

# IN THE REALM OF SIGNS: HYBRIDISM IN JAPANESE EVERYDAY LIFE

ROBERTA NOVIELLI

On 23 and 24 July 1942 the literary critics and members of the *Bungakkai* literary journal Kamei Katsuichirō, Kawakami Tetsutarō and Kobayashi Hideo organized in Tokyo the Symposium “Overcoming Modernity” (*Kindai no chōkoku*).<sup>1</sup> Some of the Japanese leaders in the fields of art, literature, history, philosophy, music, cinema and science took part in this long marathon, contributing with panels on eleven issues: the “Modern Meaning of the Renaissance”, “Modernity in Science”, the “Link Between Science and God”, “Our Modernity”, “Modern Japanese Music”, “History: The Mutable and the Immutable”, “The Problem of Civilization and Specialization”, the “Essence of Civilization and Enlightenment in the Meiji Period”, the “West Within Us”, “Americanism and Modernism”, and “Possibilities for Present-Day Japanese”.

The two terms that were most discussed at the symposium were “enlightenment” and “civilization” which translate the *bunmei kaika* slogan of the Meiji period (1868-1912), both intended as being responsible for the corruption of the true “Japanese spirit” of the past. But even if most participants stressed the urge of exalting the traditional values which could better restore the “true Japaneseness”, some elements suggested that their society had already been deeply and ineluctably changing.

Almost all the participants were experts in French literature or in German philosophy, which seemed to enforce their refusal for English and American influences and, at the same time, to provide theoretical instruments for mapping back the historical development of their own cultural fields.

Searching for the genuine aesthetical values of Japan, for example, the writer Hayashi Fusao emphatically evoked: “Japanese literature, return to your true nature! You are the progeny of the country. You are the valiant son who, born from your country, can now exalt it. You must succeed to the proper lineage and genealogy of Japanese literature.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, he was referring to the Heian period (794-1185), centuries before the first contacts

with the West.

The music critic Moroi Saburō reacted to this position asserting: “the pursuit of the [Japanese] classics *must not be* simply retrospective. The notion that ‘things are good because they are old’ is tantamount to antiquarianism; it is impossible to see any creativity here. In our pursuit of the classics, *we should adopt* the attitude of ‘restoration is renewal’, for any simply reactionary or retrospective attitude *must be* thoroughly avoided”.<sup>3</sup> With this answer, he was demonstrating that a true Japanese spirit was still alive in contemporary Japan, just like it had been in the past.

Besides asserting the “true Japanese spirit” and refusing the Western influences with a geo-political definition of modernity in Japan, the symposium had produced an interesting effect, melting the elitist and academic culture with the industrial production of culture itself, analyzing the effects of this “third culture” in society. For example, film critic Tsumura Hideo believed that overcoming modernity meant refusing the techno-commercial American mass culture imported through Hollywood cinema, but at the same time he tried to re-evaluate Japan’s own mass culture. In this field, a fusion between American and Japanese distinctive traits paved the way to a hybridism which was soon going to spread all over the country, thus becoming the utmost evidence of the Westernization of Japan.

Since ancient times, Japan’s eclecticism in absorbing elements from different cultures has represented a sign of what we now define as glocalization (global localization) and even pre-postmodernism, given the tendency to host foreign influences while still preserving an intact cultural basis. This is partly due to the peculiar way innovation spreads throughout Japan, which greatly differs from the West for its “implicit communication”. It is up to the observer to interpret the correct meaning of what is presented, catching the surfacing signs and inventing the most suitable way to adapt them to life. According to the psychologists John R. Weisz, Fred M. Rothbaum and Thomas C. Blackburn, the American influence on Japan is due to America’s “primary control” (acting on the environment in order to influence it), while Japan’s absorbing culture is closer to the concept of “secondary control” (adjusting oneself to one’s circumstances). They also add that “Americans have more frequent and psychologically more potent opportunities to influence their surroundings, whereas Japanese have more frequent and psychologically more potent opportunities to adjust to their surroundings”.<sup>4</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that the American impact on Japanese culture after the occupation had not been so shocking and, quoting Kawai Kazuo, “after the inevitable misunderstandings,

frustrations, friction, and reaction, it could still be said that, on balance, no occupation of an enemy country in all history had turned out to be such a happy surprise at this one for both the conqueror and the conquered".<sup>5</sup>

Before the war, Japanese industrial design had mainly been influenced by the European taste, even if strongly linked to the old tradition of craftsmanship, but during and following the occupation the attention shifted towards the American lifestyle, which fascinated but also intimidated the average Japanese. It was especially thanks to the diffusion of TV in Japan from 1953 onwards that the American middle-class way of life exerted a great influence in the country, also because most of the TV programs imported from the U.S. provided models which easily broke through the Japanese audience. In particular, products as electrical appliances and automobiles became the engine for urban consumerism. In the 1950s the middle-class "desire" coincided with the three treasures or the "three Ss" — *senpuki*, *sentakuki*, and *suihanki* (the electric fan, the washing machine, and the electric rice cooker); in the 1960s, the "three Cs": a car, a cooler (air conditioner), and a color television, replaced by the "three Js" in the late 1970s, *jūero*, *jetto* and *jūtaku* (jewels, jetting and house). All these items, excluding jetting, were associated to possession, the core of the American ideal as seen from a Japanese perspective.

Even food was influenced by the same kind of image: during the 1960s and the 1970s, in various television programs chefs who owned a restaurant were invited to explain how they had founded their business, how they managed it and what kind of presentation of the food they had planned. Food itself was gradually associated with the possession of a range of tools and a rich kitchen equipment, like the ones which recalled the American happy family, including a mix of older items, such as the kitchen chopstick *saibashi*, the frying pan for *takoyaki* or the bamboo draining basket, daily used together with electric appliances such as rice cookers and microwave ovens.

A long series of icons were imported from America, often associated with peculiar goals to achieve, such as fitness, beauty, romance or freedom. Many Japanese firms had to conform to the new strategies to attract consumers. When Japanese economy began to grow at the beginning of the 1960s, foreigners (usually young models) began appearing in Japanese ads, and in a second moment Hollywood celebrities were chosen, especially associated with fashion, food and cosmetics. One of the first actors to impersonate the new Japanese fashion was Charles Bronson with a TV commercial for the Mandom perfume in the early 1970s, soon followed by other prestigious names publicizing other brands: David Niven, Paul Newman, Alain Delon, Peter Fonda, Sofia Loren and

hundreds more, including Woody Allen and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Most of them generally had to say just a few short lines in English, only to confer an exotic atmosphere to the product.

An emblematic example is represented by the oldest brewing and distilling Japanese company, Suntory (established in Osaka in 1899 with the name Kotobukiya), producer of the first single malt whisky made in Japan. In 1961 Suntory launched a special campaign with the slogan “let’s drink Tory’s and go to Hawaii”, giving the audience a rare chance to make their dream become true. The same year Suntory whisky became the first Japanese whisky to be approved for registration in the United States. While ideally exporting the Japanese production abroad, in the early 1970s Suntory began “importing” famous American celebrities to advertise their product. Foreign personalities in the Suntory ads were associated to different items, almost representing a kind of “label” of the product itself. For example, a Sammy Davis Jr. commercial at the beginning of the 1970s was associated with the “white label – Suntory Owaito” whisky, with an evident effect of humor. Since whisky is originally a Western product, the American celebrities added a touch of authenticity, to certify that the middle-class Japanese man was now fond of whisky like a westerner.

Once the image of “original Japanese whisky” was consolidated, a new campaign contributed to demonstrate that it was ready to compete on an international market. Kurosawa Akira directed a series of commercials on the set of *Kagemusha, the Shadow Warrior* (1980), one of which starring Francis Ford Coppola and Kurosawa himself (Coppola and George Lucas had helped to raise the money for this film). Sofia Coppola’s *Lost in translation* represents a homage to that campaign, since the main character is an American actor (played by Bill Murray) who goes to Japan to advertise the Suntory whisky.

As a logical consequence of the tsunami of innovation vehicled by the American products and icons, the Japanese language acquired a great number of neologisms. Here again, instead of creating native equivalents of the English terms, words were used in the original form and “absorbed” in everyday life as signs of exotic values. Many of the original words were imported in their written form and pronounced differently (*raifu wāku* for “lifework”), sometimes arbitrarily shortened (*nega* for “negative”) or even summarized (*pasokon* for “personal computer”). These neologisms were called *wasei eigo*, “Japanese manufactured English”, and their use converted into signs, neglecting the meaning and represented by the *katakana* syllables used to write them.

By the beginning of the 1970s Japan was ready to create and export its “third culture” in different products. One of the first icons to be

successfully created was the pop symbol *Hello Kitty* manufactured in 1974 by Sanrio and exported to the United States in 1976. She ambiguously represents a white cat with anthropomorphic body movements and no facial mimic. Kitty is not supposed to be Japanese when sold in Japan, where it originally was very fashionable because it was potentially westerner. Her true name is Kitty White and she was born in the suburbs of London. Her white skin was the main symbol of the West, and the complete absence of a mouth (apart from the animation series) was the strongest sign of the global effect Kitty would soon gain in the world. Sanrio asserted that Kitty had no mouth to better satisfy the people's desire to "project their feeling into the character", and in fact it was successful almost everywhere in the world, without having to modify its original design to satisfy different markets.<sup>6</sup>

Like the *Hello Kitty* phenomenon, a great success and an ambiguous sign was represented by the construction of Tokyo Disneyland in 1983, the first Disney park to be located outside the U.S., larger than the original one. It became so popular in a few years that it led to the development of sixty other theme parks across Japan. Many scholars have noticed how it symbolized Japanese post-modernization, with no reference to its Americanization. Aviad E. Raz in "Riding the Black Ship: Japan and Tokyo Disneyland" calls it a mythmaker and a re-creator of history, because of "its ideological representation of American history, commodified nostalgia, utopian space, post-modern consumer society, and audience control".<sup>7</sup> Tokyo Disneyland only simulates the American culture (popular, post-industrial, of leisure) mixing it with native myths (like ghosts), all merging from an a-geographic background, becoming something different from a parody or a reproduction of the original. If according to Jean Baudrillard "the post-modern is dominated by models of the real without origin or reality",<sup>8</sup> Tokyo Disneyland is a new land suspended between reality and imaginary.

During the 1980s, the development of communication technologies and media industries led Japan's technological hegemony to produce new icons which enforced the "third culture", mixing together Western influences, cyberpunk elements and images derived from feudal Japan. At the same time, many of Japan's semi-governmental organizations were privatized and re-territorialized their images, for example using acronyms for their Japanese-English names, such as Nihon Denshin Denwa Kōsha, the telephone monopoly, which became NTT.

In commercials, besides the foreign models who originally were either blond and associated to Americans or dark-haired and resembling Europeans, we assist to a reworking of local cultural values which are

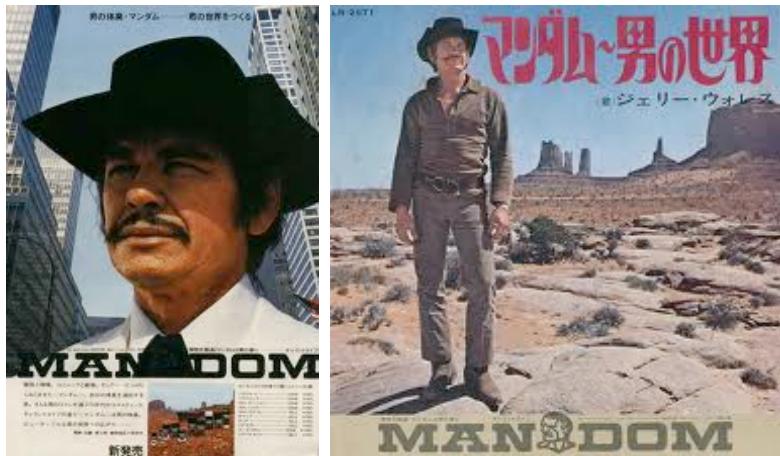
prevalently replaced by a mix of Japanese-Westerner ideals, at the same time exotic and familiar, a tendency which is still prevalent. The Japanese media industry was now turning to the Asian market adopting a new strategy. As noted by Iwabuchi Kōichi, “Japanese media industry believes that if there is anything about Japan which attracts Asian people, it is the hyperactive indigenization and domestication of ‘the West’. [...] Japanese localization strategies attempt to create local zones by gauging the practices of local media centers and their dynamic indigenization progress. These strategies that incorporate the viewpoint of the dominated, who long ago learned to negotiate Western culture in their consumption of media products imported from the West”.<sup>9</sup>

The Japanese music industry is the field where the effects of “domesticating the West” can be widely found. Each pop idol makes Western elements his own, according to his/her new image, thus becoming a hybrid idol, neither America-inspired nor truly-Japanese, but rather a sign of an indigenized West. There is no need of authenticity, but, as the British anthropologist Daniel Miller notices, local cultures are to be found “a posteriori not a priori, according to local consequences not local origins”.<sup>10</sup>

While expanding towards Asia, Japanese culture gained huge visibility in the U.S. and in Europe as well, exporting its “third culture”, and its realm of signs. One of the pioneers of this tendency was the painter Okada Kenzō, who had been particularly appreciated during the 1970s for his peculiar reinterpretation of the decorative effects of traditional Japanese painting starting from an expressionist background. Like him, the Japanese-American sculptor and designer Noguchi Isamu had long tried to link Japan and America by creating a liminal space of interaction between the two cultures. Maybe the most interesting effect of the “third culture”, springing from the influence between the American and Japanese realm of signs is represented by the “superflat” culture proposed by Murakami Takashi, especially in absence of perspective and profundity in the two-dimensional imaginary. To Murakami, this style is a criticism to the post-war Japanese society, when the a-critical absorbing of the American influence had produced an undistinguished culture, with no space for high and low.<sup>11</sup>

More than re-evaluating the “true Japanese culture”, in the last sixty years Japan has created a distinction between what can be partially mutated and what is intrinsically Japanese. In truth, not all the fields have been penetrated by outside influences. Variety shows broadcast on Japanese television have been influenced very little, and sumo, for example, has remained practically unchanged although 25 percent of the

wrestlers in the top two divisions are foreign-born. The American journalist Douglas McGray once asserted that “there exists a Japan for Japanese and a Japan for the rest of the world”,<sup>12</sup> which may suggest a new perspective for evaluating Japan’s peculiar realm of signs.



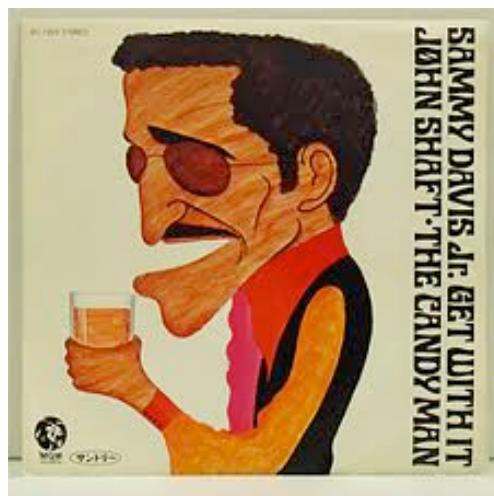
Pictures 1 and 2. Charles Bronson in a series of commercials for Mandom, a cologne from Japan created by The Mandom Corporation in the 1970s.



Picture 3. Ad for the Japanese National Television Dealer from the 1960s.



Picture 4. Suntory White commercial from the 1960s starring Sammy Davis Jr.



Picture 5. The Jacket of Sammy Davis jr.'s EP record of "Chi-ki Chi-ky Sammy".



Picture 6. Bill Murray plays the part of a testimonial for Suntory whisky ads in Sofia Coppola's 2003 film *Lost in Translation*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Full reference in Richard F. Calichman, ed., *Overcoming Modernity: Cultural Identity in Wartime Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 2

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 7. Italics included in the original text.

<sup>4</sup> John R. Weisz, Fred M. Rothbaum and Thomas C. Blackburn, "Standing Out and Standing In: The Psychology of Control in America and Japan", *American Psychologist* 39, no. 9 (1984), pp. 955-69.

<sup>5</sup> Kazuo Kawai, *Japan's American Interlude* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 1. Kawai's work is reviewed critically by Robert McNeill in *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 6, no. 2 (1962), pp. 216-8; and by Ardath Burks in *American Political Science Review* 54, no. 4 (1960), pp. 141-2.

<sup>6</sup> Chris Berry, Fran Martin and Audrey Yue, eds., *Mobile Cultures. New Media in Queer Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 172.

<sup>7</sup> Aviad E. Raz, *Riding the Black Ship: Japan and Tokyo Disneyland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. M. Poster (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 166.

<sup>9</sup> Iwabuchi Koichi, *Recentering Globalization. Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 96-7.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Shaun Moores, *Media/Theory: Thinking about Media and Communications* (New York: Routledge, 2005) p. 115.

<sup>11</sup> See Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku. Japan's Database Animals* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Douglas McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool", in Japan Society, [http://www.japansociety.org/content.cfm/gross\\_national\\_cool](http://www.japansociety.org/content.cfm/gross_national_cool) (accessed 20 May 2013).