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Introduction

to the worlds of Japanese popular culture

Igor Prusa, Ph.D. et Ph.D.
The Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Oriental Institute
https://cas-cz.academia.edu/IPrusa
igorprusa@gmail.com

Why Japanese popular culture?

- Japanese popular culture – importantly including the subcultural worlds – has not only continued to evolve at home - it has also attracted a broad following overseas
- While reaching global audiences on a large scale, Japan's pop-power gives the country a new cultural impact which complements Japan's economic progress
- This cultural impact informs the official political agenda (e.g. governmental strategy of "cool Japan", or the use of manga/anime characters for Japan's military PR)
- Need to redefine the terms subculture and counterculture in Japan today

上空から
羽ばたけ
未来へ

経済産業省
8・9月号
August/September 2011
METI
Journal
世界中を熱くする！
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国に届け
―日本には若い力が必要です
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美少女戦士セーラームーン
厚生労働省
検査しないとおしおきよ!!
STI(性感染症)・HIVは
早期発見・治療が大切です。
まずは検査・相談できる機関を検索してみよう。
HIV検査相談マップ
全国HIV/エイズ・性感染症
検査・相談窓口情報サイト
http://www.hivkensa.com/
コンドームの適切な使用により感染のリスクを減らすことができます。

The worlds of Japanese popular culture

Traditional Japanese culture

- pure / elite / classical culture (e.g. *nō, bunraku, buyō, shamisen, ukiyoe, haiku, ikebana, sadō, nikki*)
- folk / local / agrarian culture (e.g. spectacular and transgressive festivals *matsuri*)

Pre-modern roots of Japanese popular culture

- Kabuki (Japanese dance-drama, began with Okuni in 1603)

Other forms of Japanese popular culture

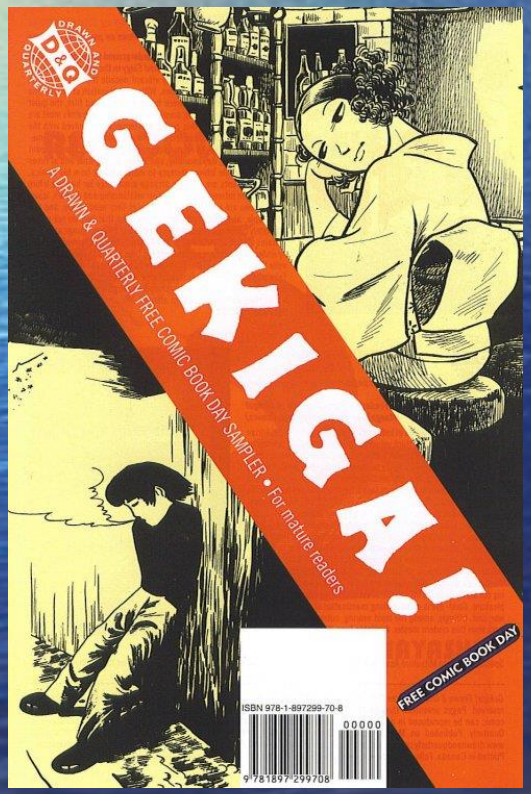
- Music (e.g. *enka*, popular songs, *Takarazuka*)

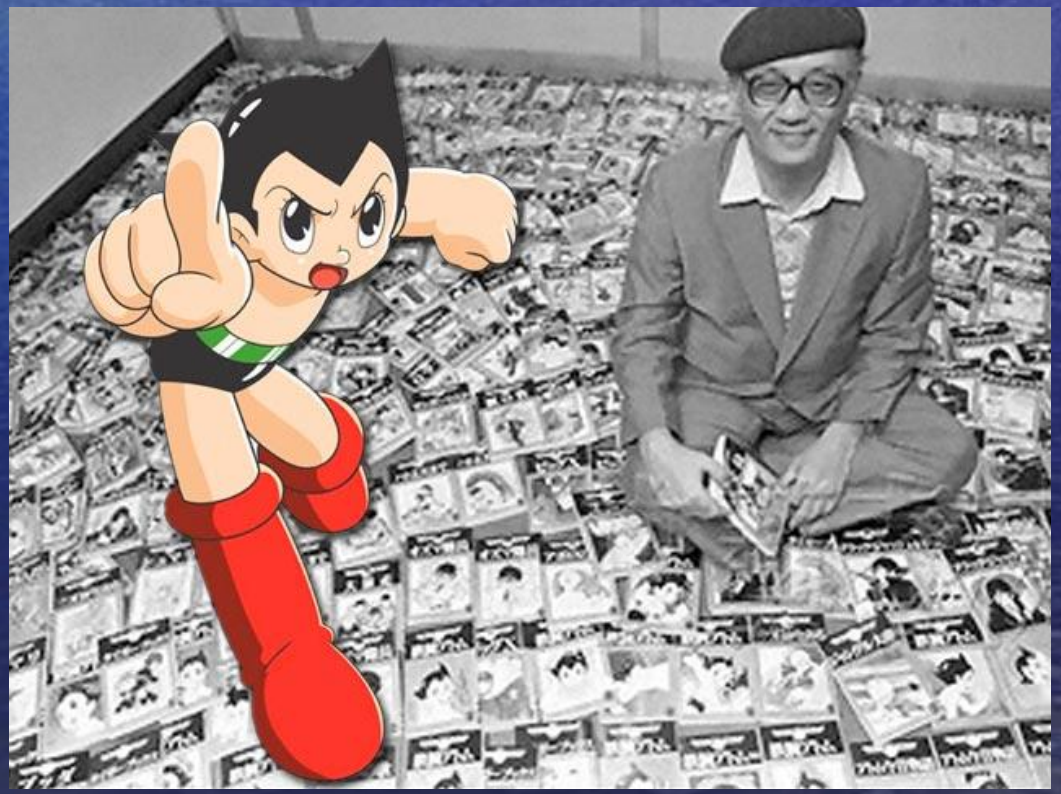
Other forms of Japanese popular culture

- Cinema (e.g. traditional films, *tokusatsu* films, horrors)

Other forms of Japanese popular culture

- Arts (e.g. gekiga, manga, avant-pop)





Other forms of Japanese popular culture

- Performances (*hanabi, kamishibai*)

Japanese Mass culture

- related to modernity (i.e. the spread of the consumer market, and the development of mass communication)
- "media culture": commercial television and popular press (emphasis on light entertainment, food, advertisements)
- "celebrity culture": heavy emphasis on star icons, celebs, non-celebrities, and their omnipresent gossip and scandal

Alternative cultures

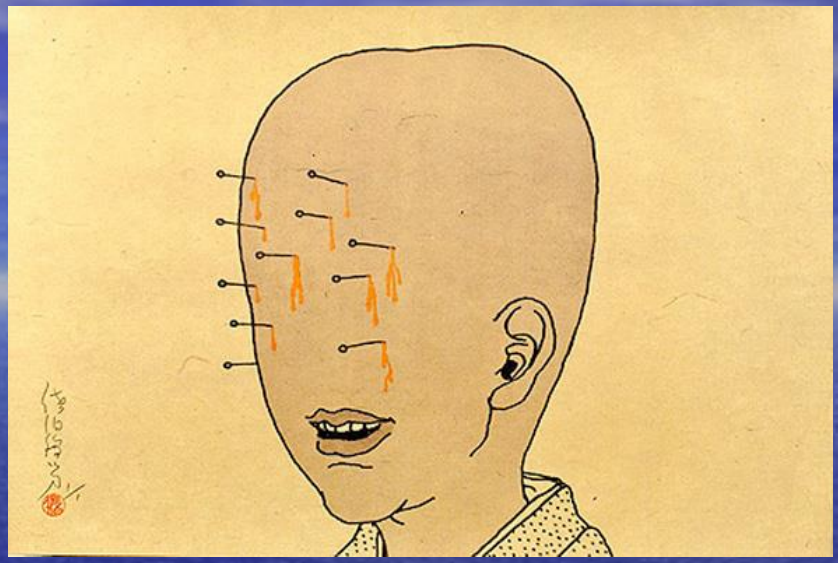
cosplay gatherings at Harajuku
small theatres in Shimokitazawa
gay clubs in Shinjuku Nichōme
host/hostess clubs in Kabukichō

Marginal Cultures

- i.e. those practices that re-present an intersection of everyday life and artistic expression (e.g. *sentō*, *manzai*, graffiti, *haikyo*)

Counterculture

- transgressive, asocial/antisocial, political, ero-guro-nonsensical



- globally acclaimed paintings of Makoto Aida, Takashi Murakami, Nara Yoshimoto or Toshio Saeki

Analysing manga: methods

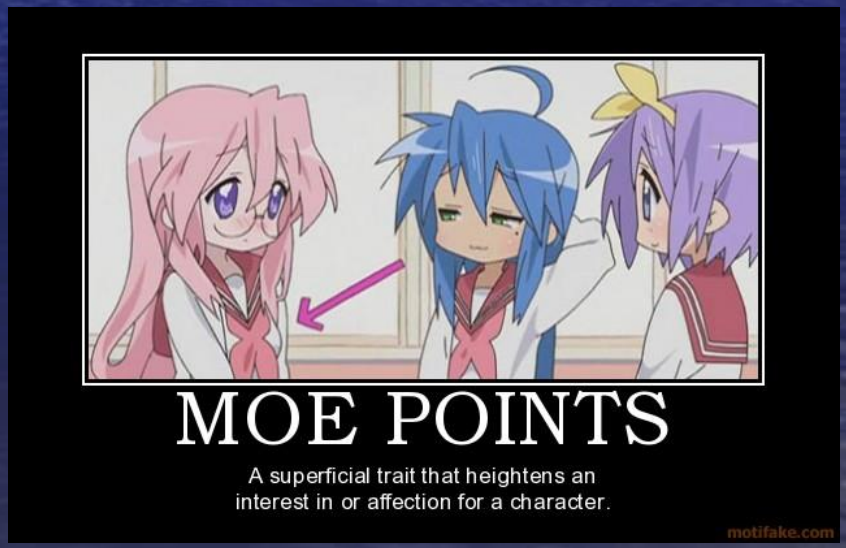
1. historical approach
- manga comes from a strong pictographic tradition in Japanese cultural history
- origins of manga seen in *emakimono* (picture scrolls that tell a story) and *kamishibai* (on-street paper performances)
- manga audiences: in 1950s-1960s: largely children; late 1960s: university students; 1990s: amateur manga boom

2. textual approach
- Japanese manga often effectively intermixes the moments of beauty and violence
- manga as a form of "odorless culture" which tends to extinguish ("oriental") fragrances instead of adding them
- anime as dystopian and folkloric (*Akira* vs *Spirited Away*)

3. cultural approach
- consuming manga as a form of "low-art" escapism at times of war or during postwar crises
- *moe* characters now expand within the Japanese and global market, becoming a potent economic force

Japanese subculture and the otaku phenomenon (1)

- located at the intersection of alternative culture and marginal culture (occasionally with antisocial traits)
- otaku are obsessed with "unsocial hobbies", they often live in seclusion (*hikikomori*), or they join otaku events (at *Akihabara*)
- the virtual worlds of *moe* : affect/obsession for fictional characters, collecting goods, admiring idols, visiting maid cafes



Japanese subculture and the otaku phenomenon (2)

- otaku seen as "failed men" who lean toward fictional contexts that are often separated from everyday life

- historically, otaku shifted from antisocial subculture to branded Japanese pop culture: from vilifying otaku (1980s–1990s) to celebrating them as part of the "cool Japan" (2000s)

- Akihabara as the (public) "home" of otaku

Analysing Akihabara:
Otaku, rorikon, moe

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- The urban spot of Akihabara represents a bricolage of electric appliances, maid cafes, foreign tourists, and domestic otaku

- Critical perspective: Akihabara as a space of "cuteness fetishism" and "infantile capitalism"

- Akihabara is both geek and global; traumatic and triumphal

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