Post-Murakami Depictions of Cute Young Women in Contemporary Japanese Visual Culture

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Post-Murakami
Depictions of Cute Young Women in Contemporary Japanese Visual Culture
by
Stephanie Denise Silberman
B.A., University of Florida, 2007

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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Post-Murakami
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written by Stephanie Denise Silberman
has been approved for the Department of Art & Art History

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
For the last decade, the artist Takashi Murakami has shaped the scholarship of contemporary Japanese art with his Superflat Manifesto, in which he claims that society, customs, art, and culture are all superflat (two-dimensional). In addition, Murakami maintains that the trauma of the Pacific War has reappeared in Japanese popular culture under the guise of kawaii (cuteness), serving as a mask for repressed feelings of anxiety and impotence caused by the United States occupation. His theories, however, ignore the female domain and the changing trends of otaku culture. Many recent depictions of cute young women serve as role models for their readers, empowering them to rebel against the societal norms of Japanese society. While the characters are still cute, they do not reflect feminine passivity or repressed postwar feelings of fear and anxiety. Instead, kawaii is presented as an aesthetic that artists choose to portray both male and female characters.
I would like to thank my thesis advisor Claire Farago for her continuous support and encouragement throughout this process. I also deeply appreciate my other committee members, Marilyn Brown and Faye Kleeman, for their unrelenting wisdom. In addition, Kirk Ambrose, Melissa Hyde, JP Park, Eric Segal, David Stanley, and Jason Steuber have all contributed to my academic career. I am deeply grateful for their assistance. Of course, I could not have produced this work without the love from my family, friends, and Thomas Spradling.
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Introduction

The Japan Society in New York currently has an exhibition entitled *Bye Bye Kitty!!! Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Japanese Art*, which opened on March 19, 2011. I recently had the pleasure to meet Joe Earle, Director of the Japan Society Gallery, and participated in a preview of the exhibition in early February. During Earle’s introduction, he declared that contemporary Japanese art was moving towards a post-Murakami stage, both post-otaku and post-kawaii. The most well known Japanese artist in the United States, Takashi Murakami, has spurred scholarship on his “superflat” style and his claim that society, customs, art, and culture are all two-dimensional. He is often compared to Andy Warhol, sometimes referred to as the Japanese Warhol, because of his references to popular culture and his factory, KaiKai Kiki. While introducing the themes, Earle claimed that the upcoming exhibition would move beyond the stereotypes of kawaii (cuteness) and otaku (geek or nerd) culture, highlighting sixteen emerging and mid-career artists. Although recent scholarship has addressed the concerns of the growing otaku culture both in Japan and the United States, I would like to expand the discussion to include kawaii imagery within art and popular culture that has also attempted to move beyond current stereotypes. I will focus on the different manifestations of kawaii in depictions of young women within Japanese visual culture.

When General Douglas MacArthur gave a testimony to the US Senate in 1951, he stated that the Japanese people were “like a boy of 12.” With this in mind, Takashi Murakami realized that the title *Little Boy* was perfect for a show on otaku culture that demonstrated how contemporary Japanese artists have responded to wartime suffering
and postwar subordination.\(^1\) For many Japanese, the term “Little Boy” invokes memories of catastrophe and defeat since it was the code name for the atomic bomb dropped over Hiroshima. In 2005, the Japan Society presented *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture* (Fig. 1), what Ken Johnson has called “an exhibition of fine and popular art that focused on the curious obsession with cuteness” in Japanese popular culture. According to Johnson, Murakami, the curator of the exhibition, believes that kawaii is “a symptom of collective postwar trauma and attendant feelings of powerlessness.”\(^2\) Drawing from Murakami’s conclusions, kawaii culture becomes mask for anxiety, fear, and impotence. While the infantilizing sense of powerlessness is played out in the kawaii obsession, the otaku are fixated on nuclear catastrophe, monster films, and science fiction. Japanese popular culture has over time absorbed what Roberta Smith has called “the largely unexamined trauma of Japan’s role in the war,” the atomic bombs, and the prolonged American occupation into a collective unconscious. The fascination with violence and power in the form of mushroom cloud explosions is one such outlet. Murakami claims that the trauma has caused many displaced emotions including anxiety, shame, and a pervasive sense of impotence.\(^3\) However, this theory limits the female domain and does not fully explain the use of kawaii imagery.


\(^3\) Roberta Smith, “From a Mushroom Cloud, a Burst of Art Reflecting Japan’s Psyche,” *New York Times*, April 8, 2005
Akio Nakamori popularized the term otaku in 1983 with a collection of essays about people obsessively engrossed in anime (animation), computers, figurines, manga (comic books), and video games. Fans at anime conventions would use the word otaku to address one another. When translated into English, the term simply means “you” and does not carry the Japanese connotations of being formal and impersonal. Ever since 1989, when Tsutomu Miyazaki was arrested for the kidnapping, rape, and murder of several young girls, the term otaku was burdened with a particularly negative connotation by the Japanese media. TV news and talk shows repeatedly showed the image of Miyazaki’s room overflowing with anime videotapes and comics. Unfortunately, throughout the 1990s, Miyazaki became the face of the otaku, casting a negative image of anime fans as perverts and threats to society. Even in 2001, when Hiroki Azuma published his book on otaku culture, he received fierce opposition from other well-known critics. In addition, he also faced opposition from a number of otaku. Azuma concluded that while some people refused to even recognize otaku, others believed that only otaku could speak about themselves.\(^4\)

Joseph Tobin defines otaku as “a term of derision used to describe adolescents and young adults, almost all of whom are males, who are obsessed with an aspect of popular culture that they access at home, through their computers, rather than through face-to-face human interaction.” He goes on to describe otaku as either too fat or too skinny with a pasty complexion. Whereas in English “geek” or “nerd” are primarily interested in technology, otaku are more interested in an aspect of popular culture that they track using

technology. If otaku originated as a term to describe maniacs and enthusiastic fans (nekura) that were mostly male, then can the term be used to describe female fans? Numerous women of all ages attend anime conventions around the globe. In the recent Denver anime convention, I interviewed over fifty female fans. Although I cannot draw any broad conclusions, I did find that the popular female characters tended to be goddesses, aliens, or robots, essentially characters with innate powers. Therefore, (I have come to the conclusion) kawaii and otaku culture cannot be separated. To represent females within otaku culture, it must be under the pretense of kawaii. As a result, otaku have evolved and progressed into a new generation of fans underneath this kawaii veneer. This new generation grew up with Hello Kitty, Power Rangers, Sailor Moon, Pokémon, and the endless supply of Godzilla films. In addition, this new generation does not remember Japan as the enemy of the Pacific War but as a rising cultural power today.

The feminist Sally Stafford argues that for women “there is only a mask, that true femininity and the mask of womanliness are the same.” When female heroines are active and aggressive, it has been argued that these women represent a fetish image of femininity. Their adopted masculinity functions to disguise their lack of it. The male spectator creates either a masculine image of women or an excessively feminine version. While one threatens the societal role of the sexes, the other is domesticated into obedience. It is the latter that I am most interested in and its relation to cuteness. Koichi Iwabuchi states that “cute” is a term most often used to describe the growing appeal of Japanese fashion, pop

6 Ibid, 242
idols, and animated characters. These cute characters have become extremely popular, and yet there is something distinctive about their cuteness. To make characters cute they must be small. Smallness can have a psychological or emotional element and can connote that the character is babyish, naïve, innocent, young, and dependent. Anne Allison discusses cuteness (kawaisa) as involving “an emotional attachment to imaginary creations/creatures with resonances to childhood and also Japanese traditional culture.” She associates kawaii with the qualities of amae (sweet, dependent) and yasashii (gentle). While kawaii is linked to girls and girlishness, it is not exclusively feminine. A boy’s face or personality can be called kawaii. Allison claims that cuteness is “something one both consumes and also cultivates as part of the self.” In particular, she talks about Pokémon’s aura of “cuteness” that appeals across gender and age. Cuteness has become a cultural power or a “soft power” that is currently being distributed overseas. Japan’s future in influencing global culture is coming through video games, anime, and manga. In the last decade, the market for the three industries has surpassed that of the car industry. Cuteness is “not only a commodity but also equated with consumption itself.” By consuming cuteness, one expresses the need to be comforted and soothed, creating nostalgia for experiences in a

8 Ibid
10 Ibid
child’s past. In this sense, cuteness is childish. However, its appeal has spread to men, women, boys, and girls. It is no longer confined to feminine realm.\textsuperscript{11}

In addition, I argue that kawaii is no longer infantilizing and that the sexual appeal of characters, derived from their innocence and childlike nature, has contributed the maturity of otaku culture. As fans mature, they cause the content of Japanese popular culture to change with them and visa versa. To start with, I provide an extensive background and history of modern manga in the first chapter entitled \textit{Historicizing Manga}. Many scholars attempt to connect modern manga to previous art historical traditions, claiming that modern manga is a direct descendent of \textit{kibyoshi}, a form of early comic books. By finding an indigenous origin for manga these scholars are attempting to raise popular culture to a scholarly level.

My second chapter, \textit{The Mask of Kawaii}, addresses the repressed emotions from the Pacific War and the outlets of trauma within popular culture. Takashi Murakami’s theories on postwar trauma and his \textit{Little Boy} exhibition will be examined along with the shifting image of otaku within visual culture. The scholarship on the film \textit{Godzilla} (1954) is used as evidence of the repressed trauma during the postwar period. This chapter also attempts to contextualize kawaii within postwar history. Chapter three, entitled \textit{Post-Murakami}, will elaborate on the scholarship within the last few years that discusses the flaws of Murakami’s theories. The newly released animated film \textit{Summer Wars} provides an example of Murakami’s aesthetics within popular culture. However, the film moves beyond the

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 38-41
stereotypical image of cuteness. Since this is a new film, I am proposing that Japanese visual culture is attempting to move beyond its own stereotypes of kawaii culture.

The fourth chapter, *Tough Love*, deals with the clashing ideals of cuteness and violence that is evident in the artwork of Nara and Tenmyouya. Images of the bad girls of Japan, particularly the *yanki* (delinquent), are examined in the characters of the anime series *Samurai Champloo*, the film *Kamikaze Girls*, and the live-action show *Gokusen*. While the fifth chapter, *Fantasy Meets Reality*, examines the artwork of female artists, it also addresses the issues of depicting women as fantasy characters. The animated film *Paprika* provides evidence of the blurring lines between fantasy and reality. Other anime such as *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* and *Kannagi* use the depictions of cute goddesses (*kami*) to illustrate strong but childlike female characters. I propose that these characters actually empower female fans and provide them with positive role models.

Chapter six, *Girls Will Be Robots*, investigates the development of the idealized female body transformed into a robot. The famous animated film, *Ghost in the Shell*, as well as the animated version of the 1920s classic *Metropolis* provide examples of the idealized female body and the anxiety that comes with such a powerful robot. The work of Hans Bellmer has been compared to both films, and this chapter addresses the existing scholarship, elaborating on the implications of female ideology. Exploring the possibility that the female robot is an extension of the idol, the animated film *Perfect Blue* is analyzed in light of the obsession with idols and the female form. The highly sexualized robotic woman is portrayed the anime *Chobits* along with the concept of *moe*, attributes of the female form that stir up the desire of the viewer. In my opinion, *moe* exists as an expression
of otaku sexuality, emerged from the continuous emphasis on the cuteness of characters. I examine this anime to discuss the role of the male as a voyeur and participant.

My conclusion will address the feminization of Japan during the postwar period and how popular culture can be used to question the line between genders. The anime *Ouran High School Host Club* and the animated film *Tokyo Godfathers* are great examples of gender ambiguity in certain characters. The prolific beautiful male (*Bishōnen*) and the current phenomenon of herbivore men (*soushoku danshi*) further the discussion of the loss of masculinity during the occupation period. Both types of males are considered heterosexual, but prefer to spend more time on their looks than on girls, a form of narcissism, turning sexuality and desire inward. While Takashi Murakami’s theories will be addressed again, it will be in a new light since the shifting trends of visual culture have been discussed throughout. Less than a decade has passed between the two exhibitions, *Little Boy* and *Bye Bye Kitty!*, by the Japan Society and yet much has changed in the otaku world. Responding to the constantly changing visual culture of Japan, contemporary artists are moving past the otaku and kawaii into a different period of work. Everything is no longer “superflat.” The Murakami era is being replaced. Although I cannot clearly define what direction contemporary visual culture is going in, the aesthetic of kawaii in depictions of young women no longer limits the role of women in Japanese society. The use of kawaii in visual culture no longer has to relate to powerlessness or an infantilizing childlike nature. The depictions of women shown throughout are powerful role models for their female fans. I have complied recent scholarship on the concept of kawaii and its relationship with women. As the female audience matures, the characters have come to represent the strength of not just women, but of the Japanese people. This is a much different reality than Murakami’s.
Chapter One
Historicizing Manga

This chapter will explore the cultural origins of modern manga, specifically within the scholarly debate of kibyoshi, an older form of Japanese comics, as the forerunner of manga. The main reason scholars would want to make this connection is to heighten the importance of popular culture by linking it to a traditional and well-researched subject such as kibyoshi. However, the complications of the references to an imaginary Edo period and an unspoiled culture of Japan that are present in modern manga are addressed. While some manga artists claim that they create for a specifically “Japanese” audience, the growing popularity of manga worldwide suggests otherwise. How can a Western audience understand the cultural references? It is in my opinion that while some fans of anime and manga may hold on to romantic ideals of Japan, others take up the study of Japanese culture, history, and language.

Over the past twenty years, there has been an influx of Japanese anime and manga that have been embraced by the American youth. However, the cultural origins of where these characters and storylines come from are not present to a western audience. It seems that most Americans are participating in a superficial cultural exchange. Many anime fans have never been to Japan and hold romantic ideals of the country, not unlike the European artists of the nineteenth century. It is possible that manga are becoming the Japanese prints of our own time, creating a modern day version of Japonisme, the nineteenth century obsession with anything Japanese. There are obvious tendencies to return to the art aesthetic of the Edo period of Japan, which is discussed further in a later part of this
chapter. After the end of the historical Edo, when Japan finally opened its borders in 1854, an imaginary Edo emerged. Unlike the newly formed nation-states of Europe, Japan did not enter the modern period with a strong sense of national identity. Instead of cutting off its past, Japan invented a tradition to posit against modernity. Everything that looked “Japanese” including architecture, clothes, entertainment, and food was considered Edo. Serving as a cultural space containing tradition, Edo became “the way we once were.”12 It was to Japan what the ancien regime was to revolutionary France, a historical imaginary period that evoked the past to get to the future. It was seen as an unspoiled version of Japanese culture, as Japan before the West.

The artist Katsushika Hokusai coined the term manga as “looser, unself-conscious sketches” in 1814.13 Today, manga are multi-volume stories that arguably belong to the long line of Japanese visual history. It was Osamu Tezuka who became responsible for the success of manga in the postwar period. He is often called the “Disney of Japan” or also “God of Manga.” His manga appealed to both sexes and all ages. It became his consuming passion.14 Although before Tezuka there had been several comics and animated cartoons, they were infrequent, individual works.15 Throughout the years, manga has come to represent all forms of Japanese comics. Unlike American comics, manga never underwent a

15 Fred Patten, Watching Anime, Reading Manga (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2004) 220
period of creative or moral restriction. Therefore, topics include a wide range of genres including action, comedy, drama, love, and tragedy. After the Pacific War, manga were a cheap and highly accessible form of entertainment. In manga that are set in the distant past, such as Samurai Champloo, discussed in chapter four, the artists often make conscious references to ukiyo-e, translated as “pictures of the floating world” from the Edo period, either in the formation of the settings or even the dress and pose of the characters. The pleasures of everyday life are echoed in the fleeting moments manga captured within each panel.

In contrast, anime are usually an animated representation of an already popular manga. The Japanese refer to all animation as anime. However in the West, it refers specifically to Japanese animation. Once only recognized as part of a subculture, anime has increasingly taken over sections in video stores and slots on cable television. While in America cartoons are considered only for children, in Japan they are considered “a legitimate form of artistic and literary expression.” The large, round eyes and various hair colors of anime characters do not indicate a specific race. The characters do not have exclusively “Japanese” or “Caucasian” features. They are multi-cultural and relate to a much wider audience. Anime eyes depict emotions and are seen as gateways into the character’s soul. Sensitive, sympathetic characters tend to have larger eyes. The loss of innocence or possession by a demonic force tends make the eyes blank, clouded, or plain. Even the distinct color of the hair has different connotations, making it easier to identify the

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17 Fred Patten, Watching Anime, Reading Manga, 222
different characters. When Caucasian characters are portrayed, they have freckles or oddly shaped large noses.\textsuperscript{18}

The art and culture from Japan, both high and low, have continuously affected the West from the nineteenth century to the present. In the Western imagination, according to cultural historian Susan Napier, “Japan has existed as an object of respect, fear, derision, admiration, and yearning, sometimes all at once.”\textsuperscript{19} Building upon previous high cultural Japanese traditions, anime and manga are each considered “a phenomenon of popular culture.” Their strength lies in their ability to “affect a wider variety of audiences.”\textsuperscript{20} Amongst the American domination of mass culture, anime and manga stand out as “implicit cultural resistance” by their insistent difference.\textsuperscript{21} While anime and manga have been enormously affected by global culture, both remain an original product of Japanese modern culture. Napier asserts that anime appeals to a new generation that cares more about the quality of the cultural product itself than its national origins.\textsuperscript{22} An interest in anime has led to an interest in Japanese society in general as fans learn about Japanese history and folklore because of anime and manga through popular culture. By integrating Japanese culture into their lives, modern day fans are like the European artists of the nineteenth century, enthralled by the “exotic visual source of pleasure and aesthetic inspiration.”\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{19} Susan Napier, \textit{From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 2-27
\textsuperscript{20} Susan Napier, \textit{Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001) 3-6
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 255
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid
Incredibly, despite the new international fan base, anime and manga are produced solely for, and about Japanese. Because this is so, both mediums provide an interesting, unique perspective into Japanese consciousness. Of course what is portrayed is not how the Japanese really live, instead it is how they wished they lived. Foreigners get a momentary look not of the conscious, proper Japanese mind but of their unconscious. The degree to which that a western audience can understand or even notice the references to the unspoiled culture of Japan are questionable. As Camp and Davis point out, “it mustn’t be forgotten that what we see in America, even on the underground fan circuit, is only a small fraction of the anime that Japanese viewers have been exposed to in the last few decades.”

When faced with something different, such as anime and manga, the differences in the way we think become apparent. Antonia Levi discusses the affects of the Judeo-Christian tradition on American culture:

Regardless of whether we are religious or even believe in god, most of us have a monotheistic outlook. We believe in one answer, one way, one Truth with a capital T. And we believe in a universe that is, or should be, rational and just. We believe that virtue should be rewarded. We regard reason as more reliable than intuition. We believe that there is a sharp dividing line between reality and fantasy, between dreams and waking. We don’t think about these things.

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The charm in anime and manga lies in making the viewer forget and then question reality. Perhaps anime and manga came at a time when many Americans needed an outlet, at a time of economic instability.26

Today, as we stand somewhat perplexed in the face of the innumerable comics produced in present-day Japan, we notice how many genres of literature originally intended for reading are now being replaced by manga. A glance into Japan’s past can, according to Ekkehard May, help us understand the practically unbroken line of tradition from earlier pictorial literature to contemporary comics.27 Illustrated booklets evolved into an illustrated literature for grown-ups by adopting themes from everyday life in a humorous manner that extended to caricature, parody, and allegory.28 These booklets, the kibyoshi, can be called Japan’s first comics or manga in the modern sense. May claims, “this applies to the nature of the pictures with their overdrawing and exaggeration, abbreviation, or caricature, as well as to the quantitative relationship of picture to text and to specific techniques of picture-text-expression, such as placing dialogues and speeches next to their speakers.”29 The bare text of a kibyoshi appears incomplete without an illustration, although not to the same extent as in manga. In both mediums, the flow of the text does not simply follow the natural sequence of lines. Instead, it adjusts to the structure and

26 For further information, see Roland Kelts, Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture has invaded the U.S. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)
28 Ibid, 33-34
29 Ibid, 36-37
sequence of the actions, the course of events, and the locations shown in the pictures. This arrangement requires a special receptiveness from the reader who must meander between texts and pictures in order to gain a perception of the whole. According to May, the kibyoshi were a form of integrated pictorial literature, with text and pictures forming an inseparable unity just like today’s comics. He asks, “How was it possible for a truly integrated pictorial literature to come into existence in the form of the kibyoshi books? Further, in a much later period, why have the comics met with such success in Japan?”

In May’s opinion, there is only one eminently plausible answer to his queries:

Through every one of these forms of pictorial literature we find a mixed verbal-visual code of script and pictures, which was perhaps able to develop freely because it springs from and is closely linked to the Japanese system of mixed scripts. In this system, ideograms in their role as an optical code meet with the indigenous Japanese syllable script, which, in its turn, is a primarily phonetic code; thus, in many cases, purely phonetic renderings are not sufficient to transmit the complete information contained in a given text. To put this in simpler terms: like a kibyoshi, a modern comic in its full sense is not something that can be read aloud to someone who cannot see it.

May makes it clear that the special training and ability of Japanese ‘readers’ simultaneously to grasp purely optical signals, along with phonetically expressible ones, encouraged the formation of such literature and contributed immeasurably to its spread, and to the popularity that continues into our own time. However, his theory only focuses on the Japanese “reader” and does not take into account the popularity of manga outside of Japan.

Another scholar, Frederik Schodt, also sees modern manga as the direct descendent of kibyoshi. He continuously compares kibyoshi to modern comics throughout his book, Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga, Schodt states that today’s manga magazines

30 Ibid, 43-44
31 Ibid
and books have direct links to two types of entertaining picture books from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, *toba-e* and kibyoshi. Both were mass-produced using woodblock printing and a division of labor not unlike the production system used by manga artists and their assistants today. Often issued in a series, again like today’s manga, they were beloved by townspeople in cities such as Osaka and Edo.\(^{32}\) Schodt claims that townspeople in the Edo period were crazy about humorous woodblock illustrations and trashy illustrated storybooks. Many of these, although they lacked sequential picture panels or word “balloons,” bore a striking resemblance to modern comics. They usually had twenty or more pages, with or without text, and were bound with tread or opened accordion-style. Like modern comics, the kibyoshi evolved from illustrated tales for children and gradually encompassed more and more sophisticate adult material. Most pages consisted of a drawing combined with the text in a block above it to form an illustrated, running story.\(^{33}\)

The kibyoshi tradition, dating back to the eighteenth century, came out of an earlier kind of picture book publishing technique called *kurobon* (black books) and *akabon* (red books), reflecting the colors of their covers. *Kibyoshi* (yellow books) were published for adults and dealt with a range of subjects. The narrative presentation in these books, with both graphics and text, draws similarities to factors that relate to manga. There were no speech balloons, although there were thought bubbles, and this technique allowed for plural scenes on one frame, harkening the advent of panels. Furthermore, the use of lines


\(^{33}\) Ibid, 138
and smoke foreshadowed manga graphic symbols, though they signified different meanings from today. However, the scholar Natsume Fusanosuke insists that kibyoshi were not manga, as they did not distinguish between narration and speech, and most examples employed full-page panels, unlike modern comics. From the title of Adam Kern’s colorful and extensively researched history of the kibyoshi, *Manga from the Floating World: Comicbook Culture and the Kibyoshi of Edo Japan*, one could gain the impression that kibyoshi are equivalent to manga or at least manga’s forerunner. However, in the book, Kern is more tentative about the connection. His classification of kibyoshi as “comic-book culture” may be seen as tenuous. Kern does make the point that kibyoshi were, like manga, mass-produced and consumed as products of popular culture, and as such, the kibyoshi were often created with content that was aesthetically, socially, and politically on the edge.

The scholarly concern of Adam Kern is that the genre of kibyoshi has too often been relegated to the status of a pre-modern precursor of the manga. However, the kibyoshi was a full-fledged comic book in its own right and one of the bestselling forms of woodblock printed literature in its day. Adam Kern claims that the kibyoshi not only mirrored and constructed urban commoner culture, but was also one of the major vehicles for the assertion of that culture in the political sphere.


35 Ibid, 40

The very assertion of an urban commoner culture in a country whose arts had historically been dominated by the court and its samurai aides qualifies as a political act of sorts. Yet the *kibyoshi* also became the most salient form of political satire. Thus, it was because the genre seemed poised to transform the uniquely Edoesque brand of townspeople culture into something more, perhaps even a national culture, thereby displacing traditional culture, that the shogunal government intervened. The politically satirical strain within the *kibyoshi* was essentially banned and its authors hounded.

Adam Kern finds this suppression crucial in explaining why the *kibyoshi* phenomenon was relatively short lived. The genre is said to have flourished for just over three decades, beginning in 1775 and ending in 1806. The standard explanation among Japanese cultural and literary historians has long been that the genre abruptly fell victim to the reforms. Kern endeavors to show that the *kibyoshi*, although assuming the guise of children’s comic books, was anything but silly kid stuff. The shogunal government for its part recognized that this seemingly playful genre was progressively becoming a more serious form of social resistance, perceived as a threat to the ideological foundations supporting the entire social structure and, hence, to its own political viability, if not legitimacy.

The *kibyoshi* represent an adult form of visual-verbal narrative art. “Adult,” Kern clarifies, not in the sense of pornographic, though some scholars have exhibited a pronounced tendency to group the *kibyoshi* together unreflectively with other forms of woodblock-printed literature and art that depict the Floating World and its various carnal delights. Rather, “adult” because the *kibyoshi* on the whole addresses a variety of mature concerns and interests. This play embraces a variety of forms of humor, sociopolitical satire, and promiscuous allusions toward much of the Chinese and Japanese cultural heritages. Since the *kibyoshi* indisputably reached a large audience, at least within Edo, Adam Kern

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37 Ibid, 9
touches on the nature and history of the comic book in Japan. One major contention is that if the comic book is defined as a medium of entertaining, sustained visual-verbal narrative, often with an emphasis on topical humor and social issues, mass-produced and sold on the cheap to a broad segment of the general population and not just a narrow privileged elite, then the kibyoshi should be considered one of the earliest if not the earliest comic book for adults in Japanese literary history. It may conceivably have been the “first” such comic book in world literary history, for that matter, raising questions of the distinction, or lack of, between popular culture and fine art. The kibyoshi was also probably the most popular in terms of sales, which inevitably then begs ready comparisons with the modern Japanese manga. After all, just over one third of all printed matter in Japan, accounting for about a quarter of total publishing sales, consists of comics and comic magazines, according to one recent study by the Japanese Research Institute for Publications. Moreover, the manga undeniably has become a force to be reckoned with in literary markets outside Japan, particularly elsewhere in Asia.\(^{38}\)

The modern manga is said to have emerged in Japan sometime during the 1920s. Since little consensus exists as to what constitutes the modern manga, a wide range of alternative dates has also been offered. Whatever date one opts for, the birth of the modern manga as a form falls well outside the chronological purview of Kern’s study. Nonetheless, since the kibyoshi is often characterized as the progenitor of the modern *manga* and many cultural commentators have tried to ground the modern *manga* in Japan’s pre-modern tradition of visual culture, Adam Kern provides an exploration of the relationship between

\(^{38}\) Ibid, 10-11
the two. Supposedly by virtue of an uninterrupted technological progression in the comic book form itself, manga's origins have been located as far back as the early twelfth-century Toba scrolls (toba-e).

Although it cannot be denied that the pre-modern tradition of visual culture was influential in many ways, to maintain that the kibyoshi influenced modern manga directly, as though its originators and practitioners of the modern form actually took their cues from the kibyoshi, is certainly problematical, and would seem full of overgeneralization, ahistoricism, and wishful thinking. Kern maintains that until proof to the contrary comes to light, it was the Western comic strip and comic book, not the kibyoshi that occasioned the advent of the modern manga. The very fact that the kibyoshi phenomenon terminated in the first decade or so of the nineteenth century suggests that, just as Edo period comic books for children did not metamorphose directly into the modern children’s story, the kibyoshi did not empty unremittingly into the modern manga, which at the earliest appeared at the very end of that century.\(^{39}\) Furthermore, the very notion that a monolithic visual culture continued unchanged from the Edo period into modern times is in itself not without complications. Why then do so many cultural commentators, in trying to trace the modern manga back to traditional forms, end up exaggerating the role and distorting the nature of the kibyoshi? Kern explains:

It would seem as though the attempt to ground the modern manga in some amorphous Japanese tradition, into which the kibyoshi would be subsumed as part of the ukiyoe culture, is part of a reactionary ploy to legitimatize manga by downplaying the otherwise incontestable influence of global but especially Western popular culture. Whatever other motivations might be at play, the main danger in positing the existence of a monolithic,

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\(^{39}\) Ibid, 129-130
transhistorical *manga* culture is that it risks distorting both the modern as well as the premodern forms. That is, in trying to impart an air of legitimacy to the modern *manga* by claiming that it partakes in some putatively venerable and unbroken tradition, proponents of *manga* culture perceive strong connections where there are few if any. And they end up, inadvertently perhaps, patronizing the pre-modern tradition, treating it as though it were valuable only by virtue of its relationship to the modern *manga*.\(^{40}\)

Because of its multiple panels and serial nature, modern manga can be thought of as a visual analogue of film. One might generally view the modern manga as a sequence of images that would effortlessly amount to an anime or some other kind of movie. The multiple panels allow the manga artist to zoom in, flash back, pan wide, or fade out all in accordance with the cinematographic storyboard. The anime is then less an animated film that it is an animated manga, which makes sense since many manga are closely linked to anime. The kibyoshi, however, cannot be described as a serial narrative since its basic panel tends to be on a single page. It takes most of its cues from representations of the popular theater with the *mise-en-scene* of the kabuki stage as represented in some form of woodblock-printed theatrical text.\(^{41}\)

In *Reading Japan Cool: Patterns of Manga Literacy and Discourse*, to improve the perception of a cultural product’s quality is to establish a relationship with previous products in history. Pierre Bourdieu describes how linking with the past can increase a person’s or a product’s cultural capital. Therefore, manga’s status improves when connections are made to works of the twelfth century. Further cultural capital is thus acquired by linking manga to kibyoshi, *ukiyo-e*, and other woodblock printings from early

\(^{40}\) Ibid, 131-132
\(^{41}\) Ibid, 150-151
modern Japan. However, not all researchers accept the connection of manga to traditional
drawing and publishing. Many insist that the rise of manga publishing is primarily a post-
World War II phenomenon, when economic conditions, stimulus from American comics,
and gifted creators all came together. As practitioners of critical linguistics, John Insulsrud
and Kate Allen are sympathetic to the position that would deconstruct the connection of
modern manga to earlier roots in visual culture. At the same time, the authors state that
they carry a bias toward language and lack training in and experience with the graphic arts.
“It is more difficult for us to perceive the historical connections in graphic
representation.”

However, as I have shown in the discourse between the kibyoshi legacy and modern
manga, it is clear that an unbroken line between the two cannot be made. While they have
many similarities, there is no evidence that modern manga artists are directly referencing
kibyoshi. In addition, as evident in Sharon Kinsella's Adult Manga, there are several reasons
why scholars would want to make the connection between kibyoshi and modern manga.
The opposition to the manga and animation industries by conservative elements in post-
war society has encouraged the defenders of manga, namely professional manga critics, to
emphasize or even invent stylistic origins for manga in ancient Japanese history. Some
critics have hoped that if they could prove that manga is, somehow, a part of traditional
Japan, then it cannot possibly be uprooted and repressed by the Japanese government. This
defensive argument has drawn attention away from the fact that manga is a strikingly

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Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984) 70-71; John Insulsrud and Kate
Allen, Reading Japan Cool: Patterns of Manga Literacy and Discourse (Lanham: Lexington
Books, 2009) 195
contemporary cultural phenomenon. As seen in the next two chapters, one of the critics attempting to connect popular culture to Japan’s past art historical traditions is Takashi Murakami. This proposition is significant because it raises a particular aspect of culture into the realm of fine art, thereby causing contemporary Japanese art to rise in the eyes of the West. However, this also lessens or ignores the fact that popular culture can stand on its own. It deserves to be discussed because of its various complexities. While I discuss popular culture in relation to fine art, at no point do I deny its merit.

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Chapter Two
The Mask of Kawaii

The mask of kawaii is a concept that the artist Takashi Murakami has referenced continually in his writings about his artwork. By focusing on Murakami, I am able to address the multitude of scholarship that he spurred since publishing his Superflat Manifesto in 2000. Many of his claims are in stark contrast to reality. For example, Murakami suggests that the Japanese just smiled and gave up, which is addressed late in this chapter, however he excludes historical references of kamikaze, Japanese pilots that willingly gave up their lives to save their country. In addition, Murakami claims that Japan lives in fear of another nuclear attack. Therefore, this chapter discusses the frequent use of the apocalypse theme and the desire for a real limit, a real ending, or a real horizon.

Takashi Murakami believes that the trauma of World War II has permeated his country, claiming that many classic anime and manga stories have plots evolving around a bomb or radiation device that devastates Tokyo. As stated by Arthur Lubow in the New York Times:

Murakami maintains that respectable Japanese artists largely ignored the horrors of World War II and the humiliations of the postwar occupation, relinquishing the subjects to the otaku, who transported these tough realities into the realm of cartoon fantasy. In childlike animated forms, anguished truths were stripped of their historical context, a flattening process that conveniently released both the artist and the viewer from grappling with the contradictions of Japan's wartime experience as predator and victim and postwar status as economic rival of, and political subordinate to, the United States.44

He concluded that otaku have “raised ‘a mirror’ to a reality” that mainstream culture has preferred to ignore. The repression of postwar trauma, according to Murakami, has reappeared in the subculture of the otaku in the form of anime and manga. According to its press release, Little Boy explored the manifestations of otaku culture, “a fantasy world where apocalyptic imagery, fetishistic commerce, and artistic vanguards meet.”45 It was the final installment of Murakami’s Superflat trilogy, “a series of exhibitions that have introduced a new wave of Japanese art and explored the interrelationships between vanguard art, manga and anime, and their forerunner, Ukiyo-e woodblock prints.”46 The earlier exhibitions were Superflat at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles in 2001 and Coloriage at the Foundation Cartier de l’art contemporain, Paris in 2002. The exhibition explores how contemporary Japanese artists appropriated popular culture “as a means to resolve the trauma of the atomic war” and “the devastation of defeat” by using imagery of atomic bombs, toxic wastelands, and mass destruction dominated postwar art and popular culture.47 Murakami adopted the skull-shaped mushroom cloud into his Time Bokan series begun in 2001, commenting on “a postwar Japan that is oblivious to its wartime history.”48 These paintings have appeared in numerous exhibitions, including Little Boy and ©Murakami. In bright colors of blue, pink, and red, Time Bokan-Black (Fig. 2), a painting of a mushroom cloud skull with smiling flowers for eyes, has a rather comical look. Murakami turned the image of the atom bomb, the mushroom cloud, from something fearful into a

45 Japan Society, Little Boy: The Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture Press Release, New York, April 6, 2005
46 Ibid
48 Ibid
kawaii image. The skull-shaped mushroom cloud has two eyes composed of happy flowers (Detail of Fig. 2). When asked why in an interview, Murakami said it referenced the Japanese smile, “We have a feeling like give up. Like okay. We’re smiling.”\textsuperscript{49} The painting does have a cartoon, or anime, look to it. Indeed, the painted surface has been rendered so finely that it appears like a screen print. The atomic bomb has been reduced to something cute and harmless. The smiling flowers have become a metaphor for the masked anxiety of the Japanese people, who just smiled and gave up. Furthermore, Murakami points out the constant use of mushroom clouds in popular culture. While the image can invoke a sense of panic with the older generation that remembers the Pacific War, younger fans do not connect the historical references to the war. For example, \textit{Time Bokan} originated as a popular TV anime series broadcasted in 1975-76 with sequels continuing through the early 1980s. A combination of science fiction and slapstick comedy, \textit{Time Bokan} had an immense following among children. The story starts with the disappearance of a mad scientist into his time machine. The resulting search for him by his assistant and granddaughter composes the narrative fabric. To find the scientist, they travel through time constantly followed by a female villain and her two minions. Every show ends with the villains suffering a miserable defeat as a bomb explodes over their heads, a skull-shaped mushroom cloud explosion. The villains always reappear in the next episode with no explanation of how. In Murakami’s opinion, “although the creators of the anime series could not have intended to send a positive message about the atomic bombing, let alone a

\textsuperscript{49} SFMOCA, Interview with Takashi Murakami, \textcopyright Murakami press release
safe return from it, children loved the indestructible villains.”⁵⁰ According to art critic Sawaragi, “Japan’s subculture generation is seemingly suspended in a historical amnesia, having little sense of the past and withdrawing from reality.”⁵¹ Reality has given into fantasy as memories of violence have been repressed. Both the victim and the victimizer, Japan has distorted its own history as a result of the postwar censorship and the degree of trauma.

The atomic bomb has been deployed only twice in actual warfare, at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On August 6, 1945 at 8:15 am, the atomic bomb nicknamed “Little Boy” exploded 580 meters above Hiroshima, where the Fifth Divisional Headquarters and other military facilities were located. As stated in the exhibition catalogue for Little Boy, “The bomb released an amount of energy equivalent to approximately fifteen kilotons of TNT gunpowder, emitting thermal rays and radiation in addition to the mighty winds of the blast.” Half the population within a radius of 1.2 kilometers of ground zero died that day, while hundreds of thousands died by the end of the year from bomb-related causes. Three days later, on August 9, 1945, the second atomic bomb “Fat Man” was dropped on Nagasaki at 1:02 am, causing similar destitution and destruction. As result, Japan immediately surrendered unconditionally to the Allied Forces. However, according to the artist Takashi Murakami, “the two atomic bombs have left a permanent scar on Japanese history: they have touched the national nerve beyond the effects of the catastrophic physical

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destruction.” The imprint of the immediate devastation and the long-term effects of radiation, which affect even future generations have left a permanent impact on the psyche of the survivors. What happened in 1945 could happen again. The Japanese endured Hiroshima and Nagasaki only to live in fear of another nuclear holocaust.

Immediately after the bombings in 1945, there were efforts by both Japan and the United States to suppress history and to forge an officially sanctioned memory of the atomic bombings. According to historian Jim Garrison, “survivors of the bombs could not grieve publicly, could not share their experiences through written word, could not be offered public counsel and support.” Psychological traumas could not be addressed in public forums. Japanese medical researchers could not publish their findings so that other doctors could use them for patient treatments. “And it was not until February 1952 – two months before the occupation ended, and six and one half years after the residents of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed and irradiated – that Japanese academic associations were able to engage freely, openly, and independently in investigating atomic bomb injuries.” Survivors were disfigured, consigned to slow deaths, or mentally retarded. Many could not cope with the “real world.” They became reminders of a miserable past both physically and psychologically. The majority of Japanese, “overwhelmed by their own struggles for daily survival,” were happy to put them out of mind. The Japanese

54 Ibid, 127
55 Ibid
government did not establish a research council to conduct surveys of bomb survivors until November 1953.\textsuperscript{56}

New information about the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki revealed that more nationalities other than just the Japanese had been killed. Many second-generation Japanese Americans had temporarily gone to Japan after Pearl Harbor. It is probable that the Hiroshima bomb killed at least one thousand American citizens. More troublesome was the realization that several thousands of Koreans were also killed in the bombing of the Pacific War. These laborers from Japan-occupied Korea were, what John Dower has termed, “double victims – exploited by the Japanese and incinerated by the Americans.”\textsuperscript{57} Even worse, the Korean survivors were discriminated against when it came to medical treatment after the war. Japan became both victim and victimizer. The atomic bomb became a symbol not only of their victimization but also of their inferiority. It was simultaneously a symbol of nuclear terror and a promise of science. Japan wanted to build “a nation of science” and did so by the 1980s. The vast majority of talented Japanese scientists and bureaucrats moved their attention away from weapons of war, devoting their time to promoting civilian applications of science.\textsuperscript{58}

The current Japanese constitution from 1946 is known as the “Peace Constitution.” The United States demanded that Japan have a peace constitution to prevent its former

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, 128
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid
enemy of waging war again. Prominently displayed in the first gallery of the *Little Boy* exhibition was Article 9, Chapter 2 from the constitution:

> Article 9. Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.

(2) In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized. 59

Although the establishment of the Self Defense Forces in 1954 contradicts the constitution, Article 9 has still had a significant impact on the psyche of Japanese citizens. According to Murakmai, “It would not be an exaggeration to say that the American-made constitution prevented the nation from taking an aggressive stance, and forced the Japanese people into a mindset of dependency under the protection of America’s military might. However just or unjust the American position may have been at the time, it cast Japan in the role of a ‘child’ obliged to follow America’s ‘adult’ guidance, and the nation willingly complied.” 60 Why did Murakami choose to display Article 9 in the exhibition? Are the effects of Article 9 so devastating that it still causes unease amongst the Japanese people? The long tradition of the West describing Japanese culture as “childlike” could also be seen in terms of colonial subordination: Japan was primitive in comparison to the military might of the West. The United States military used this type of attitude to justify the postwar occupation and the conquering of one nation. As a result, the idea that Japan needed the parent nation of the United States because it was a child became a prominent ideology.

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60 Ibid
The campaign for peace rose as fears of a nuclear World War III increased. A campaign to ban all nuclear weapons collected thirty million signatures in 1954. Later that year, *Gojira* (Godzilla) was released in November, a story about a mutant science fiction monster spawned by a nuclear explosion. The movie carried a strong antiwar and antinuclear message of “never again.” According to Murakami, Godzilla served as a metaphor for the destructive bomb, representing “the unprecedented psychological and physical trauma suffered by the Japanese people in the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.”61 It seems that the dread of a nuclear holocaust made “an indelible mark on Japanese creativity, and this disquiet undercurrent would persist in popular culture for decades to come.”62 Kato Norihiro, in his lecture “From Godzilla to Hello Kitty: Sanitizing the Uncanny in Postwar Japan,” attempts to show how Godzilla gave birth to Hello Kitty, a trademark kawaii image of a white cat with big eyes and no mouth (no expressions of happiness, fear, doubt, etc.).63 According to Norihiro, Godzilla stands as a figure of Japan’s defeat, associated with Japanese cuteness. He argues that Godzilla was not merely an antiwar sentiment, but that the monster also represented the Japanese war dead along with the loss of hope and faith that came with the defeat. The Japanese soldiers died for a cause that the living could no longer believe was right. It was a death not in vain but in error. Godzilla returns home to Japan (originating in the Japan sea), wandering through

62 Ibid
63 *Uncanny* - Sigmund Freud defines the term *unheimlich* (un + familiar): “derives its terror not from something externally alien but, on the contrary, from something strangely familiar which defeats our efforts to separate ourselves from it”; Kato Norihiro, “From Godzilla to Hello Kitty: Sanitizing the Uncanny in Postwar Japan,” lecture at the University of Colorado at Boulder (January 14, 2011)
Tokyo asking, “Where is my country?” Norihiro points out that the same sentiment would have been felt by the Japanese war dead. The country had changed so much in the wake of defeat that it would have be unrecognizable. While in the films the Japanese people constantly attempt to get rid of Godzilla, each time they violate the peace article by attacking the monster. Instead of confronting the past, the tortured position of the war dead is avoided. No matter how hard they try, Godzilla cannot be killed since he is already dead. Throughout the films, Godzilla continually becomes humanized and even has a family. The audience is no longer willing to be frightened by the past and is therefore moving on from the mask of kawaii. Anxiety and fear that once was so pervasive in the Godzilla films was replaced first by kawaii images of Godzilla and then by a more serious series of Godzilla movies that again emphasized the dangers of nuclear power. Mourning was replaced by an overwhelming sense of melancholy and nostalgia.

William Tsutsui also looks at the reception of Japanese popular culture, particularly in the Godzilla films. The cultural and racial difference between the countries comes out in the dubbed version of the films. According to Tsutsui, dubbing is a way of imposing American ideals in the translation. For example, the imperfect translation, added scenes, and humor of the first Godzilla film caused it to be radically removed from the original Japanese version, looked down upon, and laughed at. The movie was thought to be cheap and for children. By elevating the film to a culturally superior plane, the ethnographic difference highlighted the exotic. The original Godzilla supposedly had to be remade to

64 William Tsutsui, “The Prehistory of Soft Power: Godzilla, Cheese, and the American Consumption of Japan,” lecture at the University of Colorado at Boulder (November 19, 2010)
become suitable for American audiences. Tsutsui argues that dubbing domesticates the foreign by hiding the foreign nature of a film and making it a local production. Dubbing, as claimed by Tsutsui, asserts the supremacy of the new language by neutralizing the foreign elements, creating a seamless deception of undetectable censorship and political suppression. If this is the case, then what can be said about the numerous illegal fan subs (translations in the form of subtitles provided by fans) on the Internet by a wide range of otaku from around the globe? Many children have been able to enjoy anime because dubbed versions have appeared on a number of television stations. However, it is dangerous to consider dubbing as a way of elevating the original Japanese versions. Many attributes of Japanese culture and history are replaced in order to suit American standards. Tsutsui gives the example of onigiri, a delicious rice ball snack, which is frequently replaced with the word doughnut in dubbed translations. Although the depiction on the screen looks nothing like a doughnut, translators decided that children would better understand the anime by changing it. This example may seem frivolous to certain extent, but when this type of change happens frequently and on a grander scale, the meaning of the anime can fully change.

Remarkably, Japan has been able to dispel the notion that globalization is monopolized by American and European media. In a 1990 survey, Nintendo’s Mario was apparently a more recognizable character to American children than Walt Disney’s Mickey Mouse. Tsutsui calls this phenomenon Japan’s “Gross National Cool.”65 Addressing the postwar culture of Japan, Tsutsui asserts that there is an individual and collective response

to pain, loss, and horror, which created the energy and inspiration for the postwar boom in Japanese culture. Tsutsui uses Ishiro Honda, the director of Gojira (Godzilla), as an example of someone who had firsthand experience, as an infantryman, of war and the devastation of cities. Accordingly, Honda's strong antinuclear message and stunning visuals of a monster-ravaged Tokyo come through clearly in the film. In addition, “the mushroom clouds that consumed Hiroshima and Nagasaki were particularly symbolic (as well as catastrophic) events and have long been interpreted as the origin points of Japan's extraordinary postwar pop ingenuity.”

Tsutsui then addresses the work of Murakami, particularly the Little Boy exhibition. “In Murakami's opinion, the Japanese people have never fully come to terms with defeat in World War II, occupation by the United States, and a pattern of postwar subservience to America that has left Japan and the Japanese people somehow deformed and perpetually infantilized.”

Within popular culture, we see a compulsive reiteration of nuclear mutation, grotesque metamorphosis, technological escapism, masculine insecurity, and social vulnerability. The Japanese struggle to find some sort of closure for war, surrender, and ongoing dependence on America.

Another potential source of the creative energies behind Japanese popular culture is the rapid modernization Japan underwent from the late nineteenth century through the postwar era of high economic growth. With the Meiji Restoration of 1868 resulting in the overthrow of the feudal government system and the opening of Japan's borders, it seemed impossible for Japanese scholars to understand western science while remaining rooted in

66 Ibid, 27-28
67 Ibid
68 Ibid, 31-32
their beliefs of eastern ethics. According to Confucian doctrine, there are five human relations: father to son, ruler to subject, husband to wife, elder brother to younger brother, and friend to friend. The West, however, focused on the last and least important relationship, friend to friend. It also made no distinction between the samurai and merchant class, allowing its officials to travel the world as mere traders. Therefore, while it was immediately desirable to acquire Western techniques, it was thought that nothing beyond them should be allowed to infiltrate Japanese society.

Yukichi Fukuzawa, considered the father of modern Japan, was an author, writer, teacher, translator, entrepreneur and political theorist. He was also an optimist, believing in progress and a higher human nature. To him, nature served as a corrective, invisible hand to setting things back on course. He agreed with four of the five Confucian relationships, viewing them as part of an innate human nature, part of what humans receive from Heaven, but concluded that the ruler to subject relation was not part of nature. It was merely one instance where the Chinese and Japanese had it wrong and the Europeans with their deeper knowledge of the world had it right. For years, Fukuzawa pondered on the subject of civilization and the nature of Japan’s civilization in relation with that of the West. He felt that Japan had reached a moment in its history where change depended on the education of the people. Though Japan should remain independent, the people must press forward by absorbing Western civilization. While Fukuzawa admired

70 Ibid, 18-19
the West and believed that Japan should emulate its achievements, he was not infatuated with the West. His concern was always with civilization that happened to first appear in the West and not with Western civilization.72

Fukuzawa suggested that the superiority of the West was recent and may not necessarily be permanent.73 Civilization was not western. Japan was not emulating the West, but rather promoting its own destiny with the innate facilities given to man.74 Adopting civilization did not mean imitating every last detail of western custom. Fukuzawa disliked those who blindly believed in the new as they once believed in the old.75 For example, “one was not a civilized man because one ate pork, or carried a bat-umbrella, or wore one’s shoes in the best front room, or brought one’s dog into the house, or blew one’s nose on the sacred paper charms, or smashed the Buddha-shelf.”76 Things were not civilized because they were western but because they were reasonable. Rationality was the only criteria by which one could judge whether western customs should be adopted and Japanese ones rejected.77

In his Outline of Theories of Civilization, Fukuzawa describes the three stages of civilization: barbarism, which could still be found in Australia and Africa, “half-civilized,” which Japan, China, Turkey, and other Asian countries belonged, and “civilization,” the

72 Ibid, 100-102
73 Ibid, 108
75 Albert Craig, Civilization and Enlightenment, 108
76 Carmen Blacker, The Japanese Enlightenment, 38-39
77 Albert Craig, Civilization and Enlightenment, 103
enlightened phase of a society.\textsuperscript{78} Japan’s past, however, did not fit into this schema of stages. Japan had never been a pastoral or hunting and gathering society. Ancient Japan was already agricultural, a technology which is often associated with the “half-civilized” stage. Japan had never been conquered. It had never lost its national polity to a foreign power. To preserve this independence, Fukuzawa concluded that Japan must strengthen itself by quickly adopting the “civilization” that had been attained in the West. His overall argument in Outline is that Japan is backward and has to change since it is ill equipped as a “half-civilized” society to deal with the challenges presented by the “civilized” West. In calling Japan “backward,” Fukuzawa simply meant that they lagged behind the West. He was not telling the Japanese to adopt Western institutions in order to enrich the country. His goals were national independence and progress to a level of “civilization.”\textsuperscript{79}

Reflecting the changing historical and social realities of Japanese society, postwar manga serve as a collective representation of memory. According to Eldad Nakar, there are two different types of narratives that arose from the postwar period.\textsuperscript{80} In the first type (1950s-1960s), the stories ignored the home front and instead focused on heroic aerial battles. Emphasis was placed on the Japanese soldiers as heroes, “bravely fighting against an implacable foe.” The heroes were always volunteers and drawn as kawaii, childlike or cute figures. In addition, the stories ended with the war still raging on. The heroic pilots fly off in their final missions to their inevitable deaths. In Nakar’s opinion, “The war becomes

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid, 120, 152-157
what happens up in the sky, in a world far removed from the harsh realities on the ground. The enemy and death are rarely seen, and thus killing is far less keenly felt, allowing the reader to concentrate on the defenders’ heroism rather than on the war’s tragic outcome.”

Therefore, Nakar concludes that the overall effect is “to avoid dwelling on the devastating defeat and destruction that resulted from the war.”

In the second type of post-war narrative (1960s-1970s), the stories are about fighters, ordinary people, who are led to war by tragic circumstances. New topics explored the war’s moral and political ambiguities, including the atomic bomb, the air raid on civilians, the Japanese army’s mistreatment of prisoners of war and the atrocities in Asia, the American struggle in Europe, and the participation of Japanese Americans on the American side. Some artists used their own personal war experiences. “Heroic war stories are no longer the dominant discourse, since stories about the absurdity and tragedy of war have replaced them. These new stories do not look back nostalgically to the Japanese empire, nor glorify the ideals of duty, honor, and country, nor revel in Japan’s war machines. Rather, they are complex and ambiguous.” As mentioned in the discussion of Godzilla as a representation of the war dead, the soldiers are no longer heroes of war, but its victims.

It took two decades before the Japanese people were able to talk about the atrocities of the war, but only through the subculture of manga. Even then, the uncertain nature of the position of the war dead causes a great deal of anxiety. Many anime and manga that deal explicitly with World War II portray the Nazis as evil, but twist the position of Japan as

81 Ibid, 178-181
82 Ibid
83 Ibid, 182-184, 189-190
an ally force or at least a sympathizer of the ally cause. For example, at the ending of the anime series *Full Metal Alchemist*, one of the main characters crosses the threshold of the elusive gate only to enter into Germany in the midst of World War II. It is insinuated that the constant destruction of the war is what was causing the unbalance of alchemy in his dimension. The Germans are clearly portrayed as the enemy not only in the war but also in the parallel dimension of the anime. However, the position of Japan in the war is never referenced, except in relation to the destruction of their country and the possibility of an apocalypse.

The reappearing apocalypse theme in Japanese popular culture functions as a product of repressed postwar trauma. The term apocalypse implies an absolute limit, “a complete horizon of experience.” It could theoretically, according to Looser, be thought of as a return to the world as a whole, a leveling of humanity back into nature. Destruction then is the beginning, the start of life. This theory provides “a view not only of the horizon of our world but also of the limits of the present time.”84 In postwar Japan, the apocalypse theme became increasingly common in popular culture, causing cultural analysts to point to the atomic bomb experience as a principal factor. Japan suffered from six months of intense firebombing and two atomic bombs as a result of World War II, devastating the land and its people. “In the wake of Hiroshima and Nagasaki... [Japan] found itself in a period of humiliating survival of a country defeated, occupied, exposed to the unknown

effects of radiation, wide-spread destitution and an unclear future.”\textsuperscript{85} It was only after all this hardship that Japan was able to rise again by repressing its memory of the past. The economic boom of the 1980s provided a renewed sense of nationalism, and yet postwar trauma continued to reappear in the form of the apocalypse theme in popular culture. “If the past (that which took place during, and took the form of, a decisive moment in the course of a crisis) is repressed, it returns in the present from which it was excluded, but does so surreptitiously.”\textsuperscript{86} Although the apocalyptic theme should not be thought of in a strictly Judeo-Christian context, apocalyptic is defined as “the religious expression of a people who are crying out for justice in a world perverted to its very roots with injustice, who are seeking retribution and vengeance upon their enemies yet are powerless to bring them about, and who are desperate to be delivered from their plight but who see no deliverer in sight.”\textsuperscript{87} As mentioned before, the initial reaction of the Japanese was hatred and rage against their government and the United States. They felt helpless against the military might of the Allied Forces, the atomic bombs and fire raids. Desperate to be delivered from their plight, the memories of the war faded, replaced by a desire to be technologically advanced, to work harder than others, and to succeed as country once more. Children of the postwar generation escaped into the fantasy worlds of anime and manga. As they grew, the repressed memories began to reappear in those same worlds. Thomas Looser states, “The endless litany of apocalyptic images that Murakami and others now

\textsuperscript{85} Charles Merewether, “Archival Futures: On Kawara and the Date from which All Things Begin, Again,” 136

\textsuperscript{86} Michel de Certeau, “Psychoanalysis and Its History,” in \textit{Heterologies: Discourses on the Other} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) 3

\textsuperscript{87} Jim Garrison, \textit{The Darkness of God: Theology After Hiroshima} (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983) 95
invoke, from the atomic bombing in World War II, to Godzilla, to the Omu Shinrikyo sarin gassings in Tokyo, to Chernobyl, to the weekly world endings of the television show Time Bokan... and so on – all this ends up looking like just a romantic desire for a real limit, a real ending, or a real horizon."\(^{88}\) However, this desire for a limit could be interpreted as a desire to move on from the effects of the war. In order to move into the future, the past must confronted. Perhaps these artists are struggling to find this horizon Looser speaks of in order to cross it into a new beginning.

Due to the censorship by the United States, survivors could not immediately mourn, share their thoughts, or read about the atomic bombs. Once the occupation and censorship ended years later, the Japanese people had to reconstruct a memory of the war. By then, enough time had passed to construct an incomplete collective memory. It is not surprising then that the real horrors were repressed. By repressing this reality, Murakami and other artists of his generation have escaped into fantasy worlds and, the possibility of another catastrophe reoccurs constantly in the seemingly cute and superficial work. The Allied Forces decimated the country, but what of Japan’s atrocities in Asia? What of the experimental treatments to prisoners of war? With such conflicting emotions, it is no wonder that Japan sees the apocalypse as a real ending and then the beginning. Destruction becomes the start of life. Japan already survived a nuclear holocaust once. The future can and will be better, which is not something that Takashi Murakami has addressed in any of his works.

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Japanese visual culture provides an escape from the pressures of conformity, academic and job performance. Tsutsui proposes that popular culture is able to release the pressure of contemporary Japanese life. Media such as manga and video games provide a creative space for individuals to invent and explore alternate realities. Fashion statements such as kawaii, according to Tsutsui, allow young women to empower themselves and craft independent identities.89 This entry into animated fantasy worlds offers consumers a temporary release from the constant demands of daily life. These burdens are left behind, for a moment at least. Izawa explains, “as for what people seek and find in romantic anime, beyond escapism, two elements stand out: lessons about life, and dreams.”90 However, even painful, boring life in the everyday world still yields hidden treasures. It is important to never stop dreaming. Eri Izawa states, “Somewhere, someday, anime tells us, there may shine a joy that outshines transient pain and pleasure, an eternal love that survives even death. This is the treasure that is worth the struggle, the hidden answer to the hero’s (and perhaps the reader’s or viewer’s) desperate search.” 91

This sense of hope is in stark contrast to Takashi Murakami’s theories. In recent years, scholars have pointed to the theoretical flaws in asserting postwar trauma in discussions of Japanese visual culture. The next chapter lays out a post-Murakami art world by providing an alternative view of kawaii culture.


91 Ibid, 151
Chapter Three
Post-Murakami

Various scholarship that questions the theories of Murakami are thoroughly discussed in this chapter. The concept that kawaii can only be used as a mask is replaced by a theory that fans are escaping from the reality of the contemporary world, not necessarily the reality of the war. A younger generation of otaku are confronting the past and pushing towards a progressive future. Murakami’s purpose of retrieving historical memory is discussed in relation to his attempt to ally popular culture with art historical traditions. The initial target on August 9 was not Nagasaki but the city of Kokura. It was abandoned because of smoke cover caused by bombing. Murakami’s mother lived in Kokura. She would tell him, “Takashi, you are very lucky. If Kokura had not been cloudy, you wouldn't be here today.”92 Therefore, Murakami’s relationship to the war is rather vague since he was not even born during the war period, which is also the case for many of the contemporary artists in Japan today. This chapter attempts to show the outdated nature of Murakami’s theories and the shift into a new period of contemporary art.

While Takashi Murakami’s work has enabled scholars to question definitions of traditional aesthetics, history, and international relationships, to what degree is otaku culture still trying to escape from the horrible memories of the Pacific War? The sense of powerlessness Murakami discusses may not be felt by the younger generation of otaku. Dong-Yeon Koh has recently published an article entitled “Murakami’s ‘little boy’

syndrome: victim or aggressor in contemporary Japanese and American arts?” in which he questions the ambiguous nature of Murakami’s criticism of the postwar Japanese position. According to Koh, “Murakami’s blatant commercialization of art leads us to question his primary purpose of retrieving historical memory and taking the depreciative view of a national subject.” Koh claims that while Murakami’s efforts to confront the realities of the war, he takes the “highly victimized position” implying “nostalgia for a militarized state of Japan before the Second World War.” It seems that “superflat” is less concerned with the victimized condition of postwar Japanese society and culture than with Murakami’s “passive-aggressive maneuvering between American and Japanese arts.” By focusing on the influence of otaku, which reflects “genuinely ‘Japanese’ popular culture,” Murakami is able to move away from the domination of the western avant-garde. It also allowed him to move beyond the distinction between high and low art, which is rooted in the western art tradition. However, Murakami attempts to ignore that “most subcultural forms, such as Japanese manga, animation, science fiction novels, and computer games, have American origins as the result of the postwar occupation policy of America in Japan.” Murakami’s assessment of postwar Japanese culture does not preclude his own aggressive and hostile insertion into the American art world. Murakami gave this statement in the Little Boy exhibition catalogue:

We feel an abiding sense of righteous indignation at the use of atomic bombs to bring the Pacific War to a close. We level cheap shots at the Japanese government, which placed Japan in that final scenario and then concealed the

93 Dong-Yeon Koh, “Murakami’s ‘little boy’ syndrome: victim or aggressor in contemporary Japanese and American arts?” in Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, 11(3) September 2010: 393-412

94 Ibid
truth about the bombs’ effects. We feel complex emotions towards the Americans who thrust the terror of nuclear annihilation upon Japan. Added to this is our own cowardly rage for accepting media control as a necessary evil. All of this simmered in the Japanese consciousness as dogma without direction.95

By toying with the audience's sympathy in the Little Boy exhibition, Murakami is able to create a presumably superficial, cute, yet aggressive “little boy.”

Murakami employed the metaphor of childishness, referring to General Douglas MacArthur’s statement that the Japan people are like a boy of 12, mentioned in the previous chapter, to analyze Japanese culture in the Little Boy exhibition. In the opinion of David Elliot, Murakami maintained that a lack of maturity defined the contemporary subculture of Japan in which he as an artist was inextricably involved.96 By sardonically echoing the nickname of the atomic bomb, Murakami argued that the retreat of Japanese art from the adult world into an infantile, “superflat” universe was due to Japan's political subordination to the United States. The Superflat Manifesto reads:

The world of the future might be like Japan is today -- super flat.

Society, customs, art, culture: all are extremely two-dimensional. It is particularly apparent in the arts that this sensibility has been flowing steadily beneath the surface of Japanese history. Today, the sensibility is most present in Japanese games and anime, which have become powerful parts of world culture. One way to imagine super flatness is to think of the moment when, in creating a desktop graphic for your computer, you merge a number of distinct layers into one. Though it is not a terribly clear example, the feeling I get is a sense of reality that is very nearly a physical sensation. The reason that I have lined up both the high and the low of Japanese art in this book is to convey this feeling. I would like you, the reader, to experience


the moment when the layers of Japanese culture, such as pop, erotic pop, otaku, and H.I.S.ism, fuse into one.

Where is our reality?\textsuperscript{97}

The scholar Yoshitaka Mori disagrees with Murakami’s perception of “superflat” since it lacks critical reflexivity to Japan’s national history. The concept of “superflat” is not merely “a theoretical framework explaining contemporary Japanese culture, but rather one of the ideological formations which have appeared under postmodern conditions since the 1980s.”\textsuperscript{98} In other words, “superflat” is a constructed postmodern condition, an ideological formation articulated by specific historical conditions in Japan. By positioning paintings as a repressed origin of Japanese postwar art a serious problem arises, “what is missing in the postwar subcultural imagination is the memory of the war in Japanese colonies and outside Japan.” According to Mori, Japan has lost its “colonial memory together with its colonial territory after the war.”\textsuperscript{99} While this was true at one point, new generations of artists have emerged that have no connection to the war. They only have a reconstructed memory of the war. As Mori argues, “the concept of ‘superflat’, ‘Japan’, ‘Japanese’, ‘Japanese culture’ and ‘Japaneseness’ are all absolutely essentialized as a homogeneous set of values and are simultaneously set up as an international commodity to be consumed by overseas consumers.”\textsuperscript{100} Perhaps this is the reason Murakami and his idea of “superflat” has been so successful during a period when the art world has experienced a surge of interest in

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid, 182-186
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid, 187
globalization and multiculturalism. Nonetheless, it is unfair to categorize the Japanese people as a whole. Although his artwork and theories have sparked an interest not only in contemporary Japanese art, but also in many other outlets of Japanese culture, Murakami has proved himself to be outdated. Because a decade has already passed and many scholars have been able to publish works, Japanese popular culture can no longer be considered a subculture, a repressed memory, hiding behind kawaii imagery as a mask for postwar anxiety. There has been too much exposure of the various mediums throughout the world. Apparent through contemporary visual culture, the position of kawaii and its relationship to women have evolved. Kawaii characters can possess strength, independence, and integrity. As I stated in the introduction, the era of Murakami is over. The world is not “superflat.” Artists are moving on, confronting the past, and leaving kawaii behind. That is our reality.

In addition, the perception of animated characters as flat and two-dimensional, according to Thomas Lamarre, often plays into a negative assessment of anime’s potential as a serious, mature form of expression. Lamarre asks, “What kind of seriousness can be attained in a world in which characters do not seem to have weight or depth?” One way is to situate anime in a lineage of prestigious art, which is exactly what Takashi Murakami attempted to do. Lamarre claims that it is not unimaginable to view stills from an animated movie as a work of art, displayed in museums. In that context, the “flatness” of the work comes into dialogue with previous art traditions. Questions can be posed regarding composition, technique, line, color, perspective, visual organization, and so forth. According

to Lamarre, work that might otherwise be dismissed as lacking depth can offer new possibilities for thinking about art, but only once linked with the currents of art history. In this view, animation must be allied with art historical traditions and commentaries in order to be taken seriously. Lamarre uses the example of Murakami’s *Superflat* exhibition and how Murakami identifies a lineage of “superflat” sensibilities across a range of history. When Murakami links the emergence of an anime aesthetic, its flatness, to the restrictions imposed by the limited animation, he ignores socio-historical conditions and economic limitations on the animation industry in Japan. Murakami’s insistence on the flatness or two-dimensionality of anime, according to Lamarre, limits him to the flatness of older anime that emerged from such limitations.

In spite of this, Lamarre wants to redefine Murakami’s superflat theory to include flat interactions and articulations, “the superflat becomes a quality of movement, change or transformation.” The supposedly flat and depthless characters are then traversed by a potential for interaction, motion, and transformation. Animation can then become something other than a process of animated figures. In Lamarre’s opinion, “it is a process of inventing machines of movement – machines of walking, of talking, of running, leaping, flying, and so forth – that take up all manner of objects.” There comes a time when animators begin to think of their limited animation as a distinctive form of expression.

Nonetheless, Lamarre is quick to point to the pitfalls in associating animation with gallery art; “there is a risk that animation will serve only to reconfirm the legitimacy of

\[\text{102} \text{ Ibid}\]

\[\text{103} \text{ Ibid}\]
hallowed lineages, to breathe new life into authoritative traditions.”  

Since cel animation is produced by drawing or painting on transparent sheets in order to create movement, Lamarre claims that the interaction of art and anime is crucial and yet something important is lost when anime enters into art historical lineages. He explains how Murakami attempted to draw attention to a distinctive anime aesthetic. By drawing attention to this movement, anime could potentially lead beyond aesthetics to considerations of experience and spectatorship that are sometimes called cultures of consumption. Since anime emerged as a form of expression conspicuously different from other modes, it comes as no surprise that many anime artists have expressed “bewilderment over the global popularity of their work, and many insist that their work is by and large specific to Japan and probably intelligible only there.” Consequently, it becomes common to link anime’s differences to some kind of unique Japaneseness. However, as Lamarre states, “to reduce the complexity of anime to Japaneseness is to ignore the complexity of Japan in particular, and of the modern nation in general – not to mention the importance of globalizing forces in the production of mass culture.”  

The president of the Japan Society maintains that the upcoming exhibition *Bye Bye Kitty!!! Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Japanese Art* showcases young artists that are pushing the limits of creative convention by challenging Japan’s long love affair with the kawaii aesthetic. For artists born between the mid-1960s and early 1980s, according to

104 Ibid, 333-336  
105 Ibid  
106 Ibid  
David Elliot, the growth of feminism was crucial to their scrutiny of Japanese values. Elliot states, “deep-rooted social pressures that demanded women behave in specific ways were exposed and questioned, but the threat of female ‘insubordination’ was accompanied by a reciprocal male riposte: the spread, starting in the 1980s, of Rorikon (the ‘Lolita complex’), the fantasy of dominating or being dominated by sexually precocious prepubescent girls.” Elliot argues that this was a male response to perceived threats of economic insecurity and loss of status. While Rorikon initially appeared in popular culture and pornography, it became a subject of art in the mid-1990s. The Lolita complex refers to an older man’s sexual attraction to younger girls, named for the title character in the novel by Vladimir Nabokov that involved a man who became obsessed with a 12-year-old girl. In the decade before, the kawaii style had made its way into packing, advertising, and manga, as seen in the “cute ambassadors” sent to roam the globe by the Japanese government.

Within teenage culture, Elliot states that it became linked with a new fashion that entailed behaving and dressing childishly and using infantile slang words, which would be seen on the streets of Harajuku and Akihabara. Readdressing Murakami’s comments about his work, Elliot maintains that “there are many other aesthetic and critical approaches to making art inside Japan that are affected by the same history, social context, and pressures but take a different, more explicitly critical task.”

108 David Elliot, “Bye Bye Kitty...” 4-7
109 See Jun Kaminishikawara, “‘Cute ambassadors’ roam globe to promote Japan’s pop culture,” June 17, 2009, Japan Times http://search.japantimes.co.jp/print/nn20090617f1.html (accessed April 6, 2011)
110 David Elliot, “Bye Bye Kitty...” 4-7
111 Ibid
particular time and place as well as a finite relationship between art and its market. Although Murakami complains about the “soullessness that has led to Japan’s current situation,” he fully participates in it. Many artists, such as those selected for the Bye Bye Kitty!!! exhibition, have produced work that indicates a more complicated, “adult view of life.” This new aesthetic is created as alternative to kawaii.

This push towards progress can be seen in the animated film Summer Wars (2009), directed by Mamoru Hosoda and written by Satoko Okudera, which has a picturesque theme of hope, never giving up, sticking with family, and working together in times of trouble, universal themes that can be appreciated by anyone. The film opens with a black screen with a cell phone in the middle, loading the OZ program. The shot moves the cell phone image closer to the viewer until entering the virtual world of OZ. The voice over overlaps in both English and Japanese:

Welcome to the world of OZ. OZ is a virtual world that brings people from around the world together so they can enjoy themselves. You can easily access the world of OZ through your personal computer, cell phone, or television.

The grand 3-D scale of the OZ world (Fig. 3) looks incredibly similar to the artwork of Takashi Murakami (Fig. 4). The Japan Times Mark Schilling titled his review of the film "The future king of Japanese animation may be with us; Hosoda steps out of Miyazaki's shadow with dazzling new film." Many other critics praised the visuals and themes, comparing it to those of the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu, known for his postwar films devoted to the

importance of family. The virtual world of OZ is all about communication. As stated in the opening sequence, “all languages are translated on the fly, so you can have nice conversation with people all around the world.” Many people use OZ for shopping, business, to pay taxes, etc. Although a bit fantastical, corporations and governments around the world depend on OZ. The main character, Kenji Koshio, is a lowly OZ system maintainer. His virtual avatar with its Mickey Mouse ears looks just like Murakami’s D.O.B character (Fig. 5 & 6). Kenji ends up agreeing to help his classmate Natsuki despite his duties to OZ. Later in the film, he discovers that Natsuki’s great grandmother is the 16th generation head of Jinnouchi family. She was born in 1920, and her family has graves dating back to the Muromachi period. Their family owned a silk business in the Meiji period. Today, the great grandmother knows many famous CEOs and politicians. The viewer also learns that the Jinnouchi family was part of the Takeda army that tried to protect Ueda from the Tokugawa family. At one part of the film, Masuke, one of Natsuki’s uncles, exclaims, “In 1585, 2,000 of our ancestors fought 7,000 elite Tokugawa soldiers!” The humor of the film lies in the timid Kenji and his reactions to Natsuki’s large family as well as the upcoming troubles with OZ.

Late at night, Kenji gets a mysterious text that says, “Solve Me” and contains a long series of numbers. Staying up all night, Kenji solves the complicated numerical series. The next morning the television displays the world of OZ spray painted, disorganized, and chaotic (Fig. 7). One anchor announces that someone “broke into the system that runs OZ and threw it into chaos in just one night.” The other responds with “our entire society

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depends on OZ accounts for everything from shopping to government and business, management…” Kenji realizes he is the cause of the problem. Evidently OZ was protected by a 2,056-digit security code that Kenji was able to solve in one night. Without knowing it, Kenji had texted the password to an A.I., artificial intelligence, which then took over his OZ account and started reeking havoc within the virtual world. His virtual avatar now looks even more like D.O.B. with a large, menacing grin (Fig. 8). As it turns out, one of Natsuki’s uncles, Wabusuke, who was adopted into the family, created the A.I. at a robotics school in Pittsburgh. He had named it Love Machine, explaining “all I did was one thing: give a machine the desire to learn. I gave it a thirst for knowledge, in other words.” Consequently, Kenji and the rest of the family try to fix the OZ world. Although they succeed, the great grandmother dies the next morning at 5:21 AM. A different uncle of Natsuki was monitoring the great grandmother’s health through OZ on his cell phone. Her pulse, blood pressure, perspiration, etc. had stopped being sent due to the OZ trouble. On the television, an anchor announces, “10 million users worldwide are unable to use their accounts as a result of the OZ-related trouble that began yesterday.” The family is saddened by the death and the continued trouble with OZ. However, Kenji leads the male family members in an attempt to trap the Love Machine in the virtual world.

The film obviously references several artworks by Takashi Murakami (Fig. 9 & 10) in both the virtual world of OZ and in Kenji’s avatar. However, unlike Murakami, the characters in Summer Wars confront their past and never give up on the future. A line from Kurosawa’s Seven Samurai is quoted in the film: “you have to protect others to protect yourself.” This Kurosawa reference is significant because the film is blatantly looking into the past and moving forward at the same time. Despite Murakami’s claims, this film shows
that not all of Japanese popular culture is a result of repressed trauma from the Pacific War. There is a new generation that is accepting the past and moving away from it.

Throughout the film, Kenji refuses to give up and asks Natsuki to challenge the Love Machine to a Japanese card game called hanafuda. Meanwhile, Wabisuke attempts to lower the defenses of his creation. An intense game of Hanafuda ensues as Natsuki bets her family, twenty accounts in all (Fig. 11). She is able to free other accounts until she plays a bad hand and loses. Without another account, Natsuki cannot challenge the Love Machine again. However, over 150 million accounts from people around the world come out of hiding to back Natsuki asking, “Please protect our family.” Even the guardians of OZ give Natsuki a rare item. The Love Machine raises the stakes and loses to Natsuki. Only two accounts now remain in the grasp of the A.I. as a blinding light engulfs the world of OZ. Kenji and Natsuki work hard to save their family and the world. It is remarkable that Natsuki, the young female protagonist, is given the power to control millions of OZ accounts. She becomes a beautiful heroine, transforming from a cute, little girl into a mature woman (Fig. 11). Although her character still has cute elements, such as the rabbit ears, it is clear in the animated transformation that she grows taller, her hair becomes longer, and her outfit changes into a long, beautiful kimono, insinuating that she has matured. In my opinion, Japanese visual culture is also growing from the childlike nature of the past (again referring to Murakami and General MacArthur’s statement), maturing into an adult on par with the fine art from the West, which can be seen in the current Japan Society exhibition.

Japanese visual culture grapples with history and presents the past as part of the present. It is my conviction that each artist references the past to create a new sense of the present. In the upcoming chapters, by providing examples of cute young women as seen
through the lens of anime, art, and film, I argue that contemporary Japanese artists are confronting their past and moving into a post-kawaii period of art. Each artist perceives their Japanese identity differently, and it becomes apparent that each searches for a definition of themselves in past artistic traditions. Hisashi Tenmyouya produces paintings that appear like ukiyo-e prints, while Yoshitomo Nara literally paints over ukiyo-e prints in his series titled In the Floating World. Akira Yamaguchi mimics the classical Japanese painting style of yamato-e, and Tomoko Konoike has a deep appreciation of nature and a connection to the fantastical, mystical world of children. While these artists blend traditional and contemporary Japanese culture, it becomes apparent that there is a thin line between the visual aesthetics of the past and present. To what degree should their artwork be considered a product of globalization? Tenmyouya, amongst others, vehemently stands behind the idea that he is presenting new Japanese art what he calls Neo-Nihonga. How is he defining what it means to be Japanese through his artwork? Can it only be defined in relation to the West? What are the implications of such a definition? While some scholars, such as Yumi Yamaguchi, have called contemporary Japanese artists “warriors of art,” by doing so are they feeding into the romantic definition of samurai? If Japanese is not something encoded in one’s genes, then artwork becomes a way of understanding identity in its location, among specific audiences, and occurring at specific historical junctures.
Chapter Four
Tough love

This chapter focuses on depictions of Japanese women in popular culture that are tough, powerful, and even a bit intimidating. In addition to Japanese hip-hop, these women are able to create an alternative way of thinking about Japan, defying the stereotypes of the West. Through visual culture, such as hip-hop, the barriers of language fall apart as the global and the local meet. Visual culture transgresses across social and political boundaries. Japanese gangs, the yakuza, are able to exemplify the present-day pleasure of urban life. By using this imagery in popular culture, artists are commenting on the relations between high and low culture. The women portrayed in this chapter are part of this breakdown of Japanese societal restrictions. Part of the challenge of understanding cultural globalization involves recognizing that the global and local are not so much matched pairs as they are fluid, ongoing processes unfolding over time.114

In Hip-Hop Japan, Ian Condry argues that the imagery of battling samurai offers a metaphor for the dynamic historical process of Japanese hip-hop. “To battle means to work within certain rules of engagement and to acknowledge that not everyone will prevail. The idea of battling hip-hop samurai suggests a way of conceptualizing the somewhat paradoxical features of deepening connectedness and widening plurality.”115 The idea of battling samurai offers an alternative way of thinking about Japaneseness and a transnational identity. From an American perspective, a recognizable typecast, such as

115 Ibid, 50
samurai, often comes to stand for a Japanese authenticity. With their skill at handling the *katana*, a type of Japanese sword, their commitment to death with honor, and their unwavering loyalty, samurai often stand for a narrow range of Japanese ideals in the Western mind. The term “samurai” invokes in a Western reader a picture of a brave, loyal, and exotic warrior from Japan. It would usually not invoke an image of armed warriors playing baseball or soccer, and yet battling samurai are inseparably tied to Japanese art and popular culture. By using samurai imagery, artists are “evoking a contest over the meaning of Japaneseness.”  

According to Condry, “The widening use of samurai imagery with swords on hip-hop album covers and in music videos proceeds in tandem with the increased use of gangsta imagery with guns.” When break dancing first appeared in Japan, the people it initially influenced did not fully understand the movement’s roots in New York City and its connection to African American culture. Condry elaborates:

> Dance, movement of the body, and the visual language of graffiti can move easily across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Movies and videos were clearly an important channel for this exchange. Neither global homogenization nor localization accurately describes the scene’s evolution. In recent years, there has been an increased use of traditional instruments (*koto, shamisen,* and *taiko* drums) and vocal styles mimicking traditional voice performers of *kabuki* or *Bunraku* puppet-play narrators.  

The image of battling samurai highlights the processes of competition that drove the development of hip-hop in Japan. Hip-hoppers are samurai in the sense that they draw on histories, language, their own lives, and the setting of Japan to make their work original,

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116 Ibid, 51-52  
117 Ibid, 83  
118 Ibid, 65
interesting, and noteworthy. Samurai do not stand for any single Japaneseness, and in this they accurately represent hip-hop and its battles.\footnote{Ibid, 85} In addition, images of \textit{yanki}, or delinquent youth, can also be seen to embody the aesthetics of hip-hop and samurai culture. The term \textit{yanki} is used to refer to delinquent male or female students, some of which would join the ranks of the yakuza after high school. It was a subculture that was popular in Japan in the 80's and 90's. However the term became more popularized in the United States with the movie \textit{Kamikaze Girls}. In addition to many of Yoshitomo Nara and Hisashi Tenmyouya's works, this tough female yanki can be found in \textit{Samurai Champloo}'s Fuu, \textit{Kamikaze Girls}' Ichiko, and Kumiko of \textit{Gokusen}.

Hisashi Tenmyouya's “Chiba Lo-Rider Girls” (Fig. 13) from his \textit{Notorious Street Group} series provides us a prime example of the \textit{yanki}. These delinquent girls are a far cry from the stereotype of a cute Japanese schoolgirl with their motorcycle, tattoos, and punk fashion. Tenmyouya is appropriating from the masters of the late-Tokugawa period to the Meiji period, merging American-born graffiti with traditional Japanese-style painting. In Nakamori's opinion, Tenmyouya creates visual disharmony by rendering violent imagery in an elegant, historical painting style.\footnote{Yasufumi Nakamori, “Japanese Spirit: Hisashi Tenmyouya,” in \textit{Japan: Rising}, edited by Michael Rush (Lake Worth: Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art, 2003) 39-45} His figures appear to float in space with a strong emphasis on line and two-dimensionality, which is similar to the aesthetic of \textit{ukiyo-e} and \textit{Nihonga}, created to preserve a distinct “Japanese-style painting” from Western influences. Drawing on a variety of themes from contemporary life while constantly referring to classical paintings, Tenmyouya uses this style to render images of female gang members, a
high school student, a punk, and a b-girl, evidently the female equivalent of a b-boy (Fig. 14-18). Each of the paintings in this series depicts powerful females in a fusion of past and present aesthetics. Whether standing or sitting, each woman presents herself to the viewer as a formidable foe.

Many of Hisashi Tenmyouya’s artwork are paintings, but have also appeared as covers of popular magazines and even a poster at the 2004 World Cup Soccer Games. In his work, samurai play soccer, graffiti the Kamakura Buddha, and ride futuristic motorcycles. While his topics tend to be contemporary, the format of his paintings makes them appear as woodblock prints or as wall screens. According to Lydia Yee, “What has impressed many people who have seen Tenmyouya’s paintings in person is the precision with which he executes his figures. His handiwork has often been mistaken as digital outputs.”121 He emulates the graphic quality of ukiyo-e prints and re-contextualizes the subject matter to portray the present-day pleasures offered by urban life in Japan, all the while commenting on current social ills such as gang violence and teenage prostitution. 122 Since many of his works have been published serially in subculture magazines, Tenmyouya claims, “These works... are my attempt to revive the role that Ukiyo-e performed in the Edo period. Ukiyo-e which was ‘low art’ created for the masses has been sublimated to the status of ‘high art’ in the West.”123

It is apparent in Tenmyouya’s work, blending traditional and contemporary Japanese culture, that there is a thin line between the visual aesthetics of the past and

122 Ibid
123 Hisashi Tenmyouya, Tenmyouya Hisashi (Tokyo: Kawade Shobo Shinsha, 2006) 3
present. Hip-Hop culture is no more American than baseball, which has been played in Japan since 1872. Although Tenmyouya created these works “especially for the eyes of non-Japanese viewers,” it is implied that there is something distinctly Japanese about them. Is it the Buddha, the women wearing kimonos, the samurai helmets or the *katana*s? To what degree should his artwork be considered a product of globalization? The artist, amongst others, vehemently stands behind the idea that he is presenting new Japanese art. How is he defining what is means to be Japanese through his artwork? Can it only be defined in relation to the West? What are the implications of such a definition? While some scholars have called contemporary Japanese artists “warriors of art,” by doing so are they feeding into the romantic definition of samurai?

Art critic Michael Rush has argued that Japan is readily defined in terms of Western actions, particularly American, and can only be understood in terms of its relationship to the West.¹²⁴ In an age where artists are nomadic by nature, Hisashi Tenmyouya believes it is of the utmost importance that he stay in Japan and work in a specifically Japanese environment. Tenmyouya understands the elasticity of culture and conflates American graffiti with traditional Japanese calligraphy. The art historian Derek Murray describes Tenmyouya’s work in the exhibition *One Planet under a Groove: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art* at the Brooklyn Museum of Art as “elegant and seductive imaginings that allude to hybrid, hip-hop-infused subcultures.”¹²⁵ In Murray’s opinion, “These alluring and superbly crafted images encompass both the global and capitalistic reach of hip-hop. In many

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respects these works are the most insightful in illuminating the impact of cultural exchange.” However, Tenmyouya is not alone in producing a hip-hop infused Japanese culture, contemporary with his work, is the anime *Samurai Champloo*, which follows the same aesthetic vein.

*Samurai Champloo* is a twenty-six episode animated series that aired in 2004 on Fuji TV in Japan and in 2005 on Cartoon Network’s Adult Swim in the United States. Created and directed by Shinichirō Watanabe, *Samurai Champloo* is a story of three misfits on the margins of society, the Okinawan (southern region of Japan) Mugen, the reserved ronin (masterless samurai) Jin, and the young waitress Fuu in their search for a samurai that smells of sunflowers. While set in the Edo period, *Samurai Champloo* does not at any moment attempt to return us to the past. Instead the past and present are so intertwined that history is not so much lost as it is rendered impossibly present. Vinyl scratching erupts on the soundtrack to sync with crosscuts and scene transitions, reforming the anime into a remix of itself. It is as if a hip-hop crew was warped back to the Edo period to tell the story of *Samurai Champloo*. The title uses the Okinawan word for stew, champloo, to refer to a mixing of everything. Wantanabe states, “Nowadays, people think of the Japanese as reserved, shy, unable or unwilling to express their individuality, but in the past, samurai understood the importance of representing who they were. They devoted themselves to battling through their skills.”

126 Ibid
127 Phillip Brophy, *100 Anime* (London: British Film Institute, 2005) 201
128 Ibid, 204
Different episodes explore discrimination against Christians, foreigners, Ainu people, and so on in ways that ultimately questioned the oneness of the Japanese people. Identity emerges from battling, not from some primordial essence. If Japanese-ness is not something encoded in one's genes, then performances that represent Japan through hip-hop are not paradoxical at all. Rather, performance becomes a way of understanding identity in its location, among specific audiences, and occurring at specific historical junctures. *Samurai Champloo* thus goes beyond subverting postmodern interventions into culture and identity.\(^{129}\)

Critic William Benzon calls *Samurai Champloo* “seductive.”\(^ {130}\) His article relates the series to “post-modern eclecticism” and “cultural hybridity.” Focusing on two distinct episodes, Benzon argues that baseball, graffiti, hip-hop, and even Andy Warhol, although all originated in America, are not specifically American. Each has already reached an international level beyond that of the “foreign” and the “exotic,” becoming “as Japanese as sailor suits for schoolgirls. One of the main characters, Mugen, actually does break-dancing moves in his swordplay. Another, Jin, wears Armani eyeglasses. Here is a traditional samurai, patient, lethal, and fashionable. “All this,” says critics Camp and Davis, “to lull young viewers into thinking they're watching something edgy or hip-hop inspired when what they're really watching is a traditional swordplay story steeped in Japanese history and culture.”\(^ {131}\) Viewers see many traditional Japanese settings, re-created in great detail

\(^{129}\) William Benzon, “Postmodern is Old Hat.” In *Mechademia 3: Limits of the Human*, edited by Frenchy Lunning (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) 273

\(^{130}\) Ibid

\(^{131}\) “While the series [Samurai Champloo] displays the occasional trace of nostalgia for the period preceding Japan’s opening to the West, it does acknowledge the positive side of
from gambling dens to teahouses and monasteries. In one episode, we even see a full-scale kabuki performance, while in another, a catalog of woodblock prints and encounter the “father of ukiyo-e,” the artist Moronbu Hishikawa. Therefore, *Samurai Champloo* offers more “genuine Japanese historical and cultural material” and “inspires more interest in further research, than any other similarly themed historical anime.”

If battling samurai becomes a way of expressing and discovering identity, what can be said about the female character Fuu? It is interesting to note that she carries a small sword hidden in her kimono, much like geishas of the Edo period. She leads the boys in search of a samurai who smells like sunflowers and fights alongside them throughout the series. In difficult situations, she is always able to find a way out herself, rarely relying on help. In the very first episode, Fuu strikes a deal with Jin and Mugen to save them from execution. She keeps them together throughout the series despite their constant quarreling. Fuu’s cute demeanor may make her first appear weak, but as the series progresses, the viewer discovers her inner strength. In one episode, she deals the dice in an important wager (Fig. 19 & 20). Her appearance is similar to another work by Tenmyouya (Fig. 21) with strong yakuza undertones since the yakuza still control the gambling houses in Japan, as a result of the war. By holding the dice, these women control their destiny, using men only as a means to get what they want. Although their position of power is marked by an

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Japan’s impact of the West and vice versa.” See Brian Camp and Julie Davis, *Anime Classics: Zettai!* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2007) 333

132 Including *Rurouni Kenshin*, which is “steeped in references to the events of Japan’s civil war that brought the Tokugawa shogunate to close and began the Meiji era, yet it offered them without any context, so that American viewers unfamiliar with this history were left overwhelmed and puzzled.” Ibid, 333-34
affiliation with gangs, other characters are able to break away from their affiliate gangs as seen in the yanki girls of *Kamikaze Girls* and *Fruits Basket*.

Tetsuya Nakashima’s film *Kamikaze Girls*, which follows the humorous friendship of a *Lolita* and a yanki (Fig. 22). *Lolita*, discussed in the previous chapter, has come to refer to a particular Japanese fashion statement that tries to capture the innocence of youth, such as knee length puffy skirts, lacy blouses, platform shoes, long frilly socks, and head dresses. The *Lolita* Momoko is an adorable teenager living in a small town where she is a fish out of water in her elaborately, styled dresses. Spending most of her time sewing and knitting, she has little need for friends until meeting a tough biker chick, a yanki named Ichiko. Despite their clashing personalities, the girls become unlikely friends and bond together during a turbulent time of gang wars and fashion crises. What slowly becomes apparent from these depictions of tough women is the persistence of kawaii. Although fierce, these women are still cute on some level, though if you called them such, they probably would not hesitate to punch you in the face. Towards the end of the movie, Momoko comes up with a fantastical tale to claim lineage to a famous yanki. Both she and Ichiko are able to defeat the other gang members through their own inner strength. Interestingly, Ichiko is not the only yanki character to choose her friends over her gang.

The immensely popular manga and anime series, in both Japan and the United States, *Fruits Basket*, features Arisa the yanki and Saki the psychic, or Goth girl, as best friends of the female protagonist named Tōru (Fig. 23). During one of the episodes, it is implied that Tōru’s mother, who passed away before the series started, was a yanki in her high school years (Fig. 24). In another episode, Arisa has a flashback of what it appears to be Tōru’s mother saving her from the other female members. The following scene shows
Tōru’s mother carrying a bruised Arisa on her back, walking towards a smiling and waving Tōru. From the images, it looks as if Arisa and Tōru’s mother were in similar female gangs based on the color and style of their jackets. If Tōru’s mother was indeed a yanki, she is continuously portrayed in the series as a loving mother, a wise woman, and a commendable role model. Arisa mentions more than once that she admired Tōru’s mother, and throughout the series Tōru helps others by sharing her mother’s advice.

Much of the scholarship on Fruits Baskets focuses on Tōru’s relationship as a caregiver, servant, and mother figure to the Sōma family. However, why has no one mentioned the dark past of her mother? What can be said about this positive role model that was once a yanki? Is the image of the yanki today merely an image of a tough female? Perhaps another popular series will help shed some light on the distinct imagery of the yanki and female yakuza.

Gokusen is a story of Kumiko, the granddaughter of a yakuza boss and teacher at an all-male private high school. It was originally a manga series by Kozueko Morimoto, which was adapted into an anime series, a live-action series, and at least two feature films to date. The popularity of Gokusen is phenomenal. It was originally introduced to me in a Japanese language class. Although informal Japanese speech is taught in class, it is suggested that only the yakuza are allowed to speak that gruffly. The humor in Gokusen stems from Kumiko’s continual breaks into informal speech in front of her delinquent class, thus exposing her yakuza upbringing. Although her students tend to respect her more when she

gets into fights to save them or yells at other delinquents in her rough speech, Kumiko is always fearful of losing her teaching position as a consequence. Although she attempts to act cute and sweet (kawaii) her real personality shines through in difficult situations. The immense popularity of the series proves that there is room for a powerful, adorable female character. The live-action series stars cute actors from popular boy bands. Attractive bad boys surround Kumiko (Fig. 25), but they never overpower her. She always maintains the position of power as their teacher. In some ways, the boys are more objectified in series than Kumiko because of their recurrent kawaii imagery. The boys are highly emotional, superficial, and adorable. It is no wonder that the series is immensely popular amongst young women in Japan.

Although the artist Yoshitomo Nara does not implicitly depict the yanki or gangsters, he does deepen the presentation of cuteness by depicting images of innocent, but evil children. Nara, like Murakami, is a well-known artist in both Japan and the West for his engagement with Japanese popular culture. He is also an artist whom Murakami has discussed in relation to “superflat.”\textsuperscript{134} The angry or troubled girls depicted in Nara’s artwork are marooned against an empty background, excluded from the adult world. His work has an overwhelming sense of melancholy and isolation. Most of the children are looking up from a low vantage point, peering out into a world that is both threatening and mesmerizing. Some hold harmful weapons, of which Nara claims, “Look at them, they are so small, like toys. Do you think they could fight with those? I don’t think so. Rather, I kind of see the children among other, bigger, bad people around them, who are holding bigger

knives...”¹³⁵ Nara presents to the viewer in his *In the Floating World* series an image of a disrupted childhood, children defending themselves against the persistent viewer. Literally drawing on top of ukiyo-e prints, Yoshitomo Nara uses past Japanese artistic traditions in quite an exceptional way. His sometimes wicked, but charming cartoon-like children are distinctive of his artwork. In the words of Stephen Trescher, “the full-body portrait in front of a neutral background, the relationship between the figure and the picture plane, the image-object and the empty surrounding space, the connection between the image sign and the text sign, the blurring of the boundary between printmaking and painting – all can be found in Nara’s art as well as in colored prints from the 18th and 19th centuries by Hiroshige, Hokusai or Utamaro.”¹³⁶ The series *In the Floating World* transforms recognizable ukiyo-e prints into figural paintings of androgynous children. By painting over the historical ukiyo-e prints, Nara is literally painting over the past with the present. His use of pastel hues, little or no backgrounds, and confidant, cartoonish lines contribute to his overall theme of a disrupted childhood.

In this work entitled “Goldfish” (Fig. 26), large protruding nails are apparently fastened into the bloody head of an evil-looking child, nonchalantly playing with a goldfish in a bowl. The ukiyo-e print below is almost illegible, except for a few glimpses of woodblock patterns bleeding through Nara’s thin paint. He states, “But these children, who appear at first to be cute and even vulnerable, sometimes brandish weapons like knives and saws. Their wide eyes often hold accusatory looks that could be sleepy-eyed irritation

at being awoken from a nap—or that could be undiluted expressions of hate.” As seen in “Ocean Child” (Fig. 27), where a little girl emerges like a monster, starring blankly at humanity. Her mouth is painted with just a single line of red, expressing a sense of detachment and her large yellow eyes together with thin slits of black pupils make her appear catlike.

Rain clouds with black and brown rain streaks have overshadowed this image of beauties (Fig. 28). Written across the bottom of the image is “Fuck ‘bout everything!!” in black sharpie. The little girl with a knife is back. She has pigtails with red bows and slanted eyes, possibly referencing an ethnic stereotype. The moon in “Full Moon Night” (Fig. 29) has been replaced with a little girl's head. Blood is dripping from her mouth onto one of the ukiyo-e figures in the foreground. Another figure shouts while the two carrying a palanquin run off with “!!” above their heads. An angry little girl with a katana has replaced a samurai, taking up the entire composition of “Sword and Starlit Night” (Fig. 30). The background is composed of a black starry sky and a cloudy-like ground. In “Angry Face” (Fig. 31), a rather mischievous young girl pops out of the side of the image. Grinning with slanted eyes, her pigtails are not enough to describe her as childlike. She covers the ukiyo-e image below of another Edo beauty, whose kimono-clad shoulder is still visible. Since the beauty underneath is quite visible, it becomes apparent that the bratty girl is literally occupying the same space. This girl has replaced the beauty. Is Nara commenting on the present replacing the past? Is contemporary Japan merely painting over the past, only to find itself occupying the exact same space? By using kawaii imagery, Nara is able to comment on the

prolific otaku culture in Japan. His renditions create a hostile, childlike world that is both intriguing and disturbing.

In the exhibition catalogue for Japan Society’s Bye Bye Kitty!!! Tetsu Ozaki discusses the historical background of the rise of kawaii culture. In his opinion, the phenomenon was so pervasive that it inspired contemporary artists to produce artwork that was also kawaii. Many scholars and critics have agreed that the kawaii phenomenon can be explained as “a mechanism for relieving stress.” Ozuaki asserts that this was a response to the collapse of the “grand narrative,” which he explains happened as an escape from an unhappy life. However, Ozuaki is optimistic of the changes appearing on the contemporary Japanese art scene, particularly the creation of works that make a break with the generation of kawaii dominance. He claims that a new movement in art has already begun, “as the works on display in Japan Society’s Bye Bye Kitty!!! exhibition attest.” In David Elliot’s very similar opinion, the cartoonlike paintings of children and installations of toys that form the basis of Nara’s work “undermine the kawaii aesthetic through their subversive, at times malicious, self-awareness.” Elliot uses the example of Nara’s untitled photograph of a beautiful gray granite gravestone featuring Hello Kitty guardians (Fig. 32) to show that even Hello Kitty has passed beyond the veil of cuteness to say, “Bye Bye...” At the foot of the grave are two baskets with models of small dogs and cats. Crowning the gravestone are two symmetrical Hello Kitty polychrome stone guardians. Since the photograph is a more recent work of Nara’s than the Floating World series, I agree with David Elliot’s assessment


139 David Elliot, “Bye Bye Kitty...” 44-45
that Nara is among the artists that are “challenging the social, political and aesthetic conditions of their time.”\textsuperscript{140} His \textit{Floating World} series does reflect a disrupted childhood, however this cannot merely be explained by repressed postwar trauma. As with the examples of yanki, Nara is exploring the possibility of being cute and tough. Kawaii does not have to imply weakness. The examples of women in this chapter reveal that there are female characters that chose not to fit in the mold of the cute Japanese schoolgirl. Visual culture does not have to be bound by history or tradition. In the next chapter, the concept of an innate powerful female in the form of \textit{kami} (Shinto gods) will further the discussion and uncover the potential of kawaii imagery to blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality.

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid
Chapter Five
Fantasy Meets Reality

This chapter will focus on the extension of reality, the concept of powerful women, into the realm of fantasy with depictions of female kami (Shinto gods). It will also address the question of how Japanese women depict themselves and how they commenting on the roles of women in Japanese society. Overtime the boundaries between fantasy and reality have been distorted. Women have become fantasy characters that pretend to fit into the status quo. However, the depictions of women discussed in this chapter are standing up for real women. They are powerful goddesses with innate powers. The societal restrictions hold no weight on the virtual world of dreams. Both male and female artists use the blurring of fantasy and reality to portray important issues in society, such as the use of popular culture as means of escape.

The exhibition *Drop Dead Cute: the new generation of women artists in Japan* featured ten Japanese women artists that represented a generation “born of the same movement that launched artists Yoshitomo Nara and Takashi Murakami to international acclaim.” According to Ivan Vartanian, who coordinated and edited the exhibition catalogue for *Drop Dead Cute*, cute characters and cuddly animals were being used as vehicles for deeper dark and complex emotions. Vartanian claims that because these female artists are young, “it’s natural perhaps that they work with not only youthful figures, but also themes relating to childhood memories.”¹⁴¹ However, he also states that there is an understanding

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¹⁴¹ Ivan Vartanian, *Drop Dead Cute* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books LLC, 2005) 7-11
of the “embodiment of the real” within drawn images in Japan. Drawn images take on a representational function that is far more concrete than in the West. There is a gray area between reality and fantasy that is comfortably accepted. Vartanian points to the existence of the otaku whose interests and hobbies extend into obsessions of fantasy worlds, resulting in a withdrawal from reality. Shifting his attention to kawaii, Vartanian translates kawaii in a more broad sense than “cuteness” to “define anything that draws out an empathic response.” \(^{142}\) In this sense, kawaii incorporates a taste for elements of childhood within an adult life. However, in Vartanian’s opinion, cuteness does not negate darkness, and on occasion cuteness can in fact become a means to access darkness or repressed feelings of anxiety. It is easy to claim that there is blurring of fantasy and reality within Japanese visual culture. However, to restrict the concept to childhood memories seems a little presumptuous. Instead, I would like to propose that the creation of an imaginary Edo, a limited definition of what it means to be Japanese, has created a generation that is delving into fantasies to escape reality.

As many scholars have come to realize, the realm of popular culture heavily influences contemporary Japanese art. According to Michael Darling, Chiho Aoshima is one of the most exciting artists to emerge from Japan, having developed a highly original practice entirely based in digital media. \(^{143}\) Known for her large-scale works, Chiho Aoshima exclusively draws in digital illustration programs in what Darling calls “a dreamy, teen point of view.” She participated in the Little Boy exhibition and was also featured in Drop

\(^{142}\) Ibid

\(^{143}\) Michael Darling, “Plumbing the Depths of Superflatness,” Art Journal, 60 (3) Autumn 2001: 77-89
Dead Cute. Aoshima never went to art school but discovered graphics while working at a part-time job. According to Murakami’s Little Boy catalogue, her works are “a cross between popular manga and traditional scroll paintings.” She freely alters the sizes and colors of her characters, and repeatedly uses the same data for such background elements as trees. Very few men appear in her fantastical worlds. She frequently depicts young girls trapped in mystical worlds. For example, an attractive naked girl is bound to a tree in Japanese Apricot (Fig. 33) as well as Japanese Apricot 2 (Fig. 34) on a lonely island. The women in her artwork lose control over their bodies. In Japanese Apricot 3 – A Pink Dream (Fig. 35), even more young women are bound to trees in this colorful fantasyland. Most intriguingly there are skulls scattered on the ground under the central tree. How many women have been bound and perished? Is that the fate of these Japanese women? Aoshima exploits the erotic titillation of otaku manga by showing her girls nude and in bondage. However, she also portrays a powerful girl in Piercing a Heart (Fig. 36), which appears like a kami of the tree perhaps an apricot tree like the previous paintings.

Within Aoshima’s work, fantasy and reality are blended seamlessly together, providing a unique insight into the gender limitations perceived by the artist. Perhaps Aoshima is commenting on the societal restrictions of women in Japan. For example, it is still difficult for Japanese women to gain the respect that their counterparts in America enjoy in the work place. In a language where the kanji for wife is a pictogram of a woman under a house, it is not surprising that female artists would comment on the boundaries of

144 Takashi Murakami, Little Boy, 52
their sex. In Aoshima’s artwork, the world is grim, gruesome, decaying, destroyed, and full of spirits, mummies, and zombies. Aoshima states:

Duality is extremely important. Happiness comes at the cost of going through something really tough – and then it lasts just for a moment. That’s proof of our being alive. Truly valuable things and being aware of life’s small joys requires the experience of grief and bitter suffering. Overcoming such hardships leads to maturity and humility.145

She represents a horror of the human self, when one’s own body becomes the field of grotesque transformation.146 The recurrent motif of a field or an island, according to Midori Matsui, projects Aoshima’s strong Utopian longing.147 Her long-limbed girls peacefully commune with flowers and reptiles. She breaks down the boundary between organic creatures and inanimate things, as seen in Mountain Girl (Fig. 37) and Haruna in Meteor Shower (Fig. 38). However, is this breakdown of the female form really a restriction? It almost appears as if these women have become part of the earth, which in Japanese folklore would make them kami. The term refers to spirits, natural forces, or essence in the Shinto faith as opposed to the confined translation into English as “god” or “deity.” As the divine forces of nature, kami are revered as anthropomorphic spirits processing nobility and authority. It is interesting to note that the Japanese emperor is thought to be a direct descendent of the sun goddess Amatersu, and in fact, there are several stories of authoritative female kami in the Shinto tradition.

The main characters in the Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya (Fig. 39) and Kannagi (Fig. 40) are kami pretending to be regular Japanese schoolgirls in their own amusing ways.

145 Ivan Vartanian, Drop Dead Cute, 32
146 Ibid, 33
147 See Midori Matsui, "Beyond the Pleasure Room to a Chaotic Street: Transformations of Cute Subculture in the Art of the Japanese Nineties," Little Boy, 208-237
Haruhi Suzumiya is a high school student who can unconsciously change reality. Narrated by her cynical classmate Kyon, the anime follows the adventures of Haruhi and the futile attempt by her magical classmates to hold her warping powers in check by maintaining an illusion of a normal life. The anime series became an Internet phenomenon when over 2,000 clips of the series were posted to video sharing websites across the globe. As for *Kannagi*, the high school student Jin Mikuriya carves a statue from the wood of a fallen sacred tree. The goddess Nagi wakes up after years of slumber and the statue comes to life in the form of the goddess. Although her powers have weakened since her sacred tree was cut down, Kannagi lives in Jin’s house and with his help hunts down the impurities in the land. The fascinating aspect of these characters is their carefree demeanor and façade as Japanese schoolgirls despite their prevailing positions as goddesses. Both are extremely cute, mischievous girls who choose to show weakness to claim a sense of normalcy. As fiercely independent characters, they serve as influential role models. It seems that it is possible to be both cute and powerful.

According to art critic Sawaragi, “Japan’s subculture generation is seemingly suspended in a historical amnesia, having little sense of the past and withdrawing from reality.” Therefore, reality has given into fantasy as memories of violence have been repressed. Both the victim and the victimizer, Japan has distorted its own history as a result of the postwar censorship and the degree of trauma. To counter this sense of hopelessness associated with the past, the contemporary female artist Tomoko Konoike, invites us to

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consider the power of art through “play” and its full use of imaginative engagement. Konoike draws upon the ancient Japanese concept of “play”, which refers to a shamanistic retrieval of the soul for the recently departed. These “players” retrieved souls between dimensions, where the soul acts like an “inter-traveller” between the living and the beyond. Konoike metaphorically employs this sense of “play” between dimensions to claim art’s ability to release the body’s soul and invoke its interior spirit. The recent exhibition *Inter-Traveller*, held at Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery, posits the viewer as an imaginative traveler. Konoike’s signature character of *mimio* appears in a storybook version of her drawings, exhibited in *Inter-Traveller*. Connected to nature in a way unlike Nara or Yamaguchi, the viewer follows the character *mimio*, a white fuzzy ball with arms and legs, but no face, through the four seasons of life. The storybook format allows the viewer to immerse oneself into the fantastical world of *mimio*. She provides an innocent, childhood escape, but into a frightening world full of new beginnings. The mystic and fantastical story, written below, takes the viewer panel by panel through a journey of reawakening.

While Konoike has received widespread international attention, *Inter-Traveller* was the first comprehensive presentation of her artwork in an art gallery. Viewed collectively, the symbolic motifs and mythology become more evident throughout Konoike’s narrative-rich, highly distinctive world of expression. The exhibition constituted a “journey to the centre to the earth” which provided viewers with an opportunity to experience each of Konoike’s individual stories as the embodiment of her personal mythology. Designed to evoke a journey through the earth’s geological strata, the viewer travels from the crust to

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149 Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery, *Inter-Traveller* Press Release, 2009
the centre to reach the earth’s “heart of darkness” or the root of human imagination. Along this journey, the viewer can appreciate the multitude of Konoike’s works. According to art critic Yumi Yamaguchi, “The strands of Konoike’s complex and compelling narratives weave their way through a variety of media, including painting, sculpture, and video. With elements such as girls with red shoes, wolves, and knives, she acknowledges the influence of childhood fairy tales, but claims she simply paints images she finds aesthetically pleasing.”¹⁵⁰ In the exhibition, her animation “mimio-Odyssey” (Fig. 41) greeted the viewer after a series of drawings, entitled “mimio,” arranged in a spiraling circle to parallel the viewer’s journey with mimio (Fig. 42). Her sculptures, “Virginia” (Fig. 43) and “Inter-traveller” (Fig. 44) were dispersed throughout the exhibition in unlikely places. There were paintings, Konoike’s massive four-part “Story Series,” placed wall to wall, surrounding the viewer on all sides (Fig. 45). The remarkable Fusuma paintings, which are drawn on Japanese door panels that can slide from side to side to redefine spaces within a room, “Hidden Mountain” (Fig. 46) and “Shira-Spirit from the Wild” (Fig. 47) captivates viewers as they walk through the artwork. However, the climax of the exhibition was “the centre of the earth,” where the viewer was encountered with the new installation “Earth Baby,” (Fig. 48) invoking both the earth’s rotation and its rebirth. A large mirrored, screaming head rotated and reflected shards of light all around the room, disorienting the viewer into another realm of fantasy. Konoike’s world, as seen in the exhibition, is neither particularly happy nor lovely, and yet it appears as a scene from a grand fairytale. In a sense, the fantastical world presented in her artworks becomes an escape from reality. Although

Konoike does not directly reference a past artistic tradition, her deep appreciation of nature reflects the Shinto beliefs of her Japanese upbringing. She sees her work not as a violent or traumatic reaction, but rather as a “more blissful painting.” In Konoike, the viewer sees a peaceful resolution with the past into a blissful present. Do her young girls reach out to a female desire to reach the sublime? Is she commenting on the empyreal kami?

To demonstrate the concept of kami in relation to fantasy and reality within Japanese popular culture, Paprika (2007), a deeply intriguing animated film directed by Kon Satoshi, is discussed and summarized in the next few paragraphs. The film is about a device that allows psychologists to enter people’s dreams. Dreams innately have great power since they are perceived as windows into other realities. In addition, the film asserts that “the boundaries of the self are not set by consensus reality, that troubles stew in the worlds revealed by dreams, and that dreams can be accessed like playing a DVD with the bio‐psycho‐electronic DC‐Mini machine” used in the film. The DC‐Mini lets the dream world escape from our mind and reappear or materialize into reality. By allowing dreams to emerge into reality, dreams come together into even more complex dreams and those dreams become real. Therefore, anyone using the machine can “infect” other people’s dreams. The viewer watches, in the opening credits, as Paprika rides a moped on the street, rides a rocket into the sky, walks into different billboards, into someone’s computer,


around an office building, through traffic, eating a burger, hiding in someone’s shirt, looking out directly at the viewer, and in a car driving. After a car passes, Paprika’s appearance (dark red hair and eyes) turns into Dr. Atsuko Chiba (paler skin, black hair and eyes). At this point, the viewer is already confused about dreams and reality.

In the following scene, Dr. Chiba finds her co-worker Dr. Tokita, who is quite a large man, stuck in an elevator looking for her. Three samples of the DC Mini were stolen. They both agree that it must be an internal theft and that they need to protect the DC Mini. The viewer learns that Dr. Tokita is the inventor of the DC Mini but it is Dr. Chiba who knows how to use it. When Dr. Tokita tells their chief that he hadn't programmed the access controls into the DC Minis that were stolen, the chief asks Dr. Chiba to explain, “It means that the person who stole the DC Mini can connect to a psychotherapy machine at any time, from any place and use it to intrude into the minds connected to that machine.” The three understand the severity of the situation, however they are surprised to find the chairman in the chief’s office. The Chairman, an old bald man in a wheelchair, tells them, “It is man’s responsibility to control science and technology.” He thinks that sharing dreams leads to violence and that the invention should have never been made. Both the chief and Dr. Chiba defend the DC Mini and the research. The chief says it represents hope for new psychiatric treatments, and Dr. Chiba believes it creates a deeper connection with patients. As a rebuttal, the chairman mentions Paprika, “a woman who’s been using the psychotherapy machine for unapproved treatments.” Dr. Chiba dismisses this information as a groundless rumor. Shortly after, the chief goes crazy, babbling nonsense, and eventually throwing himself out a window. Dr. Chiba and Dr. Tokita can see the chief’s dream (Fig. 49) on the
computer while monitoring his stats. The dream is an elaborately large parade of animals, dolls, figurines, and pure nonsense, accompanied by a circus soundtrack.

Once returning to reality in a later scene, the chief wistfully looks out the hospital window. He asks Dr. Chiba where she thought the parade was going. Dr. Chiba replies, “a place of no return.” She explains to the chief that while he was in there, his brain waves and body deteriorated almost to the point of death. The chief tells her to thank Paprika. She replies that she will let Paprika know, insinuating that they are not the same person. Later on, Dr. Chiba looks at herself in a glass window while walking. At first she sees herself and then the reflection changes into Paprika, “You look tired. Want me to look in on your dreams?” (Fig. 50) Dr. Chiba faces her only to see her own reflection again, “I haven’t been seeing any of my own lately.”

As the film progresses, Paprika discovers that it is the Chairman who is causing all the trouble. The Chairman claims to be the guardian of dreams. He exclaims, “There are no boundaries to dreams. The spirit will be freed from the constraints of the body and gain limitless freedom.” It becomes evident that the Chairman wishes to become free of his handicapped body. There is a strong allusion to butterflies throughout the film. In Japanese culture, the butterfly can represent a person’s psyche or soul. At one point, her co-worker, working for the Chairman, has Paprika pinned down to a table like a butterfly surrounded by other pinned butterflies on the walls (Fig. 51). He is literally trapping her soul. He peels back her skin to reveal Dr. Chiba underneath (Fig. 52). Shifting back and forth between dreams and reality, the Chairman becomes lost in his own delusion and causes the dream world to spill into the real world. The parade marches down the street. The whole world is dreaming. Dreams and reality are merging. Even Paprika appears alongside Dr. Chiba. At
one point, clearly frustrated at Paprika, Dr. Chiba shouts, “Why don’t you listen? You’re part of me!” of which Paprika merely replies, “Have you ever thought that maybe you are a part of me?” As was discussed earlier, it is clear that Dr. Chiba and Paprika are not really the same person. They exist in different realms or worlds. In the same way, could it be possible that the virtual avatars of people exist separately from themselves? Can a virtual world exist parallel to reality? Paprika talks about light and dark, reality and dreams, life and death, man and woman. At the end of the film, she merges herself back with Dr. Chiba to eat up all the dreams that the Chairman is releasing into reality. She first starts out as a child, but slowly, as she keeps eating, grows up into an adult. By dealing with or absorbing our own dreams, we are able to exist in reality. However, people like the Chairman, or even some otaku, wish to stay within the dream or virtual world where they are not limited by their physical bodies.

The significance of Paprika is in the clear distinction between the character of Dr. Chiba and Paprika. The character of Paprika stands out against the others, “not simply the psychologist Dr. Atsuko Chiba’s alter-ego for entering patient’s dreams but is a flirty, stand alone goddess of dreams in her own right.” At one point, Paprika literally runs away with the film, running through different dream sequences. There is a narrow view that Paprika can be seen only as Dr. Chiba’s personality, a younger and sexier version of the psychologist’s austere professional scientist manner and costume. However, as Timothy Perper and Martha Cornog suggest, “Dr. Chiba is also Paprika's alter ego. Paprika is playing, flying, laughing, flirting, having a wonderful time in her world. Paprika is the main reality of

153 Ibid
They use Freudian knowledge of dreams as a playground of primal needs, emotions, fears, and desires to back their claim. Paprika is given some of the qualities of a dream god or kami. Beyond the adorable façade of Paprika is a clever, intelligent woman, who in the end saves the day. However, if Paprika is real at least in the dream world, then what is reality?

Different forms of Japanese visual culture are used as an escape from reality into a virtual world of dreams. At one point in the film, Paprika makes the claim that dreams and the Internet are the same since both are areas in which the repressed conscious of the mind can vent. In fantasies, powerful women can become kami with innate powers and yet there is another form that needs to be addressed. When the ideal of femininity is taken to the extreme, the female form is created, produced, and twisted into a robot in order to reach perfection. The biological woman is imperfect and rebellious. Technology becomes a way to domesticate women. However, in a robotic form, women becomes more powerful and thereby, more threatening to a male dominant society.

\[154\] Ibid, 327
Chapter Six
Girls Will Be Robots

While a fantastical girl can only exist in a virtual reality, a robot can represent a perfect female in the physical world. This chapter explores the human fascination with perfection in the form of female robots. From Hans Bellmer’s dolls to the Cyborg Manifesto, robots represent a high degree of realism and reinstate feminine passivity. These women are created in a lost world of human connection. I relate the Japanese obsession with female robots to that of pop idols, creating an unconventional extension of the perfect woman. The depictions of women in this chapter are the ideal of kawaii and yet they have an overwhelming sense of loneliness. Because of their position as robots, these women have the capacity to overthrow a male dominant society. Therefore, their cuteness actually becomes their power.

As seen with the live-action male cast of the Gokusen series, mentioned in chapter two, the position of idols in Japan is highly romanticized and reproduced in popular culture. According to Daniel Black, the Japanese idol industry produces “carefully planned and managed performances of innocent high spirits and adorable naivety.” In what he calls the “cute body” of the idol is a re-imagining of the human form, a distortion made to signify “passivity, vulnerability, and a lack of threat.” To create cuteness, the body has to be reconstructed in order to exhibit certain maoi qualities while also relying on the absence of other attributes of human corporeality. In this case, maoi does not only refer to male desire.

but any qualities in which create a sexual yearning towards a particular character or person. Although this could be seen as a reflection of biological anxieties, Black states, “kawaii representations of the body are figures from which evidence of certain biological processes have been exorcized entirely, a state of affairs never possible for living, fleshy bodies. Free of biology, they can be taken to reflect a fantasy of the body as a pure, impermeable exteriority, into which nothing may be drawn and from which nothing may emanate.” When this happens, a virtual idol is created to replace the imperfections of the real thing. The virtual idol is “a computer-generated equivalent of the Japanese aidoru, or idol, a media figure which can be taken as an extreme example of corporate attempts to prefabricate celebrity.”  

Similarly, characters from popular culture can also been seen as virtual idols. To better understand the position of the virtual idol, Daniel Black explains:

The virtual idol can therefore be understood as a logical progression from the more established model of idol creation. Rather than invest considerable time and resources in the molding and packaging of a biological body in order to create a product which can only ever approximate an ideal, and which will inevitably lose its appeal as it ages, the virtual idol promises the possibility of building an idol to order, ensuring that it perfectly reflects consumer tastes and will never change.  

For example, in the animated film Perfect Blue (1997) the main character, Mima Kirigoe starts out as a member of a Japanese pop-idol group called "CHAM!" but later decides to pursue her career as an actress much to the dismay of her fans. Reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock films, Mima becomes unable to separate her real life from her work on the drama series. Fantasy and reality spiral out of control as several people throughout the film are

156 Ibid
157 Ibid, 38
murdered. Mima’s increasingly degenerate mental state makes her question her own innocence. As it turns out, her manager was so distraught over the loss of the innocent pop idol version of Mima that she attempts to murder the real Mima, who is ruining the idol’s reputation. Although delusional and very manipulative, Mima’s manager is a good example of the obsessive nature of fandom and the appeal of the ideal idol.

As discussed previously, kawaii reflects the Japanese ideal of feminine passivity. The kawaii body is “a diminutive, rounded, passive, tidy body, almost or entirely lacking in orifices and appendages of any kind, implying an inability to exude anything (vomit, excrement) or act upon the world.” Because of the mediums of Japanese visual culture, the characters are free from living biology and therefore can obtain an ideal form. According to Black, “women’s bodies have traditionally generated anxieties because of their ‘leaky boundaries’ and association with biological processes, and kawaii’s appeal seems heavily dependent upon the assuaging of these anxieties through the hiding of biology.” As a result, female robots, virtual idols, are able to exemplify kawaii better than any biological woman.

The twenty-six-episode anime *Chobits* (2002) tells the story of Hideki Motosuwa, who finds an abandoned android used as a personal computer (*persocoms*) in the form of a young girl. He names her "Chi" since it’s the only word she can initially speak. Chi turns out to be one of the Chobits, a legendary series of *persocoms* rumored to have free will and emotions. As the series progresses, Chi develops strong feelings towards Hideki which questions the relationship between human beings and *persocoms*. The catch phrase of this

\[158\] Ibid, 40-41
particular anime is “In the future, boys will be boys and girls will be robots,” hence the title of this chapter. What I find disturbing about this otherwise adorable anime is the sexual undertones throughout the series. For example, to “turn on” Chi in the first episode, Hideki searches all over her body for her “on” button. It just so happens that it is located in her mechanical vagina. Of course, laughter ensues when the virgin Hideki has to “turn her on.”

In addition, Chi’s innocence is played up despite her sensual movements and at times scandalous clothing. Many depictions of Chi on the covers of the manga series (Fig. 53 & 54) evoke maoi. Although many female fans enjoy Chobits and an all-female Japanese manga artist group named CLAMP wrote the series, the anime clearly reflects a male gaze. Many times the viewer is put into the position of a male voyeur, spying on Chi walking through the streets, doing chores, or catching her in an awkward but adorable pose. In addition, the immaturity of Hideki’s character also attributes to the fantasy of a beautiful female android falling in love with her master. Chi’s character is meant as a parody of the ideal female fantasy, which is clearly emphasized in the catch phrase of the anime. If in the future, girls will be robots, it is because women are imperfect and the perfect female can only exist in a virtual world or as a virtual robot. While both Chi and Kusanagi, discussed later in this chapter, have robotic female forms, Kusanagi does not have the sexual nature that is clearly portrayed in the character of Chi.

However, even the perfect virtual companion because she is a woman, can still invoke anxiety in the mind of men. This is clearly seen in Fritz Lang’s Metropolis (1927) and Ozamu Tezuka’s animated remake in 2001. At the heart of Fritz Lang’s classic silent film is the interplay between robots and human beings and the consequences of this interaction. Lee Makela, in an essay in which she examines films, the differing Western and Japanese
conceptions of “the soul of the machine” explain the difference in the treatment of robots. Fritz Lang’s Metropolis is a “cold, crowded, mechanical, industrial city.” Vast numbers of the lower class live underground, where they run machines that keep the above ground world in working order, while the elite class basks in the sunlight of peaceful gardens. According to Makela, this futuristic world reflects the fears of the twentieth century European world, “industrialization, mechanization, and urbanization were wreaking havoc on the work habits and lifestyles inherited from the mid-nineteenth century.” The world portrayed in Metropolis represented the unhappy end of industrial development. Many citizens questioned the cost of modernization. Lang is able to capture this unease within the opening scenes of his film. Originally conceived as a “love object,” Lang’s robot “objectifies” both feminine beauty and emotional attachment. As Makela states, “she is not meant to have a soul of her own, an independent emotional presence, a human consciousness, or a sense of her own unique identity as a substitute (human) being.” The robot is controllable, dependent, and dependable. In other words, she represents the perfect female companion in the eyes of her creator. However, when the robot is merged with the human Maria, she comes to represent “evil and deceit.” Robot Maria misleads the workers into violence against the elite of Metropolis. According to Makela, “she is not governed by any ingrained sense of right or wrong, by any remorse over the consequences of her call to destruction, or by any misgivings over her assumption of the real Maria’s persona and charisma.” By destroying the robot Maria, the humanity of human beings is

160 Ibid
restored and reconfirmed at the end of the film. Robot alternatives are rejected, seen as part of the problem rather than the solution and the film denies the possibility that a robot might harbor a soul of its own. However, the anime version of Osamu Tezuka’s manga, *Metropolitan*, provides a more positive look at the potential of robots.

Osamu Tezuka, mentioned in the first chapter as the “God of Manga,” actually never saw Fritz Lang’s film before creating his manga in 1949:

This manmade person [the hero of the manga, a robot named Michi] was based on the image of the female robot in the famous pre-war German film *Metropolis*. That said, I hadn’t seen the movie at the time and I didn’t even know what it was about. During the war, in *Kinema junpo* or some other such magazine, there was a single still from the movie of the female robot’s birth scene. I remembered it and it gave me a little hint. I also really liked the sound of the word *metropolis* so I used the same title, but other than that there was no real connection to the movie.¹⁶¹

Michi is a biologically artificial being, described as neither human nor animal nor plant nor mineral. She/he is made entirely of synthetic cells, and a button on Michi’s throat allows the being to change into either a male or female form. The essential innocence of Michi differs greatly from Fritz Lang’s robot. As Makela states, “machine men in Tezuka’s world are not perceived of as capable of committing ‘evil deeds’ intrinsically, but instead are seen as creations of aberrant, overly self-confident human beings who are indeed capable of such malevolence.” Compared to humans, Japanese robots are dependent on their human creators for life and are untainted by any moral defilement. Makela links this perspective to the Shinto tradition, which does not draw a distinction between the animate and the inanimate. The boundaries between human beings and all other manifestations are blurred. Shinto *kami* reflect not only spiritual beings or gods, but also human beings, geological

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 101
features, and even unusual objects in the natural landscape. Therefore Makela asks, “If a human being, a rock, and a volcano can all be labeled kami, how difficult could it be to extend that category to include machines and robots (or legendary monsters? And, if that be the case, can empathy and acceptance be far behind? If little divides human and robot, if we ultimately share a common origin and if transformation is possible, what is to keep a robot from ‘becoming’ human?”

So this virtual form of a woman, a symbol of perfection and power, is not that different from the kami of the previous chapter. Within Shinto belief, it is not hard to conceive that a being such as a robot can harbor a soul or spirit. This question of what makes someone human is thoroughly explored in the animated series and two films of Ghost in the Shell. In addition, there are many other anime that deal with this same theme, including Full Metal Alchemist, where a boy’s soul becomes trapped into a suit of armor. Is he still human? Is the main character, Kusanagi (Fig. 55), in Ghost in the Shell also a human?

According to Susan Napier, Oshii Mamoru’s animated film Ghost in the Shell (1995) turns inward in its exploration of the possibilities of transcending corporeal and individual identity. Ghost in the Shell was a huge success in the United States, and “it remains a favorite of many Western anime fans because of its combination of technically sophisticated (and extremely beautiful) computer animation and its complex and philosophically sophisticated story line.” The film is a genuinely metaphysical work that is concerned less with individual identity in society than with such philosophical questions

162 Ibid, 102-107
163 Susan Napier, Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation (New York: Palgrave, 2000) 104
as whether one can possess a soul in an increasingly technological age.”\textsuperscript{164} It explores the possibility of a psychic connection through technological means and the relationship between soul, body, and technology. This film, however, does not offer much hope for the organic human body, which is seen as essentially a puppet or a doll to be manipulated or transformed by outside sources. According to Napier, “many slow, hauntingly beautiful scenes, often involving water (another obvious link to the feminine since in East Asian culture the female principle of \textit{yin} is associated with water), in which the film explores Major Kusanagi’s essential loneliness since she is not a human or even a human enmeshed in a mechanical body but a cyborg, who, while possessing human features, is actually a technological creation.” Her “birth” is shown in a sequence under the opening credits, which shows her as both organically and technologically constructed but totally free of human origins. In some ways, Napier states, Kusanagi fits comfortably into the scholar Donna Haraway’s vision of the cyborg as a creature without human limitations, “a creature in a post gender world.”\textsuperscript{165} As stated by Napier, “Although Kusanagi is hardly genderless (she clearly has a very female figure), she is characterized more clearly by her profession of assassin and is never shown with a sexual partner or in any form of sexual association, as if to render her innately free of any basic human ties.”\textsuperscript{166} She has no past, no associations with a parent or parent-like figure. This is in striking contrast to the animated character Chi from \textit{Chobits}, who falls in love with her master. However, Kusanagi is not completely comfortable in her cyborg identity. According to Napier, the real action in the film is in

\textsuperscript{164} Ibid \\
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid, 104-107 \\
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid
Kusanagi's quest for her spiritual identity. Kusanagi is profoundly concerned about whether or not she possesses a “ghost,” which Napier defines as the spirit or soul that animates a being. The film raises the possibility of technology’s positive potential, not only in terms of the physical and mental augmentation offered by the character of Kusanagi, but also in terms of the possibility of spiritual development offered by an artificial intelligence known as the Puppet Master. In Napier’s opinion, this Puppet Master offers Kusanagi the possibility of transcending her cyborg body and becoming part of the “net” or cyberspace. The film also examines profound issues such as the relations between the soul, body, and technology. 167

In addition, Napier talks about the film’s “strong ‘female’ sensibility in terms of the traditional female links with the irrational and the uncanny and the interior and the reflective.” She suggests that “rather than making Kusanagi a feminist icon, Oshii is instead using her vulnerable female body and the ‘feminine’ lyrical mode of the film itself to underline the vulnerability of all human beings in a world that is increasingly governed by oppressive and incomprehensible outside forces.” 168 According to Oshii, the “net” can be equated with the myriad gods of the Shinto religion, which Napier says underline the notion that Kusanagi’s fusion with the Puppet Master at the end of the film has strong theological undertones. Her “wedding” with the Puppet Master is “evocative of the sun goddess Amaterasu’s decision to take part in the world of the gods.” Napier proposes that the notion of a bodiless union with an amorphous greater entity has clear evocations of the Buddhist concept of Nirvana, where the self is said to become like a single drop in a vast

167 Ibid
168 Ibid, 112-114
ocean. The issues that the film raises are ones that religion and philosophy have been struggling with since ancient times. By accepting new technology into the world, the film explores the possibility of different kinds of spiritual connections. It becomes possible that other entities can become human or that humans can become ephemeral spirits.

Oshii Mamoru’s sequel *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (2004) is, according to Steven Brown, obsessed with the uncanniness of *ningyo* (human-shaped figures). While Oshii has acknowledged the importance of the concept of Freud’s essay on the uncanny (*unheimlich* in German and *bukimi* in Japanese) and its relation to *ningyo*, Brown finds particular interest in the film’s repeated interest in Hans Bellmer’s erotic grotesque dolls. The uncanny calls to mind “a sense of unfamiliarity at the heart of the familiar, a feeling of unhomeliness in the home, and an estrangement of the everyday.” In *Tokyo Cyberpunk: Posthumanism in Japanese Visual Culture*, Brown explores the film’s play with various *ninyo* to evoke the complexity of the uncanny and the limits of the human. He suggests that the appearance of the uncanny in *Ghost in the Shell 2* “should not be regarded so much as Freudian gestures on the part of Oshii as they are byproducts of Oshii’s remediation of the dolls of Hans Bellmer, which were explicitly designed to evoke the uncanny on many levels.” The film works to destabilize our assumptions about what it means to be human in what Brown calls a posthuman world and how we might relate to the *ningyo* that share our world, at least theoretically in the film. Brown provides a thorough overview of the film, starting with the opening credits where the viewer sees the assemblage of the female

169 Ibid
171 Ibid
androids, ningyo (fig. 56). As in the first film, the viewer witnesses the artificial birth, the manufacturing process involved in making the androids from the division of artificial cells to the construction and assemblage of robotic parts. However, the assembly and doubling of the gynoid's ball-jointed body clearly references Hans Bellmer's dolls (Fig. 57). In the film, the gynoids are sex slaves, “hyper-realistic female robot[s] created specifically for sexually companionship.” According to Brown, “the opening credits of Ghost in the Shell 2 offer a poignant remediation of Bellmer’s corporeal anagrams in the service of posthuman capitalism and its fetishistic obsession with what Walter Benjamin has described as ‘the sex appeal of the inorganic.’”

In 1933, Hans Bellmer constructed his first life-sized female doll, Die Puppe, which was the subject of his first book of photographs also titled Die Puppe (The Doll) that is found by one of the characters in the film. The book was published privately in Germany in 1934, featuring ten black-and-white photographs of the doll situated in a variety of poses. “Perhaps borne out of his frustration with the limited range of movement of the first doll,” according to Brown, Bellmer created a second female doll named La Poupee in 1935. This second doll was the subject of over one hundred photographs taken between 1935 and 1938. While Brown does discuss the lengthy scholarship on the gender politics associated with Bellmer’s dolls, what is interesting to note is the unstable gender marking of the dolls. Bellmer displays “an almost hermaphroditic mixing of sexes, such as the famous photo of male and female limbs joined at the waist.” This is in stark contrast to the gynoids of the film, who are clearly female. While Bellmer’s dolls evoke an erotic grotesque

172 Ibid, 44
dismemberment and reassemblage of the human body, are the *gynoids* human? Is their creation in the beginning of the film the same as Bellmer’s artwork? As stated in the film:

In this age, the twin technologies of robotics and electronic neurology resurrected the eighteenth-century theory of man as machine. And now that computers have enabled externalized memory, human have pursed self-mechanization aggressively, to expand the limits of their own functions. Determined to leave behind Darwinian natural selection, this human determination to beat evolutionary odds also reveals the very quest for perfection that gave it birth. The mirage of life equipped with perfect hardware engendered this nightmare.

During the preproduction of *Ghost in the Shell 2*, Oshii made a trip to the International Center of Photography in New York to study a special exhibition of Bellmer’s doll photographs. According to Brown, Oshii then traveled to Berlin to see the dolls that inspired Bellmer’s creation and then to La Specola in Florence to view the museum’s famous collection of wax anatomical models made from actual corpses that have been compared to Bellmer’s artwork.173

Brown also talks about the film’s relation to Donna Haraway, the author of the “Cyborg Manifesto,” mentioned earlier in Napier’s discussion of the first film. In *Ghost in the Shell 2*, there is a character named after Donna Haraway, Police Coroner Haraway, whose lab contains many *gynoids* “suspended like meat in a butcher’s freezer.” In the character’s opinion, the *gynoids* intentionally malfunctioned because “humans discard robots once they’re redundant” or out modeled. The abandoned *gynoids* become “vagrants and degenerate.” The Haraway character questions the reason why humans are so obsessed with recreating themselves by producing dolls and androids, modeled after idealized human figure. She compares raising children to dolls as “the simplest way to achieve the

173 Ibid, 35-40
ancient dream of artificial life.” Oshii has remarked in interviews, according to Brown, “to ask what the difference between an adult raising a child and a girl playing with her doll” is “not an immoral question, nor does it indicate some kind of regression.” Rather, Oshii says, it is quite simply “the only way we can understand the nature of human existence.” It is clear in the film that Oshii is fascinated with dolls, particularly Hans Bellmer’s. One of the characters in the film finds Bellmer’s book *The Doll*. Brown asks, “Why is it necessary to make robots in our own image? Is it possible to coexist with forms of artificial intelligence without forcing them into the human mold?” The film asserts through the character Haraway that humans model themselves after ideals embodied by artificial dolls such as the *gynoids*. What we consider “human” is not actually a natural phenomenon, but in reality, “a complex sociocultural and philosophical construction.” Oshii blurs the boundaries between human and machine, animate and inanimate, to evoke the uncanny. He shows the machine in the human and the human in the machine. Kusanagi becomes a character that despite her robotic form appears human, a highly sexualized human (Fig. 58). Although many images portray her in passive poses, she is extremely active in the films. She is highly intelligent and powerful, one of the only characters capable of fending off cyberbrain hacking.

A reoccurring image in *Ghost in the Shell 2* is the puppet motif in which a character literally or metaphorically “pulls the strings” of another through cyberbrain hacking and manipulation. According to Brown, cyberbrain hacking is associated with “the implantation of virtual experiences, including false memories, in order to steal information or control the

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174 Ibid, 15-16
175 Ibid, 48-49
victim.” Within the film, “most human beings have cyberbrain implants, which are electronic components that facilitate direct access to massive information networks and memory storage in cyberspace, as well as other functions such as silent communication transmissions.” In the first film, the Puppet Master was able to break into any cyberbrain hooked up to the network, compelling humans to behave like puppets. Brown claims, “the uncanny blurring of boundaries between the animate and the inanimate, and the living and dead, is clearly exemplified by puppet-like characters, but the uncanny is also evoked in scenes involving cyberbrain hacking and e-brain communication.”  

If someone else can implant memories, how could we distinguish what memories are real? Is it possible to lose touch with reality the more we connect to the “net”? Does the biological body slip away and give in the virtual form? 

Virtual idols, robots, have been contextualized within a tradition of idealizing the female body. While the bodies are manufactured, the most threatening are the ones that have “the capacity to perform an uncanny approximation of humanity.” Daniel Black asserts that technological pursuits are traditionally gendered male and “technology’s ultimate goal is the mastery and appropriation of the feminine nature which is opposed to it.” Consequently, the virtual idol strives for a high degree of realism, but a realism that has been distorted to act out an idealized female identity. It seeks to replace living women with an aesthetically cute form that is way beyond the capacities of any biological being. Black states, “the woman’s body is the ‘natural’, ‘non-technological’ shape whose simulation

176 Ibid, 24-25
177 Daniel Black, “The virtual idol,” 48
178 Ibid, 46
is technology's greatest triumph." The virtual woman may be more appealing than the real woman, but she has an imagined empowerment. Although she obtains a power greater than her male creator, her purpose is reinstate feminine passivity. In spite of this, the popular culture discussed in this chapter is at least a decade old. While these theories are still relevant, the anxieties of powerful women have diminished. New generations have emerged with more equality among the sexes. Although young women still have a complex about being perfect, more recent anime have turned away from the kawaii aesthetic. In the future, girls will not be robots. Reality, though difficult, is worth experiencing, at least that is what anime tells us.

\(^{179}\) Ibid, 48
Conclusion: Conquering Cuteness

I have argued that there are many different types of females in Japanese visual culture. Despite the cuteness of these women, they still appeal to otaku and perhaps are appearing more frequently because of this growing audience. There is a large female audience for manga as evident by shōjo and josei, made for girls and young women respectively. Furthermore, many films by Hayao Mizayaki, such as Spirited Away, Princess Mononoke, and Howl’s Moving Castle have been categorized as shōjo since the main characters are typically heroic young girls. There is a lot of scholarship that has focused on shōjo manga and its implications on young women.\(^{180}\) Shōjo manga accounts for approximately thirty percent of the entire manga industry. The majority of authors are female and their readership consists of women of all ages.\(^{181}\) The yaoi genre, which is also written by women, focuses on the homoerotic “boys” love but only accounts for 3.8 percent of the manga industry.\(^{182}\) Although the aesthetic of kawaii is still dominate, the meaning behind the images have changed. Cuteness does not have to equate to feelings of powerlessness or impotence, as Murakami suggests. As evident through Japanese visual culture, characters of young women are increasingly becoming more powerful and questioning the lines of gender in addition to their own position in Japanese society. In addition, the historical role of females is questioned through gender bending characters.

\(^{180}\) For further scholarship, see Jennifer Prough, Straight from the Heart: Gender, Intimacy, and the Cultural Production of Shōjo Manga (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2010)

\(^{181}\) Kukhee Choo, “Girls Return Home,” 277

\(^{182}\) Ibid, 279-280
Maia Tsurumi suggests that in Japan, “society’s standards of what is male and what is female are defined by men, a concept many feminists would agree with.”¹⁸³ However, she also asserts that many scholars would argue that women in Japan are challenging and changing their and society’s concept of womanhood. In her opinion:

Women who exhibit the desirable ‘female’ characteristics are ‘unworldly,” are refined in thought and speech, and desire to be stay-at-home wives and mothers. Men, by contrast, are worldly, are physically brave, and work hard outside the home to provide for their families. The traditional differentiation of male-female roles can be seen in the division of labor, with men having full-time occupations outside the household, while women occupy the domestic sphere full time.¹⁸⁴

Therefore, yanki and other forms of female strength can be seen as a blatant rebellion against traditional gender roles in Japanese society. Arguing along a similar vein, Kukhee Choo asserts that women in shōjo manga exhibit “domestic devotion to prove themselves worthy of acknowledgement by the male protagonists’ families.”¹⁸⁵ Although this may seem as a strange form of rebellion to a Western reader, by taking back the domestic role women are asserting their dominance in the domestic sphere, which is different than being forced into the role. This can be seen in the character of Tōru in Fruits Basket, where she enters the Sōma family home as a housekeeper. Choo states, “Though this may simply appear to be a loss of social status, especially from a western feminist standpoint, it is important to understand the Japanese context of being a housekeeper, and how it may function in these shōjo texts.”¹⁸⁶ While the female characters of shōjo are cute, submissive and sexy, they are

¹⁸⁴ Ibid
¹⁸⁵ Kukhee Choo, “Girls Return Home,” 276
¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 281
also strong and independent. It is revealed towards the end of Fruits Basket that the head of the Sōma family, who had bullied Tōru throughout the series, is in fact a female raised as a male, thus explaining the angst towards the independent and highly feminine Tōru. In Choo’s opinion, “the series shows how Tōru slowly becomes a part of the wealthy and powerful Sōma family, and her status as a housekeeper is bizarrely appropriate throughout this process.”

Although Tōru experiences the harshness of her reality, she maintains her “cute” attitude, her innocence and integrity. By adapting into the position of a caretaker and mother figure, Choo suggests that it may be a conscious role that females take on to compensate for their lack of social status. She points out that it is rare to see a female protagonist within shōjo manga that belongs to an upper class family, typically middle and lower class female protagonists long for upper class male protagonists. In addition, it is not the female characters that exhibit and define what ladylike femininity should be. The male characters embody feminine physical traits, “such as pretty faces, slender bodies and the aforementioned graceful mannerisms that place the female subject as inferior to the male.” This only enhances the appeal of the male character, referred to as bishōnen or beautiful boy, and places the female in a lesser position because she is not able to “perform” femininity better than the male characters. Perhaps the best example can be seen in the series Ouran High School Host Club (Fig. 59), a satirical anime that pokes fun at the character cast types found in shōjo manga.

\[\text{Ibid, 283-284}\]
\[\text{Ibid, 290}\]
\[\text{Ibid, 291}\]
The anime follows Haruhi Fujioka, a scholarship student at the prestigious Ouran Academy, who is mistaken for a boy from the start of the series. Looking for a quiet place to study, Haruhi stumbles upon the meeting room of the academy’s host club, a group of six male students that entertain female clients, fellow students at their school. Incidentally, Haruhi accidentally knocks over and breaks an antique vase valued at 8 million yen, roughly 80,000 U.S. dollars. She spends the rest of the series paying off her debt in service to the host club. With her gender-ambiguous look, Haruhi agrees to join the club as a host, continuing to dress as a male throughout the series. This romantic comedy focuses on Haruhi’s relationships with the other host members and satirizes the clichés and stereotypes that endure in shōjo, whose target audience is females. While this anime questions gender cast types within Japanese culture, in the end, Haruhi returns to her “proper” female position in society. In what seemed like a progressive anime, it becomes visible that even fantasy women cannot escape reality.

However, the anime does magnify and parody gender issues. For example, the scholars Cooper and Darlington argue, “to a great degree, all of Haruhi’s relationships are based on some level of unwitting same-sex attraction.”190 While her fellow hosts are attracted to the female Haruhi, most of their experiences with her takes place when she is pretending to be male. Therefore, “their attraction to Haruhi as a woman is filtered through the lens of Haruhi as a man” In addition, her female clients admire Haruhi in her male guise, creating another level of same-sex attractions. It is often stated in the series that Haruhi’s

main attraction is her girlish appearance and behavior. While the anime seems to be accepting of gender identity and same-sex desire, it still undermines this openness. In one episode, the viewer discovers that Haruhi’s father is actually a cross-dresser (Fig. 60), which explains her nonchalance about dressing like boy throughout the series. She accepts her father for how he is. In fact, only her future boyfriend Tamaki is flustered by the situation. The character Tamaki continuously reinforces traditional sexual and gender norms throughout the series. Therefore, while the anime pushes the envelope in terms of acceptable levels of same-sex attraction, the parody undermines how seriously the questioning of societal norms can be taken. Since Haruhi was raised by her father, “the implication seems to be that transgendered individuals are destined to pass gender confusion on to their children.”

There are many other examples of anime with cross-dressing characters. *Tokyo Godfathers* (2003) by the late Japanese director Satoshi Kon features a character named Hana, an extremely effeminate drag queen (Fig. 61). Her mannerisms throughout the film are arguably more feminine than the main character Miyuki, who is biologically a girl. In the beginning of the film, another character, Jin, was actually under the impression that Miyuki was boy, and Hana constantly tells Miyuki to act more like a lady. The film follows these three homeless characters that happen to find a baby in a trash pile on Christmas Eve, and their quest to find the child’s true mother. Throughout the film, Hana tries to keep the baby, who she names Kiyoko or “pure child” and laments that she could never have one of her own. The other characters remind Hana that she is not a woman. The significance of

\[\text{\textsuperscript{191} Ibid, 168}\]
these cross-dressing characters is their reference to *ayama*, male actors who impersonate women in kabuki performances.

According to Gerstle, kabuki is the most popular form of traditional Japanese theater. It has been central to Japanese social and cultural life since the fifteenth century. Mason explains that kabuki theaters featured “gorgeous costumes and elaborate sets.” The themes generally included historical events, conflicts of moral duty and personal desire, and ghost stories.\(^\text{192}\) Traditionally, the origins of kabuki are traced to 1603, when a former Shinto shrine dancer and prostitute, Okuni, and her troupe performed at the banks of a river in Kyoto. According to Guth, they “often performed in outlandish costumes that poked fun at the elite.” Other courtesans in Kyoto started to imitate Okuni, causing an excess of sexual activities and public disturbances. This eventually led the authorities to ban all female performers. The prohibition was enacted around 1629. However, the Japanese government never completely succeeded in “severing the association between Kabuki and sex, and both homosexual and heterosexual liaisons between actors and their fans were common.”\(^\text{193}\) The Japanese government closely regulated kabuki theaters: activities in and around them, the size and arrangement, the subject matter of the plays, and restricted the actors to not dress flamboyantly off-stage. Kyoto, Edo, and Osaka were limited to four theaters each.\(^\text{194}\) Performances attracted audiences of all classes and sexes. Kabuki attracted all classes from lowly shop merchants to large-scale rice brokers and financiers. In theory members of the


\(^{194}\) Ibid, 28, 32, 94
samurai class were not supposed to attend the theaters since they had their own private stages at the estates of feudal lords. However, men and women of the samurai class “flocked” to kabuki theaters usually disguising their faces to avoid conflict.\textsuperscript{195} The obsession with celebrities increased with the commercial publishing of full-color woodblock printing in the 1770s and 80s. To promote their favorite actors, fans would create or sponsor woodblock prints to distribute. According to Komiz, “print collecting was a burgeoning hobby, and theater fans would leaf through each other’s collections of theater prints, reminiscing about favorite actors and plays.”\textsuperscript{196} This type of extreme fandom is similar to the discussion of idols in the previous chapter.

In conclusion, the representations of cute young women within the realm of contemporary Japanese visual culture have progressively changed since Murakami’s claims made almost ten years ago. Kawaii does not have to denote childishness. It still expresses a certain level of femininity. However, as this chapter has touched upon, males in Japanese society have always dominated the defining aspects of femininity. There is a long history of female impersonators, as seen in the onnagata of Kabuki Theater. Although there is also a Japanese tradition of using a mask, such as in Noh plays, and a concept of “showing face” in situations of adversity, the mask of kawaii does not necessarily have to be connected to the postwar period. Instead, the rising stress of contemporary life could be the real reason for the escape into Japanese popular culture, which would better explain the massive appeal and embrace by the global youth. It is not confined to the borders of Japan. If popular

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\textsuperscript{196} Ibid, 64 - 66
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culture were truly continuously related to the Pacific War, then why would it appeal to a
global audience? I do not deny that in anime such as *Grave of the Fireflies* or *Bare Foot Gen*,
there is a blatant reference to the war and its effect on the Japanese people. However, I am
asserting that images of kawaii women are changing as their audience is maturing. The
female characters in shōjo manga are rebelling, reclaiming their domestic power. The
parody of genders in current anime also contributes to this rebellion. The exclusion of
gender bending characters in translated anime has contributed to the longstanding
Western idea that Japanese women are submissive. Women have taken hold of cuteness
and have turned it into something powerful. The structural mechanisms are the same but
the feelings and emotions have changed. The mask is falling as the female audience
matures. Shōjo manga appeals to a much broader range of readers than just young girls.
Contemporary artists have noticed this trend and are beginning to shift with it. As I stated
in my introduction, the era of Murakami is over. Cuteness does not represent the fear and
anxiety of the Japanese people or feminine passivity. It is an aesthetic that artists choose to
use to portray characters. While it can be a means for escape, sometimes we need a little
fantasy to remind us of our reality.
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