# *Otaku* Culture and Its Discontents:

## A Record of Talk Delivered at "The Colloquium in Visual and Cultural Studies" （October 17, 2007, University of Rochester） ¹⁾

Takahiro Ueda

## 0. PREFACE （OR PRETEXT?）

Let me first of all thank you for the opportunity to give a talk here today. I'm Takahiro Ueda from Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan. But I guess "Ta-ka-hi-ro" is a little difficult to pronounce for English speaking people. So, please call me Taka.

By the way, it's a custom in Japan that the college teacher is called by his or her family name with honorific title of "sensei." So, Yuichiro – your senior and today's assistant for me – , he always calls me "Ueda Sensei" when we talk in Japanese.

This honorific title of "sensei" literally means "teacher," but it can also imply "professor," "doctor," "senator," and etc. depending on the situation. But a much more important fact is that it sometimes implies a little scornful or derisive meaning, since there is a dictum: "I'm not such a fool as to be called 'sensei.'" Yuichiro calls me "Ueda Sensei" because he really respects me （hopefully!）, but you should not follow him. Call me only Taka, please.

（Although Yuichiro will be indispensable indispensable *after* my talk [as interpreter during the question and answer period], my manuscript isn't advised by anyone including Yuichiro. He is also among my audience until this talk is over.）

Next, on the subject of my talk. As a small gift in return for accepting me as a visiting scholar, I planned, at first, to translate and read one of the earlier papers included in my first book published last year: *Modanisuto no Monoii* （Tokyo, 2006; ISBN-10: 4902078066） ²⁾.

But then I came across another idea for this class. I guess that graduate students are not only embryos of professional academics, but can often exceed their teachers in inspiration. A talk for such inspired graduate students – especially for a Cultural Studies class – should allow a certain degree of experiment, or tentativeness, shouldn't it? So I made my mind up to talk on the subject of "*Otaku* Culture and Its Discontents."

But, what is *Otaku* in the first place? And, why is it tentative for me to present on this theme?

*Otaku* is a term used to refer to people with obsessive interests, particularly in "anime" and "manga" （"manga" means comics）. I must confess this explanation is quoted from Wikipedia with a slight modification. （I understand the danger of such quotation from Wikipedia well, but often use it with some evaluation that it's useful for understanding the general understanding of a word.） And the original explanation of *Otaku* in Wikipedia （as of Oct. 01, 2007） begins as follows: "Otaku is a derisive Japanese term used to refer to people with obsessive interests,

particularly anime and manga." From this sentence, I omitted two adjectives: "derisive" and "Japanese."（Preposition "in" is added by me.）The reason of this omission is very simple: The word *Otaku* has already been among the words which are current around the world as is used in Japan, just as "Sushi," "Teriyaki," "Tsunami"; and the "derisive" implications also have faded as its use expanded.

By the way, I am none other than a modernist. I think that modernism, especially that of fine arts, can be epitomized as a position that pursues ceaseless updates of the visions of art, believing in its relative autonomy in the society. It was thought to be realized in the movements of Abstract Expressionism and its fertile championship by the critic, Clement Greenberg. But its culmination was almost half a century ago. And after the decline of the movement, i.e. since the burst of Pop and Minimal Art, it has experienced a tough time, having found few works that suits its idea. In other words, we modernists are now living like resistances, or more like "valuable species" in the art world.

Please recall my first book. Its title "Modanisuto no Monoii" means "Modernist Objection" in English. In other words, it is a statement of "resistance" to movements in our postmodern age.

If so, it's not natural that such a modernist discusses the *Otaku* culture. In fact my usual attitude toward it would be sweeping it aside as frivolous. Besides, I have little knowledge（or *a* little knowledge）about the minute aspects of *Otaku* culture.

My starting point today, however, is to admit that it's not meaningful only to neglect it. Instead I will voice my discontents with it officially.

As is often the case with criticism, a discontent is sometimes much more significant than a gracious praise is: For example, a critique of Minimal art by Michael Fried is such a case. And further, Cultural Studies is, I believe, such a discipline as to relativize the criticism as a true/false statement.

## 1. THE CONDITION OF OTAKU CULTURE

FROM AKIHABARA TO VENICE

Well, it's not good for a presenter to make one's audience tiresome by a long introduction. Let's enter the main body of the talk by seeing a small part of a TV program broadcasted in Japan on one Sunday [Feb. 27] in 2005.

It is a 4-minute part from "Shin Nichiyo Bijutsukan（New Sunday Museum）" on NHK that will show you the very condition of the world-wide acceptance of *Otaku* Culture succinctly. After the opening title, Akihabara, the Mecca of *Otaku*, will be shown for a while. But the camera moves abroad, Venice, Italy. It was in the summer of 2004, when The Venice Biennale, which is sometimes compared to the Olympics, was held. And the camera will catch the scenes from one pavilion to another: the second one is that of the United States, and the third and last is that of

Japan, where English as an international language will be spoken by（perhaps）German and Italian native people. Please catch their English by your own ears, though part of the Japanese narration will be translated by me.

Then, let's start screening.（[ ]= caption, mostly without voice）


[Title: "Shin Nichiyo Bijutsukan"]

　Akihabara, Tokyo.

　The town full of shops for home electronics, is now changing into a town where people who have *Otaku* taste gather.

　Last year（2004）, this taste of *Otaku* people appeared on a big stage, The Venice Biennale.

　What is *Otaku* at which the world was shocked? And what aspects of the city is *Otaku* transforming? Let's investigate this *Otaku* taste as an original Japanese pop culture that's accompanying the transformation of the city.
[Subject of that broadcast: "Pop Culture Transforming The City – The Shock of The Venice Biennale"]

　　＊

　The lagoon city of Venice.

　In this most famous tourist town, an art exhibition on an international scale has been held every year for more than one hundred years. It is The Venice Biennale, the Olympics of the art world. Last year, the 9th exhibition on architecture was held on the subject of "Metamorph." [The two biennales, one for fine arts and the other for architecture, are held on alternate years.]

　Each pavilion housed an exhibition by each participating country, representing its interpretation of the theme, "Matamorph" under its respective subtitle.
[Nordic Pavilion's subtitle was "Our Nature."]

　The pavilion of the United States presented a newer conception of an architecture penetrating through Nature.
[Its subtitle was "Transcending Type."]

　What created a sensation in this prestigious Biennale, however, was the exhibition of *Otaku* culture in the pavilion of Japan, where the inner space of a shop that trades *Otaku* items was installed.
["OTAKU : Persona=Space=City" was the subtitle of the Japanese Pavilion.]

　There are many items, for example, posters full of *Otaku* taste, gadgets, and the figures of beautiful girl that *Otaku* people collect. The exhibition also reproduced a typical studio of *Otaku*. Thus the concept of the Japanese Pavilion was to put the *Otaku* taste as a whole on display.

　The commissioner of the Japanese Pavilion was Prof. Kaichiro Morikawa [3]）, whose sensational theory says that the taste of *Otaku* people has changed the cityscape of Akihabara.

[The remarks here by Kurt W. Foster, the general director of the Biennale, and one male visitor are translated and captioned in Japanese.（I will quote them it in English in my text below.）]

　　Then, let's investigate the *Otaku* power that shocked the world through The Venice Biennale.

## METAMORPHOSIS FROM INSIDE?

　　Welcome back to PowerPoint Slides.

　　Reflecting, in the first place, on the young boys who gather in front of the shops in Akihabara, it was as if the sensible voice of narration persuaded conservative audience to accept them since it's the current of the time.

　　But in Venice, inner space of *Otaku* culture was focused.

　　For example, in this scene, you can see an inner space of a shop with many transparent boxes which *Otaku* people borrow to exhibit their collections in them. In the next, you can see another inner space: Of what? Of a studio of one of *Otaku* people! Yes, the reason why the bed is almost reaching the ceiling is to keep much space for a large quantity of his collections under it.

　　What do you think about such installation? I don't think it's so good, though I understand the concept. But it was approved, or more like praised very much.

　　In reality, we Japanese sometimes need the approval by foreigners before our own acceptance. And in this most recent case of *Otaku*, the words by Kurt Foster, the general director of the Biennale, played the role of giving the cause of this acceptance. He says: "It is a complete metamorphosis of a culture. ... And probably nowhere ... is as explicit and fine ... as in this pavilion."

　　I'm sorry if I failed to catch what he said correctly; if not, his remark might be grammatically wrong since English is foreign language for him, too. But, in any case, it's a small problem. For me, it's rather incredible to hear such a phrase like "a complete metamorphosis of a culture." If his remark is right, all the classes of Cultural Studies in the world should select the *Otaku* Culture as their main themes urgently, shouldn't they?

　　But one male visitor confesses honestly that he doesn't understand the word *Otaku*.

　　Then I will ask you again: Do you *really* understand it?

## THE ORIGIN OF THE WORD *OTAKU*

　　There is an accepted notion about the origin of the word *Otaku*: It first appeared, in the way it is currently used, in 1983 in essayist Akio Nakamori's series of articles entitled "*Otaku* no Kenkyu（An Investigation of *Otaku*）" [4], in which he shed light on the behavior of young people gathering at exhibitions of anime and so on, where they substituted the word *Otaku* for the second-person pronoun "you."

　　Yes, there has been traditionally a second-person pronoun *Otaku*. As is explained in Wikipedia, "*Otaku* is derived from an honorific Japanese term for another's house or family."

（You may say, for example, "How's your family?" This "your family" is what the word *Otaku* literally designates.）

Now, recall the name of our commissioner, Kaichiro Morikawa. By the way, *this* is my assintant Yuichiro; Besides, the person in this photo is major leaguer Ichiro Suzuki of Seattle Mariners. – This juxtaposition is not a joke. Ichiro is perhaps one of the simplest names in Japan, the meaning of which is "No. 1." The parents of Kaichiro and Yuichiro added the expectation of "Ka（「嘉」=joyful）" and "Yu（「雄」=strong）" to the very prosaic name of Ichiro as for their own children respectively.

As is clear from this comparison, Japanese people have special interest in the first name, and therefore *we* call other people by their family name except for the case of very intimate relationship.

Then *Otaku* is thought to be not interested even in this family name, let alone first name!

### INCIDENTS THAT MADE *OTAKU* FAMOUS

At this point, you must understand why I asked you to call me in American style "Taka," not "the visiting scholar," or "that Japanese."

But, to return to the subject, this term of *Otaku* was only known to a small number of people in the early stages, and it was not until 1989 that it came to be prevalent.

In that year, a series of bizarre kidnaps/murders were exposed. The areas where victims lived were northern Tokyo and its suburbs, and the dates and the victims are as follows: Aug. 1988, a 4-year old girl; Oct. 1988, a 7-year old girl; Dec. 1988, a 4-year old girl; Jun. 1989, a 5-year old girl.

But they were not incidents of simple kidnaps/murders, but those involving behaviors of necrophilia. Having left my own ten-year old son in Japan, I have little bravery to minute them. But, I must skim one episode between the third and the forth incidents on February 1989, when ashes of the first victim was delivered to her family with a claim of responsibility by the name of "Yuko Imada." "Yuko" is usually a female name. But it proved to be a false name because the real male criminal, Tsutomu Miyazaki was arrested on his way to the fifth kidnap which ended in a failure. Anecdotally, Miyazaki was 26 years old as of his arrestment, when I was a 27 year-old graduate student learning art history and criticism. I was born in 1961, and Miyazaki 1962.

In any case, his name came to be known to everyone in Japan rapidly, but soon it was hidden because of the possibility of his mental disease, and an initial "M" was substituted for his real name, when the name of *Otaku* began to spread inversely and explosively.

I believe you've already understood the reason why the name of *Otaku* spread at that moment: Because Miyazaki himself was recognized as *Otaku*.

In reality, not less than 5,763 videotapes of anime and other movies were found in his studio. There is more: Two-week investigation of these tapes by means of 50 video cassette players and 74 inspectors revealed that one of these tapes included the scene of injured victims, which was the evidence of necrophilia, no less.

This necrophilia behavior by Miyazaki was linked to that name of *Otaku* by newspapers, weekly magazines, and TV shows. *Otaku* finally became a "derisive" term used to refer to a group of odd people who have little interest in real people.

## VIEWPOINTS FOR CULTURAL STUDIES

By the way, what kind of scholarly insight should I bring in at this point?

Firstly, the view point of media theory may be useful. It would provide us with the effective tool for analysis of mass media that short-circuit one exceptional geek with other normal people. In fact, being surrounded by the hostile journalism, *Otaku* type of people had a very tough time for several years.

But a much more important fact is, I think, the very same journalism has changed its stance before long to admire the virtue of *Otaku* culture as if there were no such bizarre murders. It's not only journalism but also governmental policy that praises the use of *Otaku*. Indeed, in 2002, the Japanese government made "Strategic Program for Intellectual Property" [5] under the initiative of the prime minister, deciding to create, to protect, and to utilize strategically such contents as anime, game software, and so on as national policy.

This trend has been in its expansionary phase since then, until an article published in this 2007 [6] declared that *Otaku* Industry is now one of the primary wage-earners of Japan. If so, as for such process of oblivion, we should use second approach, i.e. psychoanalysis.

Instead of these two approaches, however, I'm going to adopt the view point of aesthetics, because *Otaku* is now considered to be an authentic culture that suits the Japanese tradition.

Or, in order to criticize this alleged authenticity and to contribute to the discipline of Cultural Studies, this aesthetics should be transformed into *anti*-aesthetic mode, which is known to us by the title of the famous anthology edited by Hal Foster in 1983.

## WHAT IS "MOE"?

I'm sorry I have little time to develop this topic today, but, anyway, we reach the point where we see another one minute forty seconds part of the TV program above in order to check the new aesthetics of "Moe."

（Here, in the last scene, a young woman will speak Italian, perhaps her mother tongue. In regard to her remark, I will translate it into English through the caption translated into Japanese, since I cannot understand the Italian language well.）

A beautiful girl who is straddling the raised railway at Akihabara, whose name "Shin-Yokohama Arina" itself has a sense of fun.

Prof. Morikawa ranked it as a symbol of the exhibition of *Otaku* as a whole. Why? Because this work, he insists, represents the essence of *Otaku* aesthetics of "Moe."

Let's see a panel that explains the meaning of "Moe."

[*Otaku* aesthetics.]

The character of "Moe" is juxtaposed with the words like "Wabi" and "Sabi" which have been maintained through the long tradition of Japan. And by this juxtaposition, the word "Moe" is suggested to be accepted as one of the keywords of aesthetics of the Japanese people. "Moe" is epitomized as "a rarified pseudo-love toward fictitious characters."

[A woman's remark in Italian that can be translated as: "I know there are such forms of love, and many people devote their energies to the world of imagination. In fact, everyone has an ideal partner in one's mind. But, as for myself, I am a woman who longs for a concrete love."]

How about this figure of a little girl [omitted here with consideration for copyright], in the first place? The narration said that the naming of "Shin-Yokohama Arina" has a sense of fun, but it's not easy to explain it in a few minutes.

So I will concentrate on her "figure" itself.

As for her posture of straddling the raised railway, it means she is too young to be aware of her own sex. Another photo shows you this same girl really straddling on the railway. Don't be afraid because that's of course a digitally synthesized photo. In another words, it's a fiction in its most intrinsic sense of the word.

To understand this fictitious nature, take a look at the explanation of "Moe" on the wall that reads as follows:

"Written with the wrong Chinese character for the verb moeru［燃える］"to catch fire," this character moeru［萌える］（which means "bud" or "sprout"）now expresses a rarified pseudo-love toward fictitious characters and their related embodiments."

It's certain that this definition includes the important cultural problem of *LCP* – i.e. Language Conversion Program – between the alphabetical input and the output by the Chinese or Japanese characters, but it's outside the scope of my talk today. So let's concentrate on the phrase: "a rarified pseudo-love toward fictitious characters."

About it, as you already know, that Italian woman says very honestly that she wants "a concrete love." Rather, we could have caught the Italian words "Amore Concreto." Being a grown woman, she means she prefers a real person to make love with, doesn't she?

From her saying, I will be able to conceive of the "fictitious," unreal nature of "Moe" obliquely.

FROM "CREATION" TO "OUTPUT"

Then, take a look at another example in order to understand what *visibly* "Moe" is.

It's a character named "Di Gi Charat" [figure is omitted here, too]. It is distorted in its proportion（especially the big head and the eyes）, and is composed from many parts that intensify its "kawaii" nature: its huge loose socks, apron for a maid, a bell, cat ears and tail, and so on.（"kawaii" has a similar meaning to the word "pretty," but we cannot translate it into English with its full nuances.）

For your information, "Di Gi Charat" is created as a mascot for publicity of a anime- and gaming-related products. So, at the time when it was born in 1998, it had no narrative behind her. The small episodes were added gradually as its popularity grew, and finally it became the main character of an anime in the year 2000. Now it has a complete world as a work.

By the way, that example of "Di Gi Charat" and its accompanying explanation are quoted from a book by a philosopher Hiroki Azuma, who is just 10 years younger than me but has already published several books.

In his book *Dôbutsuka suru Posutomodan* (2001) [7], after analyzing as an *Otaku* himself, Azuma epitomizes that: The characters that are popular around Akihabara are "not unique designs created by the individual talents of the author, but an output generated from preregistered elements and combined according to the marketing program of each work" [8].

His selection of the word "output" here – not a "production," but still less a "creation" that everyone once used – is, I admit, very persuasive about the condition of *Otaku*.

## DATABASE ANIMALS

But a simple doubt arises when I recognize that Azuma gives the headline of "Database Animals" to one chapter of his book.

Why "animals"? (In fact, the title of the book above means "Postmodern Animalizing" in English.)

His terminology depends upon that of Alexandre Kojève, Russian native French philosopher (1902-62), who made a series of lectures on the philosophy of Hegel in 1930s, declaring in one chapter that the American way of life is a mode suitable for the world after the Hegelian History. And "animal" is applied to this American way of life: The human beings is intrinsically a creature which has "desires" that cannot be suffed even after the longed objects are gotten, when the animal has "needs" that can be suffed by the objects. And in the American type of consumer society in which everything is settled in manual, mediated, controlled, people would become nothing but an animal because their needs are suffed mechanically [9].

Then, hearing this as an American yourself, how do you feel about this type of American/ Non-American Dualism?

But, it's not Azuma's but Kojève's observation and, in addition, it was remarked in 1930s. For responsibility of Azuma, I must rather concentrate on his application of this Kojèvian observation to *Otaku* culture. In reality, he says, *Otaku* people, instead of being annoyed by "desires," longs for works that would suffice their "needs" by their favorite elements.

## (DE)COMPOSITION OF A BODY/CHARACTER

Now, in order to investigate the relation between the "needs" of *Otaku* people and the aesthetics of "Moe," let's recall that captured scene from that TV program, because "Moe" was seen hanging on the wall, juxtaposed with "wabi" and "Sabi" that have traditionally been used

in the discourse about Japanese aesthetics.

Just for your information, a dictionary definition of "Wabi and Sabi" reads:

"When the raging civil wars ended and peace returned to people's hearts [in the 15th century], it was the aesthetic of the newly powerful merchant class which prevailed. Born of the tea ceremony, wabi is an aesthetic of finding richness and serenity in simplicity. This was epitomized by the single wild flower and everyday plainness which decorated the tea houses." The paradox of "finding richness and serenity in simplicity" of Wabi resembles that of Sabi, where "it speaks of a quiet grandeur enjoyed in solitude." [10)]

I think it's useless to take the trouble to point out the continuity or discontinuity between these traditional aesthetics of "Wabi/Sabi" and our newly added aesthetics of "Moe" naively, since it might rather be a positive/negative relationship.

Or more like, if we dwell on this positive/negative relationship, that between（a）"Moe" that requires composing favorite parts into a character and（b）necrophilia that decomposes a dead body into parts is such a relationship, isn't it?

But, as I have said earlier, *Otaku* is now not only a cultural term but also an economic one, and the latter makes this positive/negative relationship between "Moe" and necrophilia slip into the realm of subconsciousness.

My concern lies, however, not in this psychoanalytic problem, but in an aesthetic – or *anti-*aesthetic – one, at which, I will take a brief but closer look in the next chapter, taking one symbolic case as an example.

## 2.  ART AND CULTURE

WHO IS TAKASHI MURAKAMI?

Please remember Venice.

Every year it holds either biennale of fine-arts or of architecture. And that 2004 Biennale was not that of fine-arts but of architecture. In fact, if it were an exhibition of fine-arts, it must have included some major artists: And in our *Otaku* context, I cannot think of anyone except Takashi Murakami.

Who is Takashi Murakami?

Murakami was born in the same year as that criminal Miyazaki, in 1962. But the former's month of birth was February, the latter's December. As the academic year in Japan begins in April and ends in March, Murakami and I, born in August 1961, are in the same grade.

In reality during the same term, we attended the same university, i.e. Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music; Incidentally, I graduated, as you know, from the department of Art History, when Murakami the department of Nihon-ga. Nihon-ga means literally the

Japanese Style Painting. Its name indicates us that it has a long tradition back towards the ancient time. But it's an accepted notion that it was concocted when western style painting was introduced to our country about 150 years ago.

If so, it can be said that Murakami broke this pseudo-tradition of Japanese Style Painting from inside. And on this partial ruin, there emerged a new field of Japanese Pop, adopting various designs of *Otaku* culture.

## JAPANESE POP OR CULTURAL EXPLOITATION?

Among the recent news about Murakami was his collaboration with Louis Vuitton, and organization of two major exhibitions in the United States: *Super Flat*（in LA, 2001）and *Little Boy*（in NY, 2005）. Further, an American collector paid $567,000 for his life-size fiberglass figure at Christie's in 2003. But such socializing aspects aside, here too we will concentrate on the figure itself.

For example, this is not the work that I've just mentioned above, but another highly priced work "Hiropon" [figure is also omitted because of the same reason as above]. She has incredibly big breasts, with the milk of which she herself plays a jump rope. It is unmistakable that this sexuality is the extreme case of spectrum of maturity, the other end of which stands "Di Gi Charat" or "Shin-Yokohama Arina." In other words, Murakami distorted that "Moe" aesthetics to its ultimate point.

But Murakami himself once confessed that he had been an *Otaku* but had dropped out from it. And, in reality, the *Otaku* people have often accused this dropout for cultural exploitation.

As for such a conflict between, say, art and culture, it's rather useful to introduce discontent of that young philosopher Azuma who has appreciated Murakami very much. Against the critique from the authentic *Otaku* camp, he indeed defended the artist saying in his 2001 book that:

> Murakami's experiments, no matter how much they borrow the otaku design, cannot be otaku-like in essence, insofar as they lack the level of database. [...] Murakami's venture has been able to scrape out an aspect of otaku culture sharply *precisely because* he does not understand its structure, and that it is not a mere borrowing in this sense.（italic Azuma's own）[11]

## COPYRIGHT OF "DOB KUN"

But an intriguing incident that made Azuma much disappointed will happen before long.

That is to say, in 2004, Murakami filed a complaint accusing that an apparel company Marumiya's mascot "Mouse kun" resembles to his character "DOB kun."（Just for your information, "kun" is a little honorific title for relatively intimate or younger friends.）But, he dropped his suit in Apr. 2006 on condition that the company pays nearly 360,000 dollars

（40,000,000 yen）to him. And, referring to this "settlement," Azuma pointed out Murakami's critical moment as an artist.

At first, however, before checking Azuma's view point, we should see Murakami's statement about this case in English translation by me:

In the art world where I live, the key to success solely lies in whether one can be original or not. Every work I have made is like my child, being conceived, elaborated, and completed. Especially "DOB kun" and its world is the one that I have fostered for ten years.

These are not only characters but also art works. In Japan, people have not fully appreciated art works yet. Japan is a country, in which utilitarianism keeps the field, and the respect and will for cultural development is very low.

It's important, however, to try to make original works of art be recognized by society instead of allowing the current situation to continue. I will keep throwing all my energy for that purpose in the upcoming years. [12]

Next is the core part of the critique of Murakami by Azuma published on the web:

It's the consistency of logic which is most important. His originality lies not in the design of "DOB kun," but in his total tactics of subversion of the context of commercialism and of fine arts. The fact that he is not a designer but an artist means such a case. Or more like, that was Mr. Murakami's position. And because of this position, his dangerous act has been decriminalized. Mr. Murakami's favorite phrase was that an artist competes by means of his context.

But now, he demands – or seems to demand – his right as an artist. [⋯] Although amiable settlement between the plaintiff and the defendant will rescue the right of "DOB kun," I'm wondering, at the same time, if it might not make Mr. Murakami's privileged position fragile. [13]

The fact that Azuma uses an honorific "Mr." in spite of their intimate friendship might be seen as an evidence that he might be putting an end to the friendship itself. Be that as it may, the majority of Japanese people, especially on the internet, praised Azuma's opinion.

RECESSION FROM THE POINT OF WARHOL

But I cannot agree with Azuma and his advocates who are easily moved. In other words, I myself had another small discontent that the opinion of Azuma is too naive.

I will clarify it by giving an example:

After referring to an episode that Murakami respects Andy Warhol and calls his own studio "factory" after the forerunner's manner, Azuma has been stressing Murakami's significance as an "updated *Otaku* version of Warhol." And the fact that the launch of American Pop by Warhol

was in 1962, just when 45-year-old Murakami was born, might make Azuma's evaluation more amenable.

Being an art critic, however, I must point out several important moments that exist since 1960s.

For instance, an exhibition named "High and Low"（1990）was held at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in which the hierarchy of high art and ordinary life seemed to have been perfectly leveled. In the galleries too, there had emerged a new movement called simulationism or non-expressionism announcing the end of the artist's original expression. But, on that basis, I must stress that what we could observe by that time was paradoxically the return to the image being fed up with the stoic materialism of Minimal and（even）Pop art. Although it's not confirmed to matters of Post-Minimal- or Post-Pop-generation, the myths of originality have regressively reproduced itself in our age. And in this context, Murakami expressed what he really feels with no sense of guilt or humor.

After thus paradoxically（or superficially）defending Murakami against that young philosopher's discontent, however, I must confess I have little interest in his work itself.

It's a pity there's no time to develop it, but I think it's foolish to compare Murakami to Warhol in the context of fine arts, because I'm an art critic, and especially that of modernism. In short, in this opening of the 21st century, modernist criticizes the reactionary myths of originality, too.

## 3.　CULTURAL PROBLEM AGAIN

### LACK OF AWARENESS OF FEMALE *OTAKU*

I know it's high time for me to finish, but at this last section, let me develop my own discontent about *Otaku* as a cultural problem briefly.

For this purpose, I will introduce two famous *Otaku* person, Toshio Okada and Shun-ichi Karasawa, both of whom were born in 1958 – only three years before me – constituting the first generation of *Otaku*, and have just published one book based on their series of conversation （*Otaku-ron*, 2007）[14].

Their discontents were not only simple but also essential.

For example, Okada raised a question about the absence of "Sensha"-*Otaku* and so on in Azuma's theory.（"Sensha" means tank in the battle field.）A little similar and more intrinsic question is raised by Karasawa as: "The biggest problem of the book by Azuma lies in the fact that he has no view on female *Otaku*."

Of these discontents, the former means that aesthetics of "Moe" is not a comprehensive nature but only one aspect of the *Otaku* culture, when the latter refers to the gender problem within the *Otaku* culture.

This latter is my own discontent, too.

Indeed, it's known there are a lot of female *Otaku* – of course, in my classroom in Japan – , but they have not been fully discussed.

What kind of differences are there between male and female *Otaku*, then?

Briefly speaking, (1) the gaze of female *Otaku* sometimes involves moments of homo-sexuality whether her interest goes to boys or girls: (1-a) Female *Otaku* who fall into the former category, gazing at relationships between beautiful male characters, are sometimes called "Yaoi," while (1-b) those who fall into the latter category, develop interest in relationships between she herself (=subject) and female characters (=object).

However, the most important difference, I think, is that (2) the female *Otaku* sometimes has a specific aspect of transforming the body of herself: i.e. through costume play. In this phase, she tries to transform herself from the motive of doubting her identity, when male *Otaku* gazes and fetishizes a female figure composed of his favorite parts according to his "needs."

## *OTAKU* AS QUEER?

If so, I much prefer this female *Otaku* to male one.

Or, putting my preference aside, I cannot help thinking here about one word that suits this homo-sexual aspect of female *Otaku*: "queer."

In order to develop this association of ideas, it's useful to quote another small remark by Okada. He says: "The reason why there is no movement of gay culture in Japan is the existence of the *Otaku* culture."

I must add an immediate note to this remark since there *are* some gay cultures in Japan too; especially in Tokyo. But, as Okada has suggested, there is no integral gay movement as in New York.

Okada's observation is right since it's an observation, but from a critical point of view, we should raise a question: Is *Otaku* a "substitute" – or even a "sublimation" – of the absence of gay culture? I don't think so. In my opinion, it's rather an "oppression."

If so, I'd like to substitute the long-awaited word "queer" for the word "gay." The original sense of the word "queer" is "to be strange," but, as you know, it has transformed its meaning as to include home-sexual implications and has gotten nowadays even the status of disciplinary term to criticize various cultural standards that oppress the minority's way of life.

From this point of view, a kind of female *Otaku* can probably be called queer, even if they are not fully but partially homo-sexual.

Or rather, if male *Otaku* is the only *Otaku* as Karasawa observes concerning Azuma's book, we should, instead of allowing it to be simply "not queer," put on it a seal of "seemingly-queer-but-with-no-queerness-as-its-essence."

## INTELECTUALS' RESPONSIBILITY

In any case, I really think it's anachronistic that such alleged (sub)culture of *Otaku* is promoted even by a governmental project.

Or, why on earth do feminists in Japan hesitate to criticize such a male-centered movement?

By the similar argument, Azuma's book is not only useless, but also harmful. Of course it would be like asking for the moon, if Azuma's book dealt with the specific aspects of our age. But the subtitle of the book reads "Japanese Society from the View Point of *Otaku*." Moreover the catch copy by the publisher reads "We cannot discuss Japan in 2000s without this book." These remarks announce that the book presents a general theory.

The responsibility for this unhappy situation should be laid on the intellectuals who have not blamed such anachronistic male *Otaku* on the ground that they don't know the *Otaku* well.

Critique of *Otaku* culture can and should be made even by the people who have little or a little knowledge about *Otaku* culture even from Kantian transcendent*al* point of view.

Of course, modernist must assume this responsibility, too. And that's why I called today's talk a little tentative.

That's all. Thank you for your attention.

**注**

（講演時に口頭で示されたものでもないので、あくまでこれを「読む」ための補足とするレベルに留めている。）

１）本稿は、筆者が 2007 年度に本学の学外研究の制度を利用して米国ニューヨーク州のロチェスター大学（University of Rochester）に客員研究員として在籍した折、同大大学院の Graduate Program in Visual and Cultural Studies が 2007 年 10 月 17 日に開催した The Colloquium in Visual and Cultural Studies［Morey506 教室］で、当地のカルチュラル・スタディーズ研究者と大学院生を前に読んだものだが、経緯についてはさらに若干の補足が必要と思われる。

　まずはテーマについて――。客員研究員としての着任時（2007 年 4 月）、受け入れへの返礼として英語による講演を二度おこなうことを約束した。さらに、一度は先方のリクエストでテーマを決め、一度は筆者自身が自由にテーマを決めることとなった。カルチュラル・スタディーズを専攻する Joan Saab 主任教授は、前者のテーマとして、いまや現代を代表するサブカルチャーとして世界的な受容・展開をみている日本発の「オタク」文化を提案された。モダニズム美術を専攻する筆者は一瞬、困った表情を浮かべたかもしれないが、逃げたくはないので、その場でその提案を受け入れた。そうして夏の一時帰国の折、いくつかの授業で使用している教材等を USB メモリにコピーし、再渡米後、秋の講演本番に向けてせっせと英作文に励むことになった。（なお、もう一つの、「筆者自身が自由にテーマを決め」た分も、2008 年 2 月 29 日開催の講演会で "Body (Un-)Installed: Two or Three Things I Know About Cemetery" と題してファカルティ（教授陣）を前にして読まれ［Morey321 教室］、その前半部分のみ、以下の報告書中でやはり英語で発表済みである。『戦いと弔いに関する比較文化史的研究』（「2007・2008 年度学内提案公募型研究推進プログラム基盤的研究」成果報告書 , 2009), pp. 119-135。）

　第二にその英語について――。専門分野の文献の読解そして翻訳についてはそこそこという以上の自信と実績を有するものの、長期留学のチャンスにめぐり合うことなく、よってヒアリングとスピーキングの実践力を獲得しないまま四十歳代半ばを迎えた筆者にとって、講演の成否はひとえに事前の英作文（原稿作成）に懸っていると思われた。ただし、日本語の原稿を先に作ってからそれを英語に「翻訳」するのでは、時間的ロスが大きいばかりでなくニュアンスも伝わらないと直に思い至り、そうして英語で直接作文することになった（それゆえ現在は計画中の論集に再録するために自身で「翻訳」している始末である）。そればかりか、対話者＝二人称他者の「名」への（無）関心のありように由来する「オタク」の命名をはじめ、日米間の言語的差異もが論点となってくると感じられ、ならば言語的ハンディキャップこそ隠されるのではなく露わにされるべきだ、とネイティブチェックの類を受けない判断をおこなうに至った。ついでながら、本稿冒頭には講演者の自己紹介や、Yuichiro という名の日本人留学生（アシスタントとして質

疑応答時に通訳的に活躍もしてもらった）にかんする言及も読まれるが、当日の原稿に手を入れるのも面倒といった怠惰のゆえではなく、講演の中味にも実質的に関わる部分があるのでそれを残すものであることを、ここで強調しておく。

　第三に図版等について——。視覚文化に関わる題材をあつかう以上、図版をふんだんに掲出できるに越したことはないが、著作権上の問題もあって、ここへの再録にあたってそれはすべて断念した。

　本稿の成立にかんする補足は基本的に上で尽きるが、実は、英語の「品質」が最低限、本誌『立命館文学』の伝統を辱めるものでないかどうかの判断を仰ぎたいと思い、提出直前（2011 年 7 月末）、英語教育を専門とされる湯川笑子教授に原稿を「査読」（公式のものではないのでカッコ「 」を付しておく）いただいた。本稿の掲出がなっているのは及第点が得られたからだが、そのプロセスで、冠詞の使用等にかんするミスや意味の通じにくい箇所にかんする指摘をいくつかいただいた。最終的にそれをどう生かしたかの責任は筆者に存するが、ここに記して謝意を表するものである。

　なお、要約（abstract）については、講演の広報のために配布されたフライヤー（注のあとに参考資料として提出）に載せた予告文をそのまま流用したことを、付記する。

2）上田高弘『モダニストの物言い——現代美術をめぐる確信と抵抗 一九九〇 – 二〇〇五』（美学出版 , 2006）。

3）森川嘉一郎。2011 年度現在、明治大学国際日本学部准教授。

4）中森明夫「『おたく』の研究」『漫画ブリッコ』（(1) ＝ 1983 年 6 月号、(2) ＝同 7 月号）。

5）「知的財産戦略大綱」。

6）川田都樹子「「ポップ」で「キッチュ」で「クール」なアート？——消費文化とアートの一つのエピソードとして」, 川田編『「いま」を読む——消費社会の帰趨』（人文書院 , 2007）, p. 221。

7）東浩紀『動物化するポストモダン——オタクから見た日本社会』（講談社 , 2001）；［英訳］Hiroki Azuma, Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono trans., *Otaku: Japan's Database Aniumals*（University of Minnesota Press, 2009）. ちなみに、講演時点では筆者自身の英訳によって原稿に組み込んでいた文面は、本稿においてはおおむね、上記英訳版の訳文を採用し（一部微細な改変をおこなった箇所もある）、引用箇所の明示についても同書の頁数を Azuma, p. 10 のように記すこととする。

8）Azuma, p. 42.

9）Azuma, pp. 66-67.

10）*Japan As It Is*, 4th. ed.（Kodansha, 2002）, p. 39.

11）Azuma, p. 66.

12）「カイカイキキ／現代美術家 村上隆が訴訟提起した著作権侵害事件の和解による終了について」http://www.kaikaikiki.co.jp/news/list/murakamis_lawsuit/ （as of Oct. 01, 2007; my translation）

13）「村上隆と知的財産権」http://www.hirokiazuma.com/archives/000214.html（as of Apr. 25, 2006; my translation）

14）唐沢俊一／岡田斗司夫『オタク論』（創出版 , 2007）。

<div align="right">（本学文学部教授）</div>

## The Colloquium in Visual and Cultural Studies / 2007 Fall Semester

*Otaku* culture, one of the dominant subcultures at the present time, will be discussed in my talk.

Do you think it's an easygoing way because the speaker and its theme are both from Japan? But, still belonging to "valuable species" of modernist, I have not only some discontents about this seemingly queer culture, but also a foresight that it will be difficult to develop it as a significant topic for the class of Cultural Studies. In order to overcome this difficulty and to obtain scholarly results, I will follow the procedure below:

§ 1. A part of a TV program (in Japanese; about 6 mins.) which eloquently demonstrates the popularization of *Otaku* culture will be shown in the first place. After analyzing its several scenes from Akihabara and Venice, Italy, I will stick to some terminological problems about the word *Otaku*, which will lead to raising a little psychoanalytic question about its heated reception as if it were an authentic culture.

§ 2. An influential study of *Otaku* culture by Hiroki Azuma, a young philosopher in Japan, will be introduced succinctly but critically. Although his view point is useful for the consideration of the new aesthetics of "Moe," it doesn't work well when it is applied to the specific context of the art world. But his discontent about the very case of Takashi Murakami will be invaluable for our investigation.

§ 3. As a conclusion, I will develop my own discontent about the *Otaku* Culture, which is seemingly queer but has no real queerness as its essence.

## October 17, 2007 / 10:30~12:00 / Morey506 / University of Rochester

# *Otaku* Culture
## and Its Discontents

# Takahiro Ueda
## Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan

FIELD OF RESEARCH AND CURRENT SPECIAL INTERESTS: Modern(ist) Art and Visual Culture; especially interested in the current (im)possibility of criticism on the basis of Greenbergian tradition / PUBLICATIONS: Main papers, articles, and essays previously published have compiled into a book: *Modernist Objection* ("Modanisuto-no-Monoii" in Japanese), Tokyo: Bigaku-Shuppan, 2006 (ISBN 4-902078-06-6). And many translational works (from English to Japanese) include articles by: Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried, T. J. Clark, Rosalind Krauss, and Douglas Crimps ("AIDS: Cultural Analysis / Cultural Activism," 1991).