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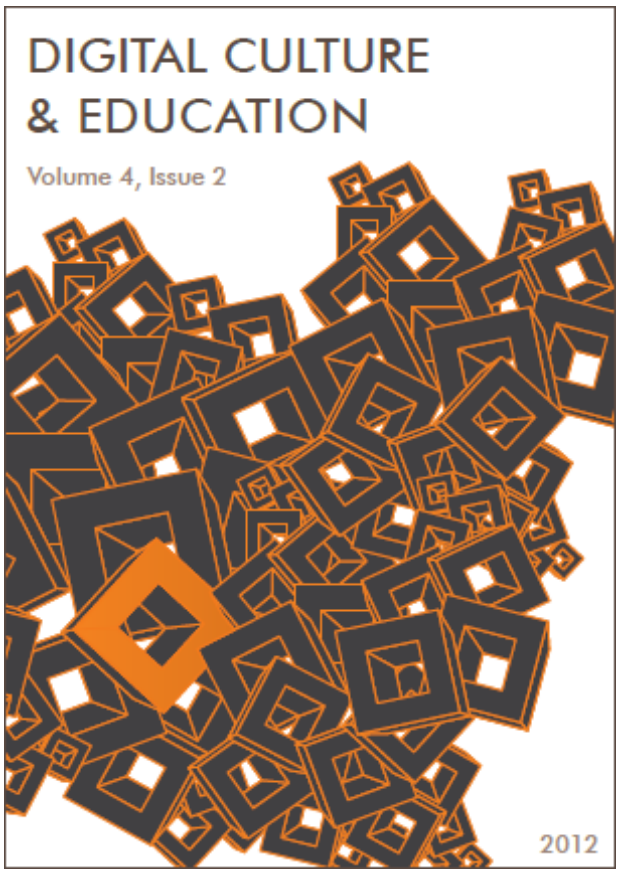

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Book Review: Otaku, subjectivity and databases: Hiroki Azuma's *Otaku: Japan's database animals*

Fabian Schäfer and Martin Roth

Azuma, H. (2009). *Otaku: Japan's database animals* (Trans. Jonathan E. Abel & Shion Kono). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. ISBN 0816653526, 200 pages, $13.16 US.

In 2001, the same year Azuma Hiroki published the first print of the book under review here in Japan, new media theorist Lev Manovich released *The Language of New Media* (MIT Press), which puts forward surprisingly similar ideas concerning databases, and which turned into a globally cited standard work on digital culture (featuring translations into Italian, Korean, Polish, Spanish and Chinese). Meanwhile, Azuma's book, despite becoming a bestseller in Japan, did not traverse the Japanese language border until its first English translation was published in 2009. This substantial delay for the translation of a key contribution to ongoing discussions about digital culture is another example of how existing global hegemonies of thought impact on transcultural scholarly dialogue.

In order not to get tangled up in questions of plagiarism (which often merely re-enacts the geopolitical asymmetry described above), we will put questions of originality in this review aside. We will rather try to take both books (and the intentions of their authors) as local inflections of global phenomena such as the digitalisation of the world and the growing importance of popular cultures seriously and discuss Azuma's work on otaku culture in Japan as an autonomous perspective on questions of global interest. This review hopes to stimulate further thought on these questions and further aims to contribute to the overcoming of "Western" universalism, while at the same time developing a critical position towards the traces of "Japanese" essentialism *(nihonjinron)* found in Azuma's work.

On the surface both books approach totally different cultural representations and processes. Whereas Manovich deals with new digital media within the (Western) histories of visual and media cultures of the last centuries, Azuma discusses what he calls contemporary "otaku culture," comprising anime, manga, digital games, science fiction, special-effects films and its agents/consumers/conveyors, the so-called "otaku" in Japan.[1] Nevertheless, Manovich's overlaps with Azuma's book in two key subjects: the duality of inter-/surface and database and modularity of (digital) popular cultures.

For both authors, '[t]he database becomes the center of the creative process in the computer age' (Azuma, 2009, p. 227). Azuma (2009, pp. 31-33) explains this by a 'postmodern' epistemological shift from the world image *(sekaizō)* of the 'tree' model to one he calls the 'database' model. Referring to Jean-François Lyotard's idea of the collapse of the grand narratives (Lyotard, 1984), Azuma claims that this 'deep inner layer' (the 'grand narratives,' namely ideals or ideologies) is replaced by a huge database in the postmodern age. Whereas the modern era was characterised by a structure in which a single grand narrative controlled the diverse small narratives (cultural and social criticism thus consisted in analysing grand narratives as reflected within various small

narratives), in the postmodern era, people may grasp any number of small world images based on a database, which, '[a]s a cultural form, […] represents the world as a list of items, and […] refuses to order this list' (Manovich, 2001, p. 225). However, Azuma stops short of addressing the questions of how the database is established and structured and whether it contains ideological underpinnings that structure everyday life. He not only remains vague about the evaluative criteria put in practice by the consumers, but is also, at times, rather uncritical towards the 'postmodern' subject he sketches—although acknowledging the global dimensions of the phenomenon (Azuma, 2009, p. 10)—even praising its Japanese form (the otaku) as being at the forefront of this process.

Nonetheless, the fact that Manovich, while agreeing with Azuma's view on databases as 'a new way to structure our experience of ourselves and the world' (2001, p. 219), has not much to say about the new *subjectivities* and *patterns of perception* coming along with the growing importance of the database structure behind digital culture makes this notion of subjectivity a very stimulating aspect and a key feature of Azumas work. He defines otaku as a postmodern subject position in the global process of ubiquitous digitalisation and 'databasification.' With reference to Alexandre Kojève's (1969) distinction between two forms of 'post-historical existence'—the 'animalization' of American society based on consumerism and the highly formalised and aestheticized 'snobbism' of the Japanese—Azuma (2009, p. 53) asserts that *otaku* developed a 'double-layer structure of consumption' *(shōhi no nisō kōzō)* that reflects the two-layered structure of the postmodern itself.

Azuma claims that corresponding to the two layers of representation (database and simulacrum), one can identify two ways of how the *otaku* deal with the postmodern condition he described with the 'database model.' He calls one the 'animalistic' *(dōbutsuteki)* side of database consumption; that is the solitude and passive consumption of the many small narratives of digital games, anime, or manga, merely based on 'combinations' *(kumiawase)* of self-referential elements from the database. However, database consumption also has a second side, that is active or 'pseudo-humanesque' *(ningen-teki)* (in the sense in which Kojéve understands 'human,' namely not the rational human, but one which is defined by having desires). According to Azuma, *otaku* actively intervene in commodities by breaking down the narratives into their compounds, like screenplay, character, background in digital games, or single '*moe*-elements' in manga. (Azuma, 2009, pp. 39-47) They thereby gain access to the database lying in the 'depth' behind the small narrations and are hence able to produce 'derivative works' *(niji sōsaku)* and new narrations or pictures themselves.[2] Works in the otaku-culture thus have to be understood as accumulations of imitations and rip-offs, which are not distinguished from original works any more. The 'double-layer structure' *(nisō kōzō)* of deconstruction and reconstruction prompts Azuma to interpret the *otaku* culture as a deconstructivist and, thus, subversive form of cultural reception which brings it close to a deconstructivist method in contemporary literary theory that offers a subject position to intervene in existing cultural forms or the discourse. According to Manovich this is only possible, because 'with new media, the content of the work and the interface are separated. It is [therefore] possible to create different interfaces to the same material' (Manovich, 2001, p. 227); and '[i]n general, creating a work in new media can be understood as the construction of an interface to a database.' (Manovich, 2001, p. 226)

The database model described by Azuma and the 'humanesque' side of otaku consumption is thus based on what Manovich describes as the 'modularity' of new media. According to Manovich (2001, p. 30), media elements (be they images, sounds, shapes, or behaviors) are represented as 'collections of discrete samples' in databases and in cultural products such as digital games. Just as with object-oriented

programming, these elements can be taken either from the grand database or the database behind a particular (digital) cultural product and can be 'assembled into larger-scale objects but continue to maintain their separate identities.' (Manovich, 2001, p. 30) For Azuma, this means that a new level of simulacra is made possible, which derivate from an original but exist as equally original works (Azuma, 2009, pp. 82-83). To the *otaku*, he adds, it doesn't matter any longer whether the 'author' of the small narratives they consume is a professional—'*author*ized' by one of the big manga or anime publishers—or an amateur who publishes self-made works *(dōjinsaku)* at events or on the Internet.

Why should all this matter? Because Azuma, similar to Walter Benjamin's remarks on the 'modes of perception' regarding film and photograph, presents a theoretical approach to new forms of subjectivity in the postmodern era, which are grounded in technological developments, namely the materiality of new digital media. According to Benjamin, the modes of perception are not genetic or biological, but anthropologic and historical: 'Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception. The way in which human perception is organized – the medium in which it occurs – is conditioned not only by nature but by history' (Benjamin, 2002/1936, p. 104). Benjamin differentiates between two modes of perception: one is contemplative, the other is 'tactile' or 'habitual.' The difference between both modes becomes extremely obvious if we think of the Internet. Other than the immersion into a book based on contemplative reading, "surfing" databases or the Internet can be described as what Benjamin termed 'reception in distraction' *(Rezeption in der Zerstreuung)* (2002/1936, p. 120). This mode of perception, according to Benjamin, is based on the 'tactile quality' of the object of perception—which was, in Benjamin's case, movies and photographs (2002/1936, p. 119). The perception of the Internet is, to use the words of Benjamin, one of 'tactile reception' *(taktile Rezeption)* that is based on 'habit' rather than on 'attention' (2002/1936, p. 120). As with Azuma's rather positive appraisal of otaku in Japan, it is important to add here that Benjamin's perspective on habitualised perception is not totally pessimistic. Benjamin (2002/1936, p. 120) asserts that perception in a state of distraction 'under certain circumstances acquires canonical value,' since '*the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed solely by optical means – that is, by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually – taking their cue from tactile reception – through habit*' (Benjamin, 2002/1936, p. 120).

If applied to the cognition of the interactive structure of the Internet or the database layer behind popular cultural products, Benjamin's and Azuma's perspective refers to two ways of dealing with (digital) new media described by hypertext theorist Jay D. Bolter. The first is a mode of reception, according to Bolter (1991, p. 167) a looking '*through* the text' in order to grasp and understand the meaning of the narration 'behind' the text. In the second mode, the user has to 'look *at* the text, as a series of possibilities [a collection of hypertext links or media elements] that he or she (…) can activate.' (Bolter, 1991, p. 167) This division establishes two *modes* of usage—one being active and 'authentic' and one being passive and "in-authentic"—rather than two *strategies* of dealing with digital, networked information. Azuma's contribution, then, could be understood as an identification or localisation of these modes in Japanese popular culture—an attempt that, at the same time, expands their applicability beyond the realm of the internet and hypertext.

This strong English translation of Azuma's book, along with its informative introduction, represents a very important step towards what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) has called the 'provincialization' of Euro-American thought through the introduction of thinkers from the periphery into the centers. However, the downside to the English

translation is its title. Although Azuma himself, in various passages of his book and other occasions such as public talks, emphasises that he understands the subjectivity (not its cultural form) of otaku not as something uniquely Japanese, but as an inflection of the global postmodernization postmodernisation of the world in general, the publisher University of Minnesota Press jumped on the *nihonjinron*-bandwagon by limiting the title to the phenomenon of *the* otaku—Japan's so-called "database animals." Most likely, this is nothing else but mere marketing strategies. Placing the book in the broader global popularity of "Cool Japan's" new soft powers manga and anime assures greater book sales.

Notes

[1] In this respect, the translation is imprecise. "Otaku culture" rather corresponds to the Japanese term *otaku bunka*. However, in his Japanese version, Azuma uses the term *otaku-kei bunka*, which should be translated as 'otaku-like culture.' This small but important differentiation should not be interpreted as linguistic nitpicking. Anime, manga, digital games and so on are not just a cultural form related merely to otaku. It is also difficult to describe them merely as subcultures, since they are an important of Japanese popular culture in general.

[2] *Machinima* ('machine cinema'), the art of using a digital game to create a movie, is a similar active form of "recreation" by computer users. See: http://www.machinima.com

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