

# Cool, Creepy, Moé: Otaku Fictions, Discourses, and Policies

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Article abstract

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# Cool, Creepy, Moé: Otaku Fictions, Discourses, and Policies

## Cool, déplaisant, Moe: Fictions Otaku, discours et politiques

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**ABSTRACT** ■ This essay looks at the *otaku* phenomenon in terms of the production of consumption (what produces consumption, and what consumption produces) primarily three registers: fictions of *otaku* that stage the repression of *otaku* desires and identities in order to form erogenous zones; cultural discourses that pathologize *otaku* consumption; and government policies related to Cool Japan that strive to reconfigure *otaku* consumption in terms of markets and self-satisfying subjects. Considering these different registers brings into a focus a neoliberal socius or social being, which allows constant intervention into everyday life in the name of the fragility of the global free market by typologizing and pathologizing consumers.

**RÉSUMÉ** ■ Cet essai porte sur le phénomène *otaku* en termes de production de la consommation (ce qui produit la consommation, et ce que la consommation produit) en examinant principalement trois registres: les fictions *otaku* qui mettent en scène la répression de leurs désirs et de leurs identités afin de former des zones «érogènes»; les discours culturels qui présentent la consommation *otaku* comme pathologique; et les politiques gouvernementales reliées à l'idée du «Japon Cool» qui visent à reconfigurer la consommation *otaku* en termes de marchés et de sujets d'autosatisfaction. Considérer ces différents registres permettra de mettre en lumière un «socius néolibéral» ou un être social qui favorise une intervention constante dans la vie de tous les jours au nom de la fragilité de l'économie du marché mondial en classant et diagnostiquant les consommateurs.

**MOTS CLÉS** ■ Otaku, cultures de fans, média mix, Japon Cool, néolibéralisme.

**KEYWORDS** ■ Otaku, fan cultures, media mix, Cool Japan, neoliberalism.

EVERYBODY IS MAKING THINGS TODAY. Cosplayers are making costumes, book readers are writing and sharing fictions, gamers are making mods and machinima, manga readers are producing “amateur” manga or scanlations, and anime viewers are fansubbing, making and posting animations. Everybody is blogging, tweeting, exchanging opinions, writing reviews, and constructing or contributing to databases. Under such circumstances it is not surprising that cultural analysis has largely abandoned the notion of the passive consumer. The emphasis in ideology critique, calling attention to the deception or manipulation of consumers, has given way to analyses in which fans and fan cultures have gradually replaced consumers and consumer cultures as key terms. And the paradigm of fans’ productivity – not only meaning and knowledge, but also products and markets – seems to have definitely replaced that of passive, mystified, symptomatic reception of messages.

The otaku phenomenon, associated with Japan and Japanese products yet widely acknowledged as a global or transnational phenomenon, offers an almost paradigmatic example of consumer productivity or productive consumption. Indeed, as a point of departure, it is better to think of otaku in terms of a mode of consumption (thus related to a mode of social existence) rather than a typology of consumers (see Lamarre and Galbraith 2010). Addressed as such, the otaku phenomenon may afford insight into both the challenges and the impasses implicit in the current emphasis on the productivity of consumption.

On the one hand, the challenge of such an emphasis lies in its reminder that consumption cannot be treated as secondary or derivative in relation to production or distribution. In Marx, for instance, *the overall mode* of production entails a configuration or assemblage of *specific modes* of production, distribution, and consumption. A mode of consumption does not come after or follow naturally from modes of production and distribution of products, nor does production determine consumption. Production, distribution, and consumption are mutually determining, serving to ground and generate an overall mode of production, which we might dub, to avoid confusion, a “society effect” (Althusser and Balibar, *in* Read 2003), “socius” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983), or a mode of social existence.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, an impasse thus arises in the emphasis on the productivity of consumption when it focuses exclusively on what consumption produces without any consideration of what produces consumption. Such an emphasis gives the impression that consumption determines production. Deleuze and Guattari's (*ibid.*) notion of "production of consumption" is intended to avoid this impasse.<sup>2</sup> While it is useful and indeed timely to focus attention on consumption, analysis must deal with the "production of consumption": both what consumption produces (social relations, knowledge, things) and what produces consumption (subjectivity).

I propose to consider the otaku phenomenon, somewhat schematically and generally in light of the essay format, in terms of the production of consumption primarily across three registers: fictions of otaku that stage the repression of otaku desires and identities in order to form erogenous zones; cultural discourses that posit otaku consumption as excessive; and government policies that strive to reconfigure otaku consumption as cool, which I will characterize as neoliberal. Considering these different registers brings into a focus a neoliberal socius or social being, produced by the assemblage of flexible production, technologies of distribution, and otaku consumption. This does not mean that otaku are automatically, irrevocably complicit with or reducible to neoliberalism. Nonetheless otaku consumption can only pose a challenge to neoliberalism if its techniques of self are in some manner prolonged in counter-production or counter-action, that is, activism.

### Erogenous Zones

Like many otaku characters, Nogizaka Haruka has a dirty little secret: she is otaku or Akiba-kei (the sort of person who likes the otaku world of Akihabara). In the high school, she appears to be a graceful and talented young woman, idolized by classmates. But Haruka has a thing for magic girls, particularly for an anime series called *Dojikko Aki-chan* (Clumsy Girl Aki-chan), and so she lives in fear of exposure. The fourth episode of the 2008 anime adaption of the light novel *Nogizaka Haruka no himitsu* (Nogizaka Haruka's secret, 2004-2012) gives substance to her fear: years earlier, when her classmates in an all-girl middle school learned her secret, they abused her to the point where she had to change schools.

Two insults continually crop up: first, otaku are creepy (*kimoi*, that is, *kimochi warui*), and second, otaku are fixated on the objects of childhood. Haruka's classmates are disgusted that a middle-school girl would like magic girls, things for little girls. *Nogizaka* gives the impression that otaku desires are savagely repressed by society in general, and by paradigms of

normative development (growing up) internalized by adolescent students in particular. Haruka's strict father stands behind the social injunction against otaku: he has forbidden magic girls. Because otaku are disturbing instances of arrested development that must be excluded or suppressed, they live a double life — apparently normal at school and with parents, but secretly, in their rooms or in areas of the city like Akihabara, they indulge their “secret vices.”

Similar scenarios of social repression, ostracism, and double life appear in other light novels, manga, and anime dealing with otaku life. Another anime series (2010) based on light novel series (from 2008), *Ore no imôto wa sonna ni kawaii wake ga nai* (My little sister can't be this cute), usually abbreviated to *Oreimo*, comes to mind, because the otaku girl in that series also has a dirty little secret: Kosaka Kirino is obsessed with *eroge* or erotic games for young men, in which the player interacts with highly eroticized girls, leading to sexual intercourse. Like Haruka, Kirino in *Oreimo* seems fixated on the sort of girls that male otaku find desirable. The girl's otaku desires implies mimicry of the sort of girl who appears in light novels, manga, anime, or video games addressed to male otaku. Haruka acts clumsy and awkward like the magic girl in her favorite series when with Yûto, the young male non-otaku classmate who discovers her secret yet goes to great lengths to help her to hide it. Kirino in *Oreimo* finds her secret exposed and forbidden by her strict father, yet her older brother intervenes on her behalf and helps her to live openly with her passions. The normally haughty and inapproachable Kirino displays vulnerability before her brother, which sometimes makes her appear as erotically available as the girls in erotic games.

This overlap between girl otaku (girl fan) and otaku girl (girl image in media forms addressed to male otaku) makes sense in the context of *Oreimo* and *Nogizaka*. Both series are addressed to male consumers, even if this does not mean that only men consume them. For male consumers, the repressive scenario in which otaku desire is forbidden by paternalistic developmental society is highly productive. In a psychoanalytic way, one might say that projecting the repression of otaku desire onto girls allows the male consumer to enjoy repression by displacing it. Yet repression sits lightly on these characters, male and female. By the third episode of *Nogizaka* anime, Haruka avows her otaku desire publicly at school, and the series moves on, offering otaku vignettes and resolving little dramas of daily life. Kirino's secret in *Oreimo* is exposed with equal rapidity. Such series thus makes it difficult to sustain a Freudian focus on dirty little secrets, their repression and exposure. As such, these otaku fictions invite us to follow Foucault's lead, to move beyond the repressive hypothesis of power and to consider the productivity of this situation: what sort of field

of possible actions is being produced, and how. And what sort of subjectivity arises to ground and guide actions?

Since these two series are addressed to male consumers, it is not unreasonable to ask at the outset whether such fictions do not serve to stabilize a masculine subject position, to objectify women, and thus reinforce the power of men over women. After all, in *Nogizaka*, girls are always falling down and exposing their panties, to the young man's embarrassment – the ubiquitous “panty shot” of manga and anime. The series unabashedly signals that Haruka's otaku secret lies between her legs. In the anime scene where Yûto discovers her otaku secret, Haruka has fallen to the floor, and the otaku magazine doubles the panty shot. The cover of the light novel makes the same gesture.

Feminist scholar Naitô Chizuko (2010) sees the male otaku passion for little girls – Lolicon, that is, Lolita complex – in terms of the reproduction of the power of men over women within Japanese society. She argues that, in the 1990s, with the crisis of Japanese economy based on the governmental support for and social mobilization around large corporations (the *kaisha* system), came a crisis in masculinity. There occurred a loss of confidence in male political and economic authority, and at the same time, a new generation of young men found it impossible to enter into the corporate system, to take on the social trappings of masculine authority. Consequently, she suggests, young men sought new ways to establish a sense of masculine authority, in Lolicon fictions in which the female characters are so childlike and powerless that young men are called upon to take charge and protect them. Such male otaku fantasies *reproduce* received class and gender inequality.

Naitô's denunciation of Lolicon fantasies recalls Bourdieu's insistence that symbolic capital serves to reproduce and reinforce class distinctions, even as the forces of capital seem to undermine them. Saitô Tamaki's (2007) discussions of otaku also come to mind in this context. Saitô likewise feels that otaku fictions do not disrupt received distinctions. He argues that such fictions help men and women to normalize their sexual relations despite the technological transformations threatening to undermine them. But where Naitô and Bourdieu offer a critique of the social reproduction of gender and class authorities, Saitô wishes to stabilize normal heterosexual relations.

Critiques like those of Naitô and Bourdieu not only afford opposition to the hetero-normativity implicit in Saitô but also serve as a reminder that otaku consumption cannot be hailed as a radical break or social alternative in itself. Still, it is important to look more closely at the transition or crisis, and not to assume that social reproduction of the same is given in advance, that the probable is all that is possible.<sup>3</sup>

*What then do these otaku fictions produce?*

*Nogizaka* produces: erotic or affective charge (*moé*); performances of arrested development (young women acting like little girls, young men acting like older brothers); non-capitalist romance (dating without cash exchange); product-worlds (prolonging the product rather than finishing it); and knowledge formations (insider or coterie knowledge). I will focus primarily on the first two relations, and will look at how these possible relations fit together, in logical and historical manner. Yet ultimately they do not work together logically or historically. They do not produce a stable identity, historical position, or subject. These possible relations work together, operatively or performatively, to produce a set of social relations and subjectivity, which demand historicization (even as they defy it).

Panty shots are obvious moments of affective charge in *Nogizaka Haruka*, that is, *moé*. There are many definitions of *moé*, but all of them build on the possibility of glossing the term with characters for “burning” or “blazing” as well as characters for “budding” or “sprouting,” or even “popping out.” Such *moé* might be glossed as “wow!” or “cute!” or “hot!” The image strikes the viewer, and perception gives way to affect. It is impossible to situate a subject who perceives an object. The thing seizes the perceiver. The implication is that the self is irrevocably bound up with a certain thing, say, glasses or cat ears or a kind of person, and the thing is inextricably caught up in a situation. You feel something or someone is cute, hot or wow, but you cannot say why. Nor can you dismiss the sensation. Self and thing are now felt joined in an ineluctable yet impossible relationship, romantically and erotically entangled. The situation affording *moé* thus has been repeated and prolonged to extend the affective relation into a relationship.

Characterizing panty shots as *moé* runs counter to voyeurism in which a subject desires to see something without being seen. While the panty shot in manga and anime is often followed by a reverse shot that seems to attribute the look to the young man, the overall sequence generally shifts from face to face showing embarrassment: everyone is blushing, the heat of *moé* rising in their cheeks. Rather than positing the male viewing position as subject, there is a heated mood. Intensity turns into intensive quantity or erogenous zone. This is how eroticism in otaku fictions becomes inseparable from the formation of social relations. The blaze of *moé* diffuses into a world of warm relations, in which acts of kindness resolve conflicts and anxieties. It is impossible to determine whether the blaze of *moé* heats up the social world, or whether the warmth of the social world brings relations to their kindling point. *Moé*



is a way of being in a warm world, and a way of bringing a warm world into being.

Otaku consumption produces intensive quantities in the form of erogenous zones rather than subject positions in the form of identities. This is surely why otaku series addressed to men also seem to invite, or at least to allow for, female consumption, and as series like *Oreimo* have shown, the possibility of female consumers does not undermine the operations of *moé*. What is more, the worlds of female otaku – the boys' love fictions associated with *fujoshi* or "spoilt girls" for instance – seem to hinge on an analogous transformation of *moé* into intensive quantities and erogenous zones. Everywhere the *fujoshi* looks, the world is staging erotic relations between young men, and before you know it, men are coupling passionately with men, and women are folded into their passion. By the same token, it is not surprising that there can also be *fudanshi* or "spoilt boys" who like boys' love series supposedly addressed to girls. It is worth recalling, too, that key paradigms in Lolicon series addressed to male *moé* otaku owe a great deal to manga for girls (Kinsella 2000: 121–126). Otaku worlds delineating erogenous zones allow for participation that is not mapped in terms of received social positions.

This does not mean that all these otaku worlds are the same. It simply means that what defines them is not a subject position or identity but the formation of erogenous zones at once individual and social, which are sustained precisely by staging a consummate relation – usually a couple whose relationship is consummate in the sense of absolute or perfect and in the sense of skilled or highly qualified. In *Nogizaka* the young man finds himself in what North American fans call a harem situation: everywhere he turns is another girl or woman, another experience of *moé* (maid uniforms, school uniforms, panty shots), and yet despite the erotic show apparently staged for his pleasure (as if all women in this world were sexually available to him), the overall effect is one of chastity and monogamy: Yûto is only attached to, attracted to, Haruka. This is also where otaku production of consumption begins to afford "practices of self" in the Foucauldian sense: "techniques, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being, as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality" (1988: 18).<sup>4</sup>

It is in such terms that the question of power (determining the conduct of others; objectifying the self to form subjects that are subject to; that is, domination) may be posed of otaku formations, that is, in terms of the production of intensive quantities and erogenous zones. The young woman remains attached to the things of childhood, performing the role



of clumsy little girl, while the young man rejects the trappings of manhood as socially received, and thus this consummate couple consistently ignores that they are indeed a couple. How can a clumsy little girl and a gentle older brother constitute, with any degree of social recognition, a couple?

From the perspective of social reproduction, this game may appear to be the oldest in (modern) book. Eroticizing the young man tends to strip him to received notions of masculinity and authority. But does this “new man” truly present a movement beyond received forms of patriarchy and paternalism? Or is this new man simply an instance of renewed paternalism? As Naitô Chizuko (2010) asks, isn’t this just another crisis in masculinity that serves to recuperate the power of men over women? After all, such a crisis has been staged before. It is the crisis presented in the modern figure of the male dandy, for instance, which was subsequently reinscribed and staged in debates over the status of love (as *ren’ai*) in Meiji and Taishô Japan. Tanizaki Jun’ichirô’s interest in overcoming the modern Western paradigm of love with *iroke* or nuances of affection comes to mind, as does Kuki Shûzô’s interest in *iki* or a sort of eroticized social panache or *savoir-vivre*.<sup>5</sup> Such visions of “non-masculine non-patriarchal men” have previously been associated with new forms of sexuality that were supposed to entail forms of resistance to the developmental logic of modern society, precisely by defying social reproduction and embracing productively non-reproductive perverse sexualities. In retrospect, however, it seems easy to see this crisis in masculinity and sexuality in terms of recuperation of male authority, or as simply embarrassing.

Still, without portraying the otaku production of consumption as inherently libratory, I would like to challenge the common sense that nothing really has changed, and more importantly, I wish to avoid the conclusion that youth cultures in Japan today should be seen exclusively in terms of negative social and political implications, and by extension, may be taken as the very source of all that is wrong with Japan. What is interesting about the otaku production of consumption is that it generally strives to bypass and even to challenge the logic of capitalist exchange. In *Nogizaka*, for instance, the couple go on dates without the man paying for the woman, or vice versa; they go out shopping in Akihabara without buying anything; and they attend non-capitalist otaku markets such as Natsucomi, that is, Natsu Comiketto or the summer comic market event where amateur or *dôjin* works are bought and sold, but in accordance with measures calculated precisely to avoid the profit motive that informs the manga and anime industries.

They avoid what Honda Tôru provocatively calls “love capitalism” (*ren’ai shihonshugi*). On the one hand, love capitalism makes romance a

matter of cash exchange, and on the other hand implies that those who do not conform to popular standards of beauty will not achieve love.<sup>6</sup> Honda stresses how love capitalism puts male otaku at a disadvantage because they are not known for their looks or earnings. Yet he argues that the male otaku rejection of masculinism and love capitalism potentially allows them to achieve genuine love and maybe social peace. Honda's commentary *moé* thus picks up the tradition of opposing erotic modalities such as *iki* or *shikijo* to *ren'ai* or "modern love," bringing capitalism into the mix, that is, a rationality of the buying and selling of qualities. Significantly, however, Honda does not propose that we stop buying and selling. His account implies a sort of alternative economy, one that is axed primarily on an alternative mode of consumption, or more precisely, an alternative production of consumption, implying a different subjectivity and product-worlds. As such, it depends on otaku consumption as a minor mode.

One crucial question, then, is whether the otaku production of consumption should be seen as *representative* of a wholesale historical transformation in capital, that is, as *the major mode* of consumption today; or as *a minor or alternative mode* of production of consumption.

### *Otaku Discourses*

Generally speaking, otaku consumption has been portrayed as a sea change, as representative or indicative of a sociohistorical transformation. At the same time, "otaku culture" is often depicted as a strange world inhabited by odd persons with unusual tastes, in which forms of communication take on bizarre contours, known only to those in the loop, almost like a secret society – otaku activities construed creepy (*kimoi*) little secrets in *Nogizaka*. The combination of these two tendencies results in discursive field in which otaku consumption oscillates between being a major new trend (youth culture or mass culture) and being a strange new minority (subculture or micro-market).

This two-fold oscillation or tension within discourses on otaku between major and minor socioeconomic perspectives and different affective dispositions is not simply a manifestation of indecision or lack of solid information. It is truly a discourse insofar as efforts to overcome this tension functions to produce an object whose apparent consistency and solid existence serves to justify the further investment into the discourse. Discourses on otaku consumption produce an object, otaku. Such discourses assure us that otaku are really out there and are knowable (if subjected to sufficient research) and manageable or corrigible (once sufficiently known).

I have no doubt that there have been actual changes in patterns of consumption, and there are actual men and women who refer to themselves as otaku, for various reasons. Discourses do not entail the top-down imposition of a grid of knowledge upon an unsuspecting populace. Nor are discourses on otaku a government or mass-media conspiracy, even though they may retroactively feel that way, as they do for protagonist of *NHK ni yokoso* who imagines that the NHK (Nippon Hôshô Kyôkai or Japan Broadcasting Association), by producing such alluring anime series, has been producing otaku who turn into social recluses (*hikikomori*) because they cannot tear themselves away from media long enough to function effectively outside their rooms or apartments. Thus our hero renames the NHK, Nippon Hikikomori Kyôkai or Japan Hikikomori Association.

The notion of conspiracy in *NHK ni yokoso* nonetheless serves as a reminder that discourses on otaku do not only construct an object or figure (otaku) but also subjectivity, drawing on a range of structural power asymmetries and potential forms of domination in the process. As *NHK ni yokoso* comically shows, a series of asymmetries are commonly pulled into otaku discourse in an attempt to stabilize it: the authority of mass media (especially print and broadcast news) over “micro” media or social media; the typology of normal over abnormal; the authority of adults over youth; the primacy of production and employment over consumption and leisure; and the ascendancy of public good over private or individual desires. The conspiracy detected in *NHK ni yokoso* is that mass media has rendered youth inoperative and abnormal, allowing their addictive consumption to destroy social production (no work) and reproduction (not even a girlfriend).

A series of recent publications have shown how discourses on criminal youth, NEET, *hikikomori*, and freeter have constructed their objects and engendered social panic about youth in Japan (see for instance Berstrom 2013; Hurley 2012; Slater 2010; Toivonen 2011). Any one of these structural asymmetries may come to entail a fairly autonomous discourse in itself. Otaku discourses are frequently linked to these other discourses on youth, particularly discourses on “criminal youth” or “youth violence” and on “unemployed-because-unemployable youth,” that is, discourses on NEET (those who are Not in Education, Employment, or Training) and freeter (those who are only occupied in free arbeit or part-time flexible labor). *NHK ni yokoso* also explores this latter possibility: otaku are unemployed because their otaku habits make them recluses and thus render them unemployable, and so otaku are both *hikikomori* and NEET.

Nonetheless, it does not strike me as useful to collapse otaku discourses into these other discourses. Not only have otaku discourses taken

on a high degree of autonomy and consistency, but they also direct attention to a dimension often overlooked in studies of these other discourses, namely the production of consumption.

My point of reference for otaku discourses thus far has implicitly been Japan. Discussions of otaku, whether they take place inside or outside Japan, tend to assume the Japanese nation as a point of reference. Yet the very tension within otaku discourses gravitates toward a *problem of the nation* or nation-state: does otaku signal an overall transformation of the Japanese nation (new Japan), or does otaku present difference within Japan, dissolution of the nation-state (end of Japan)? Posed in this way, the question is unanswerable. It makes clear, however, why otaku discourses generally settle on “Japan in crisis.” This seems to hold for otaku discourses in Japan, North America, Western Europe, and, it seems, anywhere in the world Japanese popular culture has boomed. Celebratory stances can be found almost anywhere, championing otaku cultures and product-worlds as a revolution in media and human-product interfaces. Yet as soon as the question of Japan arises (as it inevitably does), the problem of Japan in crisis, of a Japan different from itself, emerges.

The problem is one of the relation between production and consumption – for a long time, an ethno-linguistic paradigm has encouraged the myth of a stable and closed circulation model: products produced in Japan are consumed by Japanese, and so the products have been assumed to embody Japanese values. Panic sets in when it becomes evident that Japanese products may not actually be produced in Japan (outsourcing, coproduction, transnational genre), and more importantly, may readily be consumed outside Japan. Suddenly, the closed circulation-communication model fails, and questions arise about gaps between production and consumption, and within them. It becomes necessary to address production differently, in terms of an assemblage of production of production, production of distribution, and production of consumption.

The otaku production of consumption implies forms of subjectivity that may become localized in certain consumers but cannot be reduced to them. As such, otaku subjectivity does not belong to anyone, nor can it be confined to Japan. There are always gaps with and between the domains of production, distribution, and consumption, and nation-state has always been outside itself, traversed by flows of money, images, and peoples, and constituted by competition between nations. In this respect, the Japan in crisis of otaku discourses opens yet again the problem of the constitutive exposure of nation-states, which has so often been ignored or disavowed in Japanese studies and discourses on Japaneseness.

### *What Consumption Produces*

In her study of Japanese toys, Allison remarks that, while “Japan today is a country fully embedded in capitalism,” an “orientation toward the collective” has tended to smooth over a sense of unevenness or inequality (2006: 216). As such, transformations of capitalism, and especially of consumption, are treated as crises in national values that threaten to erode national community. There thus arises a tendency to pathologize new modes of consumption, to posit them as the cause of crisis. This response spurs anxiety about children and youth, leading to calls for increased scrutiny and even intervention into adult-child relations in families and schools. Allison, however, shows how *transformations in the commodity form*, related to marketing strategies (patterns of serialization, franchising, media mix) and new communications technologies (personal televisions, personal computers, Game Boy), are accompanied by *transformations in social relations* among children and youth. Rather than dwell on and reify (a crisis in) Japanese values, she offers a detailed account of local experiences of global postmodern capitalism through an analysis of the specific social relations arising around toys and franchises such as *Power Rangers*, *Sailor Moon*, *Pokémon* and *tamagotchi*.

Allison pays close attention to transformations in the commodity form, remarking that commodities today function not only as objects of exchange but also as gifts, which provoke social reciprocation. As such, “[c]apital becomes communicable: commodities that double as gifts” (*ibid.*: 211). In other words, the commodity form does not primarily serve to hide the reality of economic production and its social relations, as cause-and-effect Marxism would have it (economy or production as cause, and consumption and ideology as effect). Rather, one side of production of consumption (what consumption produces) comes to the fore: due to its enhanced communicability, the commodity form becomes productive, generative of new forms of profit and new social relations.

One might construe this situation in term of an omnivorous capitalist machinery that derives sustenance from incorporating and exploiting anything that lies outside it, even the non-capitalist outside is, in effect, inside. One might see capitalism in Japan feeding on remnants of traditional gift economies, appropriating forms of non-capitalist cooperation to its own ends. Simply put, the outside is doomed to appropriation or expropriation. While such appropriation is indeed a constant danger, I tend to agree with J. K. Gibson-Graham (2006) that critical analysis must not give way so easily to such visions of the omnipotence of capitalism and by default endorse the inevitability of the defeat of alternatives. For, as Massimo De Angelis says, “when we call our own world ‘capitalism,’

we forget the ‘non-capitalism’ of our lives, the spheres of relations, value practices, affects as well as forms of power relations, conflict and mutual aid that we constitute beyond capitalist relations of production, perhaps within its reach, but yet constituted in different *modes* and therefore articulated by different value systems” (2007: 34). Although I ultimately do not see the otaku production of consumption as an effective outside or alternative, neither do I see its non-capitalist moments as fated in advance to provide an ideal complement to capitalist exploitation.

Marc Steinberg’s (2012) study of media mix looks at the emergence of franchises in which products are serialized across different media products. He argues that the constitutive moment of media mix was *Tetsuwan Atomu* or *Astro Boy* in the 1960s, for toys of various kinds (stickers, kits, cards, figures), manga, and anime became assembled in manner that proved imitable and reproducible. He shows how media mix at once expanded to include more media forms (light novels, video games, cinema, television drama) and allowed for variations (it becomes possible, for instance, to move from manga to television drama, or from video game to anime). Put another way, media mix presents a specific mode of differentiation and integration.

Steinberg builds on the work of Ôtsuka Eiji, Azuma Hiroki, Itô Gô, and other Japanese commentators who have called attention to the centrality of characters in media mix, adding two crucial insights. First, his study provides a genealogy of characters, thus avoiding the tendency in Japanese discussions to divide postwar consumer history in discrete periods in which each generation presents a radical break with the previous generation, for instance, character-centered franchises appear in the 1990s as a radical break with narrative-centered franchises. Steinberg locates the “historicity” of media mix, that is, the moment when something new emerged through the contingent assemblage of elements. In this respect, his account also avoids the echoes of technological determinism that appear, for instance, in Azuma’s account of database structure. Rather than emphasize transformations in technology or in the psychology or behavior of consumers, Steinberg calls attention to transformations in marketing and advertising that shifted consumer attention from product to lifestyle, from object to affect. This emphasis affords a second important insight: it is the immaterial component of characters that allows for the constitution of the “character-centrism” enabling media mix.

Steinberg’s account thus meshes nicely Maurizio Lazzarato’s (2011) argument, which he cites: production and consumption today do not hinge primarily on products but on worlds: the characters of media mix are at once material (product or commodity) and immaterial (world).



Lazzarato's concerns are somewhat different, however. For him, the immaterial component of commodity is inseparable from the rise of immaterial labor that comes in the wake of the "second great transformation," from an industrial mode of production to an information mode of production. Insofar as the immaterial (information, thought, feelings) is simultaneously generated by and built back into material production, Lazzarato sees immateriality as a genuine sociohistorical tendency. As such, the immaterial is at once a site of capture actualization and a moment of resistance or counter-actualization. The politics of immateriality would thus happen at two sites: where social and intellectual knowledge is incorporated into the factory and the workplace, and where the factory expands into the social, and consumption becomes indistinguishable from immaterial labor.

Ian Condry's (2012) study of "dark energy" of fans directly addresses this question of mobilizing the constituent power of commodities for affective counter-actualization in the context of otaku consumption. Condry looks at how animation studios in Japan, for instance, have gradually come to acknowledge the productivity of fans, which has led to the production of products or franchises that are explicitly open to repurposing by fans, such as the Hatsune Miku phenomenon. His study, like Steinberg's, calls attention to the immaterial component of a particular form of commodity, the anime character. Yet, where Steinberg follows Lazzarato's emphasis on the enterprise and thus stresses the production of brands, Condry tracks the ways in which fans creatively seize the immaterial component – the soul – of the character, effectively outrunning the capacity of companies and enterprises, and making fandom a force to be reckoned with. Simply put, where Steinberg focuses on the *constitutive moment* of media mix, Condry looks for sites where the sociality and productivity of fan potentially seize the *constituent forces* that ground what is constituted by enterprises and brands.

Studies of production and consumption generally tend toward such a moment or site where underlying constituent powers (living labor, cooperation, creation) runs up against constitutive forces (labor, competition, reproduction), either to be released, or recuperated, or both. If the anime character comes to play a central role in all these analyses of otaku consumption, it is because it is site where something non-capitalist arises within the commodity form in the guise of an immaterial component that affords, however fleetingly, difference from capitalist reproduction: gift versus exchange in Allison, relation versus resemblance in Steinberg, collaborative creativity based on soul versus corporate competition based on profit in Condry. The question then is whether we see the probability of capture and reproduction, or the possibility of another economy or world.



### *What Produces Consumption*

These analyses of new social relations around commodities, the historical constitution of media mix, and fans' collaborative creativity allow a general reconsideration of the contemporary assemblage of production, distribution, and consumption. Because production, distribution, and consumption present distinct determinations or syntheses, they have to be forcibly assembled, usually by the nation-state, or by what Foucault calls *dispositif* or apparatus. To assemble them, however, involves grasping them from the angle of their production, that is, production of production, production of distribution, and production of consumption. Commentators may disagree on the nature of souls, but generally speaking, addressing production of production in this context means looking at the immaterial/material interface of characters: soul and body. At the level of production of distribution, another question comes into play: world and product, or social relations and thing. Finally, production of consumption tentatively introduces a division between subject and object, which promises to settle all manner of conflict by referring us to consumers as autonomous rational subjects who freely choose products based on self-interest, which process can be measured and charted. This is also the production of identities: that's what I am, I am a female otaku whose thing is magic girls; I am a male otaku who goes for mecha or ero-games; I am a fujoshi who is into boys' love.

In each determination then, force is needed to hold together, for instance, the immaterial and the material, social relations and things, and subject and object. Yet at the same time, because these three determinations of production, distribution, and consumption are not commensurable, even greater force is needed to hold together the three determinations, to make it seem, for instance, that the material is a thing, and a thing is an object; and that the immaterial is a soul, and the soul is subject or an identity above and beyond social relations. Forced assemblage of these three determinations makes for a mode of production, effectuating a society or *socius*, which acts to hold determinations together, to allow them to act in concert. This overall mode of production is as much subjectivity as economic machinery. Typically, the nation-state, as a hyphenated combination of social form of subjectivity (nation) and political economic institutions (state), comes to approximate this *socius*. In fact, it is the hyphen that marks the site of this mode of production, where flows of people and flows of money are assembled, holding nation and state together.

The production of consumption is a good level to pose questions about the subjectivity implicated in this assemblage or apparatus, for it calls

attention to how a subject is produced, distinct from, above and beyond, self-other or society-thing relations. There is a distinction then between otaku subject (identity) and otaku subjectivity. Otaku discourses construct the otaku subject, but such a construction at once presupposes and strives to manage the subjectivity crossing production, distribution, and consumption: otaku subjectivity, or otaku mode of social existence, which now appears to produce otaku consumption even as it is produced by it. The cause (what produces otaku) appears to be immanent to the effect (what otaku produce). Anne Allison's gloss – communicability – nicely captures this effect. It conveys the sense of something to be communicated and something to be caught, like a contagion. It signals the power of the body to affect other bodies and to be affected by them. The productive activity of fans – dark energy, as it were – has the capacity to prolong the commodity-world and to affect other fans. At the same time, such productive activity entails, even requires, an affective openness to products verging on radical exposure to them – *moé*! As *Nogizaka* suggests, fictions of otaku consumption like to explore the sort of feedback loop that unfolds affective exposure into social relations and otaku productivity, while folding social relations and productivity back into affect. The result is machinic production of intensive quantities, erogenous zones, or communicable bodies – in which intensive qualities and extensive quantities are operatively, performatively, held together.

While some wish to establish a definitive break between the eros of *moé otaku* and techné of *mecha otaku* (into machinery and weaponry, especially giant robots and tactical armor), coupling humans and mechanisms precedes in a similar fashion. One might call them technogenous zones to distinguish them from *moé otaku*, yet as the works of Shimamoto Kazuhiko attest, *mecha* and *moé* are inseparable. In practice then, otaku subjectivity implies a bleed between “erogenecity,” “technogenecity,” and communicability. Insofar as such practices force together intensity and extensity, they are by no means innocent. Otherwise they could not ground technics of self. But a power formation emerges with the construction of a *dispositif* or apparatus that draws otaku subjectivity to force an assemblage of production, distribution, and consumption. For otaku subjectivity to be harnessed and produced in this way, it must be divided into stable subject and object positions, with a resolute divide between consumer and product.

Today an “otaku apparatus” has emerged on two fronts: otaku discourses and governmental policies articulated around the notion of Cool Japan, which I will discuss below. To anticipate my argument, although the two fronts have emerged separately, they have begun to work together contingently to force an assemblage that produces a neoliberal society

effect. I have thus far looked at Japanese otaku fictions and North American studies of the production of consumption in Japan, to pave way for understanding how power is exercised in relation of otaku consumption. While North American studies tend to focus attention more on what consumption produces than what produces consumption, they do not go so far as government policies related to Cool Japan that strive to transform otaku consumption into a paradigm for neoliberal satisfaction. They studiously avoid judgments vis-à-vis otaku such as cool or creepy. Still, in keeping with Anglophone legacies of cultural studies and fan studies, it may be argued that something closer to cool creeps in.

Otaku discourses, in contrast, linger on the affective exposure of otaku bodies that makes them appear overly sensitive, like those of children who have not yet developed into subjects and open to the world; but in an adult body, this openness is associated with a lack of physical control, which makes such bodies grotesque or creepy. Thus the classic stereotypes of otaku present them above all as emaciated or obese.<sup>7</sup>

As Lazzarato suggests, “The paradigmatic body of Western control society is no longer the confined body of the worker, the mad, the sick, but the obese body (full of the worlds of business firms) and the anorexic body (refusal of the same worlds)...” (2011: 191). Such consumer bodies are able to find a proper or reasonable relation to the immaterial component of commodities, that is, affective media worlds. They consume too much or too little, or rather too much *and* too little – for instance, only magic girls or only boys’ love, and too much. Such bodies are keenly attuned but to a narrow spectrum, as if arrested on it, unable to develop fuller tastes and broader sociality. Limitation appears as excessive, and excess is limitation – hence the combination of excessive consumption and limited sociality. Such are the general pathologizing stereotypes of otaku, which pathos might be summed up in terms of discourse of *acute consumption*.

Such stereotypes function to reassure us that there are proper or normal modes of consumption, which entail a reasonable relation to capitalist modes of production, when in fact such modes of production are predicated on surplus and excess. The scandal of otaku consumption, then, is that it is impossible to confine it to a marginal modality, and yet acknowledging it as a dominant modality threatens to pathologize Japanese society, culminating in the vision of a nation-state becoming pathological. But then, such a vision also reinforces the idea that the nation-state was once normal, proper, and reasonable.

Intellectual discussions of otaku in Japan show a keen awareness of this impasse. Saitô Tamaki, as mentioned above, reassures readers that otaku consumption, for all its aura of perversion, allows male and female

otaku to arrive at normal heterosexual subject positions. But his confidence in normalcy is unusual. Azuma Hiroki (2011), however, explicitly challenges Saitô's assumption that otaku consumption produces stable subject positions.<sup>8</sup> Azuma's account focuses on consumer behaviors and media structures rather than subject formation, introducing a two-tiered model of otaku consumption. Tier one is animalization: consumers no longer look for grand fictions or worlds in anime or video games but withdraw into the production of little narratives organized around "animalized" responses to the *moé* elements of characters. Azuma's emphasis initially appears to fall on what fans produce, on how otaku make their own stories by disassembling and reassembling the elements of characters. Yet Azuma ultimately tends to stress what produces otaku. He sees in *moé* an automatic behavioral response that makes otaku prey to technologies of control, which he likens to brainwashing and drugging. Tier one or animalization entails a fully realized postmodern condition in which subjects or ideologies no longer exist; there are only brainwashed, drugged consumers responding like Skinner's rats to programmed stimuli. Azuma also introduces a second tier, which entails something like a new humanization in which the agency of otaku produce new social relations, yet on the whole, his account is concerned with animalization.

While Azuma avoids pathologizing otaku, he does so by presenting otaku as the new pathic paradigm of Japanese society based on a generational understanding of historical transformation. He adopts the stance of discourses on youth: this is where youth today are heading, into animalization. This stance implies a national discourse as well: this is where Japan is heading. As such, precisely because this approach naturalizes the nation-state, it easily turns into nationalism.

One of the other major writers on otaku and Japanese popular culture, Ôtsuka Eiji draws connections between otaku culture and ultra-nationalism or fascism, decrying what he sees as a return to Japanese nationalism in the context of otaku culture.<sup>9</sup> In keeping with his experience in manga production (as an editor and later writer) and marketing (as a developer of media mix with Kadokawa in the late 1980s and early 1990s), when Ôtsuka (2013) considers what produces otaku consumption, the emphasis falls on industrial production and marketing. As such, he is keenly aware of the market construction of otaku as well as his role in that process, and in response, he has begun to challenge what he sees as the opportunistic way in which scholars have adopted the term. Ôtsuka thus draws attention to the discursive construction of otaku, which has produced a common sense that there are certain types of people out there, and knowledge of their mode of existence can currently be mobilized for the good of the nation or for academic opportunity, due to government poli-

cies related to building on otaku consumption to spur the growth of the contents industry.

What interests me about the standoff in which Azuma is emerging as a nationalist, and Ôtsuka as an anti-nationalist, is how otaku consumption has become a national question in Japan. In other words, its “society effect” is becoming conflated with the nation-state. This is precisely where care is needed if we do not wish to lose all sense of the specificity of power.

As such commentators make evident, otaku discourses tend to oscillate between major and minor modes: otaku as a new majority, otaku as a strange minority. In terms of production of a stable subject, they oscillate between speaking of youth (this new generation) and subculture (this emerging trend). The overall tendency of otaku discourses is toward subculture, while forcing youth into a subcultural or minoritarian position: creepy youth, which slides readily into unemployed youth, lazy youth, delinquent youth, criminal youth. At the same time, because otaku consumption has gradually been identified as a large and profitable market<sup>10</sup>, new governmental policies have been developed under the notion of “Cool Japan,” which pushes in the other direction, striving to strip otaku subjectivity of its perceived creepiness toward the formation of new majoritarian subject.

Cool Japan received its initial articulation in an essay by the economist Douglas McGray (2002) who strove to explain the boom of Japanese manga, anime, and related products in the global market. The Japanese government found this notion highly palatable and began to intervene directly into otaku-related consumption, distribution, and production, sponsoring conferences on Japanese cool, establishing anime and manga characters as cultural ambassadors, developing incentives for the “contents industry” (a conceptualization of media mix), cleaning up Akihabara for non-Japanese tourists, and offering animated series as a form of humanitarian aid, all of which has been construed as a form of soft power.<sup>11</sup> But if the Japanese government has found otaku consumption to be in fact production, it is surely because such production promises a renewal of an export economy (the motor of the Japanese economic miracle), and because, as McGray indicated, such products appear recession-free: consumers were buying despite Japan’s glacial economy. As such, rather than begin with soft power, such government policies begin with appropriating otaku consumption in order to redefine the Japanese consumer along of lines of the neoliberal subject as Foucault describes it: “In neoliberalism... there is also a theory of *Homo economicus*, but he is not at all a partner of exchange. *Homo economicus* is an entrepreneur, and entrepreneur of himself.... The man of consumption, insofar as he consumes, is a producer... he produces his own satisfaction” (2008: 226). But

Foucault also shows how “economic man” makes for a situation in which “the criminal is nothing other than absolutely anyone whomsoever,” because the market, although free, is fragile, demanding constant intervention.

This is precisely what is happening with otaku discourses and governmental policies: they have come together in a contingent manner, acting on the erogenous or technogenous zones implicit in the otaku production of consumption, to configure a field of neoliberal subjects and immaterial commodities. The consequent splitting of otaku consumption into new markets and self-satisfying subjects today serves to justify new government procedures, permitting constant intervention into everyday life in the name of the fragility of the global free market by typologizing and pathologizing consumers.

## Notes

1. I am indebted here to Jason Read's (2003) account in *The Micropolitics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of the Present*.
2. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1983) present these terms and concepts in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.
3. See probability and possibility, see Isabelle Stengers, (2011) “‘Another Science is Possible!’ A Plea for a Slow Science,”
4. Although the phrase “techniques de soi” is usually translated as “technologies of the self,” Foucault's notion runs counter to a substantialization of self as “the self,” and the term “techniques” runs counter to a firm distinction between techniques and technologies. “Practices of self” or even “technics of self” is closer to his notion.
5. See Kuki Shūzō (1997), *Reflections on Japanese Taste: The Structure of Iki*, and Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, (2005) “Love and Sexual Desire,” trans. Thomas Lamarre, in *Shadows on the Screen: Tanizaki Jun'ichirō on Cinema and 'Oriental' Aesthetics*.
6. Honda Tōru, (2005). *Moeru otoko*, Chikuma shinsho 566.
7. See the discussion and images of “otaku minzoku” in Fujiyama Tetsuhito, (2003). *Moeru seichi Akiba: Akihabara Maniakkusu*. Tokyo, MyCom Mainichi Communications, p. 2-11. Also, one of the conceits of the *Genshiken* series is that, alongside the stereotypically overweight otaku and the scrawny otaku appears an attractive young man who appears excessively normal, to everyone's surprise and distress.
8. I am reprising a discussion from Thomas Lamarre, 2009. *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, p. 258-259.
9. Both Ōtsuka and Azuma have published a number of essays and books dealing with subcultures, and their differences appear clearly in a recent dialogue: Azuma Hiroki and Ōtsuka Eiji, (2008) “‘Kōkyōsei' no kōgakuka' wa kanō ka,” *Shingenjitsu* 5. Tokyo, Ōta shuppan, p. 80-146.
10. See, for instance, *Otaku shijō no kenkyū* (Tōkyō: Tōyō keizai shinhōsha, 2005) in which a research team within the Nomura Research Institute (Nomura sōgō kenkyūjo otaku-shijō yosoku chiimu) presents its account of the otaku market, providing definitions of otaku, their consumer behavior, and niche markets with projections on marketing to these groups.



11. In "Akihabara: Conditioning a Public 'Otaku' Image", Patrick Galbraith (2003) discusses how government policies transformed Akihabara with the goal of cleaning it up for tourists. In "Nationalization 'cool': Japan's government's global policy towards the content industry", Kukee Choo (2012) provides an account of how the overseas success of the content industry developed around anime, manga, and game franchises attracted the attention of the Japanese government, which began to develop "soft power" strategies to promote Japanese values through these cultural products.

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