

“I’m alone, but not lonely”

Japanese *Otaku*-Kids colonize the Realm of Information and Media
A Tale of Sex and Crime from a faraway Place

Volker Grassmuck

(Dec. 1990)

On the first of November TV reported a car accident. A minor had driven his father’s car out the garage and into the neighbor’s garden. The boy was one year old. The father told the press, that the kid had learned to drive in the video game parlor to which he had been taking him every day.

We’re talking here about a new humankind, a *shin jinrui*. Nothing more, nothing less. At the very least it’s a new kind of humans, if we chose to read it *shinjin rui*. Well, if nothing else they’re new and they’re one of a kind. Nothing more is certain about the *otaku*, even their humanness is being doubted. They might very well be from outer space.

Their phenomenology varies widely. Some *otak* hunt for photographs of music industry’s synthetic starlets, some are fanatically into computer games, many are immersed in comic-books most of their waking day, others are plastic model maniacs, and yet others fancy hacking into car-telephone conversations. *Otak* is not concerned with a certain subject matter, but is rather a mode of being. There are magazines catering to them, fairs, pornography, videos, and computer-networks, and there is the “Book of *Otaku*”. According to an estimation of the editor of “Do-Pe”, one of the *otak*-magazines, there is a hard core of 350,000 of them around, but, he says, how many ‘light *otak*’ exist, nobody knows.

If you ask different people for a definition of the term *otaku* you get contradictory answers. In different phases of its dissemination it changed in meaning, and people look at it from different angles at any given time. What is the smallest common denominator? *Otaku* are teens or twens. Mostly boys. They usually wear jeans, T-shirt and sneakers, which might not sound very

characteristic, but in fashion-crazy Japan it is. They despise physical contact and love media, technical communication, and the realm of reproduction and simulation in general. They are enthusiastic collectors and manipulators of useless artifacts and information. They are an underground, but they are not opposed to the system. They change, manipulate, and subvert ready-made products, but at the same time they are the apotheosis of consumerism and an ideal workforce for contemporary Japanese capitalism. They are the children of the media.

Take, for example, KUSHIDA Riko. She is a game-*otaku*. Her small room is littered with arcade-machines and 200-300 naked game boards that she can hook onto the consoles. She wears a blue denim jacket and skirt, and looks a little bit lost in between the sterile, industrial partitioning walls of the reception area of “Log In” magazine. She looks at me with lowering reservation as if cautious, but speaks with self-confidence and looks into my eyes, therefore she doesn’t quite qualify as a hard-core *otaku*. When she was eight or nine she started playing home TV-games like “Ping Pong” or “Block”. At age ten she went to the game-floors of department stores which offered higher quality graphics than the TV-games, and started to program her own games in BASIC. In those days kids would home- assemble radios, and it was in amateur-radio magazines that special sections for writing games on home-computers first appeared. By the age of thirteen she had made friends with the manager of the game-parlor to which she now went daily. He introduced her to second-hand game-machine dealers. Their customers up to then had been exclusively managers of game-parlors. Then the game-*otaku* discovered them. They sell boards of used machines - considered garbage before - for upwards of 5,000 ¥ , and complete consoles and rare items for around 200,000 - 300,000 ¥. An investment that breaks even in a matter of weeks if the player does not have to feed the coin-slot for every game.

As turning-point in the history of video-games Kushida identifies “Space Invader”. Introduced in 1979 by Taitô it was copied, sometimes under license, sometimes illegally, by software firms all over the world, and it created a whole generation of game-addicts. It was followed by the classics “Pacman” and - the all- time number one, according to Kushida - “Pong” from Atari, first released in 1971. In the post-Invader days the market exploded. Companies like Namco or Nintendo grew big, some very big. Originally a card-game maker, Nintendo - the ‘videogame empire’ - was the top earner of all Japanese companies in 1989 for the eighth consecutive year. They raked in 250 billion Yen in sales.

Talking about the birth and rise of the game phenomenon Kushida is taken with sentimentality. In those days she dreamt of games. But, she says, it was not the games which took over her imagination, but her imagination originally led her to the games. She is an exceptional case in the computer-*otaku* world where the overwhelming majority is male. For example, 98.3 % of the readers of “Log In”, the major game magazine for which she works as an editor, are male.

Today Kushida is 20 and studies philosophy. No, she does not find that choice of field surprising. The game world includes the ‘real world’ and vice versa. So, there is certainly a relation between philosophy and games, but a very complicated one that she can’t quite explain, she says, and laughs.

New Generations

The Japanese, maybe more so than other peoples, want to find out who they are and where they are going. It is only in the last fifteen years that the accumulated wealth can be felt in society. This didn’t happen without radical changes and ruptures. Internationally they are mostly accepted and praised for their technology. A shaky base to build an identity on. Changes in attitudes and mentality are most visible with the young. The wish to understand what they are up to brings forth the coining of a ‘new generation’ just about every year. The term *otaku* has had many predecessors in the debates about contemporary popular culture.

An older catch-phrase that was in use for a season or two is *Moratoriumu Ningen* (moratorium people). OKONOGI Keigo, professor at the neuropsychiatric department of Keiô University, coined it in 1977 (*Moratorium ningen no jidai*, in *Chûô Kôron*, October 1977, engl. transl. in Japan Echo Vol.V, No. 1, 1987). Originally, Erik Erickson’s term ‘psychosocial moratorium’ referred to a period of training or study in which young people are suspended from fulfilling their obligations and responsibilities to society. In Okonogi’s interpretation it becomes today’s dominant ‘social character’. The description of this moratorium mentality can be read as a background for the 80’s phenomenon of *otaku*.

The affluent consumer society, says Okonogi, has an infantilizing effect. Media and advertising appeal to the child in everyone. As the rate of science and technology-driven social change accelerates, everyone is forced to flexibly adapt and perpetually learn in order to keep up. The

frenzied demon's dance of cultural appearances and disappearances allows no other mode of being than a provisional, temporary one, permanently 'on call'. No other mode than a playful and leisurely involvement that maintains distance. Everybody has come to be both consumer and nonaffiliate, uncommitted visitor within a controlling and protecting structure. Like the *otaku*, the shallow human relations allow the moratorium people to live isolatedly. The moratorium biographies lead to an "identity diffusion syndrome" and an "ego vacuum" that, according to Okonogi, have today become the 'normal' state of affairs. The moratorium becomes an end in itself. But the situation also contains an explosive, destructive power.

Most of all, Okonogi blames the mass media, which produce an "unreal state of existence ... The self-dissociation characteristic of the mass media also typifies the psychological structure of young people.... They have now become omnipotent through assimilation to the mass media, which have a magical power over society."

A tone of cultural pessimism runs through Okonogi's article even if at the end he tries to comfort us by pointing out first signs of a post-moratorium trend. We get a somber picture of isolated, solipsistic men and women, who lose themselves in the postmodern tides that even threaten to engulf the 'real society' from where Okonogi writes, the society of production and distribution.

From the *moratoriumu ningen* we pick up the general social tone that sets the mood for the birth of the *otaku*, a mood characterized by self-dissociation in hyper-reality. With their successors, the *shinjinrui*, we re-encounter the vacuousness, and additionally get a more joyful approach to information.

The word *shinjinrui*, like *otaku*, varies widely in meaning. As a non-technical term it can refer to any kind of new generation. But sometimes it gets connected with a specific group of young people for a while. Like the Yuppies of the late 70's.

Those *shinjinrui* were college or professional kids in their twenties. Quite different from *otaku* they put a strong emphasis - and spend a lot of money - on glossy outward appearance. They preferably have jobs in modelling or advertising which earn them enough money and leave them enough time for their main source of pleasure: showing off luxury goods and fast cars. The latest hit among them is a left-arm suntan, because it signals that this 'girl' or 'boy' drives a left-wheel

import car. The *shinjinrui* were also called 'cristal-kids', after TANAKA Yasuo's award-winning best-seller *Nantonaku, Kuristaru* (Tokyo 1980. engl. as "Somehow Cristal") which became a sort of Yuppy-guide to Tokyo's 'in' restaurants, boutiques, and clubs, a How-to instruction on being hip. It first appeared 1980 in the monthly journal "The Arts" (*bungei*) and was immediately republished as a book which sold more than one million copies. Tanaka gives us an extensive inside view of the joyful life in empty forms. A life in which one truly and explicitly cherishes snobbery and affectation. His plot "verges on nonexistence" (Norma Field), but in 442 notes he boasts with all the information the trendy hyper- consumer needs. Example: Where do you go on a Saturday night after eleven if the desire for ice cream overcomes you? Answer: Take a taxi to Swensen's on "Killer" Avenue. Because of the rapid change in fashion, most of the information was, of course, outdated the moment "Somehow Cristal" hit the masses. Though other info bits are here to stay. Through the *shinjinrui*, for example, the Japanese language was lastingly enriched by the 'brand name syndrome'.

The *shinjinrui* shares with the *otaku* the passion for details that take over the place of a connecting ideology. He has to be around town and has to have read the latest copy of Mari Claire and Popeye and Brutus. How else would he know that Armani is out, and Perrier is again *de rigueur*. And how else would he be able to participate in the table talk at Gold's. *Shinjinrui* are well-informed snobs. Today the people are still around but the word has dropped out of use. So it is free again to signify the next generation.

The terms invented in order to be able to call the people in the postmodern, mediatized world by name - *Moratorium ningen*, *shinjinrui*, *nagara-zoku* (the people who do many things at the same time), M(e)-Generation, etc. - are coined by the professionally concerned: neuropsychiatrists, journalists, and writers. They judge the young by their own values of 'depth', 'seriousness', 'history', 'subject'. The grown-ups are disappointed that their kids do not pick up where they left them the dreams they once pursued, disappointed that they simply drop out of the 'project of modernity'. Parents want to understand their children, but those refuse to express themselves. The birth of the *otaku-zoku* (*otaku-* generation), the non-professional, non-life style kids of the 80's, was a somewhat different case.

Birth and Rise of '*otaku*'

The etymology of the word is not without black holes. *Otaku*, like *shinjinrui* is derived from the everyday language, and in the original sense means 'your home', then in a neo-Confucian *pars pro toto* 'your husband', and more generally it is used as the personal pronoun 'you' (since a Japanese individual cannot be thought of without his connection to his household). As everybody knows, there are 48 ways to say 'I' in Japanese, and just about as many to say 'you'. Most of the time 'I' and 'you' are avoided altogether, but if you do want to address someone you would use his name or *anata* (to an equal or superior), *kimi* (to an inferior, in some cases to an equal), *omae* (to an intimate friend or inferior), or - *otaku*. *Otaku* is a polite way to address someone whose social position towards you you do not yet know, and it appears with a higher frequency in the women's language. It keeps distance. Used between equals it can sound quite ironic or sarcastic, but is mostly meant in the sense of 'Stay away from me'. Imagine a teenager addressing another as "Sir!".

This is how it used to be. And then, in the days of old (about ten years ago in real-time) some people started to use this expression of detachment for colleagues and friends. There is no consensus as to the exact date and place of this historic event. The most recent past seems to be the most uncertain, and it is handed down to us only in the form of rumors. It would take a historian of everyday life to unearth what happened yesterday. Some informants convey that it was in the advertising world, others say it was in the circles of animation-picture collectors: "please, show me **your** (*otaku*) collection." The most trustworthy rumor has it that it first came up among people working in TV and video animation companies. From there it spread to the viewers of *animes* and the closely related worlds of *manga* (comic-books) and computer games.

What exactly you have to do and to be in order to qualify as an *otaku* is a little more difficult to determine. The smallest common denominator that the word itself conveys seems to be distance and detachment. To find out something about the usage of a currently fashionable expression the first thing to do is to consult the "Basic Knowledge of Modern Terms" (*Gendai Yogo Kiso-chishiki*), an annual encyclopedia on all waxes of life and a cornucopia of insights into the rapidly changing Japanese language. In the 1990 edition it says under "*otaku*": "Has been used as discriminatory word among *manga* and animation maniacs. It spread after NAKAMORI Akio's 1984 article

“*Manga Burikko*” [for an account on *burikko* see below under ‘idols’]. It indicates the type of person who can not communicate with others, is highly concerned about details, and has one exclusive and maniac field of interest. *Otaku* tend to get fat, have long hair, and wear T-shirts and jeans. The word corresponds to ‘nerd’ which in the USA is used for computer and SF fanatics.” An American friend told me, that ‘nerd’ does have some similarity to ‘*otaku*’ but is not completely congruent. A nerd was the guy at high school who would repair his glasses with Scotch-tape, the scientific type, carrying around a collection of pens in his shirt pocket, which had a blue stain, because one of the pens would always break, and, of course, he had no friends.

This image comes close to the one TSUZUKI Kyoichi draws, an ex-journalist for the Yuppy magazine “Popeye” and today an art editor, who introduced me to the more hidden corners of the extensive *otaku*-world: “In the beginning *otaku* was used in a very negative sense and meant someone who doesn’t look good, who has no girlfriend, who is collecting silly things, and is generally out of the world. As a definition I would say that an *otaku* is a person who is into something useless. Idol-, *manga*- or whatever-*otaku* means he does not have anything else. But in that he really indulges. It’s a silly way of spending time, from a normal business point of view. They play games with the same seriousness others use for business.

“They are easily visible, because they don’t care about the way they dress. They talk different, and look to the ground while talking face-to-face. They are not into physical activities, they are chubby or thin, but not fit, never tanned. They don’t care for a good meal, they think they can spend their money on more important things.

“With computers they get really involved. Computer game programmers live on potato-chips that they eat with chopsticks, and on coffee-milk. They have a different rhythm, are awake for 40 hours and then sleep for 12. Computer *otaku* are said to be able to make love with a girl on the screen. But I think many want a girlfriend, but can’t get one.”

Otaku are a media-phenomenon in several ways. The media created first them, then the name for them, they inhabit the media, and the search for them is a research into media-history. The above mentioned Nakamori (29) was at that time an editor of “*Tokyo Otona kurabu*” (adult club), a *mini-komi* (minor communication magazine^[1]) that some call a mysterious culture magazine, others a minor soft-porno publication. When he introduced the term *otaku-zoku* (*otaku-*

generation) in his article and in a public discussion with YAMAZAKI Koichi, there were already myriads of young people out there waiting for an identity boost. They were living in the media already, so it was just natural that they would want to become object of the media as well. In that sense they are average Japanese. They have a distinct predilection for mirroring themselves in social statistics and in the interpretational debates of cultural critics. Maybe it is not really the strive for identity that make the Who-we-are-and-why- we're-special books so popular, but rather the lust to get inscribed into the media. Also the importance given in Japan to calling things by their right name might have played a role. In any case, the new term spread very rapidly. An anonymous, silent mass had its coming out. As rumors have it, the first massive appearance that brought the new generation into public consciousness was the showing of the animation "Spaceship Yamato". The video-company had, as usually, rented a hall for a couple of thousand people and over a million came, all about the same age.

"*Otaku* are a product of hyper-capitalism and the hyper-consumption society", says Yamazaki (36), another historian of everyday life and an authority on *otaku*. He is a writer, editor, graphic designer, and most of all a pop critic for the the Asahi Shinbun and magazines like Asahi Journal, Popeye, Takarajima, and Weekly Bunshun. "Today '*otaku*' has taken on an extremely wide meaning. Originally it was connected with a precise, stereotyped image. It symbolized a human relationship for which the other forms of saying 'you' would be too intimate. *Otaku* referred to the space between them, they are far from each other, not familiar." He sees the origin of the social phenomenon *otaku* in the changes in Japanese culture in the 70's. They are the children of media and technology. They grew up as only child with daddy always out at work, and mummy very eager that her son studies hard so he can enter a good university so he can enter a good company. The cliché Japanese success story. And kiddy goes into hiding behind piles of toys, comics, and play machines.

Their parents are the 68's generation, very democratic and tolerant. They want to understand their children, but the kids purposely look for the things their parents can't understand. In a sense the parents are themselves immature and childish. In Japan there probably is no obvious image of what a grown-up is. Everybody is a child.

The severe communicational barriers between parents and children led to a series of killings of parents by their sons. It started in 1980 when a boy, who would today probably be called an *otaku*, had slain his parents with a metal baseball-bat. The ‘*kinzoku bat* murderer’, as he was known, was followed up by five or six other youngsters in a very short time. And it still happens sometimes today. The early 80’s were the days of school violence. The aggression of the students was stopped with disciplinary measures and school-rules that prescribe even the way a student is supposed to walk and greet. They remind Yamazaki of Orwells “1984”. *Otaku* are the post school violence generation. Superficially they are good and well-behaved students, study hard, and get good grades, but underneath the surface they are run-aways. *Otaku* is a shelter for them.

Information-Fetishism and In-Animism

The education system, in which the famous ‘industrial warriors’ are trained, is a generally acknowledged back-ground factor for the emergence of the *otaku*- generation. “In school”, says Yamazaki, “children are taught to take in the world as data and information, in a fragmentary way, not systematically. The system is designed for cramming them with dates, names, and multiple-choice answers for exams. The scraps of information are never combined into a total view of the world. They don’t have a knowledge value, but the character of a fetish.” For this emphasis on facts, on memory rather than understanding the Japanese language has again found a fitting catch-phrase - ‘manual-education’. It doesn’t prepare you for life but rather for the ubiquitous quiz-shows on TV where candidates have to produce minute details of the life of Amadeus Mozart, the comic character Ultraman, or the idol-singer Matsuda Seiko. Without any context this ‘knowledge’ remains just a collection of info-chips.

‘Information-fetishism’ is a central term for Yamazaki. The *Otaku* continue the same pattern of information acquisition and reproduction they have learned at school. Only the subject matter has changed: idols, cameras, or rock ‘n’ roll. But content has become negligible anyway. Otucky people can be found in every genre. It’s a mode of being. You find them even in fashion. Rather than dressing in trendy clothes for the pleasure of it, the fashion-*otaku* dresses in information. He shows it off, saying “Do you know this? Oh, you don’t!” That’s all. A rock-*otaku*, for instance, does not listen to the music, but collects data on the recordings, the names of the musicians, producers, engineers, studios etc. “The original *otaku* shows us that we are all information-

fetishists.” Says Yamazaki, “He caricatures the image of the Japanese.”

Our own collection of info bits and pieces seems to have come close to the core of the *otaku* phenomenon. It has to do with uselessness and information, but the role of media and technology remains ambivalent. Tsuzuki thinks it a mistake to identify them with media, it would exclude some of the people who in fact are otucky. So we pick up the “Basic Knowledge of Modern Terms” again which is itself an expression of the culture of fractured knowledge and info-chips. From the entry on “*otaku-zoku*” we learn that this generation “can only think in the mode of me-ism as a result of a way to interpret and deal with the hi-tech society. It tends towards an isolated and non-human existence. These tendencies range from necrophilia, pedophilia, and fetishism to the ‘illness of partiality’ and computer hacking. The phenomenon has exploded with the inorganic ‘key-board society’ as its center.”

I do find it surprising to read hacking in the same list with necrophilia, but I love the ‘key-board society’. Japan is the most semiotized society, everything is sign, everything is surface and interface. The Japanese lead a magazine life style. Just by looking at people’s face in the street you can tell which magazines they read. Everything comes in a ready-made package. *Otaku* are developing the Japanese mentality of hybridizing given information to the extreme. And they become, in fact, a closed-circuit hybrid with their machines. A ‘*media saibôgu*’ (cyborg - cybernetic organism), we read in the “Store of Wisdom”, an imitation of our esteemed “Basic Knowledge”, is a dependent person, e.g. a couch-potato (*kauchipoteto*). The media cyborg lives thanks to the media. In the age of cyber-medialism with its emphasis on simulation the hi-tech media become the condition for survival. The media cyborgs in their electronic womb are also called ‘aliens’.

The Japanese relation towards technology is indeed something peculiar. Japanese kids are geniuses in operating technology, like the one-year-old who crashed his father’s car. But, says Yamazaki, they can not talk and express their opinions well. They feel less at home with other people than with machines, materials, and information. Thus they tend towards a kind of in-animism. Living beings are thought of as inanimate things. Yamazaki tells me about the pet-boom, and that dogs and cats are seen as a kind of mechanical toys. When they become boring

they get dumped. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone are big heroes for many *otaku*. They themselves wouldn't even think about doing body-building and becoming strong. They think of these hunks of muscles as a kind of robot, a very well-designed machine, not any different from comic figures like Gundam. This in-animism is maybe the reverse side of the traditional Shintoist nature animism that is still very much alive in the current Japanese culture. Yamazaki gives the example of factory workers naming their machines Monroe, Hanako, or Madonna. Female names are the most popular, since it's a real MAN-machine system. "Japanese people are in a sense fetish people. They don't tell the animate from the inanimate. This fact is an important background of the *otaku*. The 'two-dimension complex' is a kind of animism. They tread humans as things and things as humans." By perceiving the world via screens and print the *otaku*-kids acquire what is known as the 'two-dimension complex'. 2-D is more real. Images plus fantasy equals hyper-reality.

Computer-*otaku* and Communication Patterns

From what we learned about *otaku* and their relation to information, media and technology we should think that they appear the purest in the genre of computer-*otaku*. So I go back to the Minami-Aoyama office of "Log In" where I had already talked with game-maniac Kushida Riko. This time in order to meet ITOO Gabin, contributing editor, and recently curator and contributor of an art installation at the "Tokyo hyper-real" exhibition. Since his picture regularly appears in Log In Itô has become the hero of the computer-game-*otaku*. When he is recognized in the streets of Tokyo's electronic district Akihabara he is not accosted directly, but a little later he can read the 'hot' info on some otucky bulletin board "I saw Gabin!". Log In's target group is game fans between 13 and 18, and it sells 180,000 copies monthly. It carries mostly product information on PC-based games and on related hardware, *manga* and animation series, especially the darker ones like "Gundam" or "Godmars".

I want to know about the content of *otaku* computer networks, and Itô lists some of the headings of the electronic boards: games, *manga*, *rorikon* (Lolita complex - child porno as characters of comp games. See below), music (exchange of MIDI-data of copies of the soundtracks of the latest arcade games), war (air guns), anything you can imagine. There is one for every branch of *otaku* which does not make all of them computer *otaku*. They use the electronic networks simply as

media that allow them to stay at home and meet like-minded without any physical contact. But, of course, you also have hard-core computer-*otaku* like the hackers who above had appeared in one row with pedophilia. The meaning of technology, Itô explains, is this: when we found something impossible we do it. Like, the hacker who finds out how to destroy data, so he does it. He doesn't think about the meaning. In the same sense they spread viruses for fun. When some techno-maniac finds a way to hack into the copy protection of DAT recorders, even if he succeeds, the real *otaku* wouldn't have any music to play. It's just a game, useless. If they can out-wit the protection-systems aren't they pretty smart? '*Otaku*' is not exactly synonymous with 'creative', but a lot of creative people are *otaku*. Itô thinks they have infinite possibilities.

The ultimate promise of technology is to make us master of a world that we command by the push of a button. The *otaku* are the avant-garde exploring this world. They grew up taking media for granted. Now they use them as their natural habitat for instant gratification of desires - desires, of course, that they only direct at what the media can give. The time structure of the *otaku* world is one of constant disposition. This attitude of consumerism is also applied to other people, which is a possible explanation for the intensive use of the telephone at every hour of the day and night.

Mostly, *otaku* avoid face-to-face communication, but excessively exercise communication via technical media. The structures of their exchange of information are *uwasa* (rumor) and *kuchikomi*, (oral communication, gossip), minor communication and *ofu-rekôdo* (off record), rupture, fictionality, and play (e.g. telephone-games and -parties), dispersal of the self into the network, and in the last instance - discommunication. It is important to speak, not what is spoken. Characteristic of *otaku* is that they speak without context. They live in the simulacrum of a self-referential system which is not subjected to content. Central is the awareness: there are media.

Basically they can communicate only with the same type *otaku*. Their exchange is not interactive, they only show off their information. People categorize each other by their predilection for certain details. If two of them find overlapping tastes they get along well, if not they don't have anything to say to each other. No proselytism drives them to preach their way.

Nagoya, I've been told, is today the center of the *otaku*. They make up whole neighborhoods and relevant sectors of the population. Nagoya is a non-place, a dead, boring city with nothing happening, therefore the only thing to do is go into the networks.

16,000 alone-but-not-lonely people in one spot

After so much talk *about* them we now leave the editorial offices and visit one of the rare occasions where the shy and unsociable *otaku* meet. The *komi-keto* (comic market) started out as a fair for non-commercial comics and is held twice a year. At the last, on the 18th and 19th of August in Makuhari- Messe, 16.000 *anime-mania* (animation maniacs) from various countries gathered. They were joined by representatives of all the other major otucky genres: amateur radio *otaku*, idol *otaku*, techno *otaku*, plastic model *otaku*, uniform *otaku* etc. etc. All of them have their own magazines which are here littering the long rows of tables. These *minikomi* keep up the communication in the more and more differentiating and specializing world of *otaku*. Just about all of them contain *manga*. The special attractions in Harumi-Messe were the *kosu-pure* (costume plays) where scenes from favorite animation TV-series are re-enacted - as comic figures in full gear, of course.

Manga are a big market. The estimated total circulation of all comic books in 1988 was 1.758.970.000. Some of them as thick as telephone books, they are omnipresent in subway-trains, restaurants, and book-shops. Successful series are re-made into book versions with again million copy sales, and into TV-animation and video-games. The one with the highest circulation, "*Shōnen Jump*", sells 5 million copies a week. According to Yamazaki it is the most otucky magazine, containing a lot of violence, mechanics, fantasy, and combinations of all three like "Gundam", or "Ultraman".

Beneath these commercial *manga* - in the 'underground', if you will - we find the *manga* drawn by *otaku*. They are produced in small copy to be circulated and exchanged on *komike* or by mail and the more successful ones in *manga*-stores like Takaoka in Kanda or *Manga no Mori* in Shinjuku. The bookstore *Shōzen* in Kanda is another place where on a Saturday afternoon masses of *otaku* in jeans or school-uniforms are grimly ellbowing their way through the narrow aisles, quietly browsing through comix and idol-fan magazines, soft-pornos and games, game music CDs, Dragon Quest and comic plastic figures, telephone-cards with *manga*-characters and idols

on them, posters, and plush animals. Here one finds a small selection of the garage comics from the *komiketo* with titles like “Uncolored”, “Cupid”, “Hyperactive”, “Paf Paf”, “Blind Logic” or the one with the extended English title “Wing. That’s Gret (sic!) It covers various kinds of Comics and Novels which makes you feel at home”.

In most cases these *manga* are hybrids or genre mutations of given commercial models. They show an attitude of joyful ‘playgiarism’ that does not even strive to be original. The only really ‘original’ aspect about them is that in contradistinction to the the ones you buy in the convenience store *otaku manga* contain uncensored depictions of primary sexual organs. In a country where every single pubic hair intended for publication in film or print, has to be covered up or sandpapered out the fact that these manga show it all is almost revolutionary.

We can safely assume that a large part of the sex-life of *otaku* is represented by comic figures in *manga*, animation and video games. Sex to them is nothing physical but medial. They don’t have lovers, in part because they are afraid of each other and find 2-D satisfaction much safer. In that sense the guy from Steven Soderbergh’s “Sex, Lies and Videotape” can be thought of as the Western correlate to the post-sexual *otaku*. Yamazaki offers another explanation: 2-d sex is a reaction to the pressure of male chauvinism. Boys refuse to grow up to become the regular *mucho*. They don’t like to be aggressive. True, in the comics there is a lot of violence, SM, lashing, and bondage, but in the real world they could not do it - they’re too shy.

A major genre in the *manga* porno world are little children. A term that frequently appears in this context is *rorikon*. An especially cryptic anagram that cannot be solved without our faithful “Basic Knowledge of Modern Terms”: “*rorikon* (Lolita complex) was named after Vladimir Nabokov’s novel. It signifies the strange sexual taste for teenage girls.” It is so closely related to *otaku* that the encyclopedia names it as most significant characteristic. “One also calls the *otaku* a *yaoi-zoku* (the generation of fans of young girls). The suspected child murderer Miyazaki’s victims [we heard about him already and will hear still more below] were between age four and seven [meaning younger than the teenagers that *rorikon* are supposed to like]. So is it not a mistake to call him an *otaku*?”

On this point we have to disagree with the “Basic Knowledge”. To identify *otaku* with the fairly mainstream cultural predilection for a teenager sex ideal would mean to ignore a whole wealth

of more bizarre forms of otucky expression. For example “In Spite of... you know it”, “Lemon Impulse” and “Submarine”, which are catering to the uniform-sex fans under the *otaku*. Or “Juggs” for the fans of big-breasted hermaphrodites. Or “Samson” a magazine with comics, fotos and poems that is completely devoted to fat, old gays. The sex ideal that in this realm corresponds to Lolita would be the aged *sumo*-wrestler. It is hard to imagine what a 15-year-old *otaku* would find elevating about these pornos. Maybe they represent the pure, abstract sex, the simulation of stimulation. But we have to admit we cannot look into the hearts of many a young man.

Since we covered sex and rock ‘n’ roll you might also want to know about drugs. Answer: none. *Otaku* are anti-somatic. Information is their only drug, but that they preferably take intravenously.

Comics have directly and indirectly influenced large areas of the Japanese culture, from advertising to junk stores that are exclusively devoted to goods with the mark of one single comic-figure. If a new trend comes up in one of the media it is instantaneously picked up by all others. Pop music idols are shaped by the Let’s-be- *manga*-figures trend, and they in turn cause new genres in *manga*, animation and games. And, of course, they have their own otucky devotees. On the *komiketo* idol *otaku* were a little under-represented but they have their own events and gatherings. Idols are mostly singers, but there are also *puro-res* (professional wrestling) idols like Cutie Suzuki (21) and Dirty Yamato (20). These living mixtures of battle- and *rorikon-manga* are also known as ‘fighting dolls’. But for the largest part it refers to young girls with cute faces who are mass-produced into ‘talent singers’.

The “Basic Knowledge 1990” keeps silent on the idol phenomenon, so we have to refer to the “Store of Wisdome” again. Under “*aidoru-shisutemu*” (idol system) we read: “What we call the idol system of the 80’s is the fiction game, where the sender and the receiver become one single thing. And we have to separate this from the charisma of the earlier age of what was called the star system (*staa-shisutemu*). The 80’s are represented by the new type of idol like KONDO Masahiko and MATSUDA Seiko. They concretized the spirit of the 80’s which has been determined by simulationization, thus making disappear the difference between reality and fiction.” The recent case of attempted suicide by NAKAMORI Akina was a break in the paradigms of idolianism. Different from Matsuda she had separated her private life from her activity on

stage, and thus maintained a relatively mysterious nature. But she failed because the audience demanded coolly that idols can exist only inside the media.

The 'new type' that Matsuda represents is called *burikko*. As a well-versed friend told me the word is derived from 'buri' (to act, pretend) plus '-ko' which makes it cute. It would roughly translate to 'sweet little pretender' or if you interpret it sarcastically you could also say 'fucking little liar'. *Burikko* refers to unattractive girl singers who pretend to act especially stupid. They look way too cute with their wide-open big eyes and too much lace. They look like *manga* characters. They seem helpless, but, in fact, are not stupid and rule with an iron fist. Matsuda Seiko was born a *burikko*. She has crossed eyes and protruding teeth. The kids went crazy and the older women hated her, because her simulated stupidity was an insult to woman. The *burikko* ideal was, of course, immediately picked up by *manga* and animation.

But this was only an aside for getting a brief glimpse of the dominant entertainment culture. Now we will look at it from the otucky point of view. Their idol worship consists in collecting artifacts and information not only on one, but on ten or a hundred idols. Mostly they don't pick the big ones like Matsuda but the B- class or 'minor' idol-singers. Of course, they have to keep track of their schedules and have to have all the records, postcards, T-shirts and other paraphernalia. But they wouldn't be *otaku* if they were satisfied with the ready-made industrial products. They come in two sub-categories: the videotaper and the photographer. The video *otaku* checks on all the TV-programs in which his idols might appear, records them all, and then edits the tapes for his favorites. The camera *otaku* has chosen a harder task. The idols regularly give promotion or mini-concerts in places like the roof-top of a department-store or in the summer a swimming-pool. Since unauthorized photographing is prohibited, the *otaku* sneak in. Sometimes three or four of them carry the camera in parts and then assemble it inside. Even at the fences security gets really tough. So the kids run away leaving expensive camera equipment with huge tele-lenses behind. You can find whole collections after a concert. They only take the film, which is worth enough to buy new cameras. Three hours later they sell the fotos on the streets in Harajuku. The highest value has shots on which the wind blows up the skirts of the girls and their underwear shows.

If you think that the hybrid system of *aidorus* and *aidorians* is pretty hyper-real already you haven't heard of the virtual idol HAGA Yui, yet (which is not a name but the word for 'irritated,

impatient, annoyed', literally 'a tooth-ache'). Virtual she is because she does not exist. She is a phantom consisting of different girls who lend Haga her voice or her body. At concerts her face remains hidden and her voice is play-back. She is an assemblage in a way quite similar to the puppets in *bunraku*. When Haga recently published a photo-book there were three girls sitting at the autograph hour. People would stand in line before the one whom they thought to be the 'more real' Haga-chan. An exhibition with her 'original' art work, scheduled for early November, was postponed. But rumor has it that the actual paintings have been done by several renowned artists. The title of the exhibition will be: "Does mysterious idol dream of human-faced sheep?"

That is, of course, a malicious homage to Philip K. Dick's "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" which served Ridley Scott in the making of "Bladerunner". The presumption from the beginning that *otaku* perform a perpetual play on the border between the animate and the inanimate seems to harden. 'Android', a somewhat old-fashioned term, is quite fit for idol Haga Yui as well as for the *otaku*. They look like humans but they aren't, and they're playing with factoids (look like facts, but aren't). The idol is pulling her willing followers by the nose. Understandable that they in turn need puppets to pull their strings.

Idols like MORITAKA Chisato appear reduced in size but only unessentially more plastic in the form of models. The model *otaku*, who were also present on the *komiketo* at Makuhari Messe, house a wide variety of entities - real and non-real - in their miniature world: models of idols and comic figures, Godzilla and Garland, automobiles and militaria. Again the real *otaku* distinguishes himself from the mere maniac in that he is not satisfied with the commercial kits. The garage kits they produce in 100 copies are really detailed and elaborate. One of the major magazines for the model *otaku* is "Do-Pe. Identity Magazine For You" with a circulation of 'only' 40,000.

One might get the impression that all *otaku* are techno-freaks, but they do not per se dislike nature. There are even *otaku* into tropical fish and fossils - as long as they do it the *otaku*-way. The attitude counts, nothing else.

But there can be no doubt, that most strands of *otaku* have a close connection to media and technology. The pure techno-*otaku* has his major forum in "Radio Life". It started out as a magazine for amateur radio operators, who came to be called *akushon-banda* (action bander), which in view of their considerable subversive potential seems more appropriate. Radio Life

features background and consumer information on electronic devices and components. For example, on radar-systems and detectors, the smallest of which is for motorcycle-riders; worn at the side of the helmet it warns with buzzer or LED. Or a description for a copy-guard cracker that eliminates the effect that digitally copy-protects certain rental-video tapes. Or an article on satellite interception. By the way: the trotskist group *Chûkakuha* (middle core faction) was just found out to have prepared jamming stations on strategic roofs around the imperial palace to disrupt the live-broadcast of the enthronement ceremony. So it's not like no one is using this subversive information in practice.

Once a year Radio Life brings out an even more hard-core "Underground RL". The latest issue features a do-it-yourself kit for an electronic time fuse for any kind of bomb. The following article is on model-kits of handgranades (e.g. the original German WW2 model or would you prefer the classic design of the American MK2, that can also be had as a 'joystick'?). The next one is on how to build a stun-gun from the condensator of a disposable camera. you can use it to give your next-door *otaku* a 35,000 - 80,000 V shock. And my last example from this hackerist sink of iniquity is the board lay-out for an adaptor that circumvents the DAT-copy-protection (a nasty little compromise between the music and the hardware industry that allows only one digital copy of every CD - the kind of misuse of technology that just begs to be hacked). In the "Underground Radio Life" the *otaku* with subversive ambitions gets the full description how it works and how to crack it.

Another clientele of "Radio Life" are military and police-*otaku*. They are girls wearing the original uniforms of politesses and boys driving around in 99,9 % 'real' police cars. The ads show where the sirens, radios, helmets, badges, accessories down to the official whistle and necktie-pin come from. Except for the guns, and even those are as-close-as-you-can-get plastic models. Everything else is authentic, as real as the stuff the genuine military or police is using. Simply, because the *otaku* buy it from the same dealer the State does. When the real and the imaginary become indistinguishable the real becomes a fetish.

Information-Crime

I don't think that this is an expression of genuine militarist or terrorist intentions, nor is it the lure of the forbidden per se. Of course, if anyone puts up restrictions to prevent the full use of existing technology, like copy-guards or scrambling of signals, it calls for hacking. *Otaku* also like to use technology for other than the intended purposes. But basically, it's an empty, content-less joy of technology and information that drives them. In that sense there is no significant difference between game-*otaku* and radio-hackers, idol-maniacs and magnet-card forgers. The structure is the same. Essential for every *otaku* is a web of technical details, whether on cameras or police cars, on fictional spaceships or 'art trucks'. Knowledge is important to be able to communicate. Information is the essence of the otucky life-style.

Though miniscule discrepancies on the informational level can have immense consequences for *otaku*, they seem to be less discriminating with ideologies. War and sex, fantasies of mass murder and sadomasochistic rape appear regularly in their media. And sometimes one of them finds it hard to discriminate the world, where no one dies because everyone is a phantom to begin with, from the other one where little children, when you torture them a bit, really die. Itô Gabin (Log In) told me the story about this guy who lived completely in a computer world. One day he saw a man standing on a subway platform and without any reason he pushed him down in front of the train. He didn't think of death, says Itô, it was so easy.

In July 1989 MIYAZAKI Tsutomu (27) was arrested for the suspected abduction and murder of four girls age four to seven and the attempted molestation of another girl. In his room in Tokyo were found piles of *manga* and a collection of 6000 videotapes, mostly dubbed from rental-stores, including child pornography and horror-videos. He was socially isolated, didn't dare approach women, was jobbing as a printing shop assistant, was crazy about video and comics, and drew comics himself - easy equation to identify him as an *otaku*.

Shortly after his arrest it was suspected that Miyazaki had re-staged some of the horror-video scenes, like the one with the guy who cuts up a woman and then fondles the dissected corpse and plays with its internal organs. But the theory could until now not be confirmed. Miyazaki admitted the killings at the beginning of the trial on March 30, 1990, but denied that his crimes were connected with videotapes, though he did state that he took videos of two of his victims so

he could view them later on. He also said he committed the crimes as if in a dream and without intent.

The defense counsel contended that the defendant is emotionally immature and has difficulty making a distinction between himself and others. "He lacks understanding of life and death, and has a strong desire to return to his mother's womb," the defense counsel said. The defense argued that the audiovisual culture of videotapes and television, the lack of a sense of reality in the information society and the isolation of youth are behind the crime as sickness of modern society. The result of a psychiatric test was that Miyazaki has little self-control and lacks emotions but is capable of being held responsible. The trial is still pending.

The tenor of the public discussion on this *otaku*-murder case was that the horror-videotapes and the media culture are somehow responsible. In reaction to Miyazaki the Tokyo Metropolitan Government began to consider restricting the access of minors to videos that depict scenes of violence. The video market exercised voluntary restraints.

The comments of the cultural critics split roughly in two lines of argument. Either he was a mental case, and therefore a sick exception or: there is a Miyazaki in every one of us. This technique is frequently applied when the Japanese culture has to deal with a nail that sticks out: Either you exclude it as something extraordinary, preferably non-Japanese, or "We are all Miyazaki".

According to Yamazaki these hasty conclusions are out of place. "We want to understand him, but we know we don't. Everybody asks Why has he done that. But we should rather ask Why don't we do it? Many *otaku* have the same life-style as he, but I don't think they would do such a thing. Miyazaki's biography is not so special. He could not communicate with women, but that's not special. It was said that he is living in a fantasy world, but maybe we are all living in a fantasy. I don't think he's crazy, because I can understand a part of him. So I'm scared. But I'm not a moralist. Many Japanese think Miyazaki's motivation is connected to our daily life with media and information, and to our human relations. So we are very shocked."

Towards a Postmodern People

The opinions on the current development of the term *otaku* vary. The Miyazaki case was certainly a blow to the already not very flattering reputation of *otaku*. “See, we never trusted these young people. Now you know what they are capable of.” But we have to wait for the outcome of the trial to be able to tell whether society will use it to exercise pressure on and discriminate against *otaku*.

On the other hand the term has expanded in scope. Was it at first signifying a quite distinct life feeling it came to include more and more phenomena, until it had taken over the function of ‘*mania*’. So today one can interchangeably talk about motorcycle-, stereo-, golf-, or music - maniacs or -*otaku*. In the earlier times *maniaku* referred to people who are open for communication and have other interests besides their special craze. Both points did not apply to *otaku*. And, *otaku* was never used for oneself, always for others. Through the inflationary use of terms we can perceive how layers of them pile up on top of each other. It seems to be true of all discourses for understanding self and other - they get bloated till everybody has room under them. We are all *otaku*. We are all Miyazaki. In the end they lose their power of distinction and get replaced by new catch-words.

Another trend is marked by the appearance of the adjective form *otakki* (otucky). Yamazaki supposes an etymological relation with *teki*, which is an earlier formation contracted from ‘technology kids’. The “Basic Knowledge” tells us: “After Miyazaki had spoiled ‘*otaku*’ ‘*otakki*’ was invented to refer to the original meaning and to the change that had taken place. The *Otaku* had moved to a new level where people wear expensive, elegant Yuppy clothes. The *otakki* people try to improve their image from something dark to something bright.”

The “Basic” is the only source that perceives a Yuppyfication of *otaku*. But that it shifted towards a somewhat more positive meaning - even in spite of Miyazaki - is widely acknowledged. Though again, the reasons given vary. Some say society has come to realize that it needs *otaku*. Their fantasies and their detailed technical knowledge make them very attractive employees, for example, in software. *Otaku* are fit well for Japanese capitalism. As has happened before, an underground might prove to be the testing ground from which the commercial mainstream

supplies itself with fresh ideas. The former reality hackers graduate from the otucky life, go professional and might eventually even get married.

Again others attempt to give an alternative meaning to *otaku*. They use the term strategically to depict an ambiguous possibility of a life-style in postmodern society - a way of positively living with media and without meaning. Says Tsuzuki: “*Otaku* is a way of involvement, an underground way of changing the ideas about the world. *Otaku* are not satisfied with consuming. They want to change things and programs. They are so much involved. The idol- industry wants consumers, *otaku* overfulfill their wish. They don’t stand for a classic confrontation, but they do have the capability of an alternative view.” Yamazaki is more ambivalent about them. In his opinion they are under- as well as over-estimated. In a sense they are typical Japanese. “They are no drop-outs, but part-time outsiders. I wonder whether *otaku* will create a new culture. It’s a kind of experiment, but I think *otaku* are the only way. Whether they have a subversive potential? I hope so. I hope they will become a real *shinjinrui*, a new kind of Japanese, I mean, a postmodern people.”

In the end we raise the question whether the possibility exists for a mode of being outside oneself without being out of one’s mind, of being dispersed in cyberspace and still finding life worth living, and whether there might even be a subversive element in postmodern media culture. But unfortunately the object of our inquiry does not answer. The center of communication does not communicate itself, it is the blind spot without which we cannot see. Asked for a definition, a self-proclaimed *otaku* answered: “The question ‘Who is otucky?’ is like the *zen-koan* ‘What is *satori*?’ It cannot be answered because *satori* is inherently that which cannot be communicated.” And when this sentence still reverberates, in the silence that usually follows the mentioning of the un-namable, the author quietly sneaks out of this article.

The author owes special thanks to Ina Kotarô, Barbara, Alfred Birnbaum, Yano, David and Ueno.

Notes

1.) Since they will appear throughout the text a word is needed on these 'Janglish' terms. In Japanese, foreign loan-words mostly from the English language are transcribed into *katakana*. Identical in pronunciation with the 'Japanese' *hiragana* it is a graphically distinguished syllabic script. Its main purpose is locking the exterior of the Japanese language into a separate space of signs. Therefore, the foreign in a Japanese text is visible on first sight. Characteristic besides the famous 'L-vs-R-problem' is the necessity to have a vowel behind each consonant, e.g. *kosu-pure* from 'costume play' where the Japanese 'purei' gets an extra 'u' between 'p' and 'l'. The Japanese feeling for the proper length of a word frequently leads to truncation and contraction, e.g. *rori-kon* from 'Lolita complex' (*Rorita konpurekkusu*). *Katakana* are furthermore used for combinations of Japanese and English words, e.g. *kuchi-komi* (oral communication) from the Japanese 'kuchi' (mouth) plus 'komiyunikeeshon'; and for alienated Japanese words e.g. *otakki* an adjective form manufactured from 'otaku' plus the English adjective-ending '-acky'. To preserve the Japanese pronunciation in English it is properly transcribed as 'otucky'.