

OTAKU: Japan's Database Animals. *By Hiroki Azuma; translated by Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. xxix, 144 pp. (Figures.) US\$17.95, paper. ISBN 978-0-816-65352-2.

The global boom of manga, anime, video games and other products of Japanese popular culture has been subject to scientific debate since the end of the 1990s and has recently led to a number of international conferences about the subject of Japan's cultural power. However, except for the writings of the professor of media and cultural studies, Koichi Iwabuchi—especially his discussion of the “odourlessness” of Japanese popular culture in *Recentering Globalization. Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002)—as well as a short article by Azuma in the annual *Mechademia 2* (Frenchy Lunning, ed., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, 175-187) comments of Japanese scholars can hardly be found in the English, German or French scientific literature to this day.

This book of the very well known Japanese philosopher and cultural critic Hiroki Azuma fills the void and is an annotated, excellent English translation of Azuma's best-selling study *Dôbutsuka suru posutomodan: otaku kara mita nihon shakai* (Animalizing postmodernity: depicting Japanese society through otaku) published in Japan in 2001 (Tokyo: Kôdansha Gendai Shinsho). “In this book, I focused on the ‘otaku’—a subculture that emerged in Japan in the 1970s and gave rise to a massive entertainment industry producing manga, anime and video games. By understanding its history through the notion of ‘postmodernity,’ I wanted to analyze the psychological structure of contemporary Japan,” describes Azuma, codirector of his project, the Academy of Humanities at the Tokyo Institute of Technology's Center for the Study of World Civilizations.

But not only the psychological structure of Japan is in Azuma's scope of interest. By analyzing otaku culture through the philosophical theories of postmodernity of Derrida, Deleuze, Kojève, Lyotard, Lacan and in Japan of Asada, Karatani, Ôtsuka, Osawa and Miyadai, he argues that otaku culture is not at all a Japanese phenomenon but can also be found in Asia, Europe or the US, among others, and therefore should be understood as “the essence of our era (postmodernity)” (6).

The book is divided into three chapters plus a preface by the author and an invaluable introduction by his translators Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono. Azuma's preface—and especially the introduction of the translators—provides the reader with an insight into the Japanese discourse on subculture and postmodernity as well as Azuma's position within this discourse. For Azuma it is of great importance that the readers in foreign countries become interested in the different positions within the Japanese academic discourse and above all acquire an understanding of his new contribution to it by taking up otaku as a subject of criticism.

In chapter 1 “The Otaku's Pseudo-Japan” Azuma discusses first the contents

of otaku culture, outlines three “otaku generations” in Japan and explains his interpretation of the term “postmodernity.” He then develops his argument, that there is nothing specifically Japanese in otaku culture, as its existence is based on the “domestication” of American subculture (comics, animated films) imported before and after World War II in the first place. The development of a “unique Japanese aesthetic” in Japanese anime for him is nothing more than an act of self-assertion towards the West by overturning the “overwhelmingly inferior status of postwar Japan” (13) and therefore a “reflection of the fragility of a Japanese identity” (19). He successfully deconstructs the allegedly continuous interconnection of the “original Japanese” Edo culture and today’s otaku culture as “a form of fiction constructed in an effort to escape the impact of Americanization” (23). He also warns against the exploitation of Japan’s subculture and otaku culture by right wing Japanese (for example, Yoshinori Kobayashi).

In chapter 2 (“Database Animals”), at 71 pages, the core chapter of his book, Azuma elaborates in detail on his main thesis of the book, the “animalized” postmodern human beings, exemplified by the otaku, who cannot consume formerly unifying “grand narratives,” like the nation–state or revolutionary ideologies, any longer, but instead are now looking for an instant “animalistic” gratification of their desires in a “database” containing reams of “small narratives” of world views (31 ff).

Chapter 3 on “Hyperflatness and Multiple Personality” contains a further application of his theses by discussing the “grand database” par excellence, the Internet and a PC visual novel called “Yu-No.”

I agree with the translators of this important piece of scholarly work, that it is indeed a must-read not only for students but also scholars “interested in otaku studies who have yet to encounter critical theory” or scholars of critical theory “who have yet to consider otaku studies as a symptom of the contemporary condition” (xxix). Within the international Japanese Studies community’s discussion on the global fad of Japanese popular culture more Azuma and less “soft power” theory is needed.

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JAPAN’S HOLY WAR: The Ideology of Radical Shintō Ultrationalism.
By Walter A. Skya. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009. xii, 387 pp. (Figures.) US\$25.95, paper. ISBN 978-0-8223-4423-0.

The history of Japanese political thought is a difficult field and that is perhaps the reason for its relative neglect by Western historians of Japan. Professor Skya, undeterred by such difficulties, has tackled this thorny subject by focusing on radical Shintō ultrationalism. This was, he claims, prewar Japan’s “ideological equivalent of Nazism and Fascism,” which “inspired