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The Sovereignty of Post-*Otaku* Culture

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Our world has undergone remarkable changes in the past 15 years. By 1990, the forces of a transnationalist globalization were already with us—an increasingly all-encompassing globalization was already an assumed structural condition of the world. Yet the last 15 years have also seen a collapse of earlier balances and equilibriums in the world. The result has been an ongoing uncertainty; like all times of uncertainty, this period has therefore been a time of possibility for change.

The conditions of globalization that I am referring to can be thought of at nearly all levels of social action: the changes we are now undergoing are eminently political and economic, but they also are tied to technologies such as the internet, and new flows of popular culture that, in part, are made possible by these new technologies.

All of these different realms of social action (the political, economic, technological, and cultural) are of course connected. But in this paper, I want to focus specifically on the cultural conditions—that is, I want to consider some of the changes and effects of the last 15 years, in terms of some examples from popular culture.

Of the many elements of social and cultural life that have been brought into question in the last few years, one of the most important is the concept of sovereignty. I would like, therefore, to use the problem of sovereignty, or what has become of sovereignty, as a central question of this paper. However, although sovereignty is usually thought of as a matter of politics, I do not want to refer to it in that way. Instead I will use it only as a general idea. It will allow me to ask what happens to the idea of the individual in popular culture in recent years, but also what happens to the idea of the nation as a sovereign being, too. So, to bring all this together, I would like to outline some possibilities for thinking about changes in the idea of the individual person, and the individual nation, that have emerged in popular culture over the last 15 years.

I should make clear that these are ideas that I have not yet studied in very much detail, and that I will only give a simple view of here. Also, the conditions, forces, and problems I am talking about are truly global, and not limited to Japan or the West or anywhere else. Nonetheless, Japan has been a centrally important location as a place where many of these conditions and trends come together most visibly, and so my examples come mostly from Japan.

In Japan, 1990 was a time of possibility, both because of the remarkable success of the postwar economy, and because of its collapse. Since that time, there are three sets of cultural developments that I want to comment on, in order to make some general comments about where I think we are today. The first is *anime*, as a global cultural product that nonetheless is an expression of “Japanese” culture. The second is the relatively new cultural category of “otaku” identity, that is part of this newly globalized culture. And the third is the “Superflat” art of Murakami Takashi and others, that is also part of global culture. In conclusion, I want to just suggest some ideas about what the post-*otaku* identity (sometimes referred to by the term “*moe*” in Japan) means both for the individual and for national identity.

Already by 1990, *anime* was marketed globally as a uniquely “Japanese” product, even though it was becoming an ideal example of a new, transnational culture. Anime is of course in many ways truly a product of Japan. But it was only after Japanese producers saw a surge of interest in Japanese animation in a large, amateur

science fiction convention in Los Angeles that they decided there might be a market for anime, and they only then provided the investments that allowed *anime* to survive and develop, both in Japan and worldwide. Furthermore, with *anime* groups in places like Ann Arbor, Michigan (U.S.) influencing the market as much as consumers in Tokyo, in a sense, the production of “Japanese” culture is happening outside the borders of Japan as much as inside. The same can be said of the production of *anime*. A now classic film like *Ghost in the Shell* was actually created in part by American producers, and the art work was done in Korea as well as Japan, with files electronically transferred back and forth. Lastly, within *anime*, there is a thematization of different ways of representing the world. In *Gasaraki*, for example, live-action type film is spliced into the animation, with film and animation each indicating two different world views, and two different histories.

Anime, therefore, in the global conditions of its production, is a very good example of a new transnational cultural form. Furthermore, in its technical means of representation, combining analog and digital formats, anime creates multiple views of the world—or rather, creates a world that itself is multiple. So in very broad terms, the cultural identity of *anime* is both a global, transnational identity, and multiple. Nonetheless, out of this global and multiple form, consumers still find a specifically “Japanese” national product. The consumer thus takes on the position of sovereignty—the consumer is the point at which identity is located and identified. So out of these global and transnational conditions, in this first example, the independent boundaries of the nation are preserved and even reinforced. But it’s important to remember that if the consumer is the ruling sovereign, the consumer/sovereign remains very much part of transnational flows.

My second example—the category of the *otaku*—is in some ways just a carry-through of the conditions of *anime*. In fact in the United States, *otaku* fan clubs have recently begun to replace *anime* fan clubs. In Japan, the background of the *otaku* includes a kind of privatized identity—an alienated person, who mostly stays at home, and is too interested in violent video games; instead of subcultural, they are more simply anti-social. This background is important, and I will return to it, but for the moment I just want to focus on the *otaku* as a person who playfully, and perhaps with some mania, identifies with a variety of consumer products. In the U.S., Japan, Europe, and elsewhere, this has been connected with the idea of costume play (cos-play). *Otaku*-types may identify with certain characters, or styles, from *anime* and elsewhere. This, in turn, is related to the idea that new subcultural identities are best described as tribes. The new tribes are temporary groups, attached to styles (such as styles of music); people may be members of these groups, but they are not exclusively members of any particular group. You might be associating with a particular cos-play group in the afternoon, and maybe a techno-music group in the evening. Those groups, furthermore, are global. A particular kind of techno-music group, for example, may have members in Tokyo, Berlin, Montreal, and elsewhere. Under these conditions, identity consists of little more than a set of networked connections, or nodes. These points of connection, furthermore, are constantly shifting. Accordingly, perhaps even more than in the *anime* example, identity and sovereignty are globally dispersed and constantly changing and shifting. Sovereignty itself, in other words, becomes dispersed and uncertain.

The “Superflat” art of Murakami Takashi and others is, I think, one of the more interesting art movements to have developed in the 1990’s. It is closely connected with *anime* and with *otaku* culture. It has also become a huge, multi-billion dollar (U.S.) global industry. Although it is a global industry, and although Murakami explicitly says he went to New York to develop it as a kind of global art, he nonetheless also says that out of this global art, he can locate something specifically and historically Japanese.

The early Superflat work created a view of the world similar to that of the anime, *Gasaraki*. Like *Gasaraki*, the Superflat art worked with both analog and digital methods of representation, and claimed that because we now use both, we now see the world in differing ways at once—we live in different relations to the world, all at the same time. Furthermore, a digital representation of the world works by first breaking things down into a code, and then re-encoding them to produce an image (or sound). Because the original code can in fact be re-encoded in any number of ways, there is no stable or unmediated connection between the origin of an image (or sound), and the actual production of an image. There is still a real-world origin to a digital photograph, for instance, but technically speaking, that origin can be reproduced as any number of different possibilities. In this Superflat model of the world, the database replaces the old ideas of memory and history; a database idea of memory or of history still acts as a point of origin, but only an origin of multiple possible identities. In the same way, a Superflat idea of both consumer identities, or of (Japanese) national identity implies a complex, multi-layered being. Japanese identity can still have real historical sources, but ones that find expression only within complex layers of contemporary global connections. This would imply a very complex form of sovereignty. One that still allows for the importance of the nation, but in a new way.

The cumulative view of the sovereign identity that these examples indicate is in some ways the promise that people spoke about 15 or so years ago. It includes an emphasis given to consumers as themselves somehow sovereign producers; it offers a view of the individual as a relatively stable identity (not a postmodern empty subject), though also an identity that is flexible and multi-layered; and it allows for the ongoing importance of the nation as a frame of identity.

However, for better or for worse, these possibilities have not entirely been fulfilled. The Superflat artist Murakami Takashi no longer talks much about the idea of multilayered identities, and instead has recently been describing clear narrative histories of postwar Japan, in which Japan has been an infantilized nation in relation to the U.S. He thus is returning to old, very modernist (almost cold war) notions of nation and history. A similar trajectory can be seen in the recent claims that otaku identities have been replaced by the *moe* generation. In these accounts, *otaku* people were already a generation beyond the classic subcultures that still persisted in the 1980's. Subcultural identities remained political, while *otaku* were a non-political and in some ways alienated culture. By these terms, otaku were self-indulgent, and living with fantasies, often of a sexual nature. This gets carried further with the new *moe* generation. This is a generation—especially of men—that may have certain manias and may still have a kind of sexual desire, but it no longer has any connection with actual human relationships. In some ways there is a conscious and happy rejection of actual human relationships. This could be considered a rejection of the consumerist desire for objects, but there is little sense of that kind of opposition to anything. Infantilism tends to be embraced, and there is little overlapping of different group identities. The result therefore is an almost entirely alienated individual. It is therefore a resurgence of a kind of hyper-modern alienated individual. Thus, the new flows of global culture in a sense return sovereignty to the individual, and to the individual as a national identity. There is no more idea of multiple “tribes,” or of multilayering. To the extent that global flows return sovereignty to the individual, it is an individual as an isolate—an isolated being. Both at the level of the individual and of the image of the nation, the result is a new form of closure.