the visual novel player accepts that “A screen and a plot, which seem unitary on the surface outer layer,

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<sup>1286</sup> Reisner, 41.

<sup>1287</sup> Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2009), 231.

<sup>1288</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 74.

<sup>1289</sup> Christiane Paul, “The Myth of Immateriality - Presenting New Media Art,” *Technoetic Arts* 10 (December 1, 2012): 167–72.

<sup>1290</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 9.

<sup>1291</sup> Parikka, “Medianatures,” 99.

<sup>1292</sup> Reisner, “Revisioning the Death-Drive,” 40.

<sup>1293</sup> Kolnai, *On Disgust*, 2003, 62.

<sup>1294</sup> Ruberg, “No Fun,” 109.



are just an aggregate of meaningless fragments in the deep inner layer.”<sup>1295</sup> Fuminori’s only choice in *Saya no Uta* (the second decision point is Kōji’s) is to acknowledge that Saya, and the pleasure that she brings him, comes at the expense of uncovering the seams of reality. In Azuma’s terms, Fuminori manifests a “desire for the grand nonnarrative.”<sup>1296</sup> After all, *loli-Saya*, the Child, is but a token of the “anonymous/ statistical/ collective”<sup>1297</sup> attributes of *moé*. Indeed, Azuma describes how the computer-savvy consumers of visual novels (primarily, the *otaku*) mine the game for its encrypted files, remediating its assets to create derivative works<sup>1298</sup> and other operations that involve reverse-engineering the game (e.g., game music videos, transplanting games from operating systems, translation patches, and so on). But it is not necessary that any actual software cracking takes place. The pleasure in visual novels, especially *nakige* and *utsuge*, results from the coexperience of two seemingly contradictory types of “fun,” resulting from a “vacillation between a surrender to the optical illusion produced by the machine and an awareness of the technology’s materiality.”<sup>1299</sup> On the one hand, the experience of being moved by the melodrama, pornography or horror, of “being manipulated, victimized, deprived of critical distance,”<sup>1300</sup> translating into accordingly passive gameplay. On the other hand, the experience of moving and manipulating, achieved by reverse-engineering the game, either literally, by cracking the software, or “vicariously,” by manipulating the visual novel through choices and clicking.

*Saya no Uta* encapsulates the central paradox in visual novels. Inserted within the *otaku* subcultural logic, “crying” and “depressing games” are often conservative on the level of stories and sex-gender roles. Even Saya, beneath all the eldritch and body horror, is just a girl looking for true love. However, due to their techno-history, the visual novel’s mechanics and dynamics gnaw at the integrity of those conventional categories by exposing their “formula, without a worldview or a message, that effectively manipulates emotion.”<sup>1301</sup> In this light, the videogame takes on a threateningly nonhumanity, which excites our death drive. *Saya no Uta* highlights this by plunging headfirst into the

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<sup>1295</sup> Azuma, *Otaku*, 83.

<sup>1296</sup> Azuma, 105.

<sup>1297</sup> Azuma, 107.

<sup>1298</sup> Azuma, 83.

<sup>1299</sup> Melendez, “Video Pornography, Visual Pleasure, and the Return of the Sublime,” 414.

<sup>1300</sup> Charles Affron, “Identifications,” in *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 99.

<sup>1301</sup> Azuma, *Otaku*, 79.

queerness of the *waifu* in all its future-canceling negativity. The game aligns Fuminori's neurodivergence with the paraphilic attraction to cartoon characters at the heart of the player experience in visual novels, a form of toonophilia defying "our normative understanding of sexuality [that] insists that it must have an object in the real world."<sup>1302</sup> But also, and crucially, by disavowing the "limitless elasticity"<sup>1303</sup> that videogames, as an interactive medium, have come to symbolize within our arts and culture. *Saya no Uta* insists on a single player reduced to repeatedly clicking, an action that, as the story progresses towards the end(s), feels increasingly like a series of "catastrophic returns to injury."<sup>1304</sup> Both Fuminori and *Saya no Uta*'s players thus "succeed through suffering,"<sup>1305</sup> advancing towards their exclusion from Earth's future, and canceling the very possibility—or necessity—of an emancipatory project for players, and humans, alike.

## Conclusion

Fifteen years after its release, the adult visual novel *Saya no Uta* remains a crucial instance of queer antisociality in videogames. Its Lovecraftian-Cronenbergian love story, written and directed by the (in)famous Urobuchi Gen, follows in the techno-historical tradition of Japanese *ero*ge ("erotic games") and *utsuge* ("depressing games"), with no happy ending and few interactive choices. While the portrayal of disability and queerness in *Saya no Uta* is hardly flattering—Fuminori and Saya rape, torture, and slaughter the game's other characters—I argue that its "gynaehorrific"<sup>1306</sup> take on reproductive horror merits consideration beyond "good" or "bad" representation. Concepts like Lee Edelman's "reproductive futurism" can help us make sense of *Saya no Uta*'s many problematic aspects, including rape and *lolicon* pornography. Saya, both *waifu* and eldritch abomination, indexes the monstrous relationality outside the Möbius strip of futurity, assaulting the player with physical and moral disgust. *Saya no Uta* may envision what Edelman and Lauren Berlant call "sex without optimism,"<sup>1307</sup> i.e., sex beyond the typical life-preserving reparativity of love narratives, even LGBT+ ones.

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<sup>1302</sup> Vincent, "Making It Real: Ficition, Desire, and the Queerness of the Beautiful Fighting Girl," xviii.

<sup>1303</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 14.

<sup>1304</sup> Reisner, "Revisioning the Death-Drive," 48.

<sup>1305</sup> Ruberg, "No Fun," 121.

<sup>1306</sup> Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film*.

<sup>1307</sup> Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 1.

But *Saya no Uta* is not just an *ero*ge that is “anything but erotic.” Regardless of whether players choose to hack it, *Saya no Uta*’s challenge to normative “fun” in videogames is more extensive, mirroring Saya’s disregard for the laws of nature. By radically minimizing the “dialogue tree,” *Saya no Uta* rejects player sovereignty, as well as mimetic realism, as the proper horizon of gaming. Instead, it forefronts the repetition-compulsion of clicking as an interface for the game’s “weird materialities that do not... bend to human eyes and ears.”<sup>1308</sup> Humanity’s love affair with the boundaries where the human comes undone is at the core of *Saya no Uta*’s antisocial queerness, manifesting in narrative and gameplay alike, and attesting to the visual novel’s potential as a tool for the creation, and analysis, of alternative imaginaries—however “fucked-up” these may be.

(See also “Absolute Boyfriend” and “Poison Girls”)

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<sup>1308</sup> Parikka, “Medianatures,” 97.

# **PART III**

## **ARTIST STATEMENT**

*Anime was a mistake. It's nothing but trash.*

— Hayao Miyazaki (troll quote)

I am interested in the Japanization of Western youth in the twenty-first century. As a millennial, I grew up with manga, anime, and Japanese video games; to this day, I obsess over them, even after years of formal education in fine arts. I am what they call weeaboo trash, an Internet slur for the annoying Japan-obsessed Westerner—the “wannabe Japanese.” A neurosis of late-capitalist globalization, the weeaboo condition challenges the pacifying discourses of hybridism and internationalism that often surround the spread of cultural soft powers, be it in the physical or digital world.

In my work, I exploit a loophole between the colorful, easy-to-read and overdetermined (if lost in translation) cuteness of much Japanese pop culture and its shadow opposite: the meaning-resistant, raw pictorial and affective materials yet to be processed into a proper commodity form. Thus, by pitting big-eyed fantasy characters, *kawaii* mascots, emoji, *aidoru*, and so on against the abstract, chancical, automatic or nonsensical operations associated in art history with the Western avant-garde, I aim to produce a double effect. On the one hand, the “dumbing down” of formal purity by (J-) subcultural styles, unsuited for high modernist aesthetics. On the other, highlighting the intimate alienation at the core of the weeaboo’s emotional attachment to products “made in Japan.” I often employ Japanese brands, materials, and software to bring out and expose these fetishistic drives.

Collage and provisionality play a crucial role in the layering of visual, narrative, and conceptual elements to create immersive, multifaceted experiences for the audience; for example, in comics like *Violent Delights* (kuš!, 2020), *Spookytongue* (Ediciones Valientes, 2017), “Trance Dream Techno” (in *š! #25'Gaijin Mangaka*, 2016) or *Muji Life* (Clube do Inferno, 2015). This also applies to my work across media besides comics, like painting, photography, video, installation, and essays—from the wall accumulations of small drawings and paintings which I have created over the last decade to my non-linear Ph.D. dissertation, *CUTENCYCLOPEDIA*, focusing on the links between cuteness and abjection and hosted online, on my website. Color and texture work to reinforce the primal, sensual side of my images, tending towards the lurid or even shocking to the senses.

In 2020, I started using a pen plotter to render digital paintings on paper using archival ink pens. These pieces inhabit a liminal materiality between the analog and the digital, enacting a conflict between the clean high-tech processes that go against the human (and artist's) touch, on the one hand, and, on the other, "low" matters ranging from the sparkling cuteness of *Blingee* GIFs and anime fantasies to discarded painted materials collected from my studio, garbage or graffiti, which are photographed and inserted into the plotted montages.

My struggles as a weeaboo and an artist between Western and Japanese, subculture and art, will resonate with those who are in the same boat as me. However, I believe that the experience of the "intimate as Other" is universal. Pictures draw us to behold and snuggle into them, only to wield their subsemiotic powers counter to interpretation, whose signal is distorted by environmental noises—pointing towards a broader boundary-violating impulse towards human identity and matters. Performing this "extimacy" (Lacan) in the realm of art can help us gain a better grasp, and productively engage with, the many cultural-ecological disasters of our time.

Recently, I began to include new materialist and Anthropocene perspectives in my theoretical research and art, informed by the work developed under the Japanized banner while experimenting beyond it, with themes related to history, science, and technology. My comic *Asbestos in Ambler* (Anthropocene Curriculum, 2017) and the graphic novel *Einstein, Eddington and the Eclipse: Travel Impressions* (Chili Com Carne, 2019) exemplify this kind of output.

### **SHORT STATEMENT**

I am interested in the Japanization of Western youth in the twenty-first century, expressed by a new generation of non-Japanese artists using Japanese pop-cultural references in their works. As a neurosis of late-capitalist globalization, the weeaboo ("wannabe Japanese") condition is one of intimate alienation. Many of my works—in the form of comics, paintings, drawings, photography, video, installation, and essays—rely on abstract, chancical, automatic, or nonsensical operations to exploit a loophole between the overdetermined graphic identity of mangaesque fantasy girls, and the unmeaning materials yet to be processed into an "easy reading" commodity form.

The struggle, as weeb and artist, between Western and Japanese, subculture and high art, will resonate with those who are in the same boat as me. However, I believe that the experience of the “intimate as Other” is universal. In art, pictures draw us to behold and snuggle into them, only to wield their subsemiotic powers counter to interpretation—thus, embodying a broader boundary-violating impulse towards human identity and matter. Performing this “extimacy” (Lacan) in the realm of art can help us gain a better grasp, and engage with, the many cultural-ecological disasters of our time.

## BIO

Ana Matilde Sousa is a visual artist and scholar from Lisbon, where she lives and works. As a teenager in the 1990s, she became obsessed with the Japanese anime series *Dragon Ball Z*, which she watched dubbed in Portuguese by actors who heavily “glocalized” the source material. This cultural schizophrenia never left her, even after years of formal education in fine arts.

In 2012, she co-founded the Portuguese zine label Clube do Inferno, and began to put out her Japanized comics under the pseudonym Hetamoé. Since then, her works have been featured in alternative comics publishers and other venues both in Portugal and internationally, including Chili Com Carne (PT), Kunsthalle Lissabon (PT), Monde Diplomatique - Edição Portuguesa (PT), kuš! (LV), Ediciones Valientes (SP), Éditions Trip (CA), or the Anthropocene Curriculum (DE). She regularly participates in art exhibitions and works across media ranging from painting, comics, and digital illustration to photography, installation, and video. Recent research and art interests include new materialist and Anthropocene perspectives. In 2020, she co-founded the artist collective MASSACRE.

As an author, she presents and publishes articles on Japanese contemporary art and pop culture in classrooms, peer-reviewed journals, and conferences. Her texts have appeared in books published by Routledge (*Gardens and Human Agency in the Anthropocene*) and the Minnesota University Press (*Mechademia*). She holds a master’s degree and a Ph.D. in Painting from the Faculty of Fine Arts of Lisbon, which she completed in 2020.

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# APPENDICES

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# **APPENDIX I**

## **GLOSSARY**

**Aidoru** (アイドル): from the English word “idol,” a Japanese term used to refer to the young performers, typically in their teens or early twenties, in manufactured girl and boy bands or sometimes as solos singers, tightly controlled by artist management companies (e.g., *aidoru* are not allowed to date). An *aidoru* is primarily admired not so much for their vocal talent, but for their attractiveness, which in the case of female performers, is measured in youth and cuteness. World-famous supergroups like AKB48 (composed of 134 members) and Morning Musume’19 hold annual popularity contest in which fans vote on their favorite member using a voting ballot that comes with CDs (the more CDs one buys, the more votes one gets). These pools determine each *aidoru*’s rank within the group, impacting their participation in singles or on-stage position. When performers reach a certain age (typically, around their early twenties), they “graduate” from the group and are replaced by a younger member.

Obsessive fans of Japanese *aidoru* called *wota*. At concerts and other *aidoru* events, *wota* perform *wotagei*, i.e., specific cheering actions like jumping, clapping, arm-waving with glow sticks, and chanting slogans. Beyond supergroups, the broader *aidoru* scene, particularly in Tokyo and Osaka, includes groups that perform in small venues for local crowds. In the 2010s, Japan has also seen the rise of the alternative *aidoru* scene. These alternative *aidoru* groups are still manufactured by agencies and have strict rules, but they appeal to an edgier image than traditional *aidoru*, for instance, by including punk, metal, or gothic elements in their songs and using violent or disturbing imagery. Examples of famous alternative *aidoru* include Babymetal, Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, BiS, and Brand-new idol SHiT (BiSH).

**Anime** (アニメ): abbreviation of “*animēshiyon*,” from the English “animation,” is the term used to describe animated cartoons made in Japan, typically, adopting the iconography and aesthetics of manga, applying to both feature films and serial television programs. Anime is produced by dedicated studios, sometimes as original miniseries, often as adaptations of manga, novels, or videogames. Serial anime miniseries typically have a runtime of 25 minutes, are broadcast weekly, and span from twelve to twenty-six episodes. These series are broadcast in four three-month yearly seasons: winter, spring, summer, and fall. Anime targeted at *otaku* (adult) audiences are *shin’ya* anime (“late-night anime”), broadcast in programming blocks from 10 pm to 4 am, e.g., Fuji TV’s

*Noitamina* and *+Ultra*, TBS TV's *Animerico*, Tokyo MX's *Anime no Me*, etc. The airing times of anime targeted at broader audiences (children, teenagers) vary from morning, late afternoon, and evenings. Popular contemporary anime studios today include A-1 Pictures, Brain's Base, JC Staff, Kyoto Animation, Madhouse, Mappa, PA Works, Production IG, Shaft, Studio Bones, Studio Ghibli, Studio Pierrot, Sunrise, Toei Animation, and Wit Studio.

Although the first registered public animation showing happened in 1912, the oldest known animated film in Japan is the Matsumoto fragment, from 1907, a three-second animation of a boy in a sailor uniform writing the characters 活動写真 (*katsudō shashin*, "motion picture") on a wall. Anime was developed during the interwar period by the "fathers" of anime, like Kōchi Jun'ichi, Shimokawa Ōten, and Kitayama Seitarō, later followed by the likes of Masaoka Kenzō and Seo Mitsuyo. Masaoka directed *Chikara to Onna no Yo no Naka* ("Within the World of Power and Women," 1933), a lost film that was the first Japanese animated film with voiceovers, and many short animations considered to be anime masterpieces, like *Kumo to Tulip* (*Spider and Tulip*, 1943). Seo, who worked under Masaoka, animated cartoons featuring the famous manga character Norakuro, and was the author of Japan's feature-length animated film, the propaganda film *Momotarō: Umi no Shinpei* (*Momotaro, Sacred Sailors*), released in 1945. The first color animation, appeared in 1958, a relatively late development, due to the technical and logistical limitations of the decade after the war, with Toei Animation's first theatrical film, *Hakujaden* (*The Tale of the White Serpent*), influenced by American animation studios like Disney. Also from Toei, came *Wanpaku Ōji no Orochi Taiji* (*The Little Prince and the Eight-Headed Dragon*, 1963), directed by Mori Yasuji, one of the most influential directors in postwar animation, who formed a younger generation including Miyazaki Hayao, Takahata Isao, Ōtsuka Yasuo, and Kotabe Yoichi.

Also in the 1960s period, Osamu Tezuka founded Mushi Productions, that began airing the first serialized television anime on January 1, 1963, an adaptation of Tezuka's beloved manga series, *Tetsuwan Atomu* (*Astro Boy*). Mushi Productions also produced adult-oriented animated feature films, such as Yamamoto Eiichi's erotic trilogy *Senya Ichiya Monogatari* (*A Thousand and One Nights*, 1969), *Cleopatra* (1970), and the experimental masterpiece, *Kanashimi no Belladonna* (*Belladonna of Sadness*, 1973). By the 1970s, anime was an established industry, with a boom of studios and styles in Japan, mostly working on television adaptations of manga. The television anime adaptation of Nagai



Go's manga *Mazinger Z* launched the roots of the mecha genre—giant humanoid robots controlled by human pilots, fighting to defend the Earth from alien armies—one of the most successful anime genres. Along with anime about futuristic space adventures such as *(Space Battleship Yamato)*, *Uchū Kaizoku Captain Harlock (Space Pirate Captain Harlock)*, and *Ginga Tetsudō 999 (Galaxy Express 999)*, the mecha genre reshaped the face of Japanese science fiction, including titles as diverse as Sunrise Studios's *Gundam* franchise, or Anno Hideaki's *Shin Seiki Evangelion (Neon Genesis Evangelion, 1995)*, from the influential Gainax studio. Anno and other animators that founded Gainax had also worked on the short anime films *Daicon III* and *IV Opening Animations* (approximately 6 minutes each) for the Nihon SF Taikai fan convention in Osaka, which crystallized the *otaku's* love affair with anime, comics, and science fiction, in 1981 and 1983. Another popular genre since the 1970s is magical girl anime, including not only classics like *Minky Momo*, *Creamy Mami*, and *Sailor Moon*, but also deconstructive works such as Ikuhara Kunihiko's *Shōjo Kakumei Utena* (1997) and *Mahō Shōjo Madoka Magica* (2011).

Animated feature films regained momentum in the mid-1980s, with works by Miyazaki Hayao and Takahata Isao. After the success, in 1984, of Miyazaki's post-apocalyptic science-fiction anime *Kaze no Tani no Nausicaä (Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind)*, Miyazaki and Takahata founded Studio Ghibli. Studio Ghibli has created some of the most beloved Japanese animated films, such as Miyazaki's *Tonari no Totoro (My Neighbor Totoro, 1988)*, *Kurenai no Buta (Porco Rosso, 1992)*, *Mononoke-hime (Princess Mononoke, 1997)*, *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi (Spirited Away, 2001)*, *Howl no Ugoku Shiro (Howl's Moving Castle, 2004)* or *Gake no Ue no Ponyo (Ponyo, 2008)*, and Takahata's *Hotaru no Haka (Grave of the Fireflies, 1988)*, *Omohide Poro Poro (Only Yesterday, 1991)* or *Heisei Tanuki Gassen Ponpoko (Pom Poko, 1994)*. Other anime films, such as the cyberpunk classic *Akira* (1988), directed by Otomo Katsuhiro, Mamoru Oshii's masterpieces *Tenshi no Tamago (Angel's Egg, 1985)* and *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), Kon Satoshi's films *Memories* (1995), *Perfect Blue* (1997), and *Paprika* (2006), *Tekkonkinkreet* (2006) based on Matsumoto Taiyō manga series of the same name, Yuasa Masaaki's *Mind Game*, Hosoda Mamoru's *Summer Wars* (2009), and Shinkai Makoto's films including *Kimi no Na Wa. (Your Name, 2016)*, the highest-grossing anime film of all time, have achieved the status of animation landmarks.

On the other hand, the direct-to-video industry, or OVA (“Original Video Animation”), i.e., anime designed for being released on VHS or, more recently, DVDs and Blu-rays, has flourished since the mid-1980s, occupying a considerable share of the market and generating its own specialist magazines. Original or part of broader franchises, one-shots or spreading over several episodes, which have no predefined duration, OVA often contain graphic violence and explicit sexual content, due to the absence of the restrictions applied to television and film productions. More recently, ONA (“Original Net Animation”), i.e., anime produced directly for the internet, usually of short duration (a few minutes) and initially used by amateur and independent artists (although now adopted by major studios), have enjoyed increasing popularity, with major hits such as *Hetalia: Axis Powers* in the early 2010s.

In the mid-to-late 1990s and 2000s, anime became widely available on foreign television channels and legal and illegal Internet streaming sites, with the worldwide dissemination of fansubbing groups (i.e., fan groups of who translate and subtitle anime and other contents), which prompted the global popularity of series like *Dragon Ball* (1986-1996), *Sailor Moon* (1992-1997), and *Pokémon* (since 1997). Popular anime from the 2000s and 2010s include adaptations of manga like *One Piece* (since 1999), *Naruto* (2002-2017), *Bleach* (2004-12), *Death Note* (2006-07), *Shingeki no Kyojin (Attack on Titan)*, since 2013), as well as original or novel-based series like *Furi Kuri* (2000-01), *Paranoia Agent* (2004), *Mahō Shōjo Lyrical Nanoha* (2004), *Samurai Champloo* (2005-06), *Code Geass* (2006-08), *Suzumiya Haruhi* (2006-09), *Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann* (2007), *Lucky Star* (2007), *K-On!* (2009), the *Monogatari* series (began in 2009), *Durarara!!* (2010), *Mawaru Penguindrum* (2011), *Free! Iwatobi Swim Club* (2013), *Yurikuma Arashi* (2015), or *Yuri!!! on Ice* (2016), among many other series.

**Anime Was a Mistake:** A popular 2015 Internet meme started by the *Tumblr* blog old-japanese-men, consisting of a series of animated GIFs with troll quotes misattributed to Japanese animation guru Miyazaki Hayao, in which he bitterly vocalizes his disdain for anime and its fans, stating that “Anime was a mistake. It’s nothing but trash” or that “Those who identify as ‘otaku,’ they sicken me deeply.”

The meme, which uses footage from *The Kingdom of Dreams and Madness*, a 2013 documentary film about Studio Ghibli, is inspired by an interview given by Miyazaki to a Japanese website, in 2011, in which he complains—albeit in softer terms—about the anime industry being full of *otaku*.

**Animegao kigurumi** (アニメ顔着ぐるみ): literally, “cartoon-character costume with anime face.” The term often refers to or is synonymous with “dollers,” i.e., performers wearing this kind of costume covering the entire body (including arms and legs covered in skin-tight sleeves), and a mask with anime-like features.

**Anthropocene:** literally, “age of humans,” a name for the proposed new geochronological epoch in which human societies have become a planetary force capable of drastically impacting the Earth and its ecosystems, e.g., through anthropogenic climate change. Although the term had been used already in the 1960s, its current meaning was allegedly coined by American biologist Eugene Stoermer in the 1980s. In the 2000s, it was popularized by Dutch atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and became widely discussed not just in the natural sciences, but in the social sciences, the humanities, and the arts originating a cross-disciplinary debate among several fields of knowledge production. Famous Anthropocene-related authors in the social sciences and the humanities include Bruno Latour, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Donna Haraway, and Timothy Morton.

There are several dating hypotheses for the Anthropocene, including the European Expansion of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the eighteenth-century Industrial Revolution, and the Great Acceleration after World War II. The term “Anthropocene” has been widely criticized as, ironically, the theoretical and artistic it indexes often emphasizes the agency of the nonhuman. Alternative names include Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene, and ~~Anthropocene~~.

**Bishōjo** (美少女): literally, “beautiful young woman,” in Japanese, the prefix *bi*, 美, denotes feminine beauty, with the word *bijin* meaning “beautiful person,” usually referring to beautiful women. In animanga terminology, a *bishōjo* is an attractive female character, whose specific attributes vary according to industry trends and genres, from accurately proportionated beauty to sexy or cute caricatures (the latter known as *loli*), and the many stages in between these poles. *Bishōjo* statuettes are a popular form of merchandise among Japanese *otaku*.

**Bishōjo game** (少女ゲーム): also known as “girl game” or “galge,” is a Japanese videogame genre consisting of dating simulators or dating-themed point-and-click adventures or visual novels, in which the player interacts with female anime characters. *Bishōjo* games co-evolved with *eroge*, and many (although, not necessarily) contain

erotic or pornographic content. Although many masterworks of Japanese videogames can be filled into this category, for instance, *To Heart*, *Clannad*, and *Kanon*, “purer” popular *bishōjo* dating simulators include the Elf’s *Dōkyūsei* and Konami’s *Tokimeki Memorial* series, beginning in 1992 and 1994, respectively.

**Bishōnen** (美少年): literally, “beautiful young boy,” in traditional East Asian aesthetics, the term applies to androgynous males whose universal beauty transcends gender and sexual orientation. In animanga terminology, the characteristics of *bishōnen* (“pretty boy”) or *biseinen* (“pretty man”) characters have changed according to different trends over the decades, but broadly denote a type of male figure with a slender and delicate beauty, combining stereotypical “masculine” and “feminine” features, with links to the slang term *ikemen* (イケメン), meaning a handsome man with a suave voice. The shortened form of *bishōnen* or *biseinen* is “bishie.”

Although the *bishōnen* has become particularly popular in Japanese girl’s comics, it stems from erudite Japanese culture, particularly in literature and the visual arts, linked to an ideal of homosociality and homoeroticism with deep roots in the Japanese religious tradition (and the East Asian in general, mainly in China). Its roots can be traced back to the *chigo* (“children” or “acolytes”), i.e., an adolescent boy who served as helpers in Buddhist temples or aristocratic household in the Middle Ages. The *chigo* were meant to add beauty to religious ceremonies and everyday life and to provide companionship, and, often, sexual services, to a monk to assigned to initiate them. Although initially developed within an aesthetic and spiritual context—the *chigo* are recurrent characters in the Buddhist moral tales, associated with the transience of beauty—the *bishōnen* soon became associated with more worldly realities, for example, in connection to *kabuki* theater to prostitution. In the medieval Japanese imagination, the *chigo*, seen as passive and innocent sexual objects, were both deified and recurrent victims of violence.

With the importation of the term “*gei*” (“gay”) in the postwar period, the *bishōnen* became connoted with the feminine-looking *gei boi* (“gay boy”). With the development of postwar *shōjo* manga, including BL (“boys’ love”), *shōnen ai*, and *yaoi* and the emergence of the visual *kei* in music, *bishōnen* aesthetics became a central part of women’s culture in contemporary Japan.

**Bizarro**: in pop-cultural tropes, a Bizarro world or universe describes a type of inverted or mutated alternative universe, originating weird versions of canonical characters and

structures (e.g., a character who is good or talented in the canon becomes an evil or clumsy Bizarro). The term first appeared in the American superhero comics magazine *Action Comics*, published by DC Comics, in 1960.

**Boys' Love:** BLB (“boy loves boy”) or BL (“boys’ love”), a subgenre of Japanese girls’ comics (*shōjo* manga) emerging in the 1970s, whose central theme are gay relations among men, traditionally *bishōnen*, ranging from the platonic homoeroticism (*shōnen ai*) to hardcore pornography. Female fans of BL are called *fujoshi* (literally, “rotten girl”). Unlike *bara*, i.e., gay erotic or pornographic manga written by gay men for gay men featuring “manly men” (bulky, muscular, with body hair, etc.), boys’ love is typically written by women, for (mostly, straight) women, presenting an idealized expression of feelings and slender, androgynous “pretty boys.” Usually, male characters in BL do not actively identify as gay and only occasionally deal with the real constraints felt by gay men in society, such as homophobia, family expectations, or social disapproval. BL has sometimes been criticized by LGBT activists for its stereotypical (even, heteronormative) representation of male-male love and relationship roles.

The first BL author in the postwar was Mori Mari, daughter of the famous Japanese writer Mori Ōgai, who wrote “aesthetic novels” (*tanbi shousetsu*) of a luscious, decadent gay romance between beautiful boys and men, namely, the trilogy *Koibito-tachi no Mori* (“Lovers’ Forest,” 1961), *Nichiyōbi ni Boku wa Ikanai* (“I Don’t Go on Sundays,” 1961), and *Kareha no Nedoko* (“The Bed of Dead Leaves,” 1962). In manga, Year 24 Group authors such as Hagio Moto, Takemiya Keiko, and Aoike Yasuko, established and developed the genre with *shōnen ai* classic such as *Tōma no Shinzō* (*The Heart of Thomas*, 1974-75), *Kaze to Ki no Uta* (“Balad of the Wind and the Tree,” 1976-84), *Eroica Yori Ai wo Komete* (*From Eroica with Love*, 1976-2012). In the 1980s, BL was closely connected with the *dōjinshi* (amateur manga) boom at the Comiket, whose vast majority of participants were young women. Female fans began to create erotic or pornographic parodies of popular (male-oriented) animanga series like *Space Battleship Yamato*, *Mobile Suit Gundam*, *Captain Tsubasa*, *Saint Seiya*, *Yoroiden Samurai Troopers*, *Yū Yū Hakusho*, *Slam Dunk*, among others. Because of their parodic, often random or over-the-top quality, this kind of works became known under the label *yaoi*, an acronym of the phrase *yamanashi ochinashi iminashi* (“no climax, no point, no meaning”). One of the more iconic *yaoi* series of the 1990s is Ozaki Minami’s *Zetsuai* series, an extravagant

psychosexual melodrama which began as a *dōjinshi* of *Captain Tsubasa*, before transitioning to commercial publication.

In the 2000s, popular BL series include Nakamura Shungiku's romantic comedies *Junjō Romantica* and *Sekai-Ichi Hatsukoi*. The genre has also had a significant influence on sports anime like *Free!* And *Yuri!!! on Ice*, which are catered to female *fujoshi* audiences.

**Chan:** from “channel,” in Internet terminology, a *chan* is a text or imageboard in which users post anonymously, split into various boards with specific content and guidelines. Famous examples include the Japanese imageboard *Futaba Channel* (a.k.a. *2chan*, launched in 2001) and the American *4chan* (launched in 2003) and *8chan* (consisting of user-created boards, launched in 2013). Chan culture originally sprang from *otaku*, gaming, and underground culture, which still plays a vital role in these boards, although it has also become linked to hacktivist groups like Anonymous, Internet troll culture, and far-right Internet phenomena like the alt-right movement and the Gamergate controversy. The chans are also the birthplace of many Internet memes, including LOLcats.

**Chibi** (ちび): literally “small child” or “short person,” also known as *mini kyara* or superdeformed, in animanga terminology, describes a popular type of cute caricature of manga, anime, or videogame characters with oversized heads, roughly half of the *chibi*'s total height. *Chibi*'s typically have enormous eyes, miniature bodies, and tiny, sometimes rounded, hands and feet.

**Comic Market** (コミックマーケット): or **Comiket**, for short, is Japan's largest fan convention, focusing mainly on the promotion of *dōjin* (self-published) culture and cosplay. The main attraction of the Comiket is amateur manga fanzines known as *dōjinshi*, mostly *parodi* manga, i.e., parodies and pastiches of commercial works of manga, anime, and videogames. Held twice a year since 1975, for three days in mid-August and mid-December, and housed at the Tokyo Big Sight pavilion since 2009, the Comiket receives nearly 600 000 visitors, i.e., over 6% Tokyo's population. The Comiket is the *otaku* event par excellence, where the pulse of contemporary animanga and fan trends can be felt.

**Cool Japan:** a concept and governmental policy to promote Japan's “indigenous” pop culture abroad, e.g., anime, manga, videogames, J-pop, *aidoru*, fashion, and *kawaii* culture. The term was prompted by the 2002 article “Japan's Gross National Cool” by

American journalist Douglas McGray. It is a kind of cultural diplomacy, meant to increase Japan's soft power in the global market.

**Cosplay** (コスプレ): from “costume play,” describes the hobby or professional practice of dressing oneself as a fictional character (comics, animation, videogames, films, literature, etc.). Although the term was coined in Japan in the 1980s, the practice has much earlier roots, in Japan and elsewhere. Since the 1990s, the practice of cosplay has become a global phenomenon, happening in fan conventions around the world. Professional cosplayers often perform at public events and sell merchandise, like photo books.

When the performer is of the opposite gender of the portrayed character (e.g., a female performer dressing up as a male character, or a male performer dressing up as a female character), the practice is called “crossplay” (from “crossdressing”).

**Crossplay** (クロスプレ): see **Cosplay**.

**Dark Web**: a small portion of the non-searchable web” (called the deep web) hosted on darknets, i.e., “restricted networks.” Accessing and navigating the dark internet requires that users use anonymous communication over a computer network, or onion routers, like Tor. Therefore, websites in the dark web often have the domain suffix “.onion.” The dark web gained a reputation for being a hub for illegal activities (e.g., terrorism) and black markets (e.g., drugs, weapons, child pornography, etc.). The *Silk Road* was the first modern darknet market, active from 2011 to until it was shut down by the FBI in 2013.

**Decora** (デコラ): from “decorative,” a Japanese street fashion style associated with cute culture which emerged in the late 1990s in the Harajuku fashion district in Tokyo, and remained popular throughout the 2000s. Practitioners of *decora* fashion are called *decora-chan*, emphasizing their childlikeness, and were often featured in iconic Japanese street fashion magazine *FRUiTS*. Decora is characterized by the “excessive” use of accessories in bright and neon colors, including numerous toys, bows, face stickers, ribbons, hair clips, and colorful stockings. Related styles include *koteosa* (decora mixed with goth and *visual kei* elements) and *decololi* (decora mixed with *Lolita* fashion).

**Dōjin** (同人): a Japanese word for self-published media and activities, including *dōjinshi* (同人誌, fanzine), *dōjin soft* (同人ソフト, independent videogames or fangames), *dōjin ongaku* (同人音楽, self-published CDs), and others. *Dōjin* culture is the basis of fan conventions like the Comic Market.

**Doller:** See **Animegao Kigurumi**.

**Dorama** (ドラマ): or J-drama, are television miniseries produced by major Japanese networks like NHK, broadcast in four three-month seasons yearly: winter, spring, summer, and fall. *Dorama* comes in all genres, from romance to horror, from crime-mystery to period dramas. Many popular *dorama*, like *Hana Yori Dango* (“Boys Over Flowers,” 2005), are based on manga, mainly, of the *shōjo* variety.

Serial *dorama*, with a runtime of about forty-five minutes, are typically broadcast weekly, from 9 pm to 11 pm. *Dorama* transmitted in the morning, called *asadora* (“morning *dorama*”), are broadcast daily.

**Enjo-kōsai** (援助交際): a practice of “compensated dating” in which middle- and upper-class girls and women voluntarily go on dates with older men in exchange for money and luxury gifts. *Enjo-kōsai* gained notoriety in Japan during the 1990s, originating a moral panic in the mass media. The practice became associated with the *kogyaru* subculture of schoolgirls wearing *seifuku* (school uniforms) with miniskirts, loose socks, tans, and branded goods.

**Ero guro** (エログロ): a short form of “erotic grotesque nonsense,” a countercultural modern art movement which emerged in Japan during the 1920s and 1930, celebrating the macabre, the perverse, the decadent, and nihilistic parody. The movement became associated with the representation of violent and queer sexuality and women liberation, in the artworks of artists like or novels like Tanizaki Junichiro’s *Chijin no Ai* (in English, *Naomi*). *Ero guro* has its roots in the *ukiyo-e* wood prints of nineteenth-century artists like Yoshitoshi Tsukioka, which depicted graphic violence and death. The *ero guro* movement has been highly influential in Japanese popular culture throughout the twentieth century, including manga and anime, for instance, in the works of comics artists and illustrators like Maruo Suehiro, Kago Shintarō, Takato Yamamoto, and the “Godfather of Japanese Erotica,” Saeki Toshio.

**Eroge** (エロゲ): “erotic videogames” emerging in Japan in the 1980s. The first *eroge*, Koei’s *Night Life* (ナイトライフ), was marketed as an educational erotic simulation game to enhance couples’ sex life, released in 1983 as part of the company’s adult label, the Strawberry Porno series. *Night Life* had schematic black and white graphics, but *eroge* soon adopted animanga graphics and coevolved alongside related genres like bishōjo dating sims and visual novels.



*Evangelion* (エヴァンゲリオン): originally, *Shin Seiki Evangelion* (*Neon Genesis Evangelion*), is a science fiction anime television series written and directed by self-proclaimed *otaku* Hideaki Anno—one of the animators involved in the production of the iconic anime short film DAICON IV Opening Animation, in 1983—and produced by GAINAX studio, with character design by Sadamoto Yoshiyuki. It was initially broadcast in 1995 in a series of 26 episodes plus a 1997 film entitled *End of Evangelion*, or *Shin Seiki Evangelion Gekijou-ban: Air / Magokoro o, Kimi ni. Evangelion*, acclaimed by many critics and fans as the best anime television series of all time, is credited with revitalizing the *otaku* industry in the 1990s and launching a new wave of anime and manga. *Evangelion*'s protagonists Ikari Shinji, Ayanami Rei, Sohryu Asuka, Katsuragi Misato, and Nagisa Kaworu, remain some of Japan's most iconic, influential, beloved, and merchandisable characters. More recently, Anno has worked on the film tetralogy *Rebuild of Evangelion*, that remakes of the original series.

As postmodern critic Azuma Hiroki puts it, *Evangelion* is “the absurd story of a meaningless battle that takes place while riding on a puzzling machine against an equally puzzling enemy.” The series's exotic combination of giant humanoid robots, Judeo-Christian mythology, psychological drama, terminologies and scenarios drawn from biology and psychoanalysis, and an inexhaustible range of symbolic associations combined in a cryptic cocktail sparked endless debates and interpretations by both regular anime fans and a wider audience of intellectuals drawn by the series' complexity and aesthetic boldness. *Evangelion* subverts the more linear narrative structure typical of famous mecha (giant robot) franchises like *Mobile Suit Gundam*, especially in the second half of the series, when characters and the narrative fabric begin to implode, and the horror, violence, and anxiety intensifies. According to Murakami Takashi, *Evangelion* was a “meta-*otaku* film, through of which Anno, himself an *otaku*, sought to transcend the *otaku* tradition.”

**Furry:** originating in 1980s science fiction conventions, the term “furry” is used to describe the fans or enthusiasts of fictional anthropomorphic animals, usually expressed by dressing up in full-body costumes called “fursuits,” or creating online avatars to roleplay as “fursonas,” i.e., an individual's furry persona. On the Internet, furries have gained the reputation of sexual fetishists; while the term may indeed refer to someone who is sexually attracted to anthropomorphic animals and fursuits, the term is not necessarily sexual.

**Ganguro** (ガングロ): literally, “black face,” a sub-style of *gyaru* fashion, emerging in the late 1990s and peaking in popularity around the year 2000, characterized by deep solarium tans, blonde, orange or silver highlights (*messhu*), thick black eyeliner and mascara, false eyelashes, white concealer around the eyes and lips, facial gems and stickers, brightly-colored outfits, miniskirts, platform boots, and colorful accessories. *Ganguro* propelled and was propelled by the fashion magazine *Egg* (closed in 2014, returned in 2018 as online publication) and their starlet, the *ganguro* model Buriteri. Other magazines associated with *ganguro* included *Cawaii*, *Popteen*, and *Ego System*.

**Gekiga** (劇画): see **Manga**.

**Giri** (義理): literally, “duty,” “obligation,” “burden,” in the sense of serving one’s superiors with a self-sacrificing devotion and paying one’s debt to society. It is a fundamental value in the organization of traditional Japanese society, regulating the entire hierarchical pyramid, and it is inseparable from the concept of “*ninjo*” (人情), i.e., humanity, empathy, sympathy, which humanizes these relations. The conflict between *giri* and *ninjo* is a classic theme in Japanese art.

**Gyaru** (ギャル): from “gal,” an umbrella term which emerged in the 1980s for a diverse set of subcultures of young women in Japan, including *kogyaru*, *ganguro*, *yamanba*, *agejo*, *amekaji*, *himegyaru*, *onegyaru*, *mode*, *rokku gyaru*, and *neo gyaru*. *Gyaru* is a street fashion and lifestyle generally associated with sexually liberated women rebelling against traditional Japanese beauty standards and gender roles—namely, the *yamato nadeshiko* ideal of white-skinned, demure feminine beauty—with loud personalities who enjoy bodycon sexy clothes and clubbing. Typical *gyaru* traits include *messhu* and *chapatsu* hair, bleached or dyed hair in shades ranging from dark brown to platinum blonde (occasionally, colors), tanned skin, long decorated nails, and dramatic makeup. The discothèque *Juliana's*, operating in Tokyo from 1991 to 1994, was a symbol for the *gyaru*’s hedonistic lifestyle, and in the late 1990s, the *gyaru* subculture popularized synchronized dance style known as Para Para. The Tokyo neighborhood of Shibuya and department stores like 109 are known as the *gyaru* Mecca.

**Harem** (ハーラム, *haaramu*): in animanga terminology, the term “harem” describes anime, manga, and videogames focusing on a male protagonist who pursues and is pursued by three or more female romantic interests. In a “reverse harem,” the protagonist is a female surrounded by three or more male romantic interests.

**Hauntology:** a portmanteau of “*hanté*” and “*ontologie*” and near-homonym of *ontologie* (“ontology”), the neologism “*hauntologie*” was first formulated by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida in his book *Spectres de Marx* in 1993, to describe the ambiguous state of the specter, which is neither being nor nonbeing. In the mid-2000s, the term was applied to a cultural movement interested in retro, ghostly, and uncanny aesthetics, by journalists and critics like Mark Fisher, Simon Reynolds, Mike Powell, Adam Harper, Ken Hollings, or David Toop. Although hauntology is mostly associated with electronic music (e.g., labels like Ghost Box, genres like witch house), the concept has had a significant influence on films, photography, videogames, and art in the 2000s and 2010s.

**Health goth:** an Internet-bred street fashion style and aesthetic mixing goth culture and sportswear, emerging in the mid-2010s. It is inspired by transhumanist ideals of physical and mental fitness, monochrome sportswear, technical and smart wear, biotechnology, and combat gear. Health goth aesthetics conflate with net art and environments.

**Herbivore men** (草食男子, *sōshoku-kei danshi*): a term coined in 2006 by Fukasawa Maki to describe heterosexual men with a passive, nonaggressive approach to sex or relationships (including marriage) with women. Herbivore men deviate from hegemonic masculinity because of their gentle nature, respect for women, and fear of emotional pain. Herbivore men are also interested in “feminine” hobbies, like eating sweets and shopping.

**Hikikomori** (引き籠もり): a Japanese term for the phenomenon of “acute social withdrawal” or “exclusion” in which a person (the majority of which are young men between 18 and 35, although it also affects women) stops going to school or work and voluntarily isolates themselves in a single room at home for long periods, sometimes for years or even decades. Studies estimate that there may be over one million people in Japan suffering from this condition. Although Japanese shut-ins have captured the media’s attention, this is a widespread phenomenon across the globe, including other Asian countries, the United States, and Europe.

**Host or Hostess Club:** In Japan, host or hostess clubs are nightlife establishments where clients pay for the company of young employees who are attractive men or women, respectively. The costumers typically buy them drinks, engage in conversation, sing karaoke, or play games. The most famous location for host and hostess clubs in Japan’s is Tokyo’s entertainment and red-light district of Kabukichō, in Shinjuku, or the high-class Roppongi district.

**Josei manga** (女性漫画): Women's comics. See **Manga**.

**Kaomoji** (顔文字): the Japanese style of emoticon made up of Japanese characters and grammar punctuations, used to express emotion in texting and cyber communication. This type of emoticon is read from up to down (unlike Western-style emoticon, read from left to right, e.g., :-D) and are also characterized by the use of *kawaii* and animanga iconography, for example, (^ \_ ^).

**Kawaii** (かわいい): the Japanese word *grosso modo* equivalent to the English word “cute,” and the national aesthetic of postmodern Japan, popularized by global icons like Hello Kitty and the dissemination of animanga culture, with which it has profound ties. According to Japanese artists Murakami Takashi, in Japan, has transformed into “a living entity that pervades everything,” resulting from country's “post-war” (Harry Harootunian), the hefty social and environmental price of the Japanese economic miracle and workaholic ethic, and the tremendous tensions emerging in a Confusion public sphere. For a more substantial overview of cuteness in Japan, see the Introduction: “The setting of *kawaii*: etymology, history, culture” and “*kawaii* and manga.”

**Kemonomimi** (獣耳): literally, “animal ears,” a popular *moé* trope in *otaku* culture, in which otherwise human characters are attributed animals' ears and other traits like tails or paws, used as if they were costume accessories. Animals commonly used for this practice are cats, dogs, foxes, mice, lambs, tigers, and so on. The popular franchise Kemono Friends (beginning in 2015) has a *kemonomimi* cast consisting of exotic, endangered, and legendary species.

**Kinderwhore**: a fashion style popularized by female alternative icons like Hole's Courtney Love and Babes in Toyland's Katherine Bjelland. Kinderwhore fashion consists of provocative outfits reminiscent of children or Victorian dolls, often including red lipstick, garish makeup, babydoll dresses, knee socks, and Mary Jane shoes, combined with a confrontational feminist attitude.

**Kogyaru** (コギャル): literally, “little gal,” a *gyaru* subgenre which emerged in the mid-to-late 1990s. The style is characterized by the use of Westernized attire based on modified Japanese school uniforms: raised pleated skirt, loose socks (i.e., white, thick, and long leggings-like socks originally for mountaineering), a tanned solarium complexion, cute accessories, branded bags, mobile phones, and hair dyed in light brown or reddish hues. Like the *gyaru*, the *kogyaru* cultivates an infantile aura, in which the girls

neglect the obligations like school, work, and marriage, in favor of a superficial and promiscuous lifestyle. The *kogyaru* became associated with the *enjo-kōsai* “compensated dating” phenomenon and moral panic. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, *kogyaru* gave rise to the subgenres *ganguro* (“black faces”), *yamanba*, and *manba* (“witches”), which became the target of intense media attention and open hostility by the public opinion.

**Kyara** (キャラ): a clipping of *kyarakutaa* (キャラクター), the Japanese transliteration of the English word “character,” in media studies and animanga terminology, it describes a stylized type of character with a recognizable name, often sporting *kawaii* aesthetics. *Kyara* can have “primitive” forms like Hello Kitty or Gudetama, or adopt animanga visuals, like Di Gi Charat and Hatsune Miku. Typically, the design of *kyara* is post-authorial, i.e., its success is not measured by its creativity, reflecting the “voice” of an author, but for its commercial effectiveness and “anonymous,” corporate-like style. As such, many popular *kyara* are standalone merchandisable icons that do not emerge from traditional narrative milieus (for instance, a novel or a film) and are synergistically transmedial, working across different narrative or visual platforms like manga, anime, videogames, toys, etc.—or what is called, in Japanese, a “media mix.” In recent years, the concept of *kyara* as gained traction in media theory for its usefulness in the study of transmedia or multiplatform storytelling.

**Light novels** (ライトノベル, *raito noberu*): also called *ranobe* or LN, are a style of serialized Japanese novels primarily directed at a teen or young adult demographic, often involving complex plots and supernatural elements, accompanied by animanga illustrations. Not to be confused with the term “light literature,” used in Latin America and Iberian countries to describe “easy reading” middle-brow novels most often written by women and targeted at a female demographic.

Popular light novels include the series *Durarara!!* by Narita Ryōgo (2004-14), *Monogatari* written by Nisio Isin (began in 2006), *Ore no Imōto ga Konna ni Kawaii Wake ga Nai* written by Fushimi Tsukasa (2008-13), or *Yahari Ore no Seishun Love Come wa Machigatteiru* written by Watari Wataru (began in 2011).

**Loli** (ロリ, *rori*): a character type associated with the boom of *moé* in *otaku* culture and CGDCT (“cute girls doing cute things”) anime and manga. Typical *loli* protagonists are short for their age, flat-chested girls, with the large-breasted ones occupying supporting roles. Compared to old school *bishōjo* (“beautiful girl”) animanga visuals, who are

typically voluptuous and long-legged female characters, the *loli* emphasizes curved lines and overall body proportions that make characters look young and petite, fitting a “little sister” (*imōto*) or “daughter” (*musume*) archetype. Other traits include large, soft puppy-dog eyes and almost nonexistent noses, rendered as dots rather than the traditional "L" shape of manga iconography. *Loli* look pre-pubescent regardless of how old they are diegetically, resulting in a decrease of the general artistic age in *moé* animanga. *Loli* designs emerged and became popular in the adult visual novels from the mid to late 1990s, including Leaf’s *Shizuku* (1996), *Kizuato* (1996), and *To Heart* (1997). In particular, HMX-12 Multi, a popular heroine from *To Heart*, a robot high school maid with an earnest and hard-working personality, was influential in the development of design and character elements of the *loli*.

**Lolicon** (ロリコン, *rorikon*): Taking after Vladimir Nabokov’s 1955 *Lolita* novel, the phrase “Lolita complex,” was introduced in Japan through the translation of American author Russell Trainer’s 1966 book *The Lolita Complex*. In Japan, the term broadly indicates the sexual attraction of adult men to underage girls, while in the Western animanga fandom, it refers to someone who is sexually attracted to cute, young-looking 2D characters in anime, manga, or videogames.

As a genre, *lolicon* manga emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s, in dedicated magazines like *Manga Burikko* and *Lemon People*, whose contents ranged from soft illustrations of young female characters to sexually explicit and violent animanga pornography, often with fantasy or sci-fi elements. The word is also used to describe a fan of the *lolicon* animanga genre (as in, “that man is a *lolicon*”). The male equivalent of *lolicon* is *shotacon*, featuring underage male characters.

**Lolita fashion** (ロリータファッション, *roriita fasshon*): one of the most popular styles of Japanese street fashion, emerging in the Harajuku fashion district in Tokyo in the late 1970s. Practitioners of lolita fashion are known as *roriita* or lolitas, including a growing community of international fans. The style was launched and popularized by Japanese clothing and accessory brands such as Pink House, Milk, Angelic Pretty, Baby, The Stars Shine Bright, Metamorphose temps de fille, Innocent World, Mary Magdalene, and Moi-même-Moitié, among others. These brands made a collage of elements inspired by French fashion of the Rococo period and Victorian children’s clothes, including a bell-shaped silhouette achieved with petticoats and culottes worn underneath dresses or knee-length

skirts, round collar shirts, knee-high socks or opaque tights, mary jane shoes, big ribbons, hats, hair clips, or other accessories on the head.

Within this general formula, there are numerous variations. The sweet lolita (*suriito roriita*) is the most ostensibly childish, making excessive use of ribbons, lace, light pastel colors (mainly pink, white or blue baby), accessories like toys, and fabrics with patterns of strawberries, hearts, flowers, cakes, etc. The gothic lolita (*goshikku roriita*) mixes *Lolita* fashion with Victorian-inspired gothic, wearing outfits in black and other dark colors, articulated with white details and adorned with crosses and crucifixes; the gothic lolita style was popularized by visual *kei* bands such as Dir En Gray and Malice Mizer, whose popular leader, Mana, established a clothing brand and coined the term EGL, Elegant Gothic *Lolita*. Other lolita substyles include casual lolita, *hime Lolita* (“lolita princess”), *shiro Lolita* (“white lolita”), *kuro Lolita* (“black lolita”), classic lolita, country lolita, sailor lolita, *wa Lolita* (“Chinese-style lolita”), ero lolita, *kodona* ou *ouji* (“tomboy style”), aristocrat and hybrids resulting from the combination of lolita fashion with discreet Japanese fashion subcultures such as *decololi* (lolita fashion + *decora*), *guro lolita*, punk lolita and cyber lolita.

In addition to fashion, the *Lolita* subculture is also a lifestyle that emphasizes beauty, modesty, and nostalgia by adopting “old-fashioned” women's activities, such as sewing, embroidering, making cakes and other domestic work, which are also associated with house-dolls or court ladies from fantasy realms. The emergence and dissemination of the lolita style have been linked with the sociological phenomenon of “parasite singles.”

**Magical girl, *mahō shōjo*, *majokko*:** literally, “magical girl,” a subgenre of fantasy manga and anime with specific visual codes and mythologies, in which the protagonists are girls endowed with supernatural powers. The *Sailor Moon* series is considered a paradigm of the genre. *Mahou Tsukai Sally* (*Sally the Witch*, 1966-67), by Yokoyama Mitsuteru, inspired by the famous American series *Bewitched*, and *Himitsu no Akko-chan* (*Akko-chan's Got a Secret!*, 1962-65) by Akatsuka Fujio, defined the genre in the 1960s with their young heroines endowed with magical powers and secret identities, establishing the element of transformation that became central to the magical girl mythology. In the 1990s, Takeuchi Naoko's *Bishōjo Senshi Sailor Moon* (*Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon*, 1992-1993), reinvented the genre with a style that crossed the glittery femininity typical of the *shōjo* genre with action elements inspired by live-action television series with superhero teams, like *Super Sentai*.

Throughout the three decades of evolution, including popular 1980s series like *Minky Momo* and *Creamy Mami*, the magical girl genre took on specific codes of its own. These include familiars (magical speaking animals that accompany the girls), teams of heroines who fight together to defeat the enemies that threaten world peace, and ritualized transformations, often in intricate sequences of dynamic pirouettes in which the girls' everyday clothing disappears and is replaced by special costumes. The series commonly referred to as the prototype of this transformative strand of the magical girl is the *Cutie Honey* series, written and illustrated by Go Nagai in the mid-1970s, a male-oriented series which eroticized the transformation. In the early 2000s, there was a boom of animanga magical girls directed at male *otaku* audiences, associated with the increasing popularity of *moé*. In 2011, *Mahō Shōjo Madoka Magica*, a dark, deconstructive magical girl anime series by acclaimed writer and director Urobuchi Gen and Shinbo Akiyuki, became widely popular and brought a new depth into the genre.

**Manga** (漫画, まんが), **komikku** (コミック): literally, “whimsical or impromptu pictures,” initially referring to late-eighteenth century picture albums like the famous *Hokusai Manga*, manga is the Japanese term for comics and cartooning. With the globalization of Japanese comics, manga is also used to refer to comics produced outside Japan by non-Japanese authors working in “mangaesque” iconography and style (e.g., Euromanga, Manfra, Amerimanga, Original English Language manga, etc.). In Japan, manga is typically divided according to the age and gender of its target audience, namely, *kodomo* manga (children's comics), *shōnen* manga (boys' comics), *shōjo* manga (girls' comics), *seinen* manga (young man comics) and  *josei* manga (young woman comics), along with pornographic genres like *eromanga*, *lolicon*, *bara*, or *yaoi*. *Mangaka* is the term used to describe an artist who draws manga, usually professionalized. A writer who writes stories for manga is called *gensaku-sha*.

Manga is typically published as one-shots or serial chapters in weekly or monthly comics anthology magazines belonging to large publishing houses like Kodansha (e.g., *Weekly Shōnen Magazine*, *Nakayoshi*, *Afternoon*, *Evening*, etc.) and Shueisha (*Weekly Shōnen Jump*, *Weekly Young Jump*, *Non-no*, *Ultra Jump*), and then each individual series is collected and reprinted in higher quality as separate *tankōbon* (“separate volume”), or trade paperbacks. In Japan, reading manga is widely spread across all kinds of demographics, from young children to commuting salaryman; nevertheless, manga



magazines often specialize in different kinds of manga (e.g., *kodomo*, *shōnen*, *shōjo*, salaryman, *lolicon*, etc.), so not all manga is read by all kinds of people.

Although there is a mainstream manga style, with some unifying narrative and visual characteristics, the term “*manga*” encompasses an extremely heterogeneous, sometimes contradictory, variety of expressions. The contemporary mainstream manga style is often synonymous with visual dynamism and dynamic panel arrangements, abstract backgrounds that communicate emotions, eccentric points of view, using *mise en scène* details to control the story-telling pacing, close-ups of character’s eyes, and mini-flashbacks. In terms of visual iconography, it primarily draws on linear, black and white drawings, use of screentones (preprinted sheets with textures and shades) to produce gray tones, expressive speech balloons and drawn onomatopoeias, an extensive emotional iconography—“sweatdrops,” “embarrassment blushing,” “cross-popping veins,” “nosebleeds,” “tear lines,” “happy eyes,” “starry eyes,” 3-shaped mouths, elongated canine teeth to signify impishness or aggression, giant head-bumps to represent lesions, white band-aids to represent physical pain, faces that change shape according to the character’s emotions, and so on—and a specific character design canon: big, bright eyes regardless of external lighting, small L-shaped noses, stylized mouths reduced to lines, sculptural hair, etc. In terms of themes, manga has an endless variety of subgenres, including adventure, action, drama, romance, comedy, science fiction, historical, police, terror, erotica, food and cooking, sports, abstract, among many others.

Manga resulted from interaction and contamination between, on the one hand, cultural and historical phenomena dating back to the end of the Edo Period and the Meiji Era (nineteenth century, beginning of the twentieth century) and, on the other, a set of specific socio-political conditions occurring in the aftermath of World War II, including the influence of American comics and Walt Disney animated films. The origins of manga go back to the late nineteenth century, with Rakuten Kitazawa and Okamoto Ippei considered to be the first professional manga artists. The interwar period was a fertile ground for the development of the comics medium, namely, manga published in monthly children’s magazines like *Boys’ Club* and *Shōjo no Tomo* (“Girls’ Friend”) or in *akahon* format, i.e., cheap comics books for children, often drawn by anonymous artists and published by houses (examples of *akahon* publishers include Osaka Manga Company, The Art Company, Araki Publishing, or Enomoto Books). Influential children’s manga from the interwar period include Shishido Sako’s *Speed Taro* (1930-33), Tagawa Suihō’s

*Norakuro* (1931–81), Shimada Keizō's *Bōken Dankichi* (1933–39), Sakamoto Gajo's *Tank Tankurō* (1934), *Nazo no Clover* ("Mysterious Clover," the first *shōjo* manga, by Matsumoto Katsuji), Asahi Taro (story) and Oshiro Noboru (art)'s *Kasei Tanken* ("Expedition to Mars," 1940), and Oshiro's *Kisha Ryoko* ("A Trip by Train," 1941).

Tezuka Osamu is considered the "father" of postwar manga. Along with other seminal authors, he developed the current stylistic features of manga, crystallized in paradigmatic creations such as *Tetsuwan Atom* (*Astro Boy*), *Jungle Taitei* (*Kimba the White Lion*), and *Ribbon no Kishi* (*Princess Knight*), triggering a robust publishing industry and transforming manga into a medium consumed across genders, age groups or social class. When, in 1947, Tezuka published his first book with Sakai Shichima, *Shin Takarajima* ("New Treasure Island"), a 192-page manga credited with reigniting and developing the "story manga" and "cinematic style" pioneered in the interwar period, it sold an unprecedented 400 000 copies. Tezuka moved to Tokyo and created a core group of followers, many of whom, like Ishinomori Shotaro (*Cyborg 009*, *Kamen Rider*), Fujio Fujiko (*Doraemon*), Akatsuka Fujio (*Tensai Bakabon*, *Osomatsu-kun*) and Mizuno Hideko (*Fire!*, *Honey Honey no Suteki na Bōken*), lived and worked with Tezuka in the mythical Tokiwa-sō apartments, originating the model of a studio in which a main manga author works with the help of various assistants, that still prevails in today's manga industry.

Tezuka's success created a generation of avid readers that did not grow out of manga but continued to read it well into their adolescence and adulthood, contributing to the expansion of an industry that until then was almost exclusively directed at children. In the second half of the 1950s, the first weekly magazines emerged, like *Weekly Shōnen Magazine* and *Weekly Shōnen Sunday*, in 1959, in which comics were the main attraction; to this day, weekly and monthly magazines remain at the core of the manga industry. In turn, in 1958, Tatsumi Yoshihiro coined the term *gekiga* to describe the subgenre of alternative, "hardboiled" manga that he and other *mangaka* from Osaka had been developing since 1956 in the magazine *Kage*, often with socio-political themes. *Gekiga* fed and was fed by the boom of *kashibonya*, i.e., bookstores specialized in renting comic books (at the time, buying manga was a luxury, inaccessible for much of the population), attracting young people in their late teens, blue-collar workers, and college students, to whom reading manga was a form of rebellion. *Weekly Shōnen Jump*, a manga magazine established in 1968 that catered to a young male audience with a taste for edgier contents

than other boy-oriented magazines, became the bestselling manga magazine—a position it occupies to this day. Weekly *Shōnen Jump*'s most famous titles include, for instance, Toriyama Akira's iconic *Dragon Ball* series (1984-1995) and, more recently, *Naruto*, *One Piece* or *Bleach*.

On the other hand, the alternative manga scene continued to develop and expand in *seinen* and *avant-garde* magazines such as Nagai Katsuichi and Shirato Sanpei's *Garo* and Tezuka's *Com*. In the late 1970s and 1980s, *Garo* regularly published experimental and edgy works, directed at the intelligentsia and the counterculture, harboring different voices, from *gekiga*-style realism to the surrealist works of authors like Tsuge Yoshiharu and Hayashi Seiichi, as well as the *heta-uma* (“incompetent but good,” i.e., a deliberately “bad” or “ugly” style) movement led by artists such as King Terry and Ebisu Yoshikazu. In 1982, the *Youth Magazine* began publishing Otomo Katsuhiro's *Akira* (1982-1990), a landmark cyberpunk epic, in which, through detailed realism of representation, each panel acted as individual imaged to create, as artist Murakami Takashi puts it, a kind of meta-manga, i.e., “using manga to criticize manga.”

Parallel to *shōnen* and *seinen*, *shōjo* manga, whose target audience is young girls, was developed, especially as women authors entered into the manga industry (until the 1970s, most manga for girls was written and drawn by men). The magazine boom also contributed to the expansion of the genre and established many bi-weekly or monthly magazines entirely dedicated to girls' comics, such as *Ribon*, *Shōjo Comic*, *Margaret*, *Hana to Yume*, *LaLa*, and others. Authors like Takahashi Macoto (*Sakura Namiki*, 1957, *Tokyo-Paris*, 1959) developed innovative layouts for expressing impressionistic rhythms and emotions, along with the (in)famous *shōjo* manga eyes, that kept getting bigger, brighter, and more starry during the 1960s, creating a stark contrast with the more stylized characters of *shōnen* manga and *gekiga*'s realistic style. In the 1970s, a group of female artists known as the Year 24 Group or the Fabulous Forty-Niners (as they were born in or around the year of 1949), revolutionized the genre. Artists like Hagio Moto (*Poe no Ichizoku*, *Tōma no Shinzō*, *Jūichinin Iru!*), Takemiya Keiko (*Kaze to Ki no Uta*, *Terra e*), Ikeda Riyoko (*Versaille no Bara*), Ōshima Yumiko (*Banana Bread Pudding*, *Wata no Kuni Hoshi*), Aoike Yasuko (*Eroica Yori Ai o Komete*), and Yamagishi Ryōko (*Shiroi Heya no Futari*, *Hi Izuru Tokoro no Tenshi*, *Terpsichora*), among others, rejected the limitations imposed on gender, exploring new themes and styles, and testing the frontiers of sexual identity and the comics medium alike.

The quality of these works expanded their readership beyond the original target audience, capturing the attention of critics and adult men and women. With the thematic and stylistic diversification and an increasing number of readers, *shōjo* as a whole became more flexible, even breaking the taboos in more sophisticated mainstream romantic comedies. The result was a growing number of *shōjo* subgenres, like *mahō shōjo*, boy's love, yaoi, horror, mystery, sci-fi, sports, etc. with their specialized magazines, that characterize the contemporary *shōjo* manga landscape today.

**Mecha** (メカ): a contraction of the English word “mechanism.” In a broad sense, it is used to refer to any robot or science fiction machine; in a narrower sense, used by manga and anime fans in the West, it describes a mechanical kind of vehicle, typically, a giant, biped, humanoid, single-pilot, combat-oriented robot with sword-like weapons or cannons. The term is also used to describe the animanga genre in which this type of vehicle plays a central role in the argument and aesthetics of the series. One of the most popular examples of this genre is the *Mobile Suit Gundam* franchise.

**Murakami Takashi** (村上 隆): the Japanese art impresario, artist, curator, and author, born in 1962 in Tokyo, known for coining, popularizing, and forefronting the Japanese postmodern art movement Superflat. Murakami attended the Tokyo University of the Arts and holds a Ph.D. in Nihonga (traditional-style Japanese painting). In 1996, he founded the Hiropon Factory, an art production workshop, incorporated in 2001 in the art production and management company Kaikai Kiki, of which he is the founder and president, and which manages the careers of younger Japanese artists like Mr., Takano Aya, Aoshima Chiho, and others. Murakami curated the Superflat trilogy of group shows from 2000 to 2005 (*Superflat*, *Coloriage*, *Little Boy*) and published *Superflat* (2000) and *Little Boy*, two book-manifestos of Superflat aesthetics. He was also the founder of the biannual GEISAI art fair in Japan, which is presently organized by Kaikai Kiki.

Murakami works across a broad range of media, from painting and sculpture to video and installation, and has created various recognizable characters, including DOB, the laughing flowers, Kaikai, Kiki, or Inochi-kun. His works often deal with themes of “indigenous” Japanese pop culture, like anime, manga, *kawaii* (cute), and *otaku* sexuality (*Hiropon*, 1997, and *My Lonesome Cowboy*, 1998, are two of Murakami’s most known creations in this respect). Murakami has collaborated extensively with Western celebrities and brand, such as Louis Vuitton, Kanye West, Pharrell Williams, Kirsten Dunst, Britney Spears,

among others. He also embraces new communication platforms, being highly active on *Instagram* (takashipom).

**New materialism:** an umbrella term originating in the late 1990s for a conceptual framework stressing the tangible but complex materialities of living and non-living bodies immersed in social power relations. New materialism stems from cultural, social and feminist theory, including a plethora of approaches by scholars of heterogeneous backgrounds.

Leading new materialist scholars include Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Iris van der Tuin, and Jussi Parikka.

**Moé** (萌え): a polysemic concept known for being difficult to describe, but intuitive for the *otaku* to understand. Resulting from the synergy of Japanese and Western animanga fandoms, the contemporary meaning of the term *moé* indexes both a general love for fictional characters (i.e., an emotional reaction aroused in fans) and a specific type of cuteness (that tends to stimulate such responses), namely, “little sister” or “daughter”-like characters for whom one roots, as well as the genre of anime, manga, and videogames revolving around these characters. Containing *moé* characters, however, does not necessarily make an anime or manga *moé*. *Moé* animanga is focused primarily on the *moé*-ness of characters, often in a slice of life CGDCT (“cute girls doing cute things”) or magical girl setting. Characters in *moé* anime and manga are typically *loli* and *moé* is closely related to the *waiifu* phenomenon among male *otaku* audiences.

As a slang word, *moé* is thought to have emerged online in Japanese textboards in the late 1990s. The term encompasses an etymological duplicity: the verb *moeru*, from which the noun *moé* derives, is pronounced the same whether it refers to 燃える, meaning “to burn” or “to get excited about,” or 萌える, meaning “to bud” or “to sprout.” It is said that Japanese word processors would mistakenly convert one into the other. Although “pure” *moé* animanga is mostly innocent, due to the historically specific circumstances of Japanese *otaku* culture, *moé* is often considered to be the spiritual heir of *lolicon* manga, as the latter morphed into a more palatable, desexualized form, and many grey zones remain between the two. When *moé* characters lack any distinctive features beyond a high percentage of cuteness, they are derogatorily called “*moé* blobs.”

In Japan, *moé* animanga and merchandise is an industry with its codified a repertoire of stock “-dere” and “-kko” characters: *meganekko* (“glasses-wearing girl”), *tsundere*

(“angry on the outside, lovey-dovey on the inside”), *kūdere* (“cool on the outside, lovey-dovey on the inside”), *dandere* (“emotionally stunned on the outside, lovey-dovey on the inside”), *gandere* (cute but likes guns), *darudere* (cute and sluggish), *nyandere* (cat-related cute), *yangire* (cute but psycho), *yandere* (lovesick but psycho), *otenba* (“tomboy”), *ojōsama* and so on. *Moé* can also be situational or associated with mannerisms, certain types of outfit (e.g., sailor school uniform), relational or speech patterns, and even cute onomatopoeia like *kyun*. Iconic *moé* animanga include, for instance, *Azumanga Daioh*, *Lucky Star*, *K-On!*, *YuruYuri*, *Nichijou*, or *Yotsuba&!*.

***Moé gijinka*** (萌え擬人化) or ***moé anthropomorphism***: in animanga terminology, a humorous trope in which all kinds of animals, concepts, objects, places, machines, technologies, or brands, are turned into anime girls by attributing them *moé* qualities and cosplay-like accessories that highlight their nature previous to anthropomorphosis. Part of the humor of *moé* anthropomorphism is the character’s satirical personality and the arbitrariness of characterizing a living and nonliving entities as *kawaii*.

**Murakami, Takashi**: See Superflat.

***Nihonjinron*** (日本人論): literally, “theories about the Japanese,” it is a genre of non-fiction texts discussing issues of Japanese national and cultural identity and how Japan and the Japanese should be understood. These books are typically written by Japanese authors, for Japanese audiences.

**.onion**: see **Dark Web**.

***Otaku*** (オタク): a Japanese term *grosso modo* similar to “geek” or “nerd” in the West, which came into widespread circulation in the mid to late 1980s (columnist and editor Nakamori Akio is often credited with popularizing the term in 1983). In Japan, “*otaku*” describes someone obsessed with a specific subject or hobby. Internationally, it has become associated with the Japanese subculture of superfans obsessed with comics, animation, *tokusatsu*, videogames, or *aidoru*. In Japanese, お宅 (“*o-taku*”) is an honorific for “you,” originating from 宅 (*taku*, “house,” “home,” “family”), meaning, as a slang, that those with obsessive interests are not used to having a social life and therefore are excessively formal when engaging in interpersonal relationships. The Tokyo neighborhood of Akihabara is considered to be the Mecca of the *otaku* subculture, where the biggest retailers of manga, anime, merchandise, and other *otaku*-oriented venues (e.g., maid cafés) can be found. Female *otaku* are known as *otome* (“maiden,” “young lady”),

and hang around the “*otome road*” in Tokyo’s Ikebukuro district, whose manga and anime stores are mostly aimed at women. The Comic Market or Comiket, beginning in 1975 and held biannually at the Tokyo Big Sight, is the *otaku* and *otome* event par excellence.

Although *otaku* culture is often seen as youth culture, the first generation of *otaku* is composed of individuals born in the late 50s and early 60s, now in their 40s and 50s, so far from being a recent phenomenon, it is a subculture with deep roots in Japanese postwar society. *Otaku* culture is typically divided into three or four generations. The first generation, composed by individuals born around in the 1960s, spent their childhood and adolescence watching anime shows like *Space Battleship Yamato* and *Mobile Suit Gundam*, and are those whose interests fall more heavily on science fiction and B-movies. The second *otaku* generation, born during the 1970s, lived in a period of industry consolidation and expansion that brought about a new diversity of genres, approaches, and resources; this generation consumed manga like *Dragon Ball* or *Akira*. The third *otaku* generation of the 1990s watched anime like *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and *Sailor Moon* while attending elementary or secondary school. The fourth, prospective *otaku* generation, born in the late 1990s and 2000s, is currently living their adolescence with Web 2.0 and social media, at a time when *otaku* culture has become a globalized phenomenon.

One of the incidents that most marked the history of *otaku* culture was the arrest of Miyazaki Tsutomu, a serial killer who raped, murdered, and mutilated the bodies of four little girls. In Miyazaki’s room, they found a collection of anime, manga, and slasher films, which prompted the mass media to nickname him “the *otaku* killer.” The incident put the term “*otaku*” in the limelight and created a moral panic around the members of the subculture, considered by many commentators to be an army of potential assassins-in-waiting. This sparked a heated debate on the decline of Japanese values, the permissive education of modern parents, and the threat posed by a new generation immersed in the fantasy world of “hazardous” comics and cartoons. From 1989 onwards, the *otaku* stopped being mostly invisible, as they had been so far in Japanese society, to become personae non gratae; consequently, a wave of *otaku* bashing began that translated into raiding of bookstores by the Japanese authorities, arrests, dismantling of underground *dōjinshi* distribution circles, and tighter content control and censorship.

On the other hand, this generated a reaction on the part of the *otaku*—suddenly hyper-conscious of their group identity—that instead of rejecting the label “*otaku*,” began to use

it deliberately to describe themselves, reinforcing a positive feeling of group membership, often to the point of self-absorbed snobbery. An example of this was the reclamation of the *otaku*'s “*dame*-orientation” (the Japanese word “*dame*” meaning “useless,” “hopeless,” “purposeless”), i.e., the *otaku*'s attraction towards things that are “no good” (including, but not limited to, pedophilic drawings and cartoons). In the 2000s, there began to emerge shifting perceptions of the *otaku*, that “re-humanized” the members of this subculture and even made them icons of Japanese cool around the world. This was both the result of Cool Japan policies, popular television series like the live-action *dorama* *Densha Otoko* (2005), and influencers like blogger Danny Choo, who launched the book series *Otacool* (starting in 2010), featuring photographs of *otaku* rooms across the globe and their collections. In the academia, critics such as Otsuka Eiji, Okada Toshio, and Murakami Takashi refashioned the *otaku* as heirs to traditional Japanese culture like *kabuki*, *bunraku* puppet theater, and so on, or praised their role in the “indigenization” or “domestication” of foreign (mostly, American) culture.

**Parasite single** (ラサイトシングル, *parasaito shinguru*): In Japan, the term “parasite single” is used to describe an unmarried person, typically a woman, who lives in their parents' house throughout their 20s and 30s (sometimes 40s). Unlike NEETs, parasite singles often pursue a stable career but choose to spend their incomes on material goods, refusing to marry and raise a family.

**Seifuku** (制服): the Japanese school uniform used in many Japanese public and private schools until entry to the university (although in some women's colleges the use of uniform remains mandatory). Commonly, schools have a summer model and a winter model.

The Japanese school uniform was introduced into the education system at the end of the nineteenth century, with a model derived from military uniforms of the Meiji era, in turn, shaped in the image of European navy uniforms. Later, Japanese schools also introduced and adopted models inspired by Western school uniforms, e.g., blazers with the school emblem, bows for girls or ties for boys, and white shirts or blouses. Students often personalize their seifuku by upping or lowering the hem of the skirt, ditching the tie or bow, etc.).



*Gakuran* (“Dutch uniform”) or *tsume-eri* is the term used to describe the traditional school uniform for male students, inspired by the Prussian military uniform, usually in black or dark blue with buttons inscribed with the school emblem.

*Sērāfuku* (“*sērā*” from “sailor”) is the term used to describe the traditional female school uniform introduced in the 1920s, designed in the image of the British Royal Navy uniforms. As a rule, it consists of a blouse with a collar reminiscent of navy uniforms, a type of V-necktie, pleated skirt, with colors that usually range from blue, gray, black or green, and knee-length socks, generally in shades of white or blue. In the context of the *otaku* subculture, the *seifuku*, in particular, *sērāfuku*, is a fetish item, and although its second-hand sale is prohibited, it can be found on the black market in underground shops known as *burusera*.

***Seinen manga*** (青年漫画): Young men’s comics. See **Manga**.

***Shōjo manga***: Girls’ comics. See **Manga**.

***Shōnen manga***: Boys’ comics. See **Manga**.

**Superflat**: a term coined by Takashi Murakami (b. 1962) to define an art movement including artists, curators, and critics emerging during the 1990s, sharing a common set of references to Japanese pop culture—mostly, anime, manga, and *kawaii* culture—and an overall attitude toward contemporary art in general and the Japanese art scene in particular. In his book-manifesto *Superflat* (2000), Murakami emphasizes the trans-historical character of superflatness, which he applies to the characteristics and contradictions of postwar westernized Japan. According to him, for instance, the influential style of 1980s animator Kanada Yoshinori continues the expressionist and decorative style of what art historian Nobuo Tsuji calls an “eccentric lineage” of artists of the Edo Period (namely, Iwasa Matabei, Kano Sansetsu, Ito Jakuchu, Soga Shohaku, Nagasawa Rosetsu, and Utagawa Kuniyoshi). For Murakami, Superflat is also an extension of this lineage.

On the other hand, Murakami highlights a set of factors influencing the development of Japanese art in the second half of the twentieth century, that contributed to the emergence of Superflat. These include the instability of the concept of “art” in postwar Japan, resulting from the confusion between the traditional terms *geijutsu* and *bijutsu* and the Western notion of art; the promiscuity between art and entertainment, epitomized by the Expo 70 in Osaka; the association of “freedom” with shallowness instead of self-

knowledge in Japanese society; the general understanding of the avant-garde as a subculture, and the subculturization of the avant-garde; and Japan's infantilized status in relation to the United States of America. Murakami also lists several topics that make up his superflat image of Japan and which serve as a conceptual background to the various artistic manifestations within the movement, including an eccentric, secular and grotesque Japanese subculture, meaningless hierarchy, celebrations and media frenzy, eroticism and grotesque, *otaku* and manga, freedom and childishness, pop, cheap ticket (an allusion to the first time that the Japanese were able to travel abroad, which had a significant impact on the relationship between Japanese youth and the West), the West, History, and Art.

Although Superflat and Neo-Pop—the name for the broader movement in Japan influenced by Pop Art and pop-cultural imagery, not necessarily under Murakami's banner—are united stylistically by the use of Japanese pop iconography, the result differs significantly from artist to artist. Artists like Murakami, Mr. (pseudonym of Iwamoto Masakatsu), Aoshima Chiho, Miyake Shintaro and Hasegawa Jun are more direct and strategic in their borrowing of animanga visuals, while Nara Yoshitomo, Takano aya, Kuwahara Masahiko, Ban Chinatsu or Kudo Makiko explore their more manual, lyrical and intimate side. Others, like Murata Yuko, Aoki Ryoko, Hosoya Yuiko, Murase Kyoko, Sugito Hiroshi, and Yanobe Kenji, share an interest in cute aesthetics less linked to comics.

In the West, the Superflat movement was marked by three major group exhibitions—manifesto curated by Murakami. Namely, *Superflat* (2001) at the MOCA in Los Angeles, *Coloriage* (2002) at Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain in Paris, and *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture* (2005) at the Japan Society, in New York.

***Tareme*** (タレ目), ***tsurime*** (つり目): two shapes of anime eye design, used to represent opposite character types. *Tareme* are droopy puppy-dog eyes meant to represent a character's inner softness and kind-heartedness. In turn, the outer corners of *tsurime* slant upwards, giving it a sharp or pointed look, signifying the harshness of a *tsundere* character.

***Tarento*** (タレント): from the English word “talent,” Japanese celebrities who are primarily known for appearances on television. While *tarento* often begin their careers as singers or comedians, their most important quality is cuteness (for female stars) and

charisma (for male stars). Contrary to traditional actors or singers, *tarento* do not need to act or sing well, as they are mostly famous for being famous.

**Tokusatsu** (特撮): meaning “special effects,” Japanese films or live-action television series with superhero teams and special effects. The *kaiju* (literally, “strange animal”) monster film is one of the most popular subgenres, carried out by monstrous creatures, like *Gojira*, *Mosura*, *Angirasu*, *Radon* or *Gamera*. Popular *tokusatsu* shows *Kamen Rider*, *Metal Heroes*, *Giant Robo*, *Ultraman*, and *Super Sentai*.

**Tsundere** (ツンデレ): in animanga terminology, a hot-cold personality type, used to describe characters who are overtly hostile on the outside, but warm, friendly or lovestruck on the inside. The word is a portmanteau of the *tsun tsun* (ツンツン), meaning “to turn away in disgust,” and *dere dere* (デレデレ), meaning “lovey-dovey.” The term initially referred to the gradual development, over time, of a character in a show which starts as “bad” or hostile but eventually becomes somewhat “good” and affectionate. The present meaning of *tsundere*, however, has shifted to encompass characters who are double-faced from the get-go, discarding the term’s temporality or transition.

Related personality types include *kūdere* (cold outside, sweet inside), *dandere* (apathetic outside, sweet inside), *tsundra* (cruel or merciless outside, sweet inside), *darudere* (sluggish outside, sweet inside), or *himedere* (arrogant, snob or posh outside, sweet inside).

**Tumblr**: a microblogging and social networking website founded in 2007 by David Karp. The dashboard, a live feed showing the posts of the blogs one follows, is *Tumblr*’s primary feature. Besides posting original content, users mostly like or reblog posts from other *Tumblrs*. *Tumblr* became a popular hub for fandoms, the Internet social justice movement, and subcultures. Although its popularity is said to have declined in the second half of the 2010s and, particularly, after its ban on nudity and pornography, starting in 2018, it remains a significant presence on the Internet.

**Ukiyo-e** (浮世絵): literally, “images of the floating world,” an influential school of woodcut and painting that emerged in Japan in the early seventeenth century, linked to the emergence of urban-bourgeois culture and the depiction of daily and hedonistic themes. The recurring motifs, especially in the engraving, were scenes from the world of popular entertainment (courtesans, sumo wrestlers, actors) and, later, landscapes and scenes containing explicit sexual content, known as *shunga* although, the latter were

banned. In the 1760s, the first polychromatic *ukiyo-e*, called *nishiki-e* (“brocade images”) appeared. Japanese *ukiyo-e* masters include Moronobu Hishikawa, Harunobu Suzuki, Utamaro Kitagawa, Hokusai Katsushika, and Hiroshige Utagawa.

**Uncanny valley** (不気味の谷, *bukimi no tani*): in the field of robotics and 3D animation, the uncanny valley or *bukimi no tani* refers to a hypothesis, first formulated by Japanese roboticist Mori Masahiro in 1970, that there is a point along the scale which separates the machine from the human in which robots look almost, but not entirely, like a human being, provoking mixed feelings of attraction and repulsion. The hypothesis is visually described by an upward curve, which corresponds to an increase in familiarity with the automaton as it becomes more humanized, followed by a steep fall, which corresponds to the “uncanny valley,” which rises again to as we approach the 100% human or the perfect android.

**Vaporwave**: an Internet-bred aesthetic emerging in the early 2010s from chillwave, including music, fashion, and art. Vaporwave was popularized by electronic musicians like Oneohtrix Point Never (under the alias Chuck Person), Vectroid (namely, with the album *Floral Shoppe*, released under the alias Macintosh Plus), or Blank Banshee, who combined sampling and chopped and screwed techniques with lounge and elevator music, smooth jazz, R&B, and so on. As a critique and appreciation of postmodernity and cyber capitalism, nostalgic mass culture, and corporate aesthetics, vaporwave often includes references to Japanese anime and advertisement.

**Visual kei**: literally “visual style,” a subgenre of J-rock (Japanese rock) by bands whose image and appearance is as important as their music. Visual *kei* bands are typically characterized by theatrical poses, heavy make-up, eccentric hairstyles, and extravagant clothes, often combined with an androgynous look reminiscent of animanga characters. Musically, the main influences are glam rock, hard rock, and metal. Classic visual *kei* bands include X Japan, Versailles, Malice Mizer, Glay, or Luna Sea.

**Visual novel** (ビジュアルノベル, *bijuaru noberu*): a form of interactive fiction emerging in Japan in the 1990s, with similarities with Western-style adventure videogames, but characterized by a significant emphasis on the “passive” reading of a script and watching illustrations, with few points where the player interacts with the game—as opposed to the point-and-click puzzle-solving model in adventure games. The typical visual novel includes rotating backgrounds and character sprites, a textbox with

the scripted narration, background music, and character voiceovers, along with multiple endings and story branches, which change according to players' choices at crucial moments of the game.

The visual novel medium coevolved alongside *ero*ge (“erotic games”) and *bishōjo* games (i.e., dating simulators), and it is sometimes hard to establish clear-cut distinctions among the three. Many classic visual novels are adult visual novels containing erotic or pornographic content, for instance, Leaf’s *Shizuku* and *Kizuato*, that coined the term “visual novel” in 1996, or *To Heart* (1996), the first bestselling visual novel that crossed into the mainstream, with its theme song appearing in karaoke machines across Japan. Subgenres of the visual novel include the *nakige* (“crying game”) and *ustuge* (“depressing game”) in which the point is, respectively, to make the player cry with emotional melodrama (e.g., Tactics’s *One: Kagayaku Kisetsu e*, 1998) or depress them with no happy endings and hopeless scenarios (e.g. Nitroplus’s *Saya no Uta*). The classic visual novel trilogy consists of Key’s *Kanon* (1999), *Air* (2000), and *Clannad* (2004). Other popular visual novels include *Higurashi no Naku Koro ni* (2002), Type-Moon’s *Fate/stay night* (2004), Key’s *Little Busters!* (2007), or Nitroplus and 5pb’s *Steins; Gate* (2009).

**Vocaloid** (ボーカロイド, *Bōkaroido*): from “vocal” and “android,” a text-to-speech voice synthesizer developed by Yamaha, that uses recorded phonemes by a human speaker to create “vocal fonts.” By entering syllables into an editor, allocating them musical notes, and modulating the voice through a set of options, VOCALOID end users can generate realistic singing clips. In short, Vocaloids are editable singers, originally used as background voices in professional music production, before spawning the phenomenon of crowd-sourced virtual idols like Hatsune Miku (meaning “first sound of the future”), launched in 2007 by the Japanese company Crypton Future Media.

**Waifu** (ワイフ): the Japanese transliteration of the English word “wife,” in animanga and fandom slang, a *waifu* is a female character, typically from anime, manga, or videogames, to which one is attracted and who one considers to be their significant other—often translating into the building of merchandise shrines devoted to the character in one’s bedroom. The term *waifu* conveys the male *otaku*’s possessive attitude toward characters and is associated with the *moé* phenomenon; Izumi Konata, the protagonist of the *moé* animanga series *Lucky Star*, is the prototypical *waifu*. The *waifu* has originated several Internet memes about lonely *otaku* in love with fictional girlfriends, such as Dinner with *Waifu*. The male equivalent of *waifu* is *husbando* (“husband”).

**Weeaboo, weeb:** from “wannabe Japanese” or “Wapanese,” it is an Internet slur for a non-Japanese person, typically from Europe or the United States, who is obsessed with Japanese pop culture, e.g., manga, anime, videogames, or *aidoru*. Contrary to “simple” fans, weeaboos are thought of as engaging in annoying and gratuitous Japanophile behavior, like blurting animanga soundbites (“*sugoi*,” “*kawaii*,” “*desu*”) or ostensibly wearing animanga merchandise.

**Wota:** See *Aidoru*.

**Y2K aesthetics:** refers to a specific look fashionable from the mid-90s to the early 2000s, coincident with the dotcom bubble and preceding the “war on terror” after 9/11. *The Guardian* writer Alexander Leigh describes it as such: “Synthetic or metallic-looking materials, inflatable furniture, moon-boot footwear, and alien-inspired hairstyles were just a few signposts of the spirit of the age. Even popular music videos of the time had a cluster of common traits: shiny clothes, frosty hues, setpieces that resembled airlocks or computer interfaces, and a briefly omnipresent ‘bubble pop’ sound effect -- almost as if the music charts could foretell the end of the dotcom age.” The popular *Tumblr* blog *Institute for Y2K Aesthetics* is often credited with coining and disseminating the term.

**Yamanba** (ヤマンバ), **manba** (マンバ): a “mountain witch” from Japanese folklore and Noh theatre, to date the most extreme expression of the *gyaru* subculture. *Yamanba* upped the contrast in *ganguro* fashion by adding “tribal” face paintings (white streaks on the nose, larger white circles around the eyes reaching down to the cheeks), bushy hair with rainbow-colored extensions (sometimes using wool to emulate dreadlocks), facial stickers, nail art with complicated and often ridiculously long and clunky miniaturized ornaments, coloured contact lenses, temporary tattoos, fluo and metalized clothing, Hawaiian leis, cowboy hats, and other incongruous accessories creating a garish getup in which Western and ethnic signifiers magnified and distorted beyond recognition.

*Yamanba* and *manba* styles are distinguished by the placing of makeup above or below the eyes. The *mamba* style peaked from 2004 and 2008.

**Yonkoma manga** (コマ漫画): literally, “four-panel manga,” a format generally associated with gag or humourous manga, composed of four panels of the same size arranged vertically from top to bottom. It is a Japanese equivalent of the comic strip.

As a genre, *yonkoma* manga is a form of gag manga introduced in the early 1900s by the first professional cartoonist in Japan, Rakuten Kitazawa, considered the founding father

of modern manga along with Okamoto Ippei. Rakuten was influenced by Western-style political caricature of pioneering cartoonists such as Frank Nankivell and Frederick Opper and published his comic strips and cartoons in Japanese weekly newspapers like *Box of Curios* and his magazine *Tokyo Puck*, founded in 1905. After World War II, the first women to work as a cartoonist in Japan, Hasegawa Machiko, authored the *yonkoma* manga series *Sazae-san*, comprised of light-hearted vignettes from the everyday life of a housewife, which became extremely popular, running in the national newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* for nearly 30 years. In the 1990s, the *yonkoma* series *Tonari no Yamada-Kun* (later renamed *Nono-chan*) by Ishii Hisaichi began serialization in *Asahi Shimbun* and continues to run to this day, having been adapted into the animated feature film *My Neighbors the Yamadas* (1999) by Studio Ghibli.

In the 2000s, there was a boom of *yonkoma* manga targeted at *otaku* audiences, including series such as *Azumanga Daioh* (1999-2002), *Sketchbook* (since 2002), *Lucky Star* (since 2004), *Hidamari Sketch* (since 2004), *Potemayo* (2004-11), *Working!!* (since 2005), *Sweet Valerian* (since 2005), *Yurumates* (since 2005), *Hetalia: Axis Powers* (since 2006), *A-Channel* (since 2008), *K-On!* (2007-12), *Kill Me Baby* (since 2008), *Yuyushiki* (since 2008), *Shiba Inuko-san* (since 2010), *Wakaba Girl* (2010-13), *Gekkan Shōjo Nozaki-kun* (since 2001), and *Tsurezure Children* (2014-18).

**Yaoi:** see **Boy's Love**.

**Yurui** (緩い), **yuru kyara** (ゆるキャラ): from the words *yurui* and *kyarakuta* ("character"), *yuru kyara* is the term coined by illustrator Miura Jun to describe cute characters found throughout Japan, designed by local artists to promote specialties, attractions, and tourism, or regional organizations and events. They have "weak," unpretentious designs which, according to Miura and Murakami Takashi, are the key for their success as public relations tools.

Initially, the adjective *yurui* orbits around notions like "loose," "mild," "free," "moist," "lacking in firmness," or "without tension." Recently, *yurui* has acquired the additional meaning of "undemanding," "tolerant," "relaxed," "lazy," "languid," "listless," "inattentive," or "disinterested." It is used as an antonym of "severe" and, in a broader sense, of the accelerated, relentless and competitive lifestyle that Japan has epitomized since the postwar economic miracle. It can also elicit connotations such as an "adorable failure" and "self-deprecating humor," both with a positive meaning, reflecting a

sympathy towards the underdog that the *kawaii* also evokes (in the sense of “pitiful” or “helpless”).



# **APPENDIX II**

## **FIGURES**

**VIEW AND DOWNLOAD THE PORTFOLIO AT:**

**<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1wZY3MWUH2FZRJUKFOdhZK-9FnTxOH-uF>**

# **APPENDIX III**

## **PORTFOLIO**

**VIEW AND DOWNLOAD THE FIGURES AT:**

**[https://drive.google.com/open?id=1q1C7pw76LknnUL7\\_s3usMbp2e8iXWubW](https://drive.google.com/open?id=1q1C7pw76LknnUL7_s3usMbp2e8iXWubW)**