

The Politics of Popular Culture

June 5, 2010 Temple University, Japan Campus

Frederik Schodt

Keynote Address

12:30 - 1:30pm

“Manga as 20th-Century Ukiyo-e:

The Past, Present, and Future of the J-pop Engine”

Manga are sometimes said to be a modern version of ukiyo-e, the woodblock prints so popular long ago. In a wide-ranging talk, Frederik L. Schodt looks at modern manga as a profoundly 20th century phenomenon, examining their roots, their de-politicization, some reasons for their current success as an international soft-power medium, and their problematic-yet-possibly-bright future in the new 21st century.”

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Frederik L. Schodt is a writer, translator, and conference interpreter, based in the San Francisco Bay area. He has written widely on Japanese history, popular culture, and technology. Among his better known works on popular culture are *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics* (Kodansha International, 1983), and *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga* (Stone Bridge Press, 1996). His writings on manga, and his translations of them, helped trigger the current popularity of Japanese comics in the English-speaking world, and in 2000 resulted in his being awarded the Special Category of the Asahi Shimbun's prestigious Osamu Tezuka Culture Award. In the same year, his translation of Henry Yoshitaka Kiyama's 1931 pioneering graphic novel, *The Four Immigrants Manga* was selected as a finalist in Pen West USA translation award. His latest book, *The Astro Boy Essays: Osamu Tezuka, Mighty Atom, and the Manga/Anime Revolution* was published by Stone Bridge Press in 2007. In 2009, Fred was awarded the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold Rays with Rosette, for his work in helping to promote Japan's popular culture overseas. Also, in the same year he was awarded the "Special" category of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' 3rd International Manga Award.

10am - 11:30am Panel I: Gaming Reality: The Politics of Digital Appropriation

John G. Russell
Gifu University

“Don't (It) Make My Brown Face Blue: Racial Avatars and the Embodiment of Alien Others in Contemporary Science Fiction”

This paper examines the ways in which popular culture, particularly American and Japanese cinema of the fantastic and the graphic arts, reinscribes conventional notions of racial alterity and projects them onto imaginary Others and into imagined futures. All Others – cinematic and otherwise – are, of course, imaginary, but in science fiction and fantasy, we are dealing with imaginary Others at once removed from the quotidian but that nonetheless reproduce its basic assumptions, preoccupations, and obsessions: giant gorillas extraterrestrials, robot, and replicants that serve as convenient proxies, allegorical avatars, of and for more mundane racial-ethnic others. In addition to displacement, such representations are also marked by absence, substitution, and abscence – transformational whiteness – by means of which nonwhite others are strategically whitened and the future is imagined as white by default, a virtually monochromatic landscape from which traces of racial and ethnic identity have largely been erased.

Peter Mantello
Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University

“Pixel Counts versus Death Counts: The Aesthetics and Politics of Networked First Person Shooter Video Games”

This presentation looks at the binaural relationship of the massive online first person shooter game, as a site of contestation between the real and the imaginary worlds, clear cut political agendas and vague ideological platforms that blur the demarcation between player and hero, modern and pre-modern, good and evil, civilian and soldier, the Pentagon and Hollywood, the West and the Rest. The discussion then moves to the increasingly homogenous relationship between the martial art of the tactical and the tactile sensation of the virtual, computer simulated game play and actual digitized warfare, the tension between overt realistic narratives and covert hidden subtext which conflate the authenticity of combat with the legitimacy of political agendas.

Rebecca Suter
University of Sydney

“Creative Misreadings of Christianity in the Samurai Shodown Videogame Series”

The creative appropriation of Christian images and themes has played a significant role in postwar Japanese popular culture. A recurring figure is that of Amakusa Shiro, the fifteen year-old leader of the Shimabara rebellion, the last Christian revolt after the definitive ban on foreign religion of the Tokugawa period. Since Yamada Futaro's famous recreation of Shiro as a bloodthirsty demon in his *Makai Tensho* (Demon resurrection) in 1967, the character has appeared in a number of different media and genres and has undergone a number of intriguing transformations, from sex-obsessed sadistic samurai to gender-ambiguous gentle Messiah. In this paper, I will look at the evolution of Shiro from absolute Other/pure villain (what in gaming is called a “boss”) to playable character in the videogame series *Samurai Shodown*, in order to reflect more broadly on the political significance of the creative appropriation of Christianity in contemporary Japan.

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Institute of Contemporary Asian Studies

1:45 - 3:45pm Panel 2: POLITICIZING OTAKU

Discussant: Frederik Schodt

Patrick W. Galbraith “Otakuology’:The Study of Japan and the Politics of the Popular”
University of Tokyo

In order to understand our current understanding of “otaku,” we have to turn to the burgeoning scholarly discussion of Japanese popular culture. This phenomenon was propelled by three interrelated factors:

- 1) The crisis in area studies and declining interest in Japan after the end of the Cold War and collapse of the “Bubble economy.”
- 2) The rising profile of Japanese popular culture around the world, including the academic centers of United States and Western Europe.
- 3) The Japanese government’s promotion of popular culture in the “Cool Japan” policies.

“Otaku” is a shifting signifier that was naturalized along with discussions of anime, manga and videogames. This is problematic, as understandings are based almost entirely on received media stereotypes. The definition of otaku is often assumed and never questioned. Many commentators present themselves as otaku, implying a sort of hermeneutic symmetry and foreclosing discussion. There is also a dearth of dialogue with experts in Japan, who operate in the context of a social and historic debate about otaku. The danger is that otaku get caught up in assumptions of difference and uniqueness, the rationale necessary to uphold interest in, and study of, Japan as the exotic Other.

Roland Kelts “Japan's Pop Culture Branding Gap: Why 'Cool Japan' Isn't Enough”
University of Tokyo

The phrase 'cool Japan' has become a national brand. But it's as convenient as it is vague. Does it indicate an aspect of the national or ethnic character that is fundamentally cool? Is it about Japan's capacity to absorb and then reinvent a range of outside influences that makes Japan so au courant in our smorgasbord 21st century? And, perhaps most pressing: If Japan is cool now, can it possibly stay that way? There remains an unsettling gap between international fans of 'cool Japan' and the Japanese who actually make what's cool. While the faces of popular anime and manga characters elicit oohs and aahs and sometimes squeals of recognition when they flash on projection screens or parade past in cosplay events, the industry that creates them--producers, publishers, artists and animators--continues to be virtually faceless outside of Japan. How and why has this happened? And is it too late to remedy Japan's failure to distinguish and market its most attractive brands beyond its shores, as branding itself becomes more diversified via multiple digital media platforms?

Kaichiro Morikawa “Popular Culture Politics”
Meiji University

In the past decade, manga, anime, games and related Japanese pop-cultures have collected growing interest from the Japanese government. They were discovered as golden eggs, attracting buyers worldwide. The government even planned to erect a national museum to promote and to elevate these cultures. The problem is, that the goose that laid the eggs — the otakus and their realm — was and is, considered ugly. The more the eggs became attractive, the more problematic the goose's ugliness became. So the authorities started to try separating the goose from the eggs, and to cleanse its realm. Little is considered that this segregation and cleansing could be a serious threat to the fertility of the mother goose. Focus will be on the actual events which constitute the present state of otaku culture.

4 - 6pm: Panel 3: THE POLITICS OF POPULAR CULTURE

Discussants: Anne Allison (Duke University) and Iwabuchi Koichi (Waseda University)

David Leheny “Soft Power Goes Regional: Appeal as an International Norm”
Princeton University

When the term “soft power” leapt into international relations debates in the final days of the Cold War, it was usually understood as a peculiarly American resource; because of its values of openness and tolerance, only the United States had the ability to persuade other countries through the attractiveness of its culture, rather than to simply coerce them with its military and economic might. Japanese writers themselves had argued that their country was too insular and distinctive to have soft power until a 2002 article by Douglas McGray affirmed Japan's “Gross National Cool” as the source of its soft power. This paper examines how the literature on international norms -- standards of behavior that states, as states, are supposed to follow -- can be enriched by considering the politics of distinctiveness and appeal in Japan and East Asia.

Dan White “Affecting Cultural Expediency: Observations From the Field on Soft Power's Interpretations, Applications, and Emergent Forms of Life”
Rice University

In *The Expediency of Culture* (2003), George Yúdice traces the historical processes by which culture has in the recent past become transformed into resource, increasingly appealed to in order to solve problems that “previously were the province of economics and politics” (2003:1). Yúdice's insight is confirmed in the recent appropriation of Joseph Nye's term “soft power” (1990) by Japanese bureaucrats invested in projects that transform representations of “Japanese culture” into resources of commodity expansion and political prestige. Although Nye's concept has been rigorously debated in theory, how is the transformation of representation into resource achieved in practice? Based on fieldwork at the Japan Foundation and interviews with officials from Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Agency for Cultural Affairs, and Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, this paper analyzes how soft power is interpreted, appropriated, and activated in policy within the everyday practices of cultural administration. The paper introduces some of soft power's “emergent forms of life” (Fischer 2003) and ultimately argues that in understanding soft power's appeal in Japan, one must pay attention to the affective dimensions by which soft power's promises alleviate political concerns over increasingly uncomfortable shifts in international power relations.

Kukhee Choo “Cool Japan and the Trajectory of Japan's Soft Power”
National University of Singapore

Into the first decade of the 21st century, Japanese popular culture such as anime, manga and video games in the global market has garnered the unprecedented support from the Japanese government. After extensive research and development, the government launched the Content Industry Promotion Policy in 2004 to internationally promote their creative media industries under the banner of “Cool Japan.” The Tokyo Metropolitan Government has also established itself as the Mecca of anime, manga and video games. This presentation will examine the various approaches that both the Japanese government and anime industry have taken to adjust to the rapidly changing global and domestic market trends. Japan's national project not only provides a salient example of the rapidly changing relationship between culture and policies, but it also denotes a significant alteration in how the nation state, popular culture industries and the urban spaces are reconfigured through the global consumption of Cool Japan.