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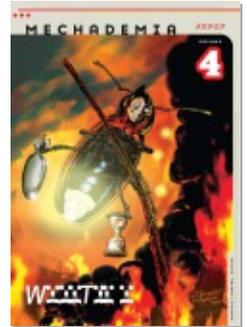
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Otakuology: A Dialogue

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our individuality in a world where the special character of individuals seems increasingly under threat. After all, one reason Superman and Batman have been around so long is that they have successfully protected their secret identities. In *Death Note*, “secret” identities are all ultimately revealed, and it is finally the *shinigami* who have the last laugh.

Notes

1. Mishima Yukio, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

2. *Battle Royale* is a novel by Koushun Takami that was later made into two live action films and a manga. See <http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/encyclopedia/anime.php?id=2971> and <http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/encyclopedia/manga.php?id=68> (both accessed September 22, 2008).

3. Natsuo Kirino, *Real World* (New York: Vintage, 2008).

4. Murakami Haruki, *Kafka on the Shore* (New York: Vintage, 2006).

5. Lisa Katayama, “*Death Note* Manga Spawns Movie, Crime Wave.” *Wired*, May 19, 2008, http://www.wired.com/entertainment/hollywood/news/2008/05/death_note (accessed August 27, 2008).

6. Murakami Haruki, *Wind Up Bird Chronicle* (New York: Vintage, 1997).

トレンド Torendo

Otakuology: A Dialogue

PATRICK W. GALBRAITH AND
THOMAS LAMARRE

PATRICK W. GALBRAITH: Thank you for agreeing to this dialogue, which I hope will open some new perspectives on the study of otaku, or “otakuology.” With the transnational success of manga, anime, and Japanese videogames, the term “otaku” has become common across a variety of popular discourses, as a sort of identity

designating the consumers or users of these products. But I believe that we’ve come to an impasse in our discussions of otaku, precisely because the term has become so familiar and ubiquitous that we run the risk of naturalizing an otaku identity without exploring its significance for our understanding of the interactions of culture, technology, and economy. With this goal in mind, I would like to begin by asking about your academic interests in general.

THOMAS LAMARRE: My general interests lie in the history of perception. So my basic questions are about how people perceive the world, how they experience it, at different historical junctures. These kinds of questions grow out of intellectual history. But the history of perception, sensation, or experience is different from the history of ideas. The history of ideas can rest content with an archive of texts or documents that are clearly established as philosophical, theoretical, or intellectual in nature. The history of perception or experience, however, turns to a broad range of materials that were traditionally ignored by historians—the stuff of everyday life. This makes for a vastly expanded empiricism. In fact, the archive threatens to become unmanageable. Histories of experience or perception have tended to turn to “aesthetic” materials that range across art history, literary studies, and media studies—art, visual culture, design, media, architecture, and all sorts of texts, fictional, philosophical, pedagogical, and discursive. The basic goal is to unearth the contours of a historically specific set of material orientations that guide or shape patterns of experience, or the material orientations that set up a field of possibilities. My interest in the history of specific sets of material orientations has gradually led to a focus on media, especially those associated with technologies of the moving image.

PG: I also am interested in material conditions, but I chose to conduct extended participant

observation in Akihabara, an area of Tokyo associated with otaku, because I wished to introduce the voices of otaku into our discussions. Even in Japan, the voices of otaku have been largely missing from academic discourse. The term “otaku” began to appear in popular texts and “New Academism” in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but there was, and still are, very few examples of those identified as otaku speaking for themselves. Akihabara presents one narrow window onto one small segment of otaku culture, insofar as we imagine it to exist, and that window is anything but clear. Still, it offers a place to start to consider how otaku speak about themselves. How did you become interested in otaku?

TL: When I first went to Japan in the late 1980s, I developed a love for manga and anime. So when I started teaching at McGill in the early 1990s, I offered a course on Japanese popular culture in which I tried to introduce students to manga and anime. There were not many anime with subtitles and very few manga in translation at that time, so it was tough putting together a decent syllabus. What surprised me was that a large number of the students loathed the materials, complaining that they were juvenile, incomprehensible, misogynistic, or worse. Also, the late 1980s and 1990s were a time of major transition in discourses on otaku in Japan, particularly with the arrest of Miyazaki Tsutomu in 1989, which encouraged a general pathologization of otaku in the media. As a result, even though my interests led me toward anime, manga, and so-called otaku culture, it took years of teaching and reading for me to make the connection between my interest in the history of perception and my interest in the otaku stuff.

A great deal conspired against making such connections, not least of which is the fact that there was not, until the late 1990s, any sense of a historical or theoretical perspective on otaku. In the mass media, the general trend

was to sensationalize, exoticize, or demonize what was happening between fans and their “image worlds.” In the university, as you noted, the general trend was to read anime and manga in the manner of literary texts. Yet, even when commentators were reading anime as texts, they tended to shy away from the tough questions that arise in literary analysis, which would have opened their analysis to questions about materiality, material conditions, identity, subject formation, power formations, or powers of the body. Anime especially was treated as a textual object that does not or cannot pose any difficult textual or historical questions. Except for a very few works, analysis tended to be relegated to re-presenting anime narratives, almost in the manner of book reports or movie reviews. At the very moment when new historicism, radical historicism, post-Marxism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction introduced very important and challenging questions into the study of literature, many scholars seemed to jump onto the pop-culture bandwagon as if determined to avoid the sorts of questions posed by these approaches, as well as the questions that you’re asking through participant observation, or those that I wish to pose at the level of history of experience and material orientations. Nonetheless, we shouldn’t suppose that looking at otaku presents in and of itself an intellectual advance. And there are a number of other factors that have encouraged a shift away from textual analysis toward ethnographic questions about otaku activities.

PG: Absolutely. The trend toward studying Japanese popular culture demands closer consideration. After the end of the Cold War and the Bubble Economy, the imperative to study Japan greatly diminished. Japan could no longer be discussed in terms of its threat, be it military or economic in nature. Scholars of Japanese literature turned to popular culture in the 1990s in an attempt to invigorate the field, partly attracted to its mass appeal, which made both for

publishing opportunities and increased student interest. There was also new funding from institutions eager to compensate for Japan's shrinking political and economic significance. Basic questions—why we study Japan and why study its popular culture—were swept aside, as Japan studies overcame its crisis by turning to new popular topics. As you mentioned, popular culture seemed to offer a way to avoid facing difficult questions about the history of area studies and postwar politics. Keeping Japan popular—that is, appealing yet unchallenging—allowed and still allows for the US–Japan relationship to continue largely unaltered. Studies of Japanese popular culture have become an academic commodity. Observed from a functionalist and perhaps cynical standpoint, the fact of studying Japan threatens to become more important than the content of the studies, and popularity more important than academic rigor. Indeed, many of those writing on Japanese popular culture today are young; they are outside the academy and publishing in popular venues. Many of those writing on popular culture work part time in universities, where there is a demand for them to teach specialty courses but no place for them in the permanent faculty. Owing to the lack of long-term expectations and professional integration, few demands are placed on popular scholarship. Scholars working on Japanese popular culture are only distinguished by the quantity of their publications and the novelty of their topics, which conditions a preference for niche subjects, which are analyzed by applying simplified superstructures. The result is a tendency toward exoticizing and essentializing. This tendency often reflects or even reproduces sensationalist journalism about Japan. This is very clear in the context of otaku. Definitions are set up on the basis of “otaku” in Japan, but often with little or no contact with these imagined others, and there is a critical lack of engagement with experts in Japan. Thus discussions of otaku repeat assumptions about unique, even bizarre habits and practices. And

such assumptions go unquestioned, because Japanese uniqueness is *the last remaining* rationale for continued study of Japan itself. Japan appears as the quintessential “non-Western” example. Given such difficulties, how can we improve on the study of otaku?

TL: It is impossible to avoid the impulse to define otaku, and any account of otaku will by default imply some kind of definition. Yet it seems to me that we need to be more cautious and critical about definitions of otaku. I don't mean critical only in the sense of showing how someone gets the definition wrong. I think that we also need to look at how the process of defining to some extent creates its object. So it is not a matter of saying to someone, “Look, you're not defining otaku properly,” but of considering how the definition sets the parameters for discussion. This is especially important in the case of otaku, because the mass media has played an important role, and maybe *the* most important role, in setting the parameters for discussion. And the mass media tends to construct easily recognizable types. We end up with a typology of otaku, which encourages us to think about otaku in very naïve psychological or behavioral terms, and to generate and embrace stereotypes. This tendency toward typology has also encouraged a massive simplification of anthropological and sociological approaches in talking about otaku culture. Often the definition of otaku is presumed in advance and never questioned openly, as if we all implicitly understood who and what otaku are. Often commentators present themselves as otaku in order to authorize their knowledge—they present themselves as native informants. The problem is not that commentators wish to situate themselves as otaku writing about otaku. The problem is that such a stance tends to make definitions of otaku appear self-evident, while reinforcing received stereotypes. It is often calculated to prevent or foreclose questions about how we define otaku, rather than to invite them.

PG: I'd like to highlight the issue of labeling. As popularized in the media, the word *otaku* was pejorative from the outset. In 1983, in "'*Otaku*' no *kenkyū*," an article for *Tokyo Otona Club* that appeared as a special supplementary issue of *Manga Burikko* magazine, Nakamori Akio expressed his shock over what he perceived to be the bizarre behavior of *dōjinshi* fans at a convention. They spoke to one another using "otaku," a polite and slightly archaic second-person pronoun, which made them look socially awkward to his eyes. Nakamori then proceeds to belittle these fans using common images of social rejects—the nerd, weirdo, fat kid, momma's boy, and so on. As Nakamori puts it, you know these people from your school days, you've seen them around town. And he names them, all of them, *otaku*, a convenient, arbitrary label for all those he perceived to be social rejects. *Manga Burikko* was a subcultural magazine, one including parody manga, and fans of anime and manga were beginning to imagine a shared identity in this and other specialty magazines. There was a strong backlash against Nakamori's comments, and a debate raged in the reader-response section of the magazine, spawning three additional articles on *otaku*. Although the debate continued until 1984, editor Ōtsuka Eiji finally canceled the column. He later explained that he had done so because he came to see Nakamori's use of "otaku" as part of a personal image campaign, as way to define himself as part of the "new breed" (*shinjinrui*) or cool youth culture. Ōtsuka concludes that the word *otaku* was becoming part of the ongoing "game of differentiation" (*saika no gēmu*).

The word *otaku* continued to circulate, as evidenced by its appearance in a Recruit survey on youth personality in 1985, but it was not widely used among anime and manga fans. Indeed, although the mass media widely described serial killer Miyazaki Tsutomu as an "otaku" in 1989, Ōsawa Masachi points out that Miyazaki himself did not know the meaning of the word. Ōtsuka also wonders if

the widely disseminated photos of Miyazaki's "otaku room," filled with 5,763 videotapes, might not have been staged by police and journalists in order to connect the gruesome crimes to the rising anxiety about "virtual reality" and media effects. We need to be aware that the word *otaku* is inextricably tied to media discourse. This is also true for "positive" images of "otaku." It is no coincidence that Okada Toshio, one of the founding members of animation studio Gainax, started his infamous *otakuology* lectures at the University of Tokyo in 1992. At the height of "otaku bashing," Okada and other fans claimed they themselves had abandoned the word *otaku* a decade earlier, and yet *otaku* bashing made the term so popular that Okada could use it to garner attention, titling himself "Otakingu" or the King of Otaku. Okada also claimed that *otaku* were the heirs of Japanese culture and the next stage of human evolution. This at times almost smacks of parody, as in his *Otaku no Video*, but it also was a political move made with full expectation of media response. Indeed, no definition of *otaku* is entirely unproblematic, and all should be considered in context.

In producing knowledge about *otaku*, we run the risk of imposing static categories to facilitate analysis. I find myself confronting this in the context of ethnographic inquiry. Kam Thiam Huat points out that when we go into the field looking for *otaku*, we select those who match internalized stereotypes. Someone is only an *otaku* insofar as he or she is imagined to be. The ones doing the imagining can be them, others, or us, but in any case someone identifies the person as an *otaku*. For Kam, fluctuations in the word *otaku* over the years are based not in changes in people or activities but rather in changing perceptions of play and consumption. "Otaku" was perceived in the 1980s and 1990s in terms of flight from roles and responsibilities associated with family, school, and work. Thus *otaku* seemed to threaten the integrity of the social. The same behaviors are now seen

as inevitable or even desirable. The meaning of otaku continues to change.

TL: In response to such difficulties in defining otaku, some critics in Japan have introduced terms such as *otaku-kei bunka* (otaku-type culture) and *otaku-kankei shôhi* (otaku-related consumption). I am thinking especially of Azuma Hiroki, author of *Dôbutsu ka suru posutomodan* (Animalizing Postmodernity, released in translation in 2009 as *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*). I feel that we should follow through the implications of such an approach, even if Azuma himself does not necessarily do so. The idea would be to consider otaku as a new mode of social existence, as a kind of social being. This means that studying otaku is not only a matter of collecting information about people whose behavior appears to conform to stereotypes generated in the mass media, or about interviewing people who declare themselves otaku, who adopt it as an identity. Even while we acknowledge the importance and necessity of such data gathering, we also need to look at the emergence of a new set of social relations and to consider how our knowledge procedures interact with those social relations.

Even though I am using the terms “existence” or “being,” it is not an ontology of otaku that is at stake. It is a matter of looking at where divisions are emerging, where something is contested. You implied that the label “otaku” is a discursive construction. At the same time, you suggested that those labeled otaku either did not accept the appellation (actual fans) or used it in a strategic or tactical manner (Okada Toshio). This implies that there are effects of power associated with mass media discourses on otaku, which appear where otaku discourse is being contested or redirected. A question then arises about the specific material conditions and limits for this otaku discourse. How is it different from other discourses? When I suggest that we see otaku as a mode of social existence, my goal is not to generate an ontological

definition for otaku but to bring critical attention to bear on the specificity of otaku activities or practices. If we think in terms of activities and practices, then it is clear that the otaku mode of social being may become highly condensed and very visible in certain locations and social relations and within specific populations. But it touches everyone. Of course, we might also conclude that, because values associated with otaku are constantly changing, there is no consistency to otaku at all, in which case we should drop the study of otaku altogether, because everything is happening elsewhere. But I do think that there is some consistency or coherence to what is called otaku, and that is why I refer it to as mode of social existence.

On this basis, I think that we can relate the otaku phenomenon to transformations in capitalism, to changes in how we interact with and through commodities, and to transformations in technologies, especially communications and information technologies. These transformations also pose a challenge to how we envision the role of intellectual activities and scholarship. Given my interest in historically specific sets of material orientations, or perception grounded in media and media technologies, I tend to stress these parameters when looking at otaku as a mode of social existence. For me, then, “otaku” implies at least three problematics. First, there are new kinds of images and image flows associated with the emergence of a series of new media technologies from the VCR to the DVD player and personal computer. Second, there is a new set of relations to those images and image flows, which has gradually shaped a form of knowledge production around them. This knowledge production is as abstract, encyclopedic, totalizing, and rational as the heyday of Enlightenment thought and practices, yet is novel in the intensity of its engagement with the “open source.” Third, otaku entails a transformation in our relations to commodities and consumption. It is commonplace in discussions of the postmodern to talk about consumption

taking priority over production, or of a collapse of the difference between production and consumption. Otaku consumption, for instance, is so active and productive that it is difficult to bring it under the banner of consumption in the traditional sense of an acquisition and using up of discrete objects. Otaku does not entail acquiring and then abandoning, “wasting,” or “destroying” commodities. Rather, commodities function more like events and thus entail worlds to be prolonged, which would at the same time imply the prolongation of a set of social relations.

PG: The idea of consumption as an event is in keeping with otaku descriptions of their activities in terms of *matsuri*, or “festival.” Many otaku use *matsuri* to describe the group dynamic that forms around special events, or the discussions and activities that develop around *neta*, which are *faits-divers* or “newsy” items of interest, of a sort that a comedian might also draw into his or her performance. Connections emerge and spaces of interaction arise as people share the moment—as in *matsuri*. As you say, the festival-like emergence of such “worlds” is very much tied to communication technology. The *matsuri*-like communities of 2channel and Nico Nico Dōga would not be possible without computers and Internet access. Connections are on the surface of the screen, and the technological mediation is evident. But these dynamics do not end at the screen—they also occur in the so-called real world. With otaku activities, we probably do better not to posit a strict boundary between the screen and the real world. People perform dances from anime series, stage recreations of popular online videos, and make “pilgrimages” to places seen in anime. They also gather to buy and sell goods inspired by favorite characters. Comiket, the biannual sales event for *dōjinshi* (material published outside official channels), draws 35,000 creative “circles” and over half a million people. Yes, these circles frequently

draw on mainstream commercial characters in their “parody” works, but what they create is distinctive. This is very much open-source remix culture. I was discussing this with a friend from Rome, who pointed out that only a handful of people contributed to the European Renaissance, while a thousand times that number contribute to Comiket and Wonder Festival (a *dōjin* figure event). He thus proposed an “otaku renaissance,” which entails cultural production on an unprecedented scale. For some reason many people appear willing to invest great energy in hobbies over long periods of time. They are not alienated from their labor, but their labor serves as a source of innovation and financial profit for companies. Given the scale of these events in Japan, or rather Tokyo, we can safely say that the otaku social mode is highly visible. Why did otaku appear in Japan first, and why are they most visible in Japan?

TL: Some critics stress the Japaneseness or Japanese origins of otaku culture (Okada Toshio, Morikawa Kaichirō, Ōtsuka Eiji). Others (Azuma Hiroki, Sawaragi Noi) argue that, on the contrary, the Japaneseness of otaku culture is “fake” rather than authentic and that it has developed in response to the insurgency of American pop culture in postwar Japan. Nonetheless, across these debates, the nation typically appears as the frame of reference for discussing otaku. Naturally, because Japan–U.S. military and economic relations continue to shape the everyday realities of Japan, it is not surprising that discussions of Japanese fan cultures would turn in this direction. But a problem arises. Where the model of subculture versus hegemony allows for the possibility of conflict and resistance within the nation, discussions of otaku tend to discount otaku or fan cultures as a source of difference internal to the nation. Instead the emphasis falls on abnormal or deviant tendencies of the nation, which assumes by default that there can be a normal and healthy nation, with the presumption that

Japan may have been more normal and healthier before the advent of otaku.

The problem then is not that the nation and national sovereignty tend to provide a horizon for understanding otaku but that the national form is naturalized, rather than interrogated. As a result, in Japanese discourses, even when the transnational dimension of otaku culture is acknowledged, differences between nations and national values (say, Japanese otaku values versus American otaku values) receive a great deal more attention than do differences within nations and across nations (say, information access, purchasing power, gender, class, or other forms of social difference). To counter such a reification of Japan, I would like to call attention to some contributing factors that are institutional and structural, and historically contingent.

First there is the emergence of what might be called mass intellectuality in the postwar years. As Kotani Mari points out in her account of *shōjo* in *Tekuno-goshikku* (Techno-Gothic), a chapter of which appeared in translation in *Mechademia 2: Networks of Desire*, the intellectual pursuits and “cultivation” that were largely the preserve of the middle and upper middle class in prewar Japan became widespread after the war, with the expansion of literacy, wealth, and access to media such as newspapers and television. Something similar happened in other parts of the world with increased wealth and literacy. Autonomia school theorists frequently refer us to Marx’s discussion of the “general intellect” to understand this historical shift, and Maurizio Lazarrato describes this moment in terms of the emergence of “mass intellectuality.”

A second factor gave this expansion a particular inflection in Japan—hobby culture. By hobby culture I mean not only the importance given to having a hobby, but also the institutional support for clubs or circles within high schools and universities. While there isn’t necessarily a great deal of financial support for them, clubs are an integral part of daily life,

especially in universities, where students are rewarded for their years of labor in high school with greater leisure time. Such university circles frequently contribute to the formation of circles at Comiket and other fan events. It is no accident that Gainax got its start through the Osaka Science Fiction convention, which was organized by a college sci-fi club. Similar organizational skills contributed to the formation of Comiket, Wonder Festival, and other events.

Third, while the fortunes of its culture industries have waxed and waned, Japan not only has well-established film, animation, manga, and television industries, but also imports entertainment from a number of locales. Japanese producers and consumers have long had a high degree of literacy in American, Hong Kong, Chinese, and European entertainment, alongside literacy in the hybrid conventions of film, manga, and animation expression established in Japan from the 1930s. The result is a heightened awareness of genre conventions across national boundaries, as well as of modes of address that are decidedly international or global, even when the target audience is Japanese. This kind of global address was not recognized as such in some parts of the world until the 1990s, because the Hollywood industries had effectively promoted themselves as the only bearers of global address by controlling international distribution networks. There is still great reluctance to acknowledge the global address of Japanese entertainment. As Ōtsuka Eiji astutely points out, Miyazaki Hayao’s animated films, for instance, are decidedly global entertainment, and the desire to recode them as distinctively Japanese simply plays into the formation of a Studio Ghibli brand. We need to consider how modes of address can be at once local and global and to address actual processes of universalization.

Fourth, discourses on information society emerged early in Japan—in the 1960s. Even if information society may have been slow in its realization in Japan, there was an important

discursive engagement with, and critical enthusiasm for, information society in conjunction with an insistence on Japan's natural disposition toward robots and the roboticization of society. The conceptualization of Japan as a robot kingdom had a profound impact on mecha otaku, that is, fans interested in armored vehicles and suits, tactical armor, and piloted robots.

Fifth, in keeping with the American decision to make Japan a "bulwark against communism" through high capitalist growth, the Japanese economic miracle made Tokyo into a global city, one of the most capital-saturated urban areas in the world. Industrial planners set out to make Japan a distinctive export economy and, due to space limitations, tended to direct patterns of consumption toward appliances and electronics. At the same time, an unprecedented amount of capital was allocated to advertising, packaging, design, and image production. As a result, although the world of Japanese promotion still tends to operate on the basis of large categories targeted toward specific masses (*shōnen*, *shōjo*, *seinen*, and so on) or national masses, consumption in Japan rapidly fragmented into what some commentators call "micromasses." These micromasses attain a degree of social, discursive, and even institutional solidity through the formation of clubs and circles, through the spread of intellectuality, and through the wealth of competing genre conventions. Add information technologies and stir well and you'll get a mode of social being that encourages the proliferation of otaku-related micromass lifestyles. Otaku in this respect is not mass culture but rather a personalization or life stylization. But I am groping for words here. I don't wish to imply that these micromasses are merely lifestyles or a matter of personalization in Jean Baudrillard's sense. They entail a degree of performative self-cultivation or what Michel Foucault called "technologies of the self," without implying the formation of fixed subject position or identity.

PG: Life stylization is one way to put it. Could

this also perhaps be called subculture? After all, since Dick Hebdige's classic work in 1979, the expression of stylistic difference has often been associated with alternatives to hegemonic norms.

TL: Otaku are frequently cited as a prime instance of subculture, but the question for me is: What do we mean by "subculture"? In Anglo-American cultural studies, subculture usually carries connotations of the marginal or the non-normative, and of resistance to mass or mainstream culture. Subculture has different connotations in Japan. Generally speaking, in Japanese discussions the emphasis often falls on subculture as "small," both in terms of the number of producers and consumers and in terms of its concerns (intimate and petty). Which is to say, because its numbers were small, a subculture was not seen to address the larger concerns of Japanese society and the nation. Subculture was construed as a retreat from questions about world history and sovereignty. Consequently, subculture could be seen as a harbinger of the end of the history and of the nation, rather than, say, as a set of practices entailing resistance to dominant modes of understanding the world and organizing social relations.

Nonetheless, an understanding of subculture drawing on Anglo-American debates has entered the Japanese debates. In her essay in this volume, Anne McKnight maps the contours of some of these debates on subculture in Japan, calling attention to a tension that emerges between these two ways of looking at subculture. On the one hand, there is the view of subculture evident in Ōtsuka Eiji's studies of otaku, including his piece in this volume, in which the smallness of subculture is a sign of the disappearance of the public sphere, of debates on sovereignty and modernity, and of a concern for Japan's position in the world and world history. On the other hand, there is the view of subculture evident in Ueno Toshiya's

writings, in which the emphasis falls on the differential production of identities by creatively and defiantly patching together a new set of tribal social relations.

For my part, I like the challenge that Japanese debates on subculture pose to the now rather entrenched assumption of subculture as resistance that reigns in Anglo-American studies. Generally speaking, Japanese stances on subculture show less romanticism about escaping capitalism and fewer presumptions about getting outside it. Nonetheless, I think that there must be a middle way that acknowledges both tendencies within the Japanese subculture debates, which would take seriously the question of whether there can be zones of autonomy within capitalist societies, and what impact these might have. What sort of opportunities does the internal differentiation of global capitalism visible in the formation of fan cultures present for the emergence of different political or social possibilities?

PG: In a conference held in Tokyo in 2009, Miyadai Shinji and Azuma Hiroki suggested that subculture in the Japanese sense means anything that is not recognized as high culture. So, in effect, popular, mass, and commercial culture all might be subculture. They also resisted the urge to politicize subculture in any form. Their definition seems to be ignoring the concerns that you raised, conflating micro and mass cultural phenomena, which renders otaku “subculture” quite ambiguous. If otaku subculture is about interaction with mass/commercial/popular culture, then it might be better described as fan culture. I am specifically thinking about Matt Hills’s discussion of cult fans. Like you, Hills has questioned whether these sorts of cultures are about resistance. Taking up the concept of a “dialectic of value,” he proposes fans tend toward “anti-commercial ideologies and commodity-completist practices.” I have the impression that otaku cultures display less ambivalence toward mass culture than Hills sees in

his cultures. But Hills nonetheless allows for fan practices that defy commercial or mainstream logic. Lawrence Eng has suggested that otaku in the United States are also somehow resistant, as these “reluctant insiders” of the middle class are engaged in unanticipated consumption and appropriation of media and technology. They transgress boundaries in a way that is not entirely incongruent with Japanese otaku. This is a topic that deserves further attention. How do you position otaku in the discussion of fans?

TL: For a long time, fans were seen as mere consumers of what was produced, including the dominant meanings implicit in products. Cultural studies transformed this paradigm, showing how fans were in fact active receivers, in the sense that fans contributed actively to the production of meaning. Otaku might thus be seen as an intensification of these active modes of reception, because the hallmark of otaku is not only heightened consumption—connoisseurship, discrimination, collecting—but also a sort of production. This otaku productivity entails both knowledge production—collating, classifying, disseminating, commenting, annotating, translating—and “unofficial” material production, for example the *dōjin* scene. What’s more, so-called amateur productions frequently make money and sometimes creators go professional. In sum, rather than a strict divide between ordinary fans and otaku, or between otaku consumers and corporate producers, there is a spectrum of productivity. In Japanese discussions of otaku, there is a tendency to insist on consumption and to use the term “otaku” in order to delineate “fans” or “cult fans” from ordinary people or mainstream culture. “Otaku” is a term commonly deployed to construct and to patrol a boundary between normal or ordinary consumption on the one hand, and excessive or abnormal consumption on the other hand. As such, in various contexts, the term “otaku” can be evoked either to demonize or to celebrate a certain set of consumer activities that are

loosely associated with certain kinds of people. Such a way of using the term “otaku”—to separate normal from abnormal—tends to gravitate toward an identity politics based on affirming one’s ordinariness or extraordinariness. For my purposes, such distinctions are interesting in terms of their social effects but not very helpful in the context of thinking the productivity of fans, because their primary effect is to invite moralizing about consumption. Everything begins and ends with a moral question: Are we consuming too much or too little? Such a moralizing stance serves to disavow the excesses of capital by assuming that it is indeed possible to successfully manage capital by practicing moral restraint.

PG: Do you see any change in the meaning of otaku?

TL: There is a straightforward way of telling the story of otaku as the explosion of ignored or largely dismissed products and activities into the national and global mainstream. The arrest of the serial killer Miyazaki resulted in a wave of demonization and pathologization of otaku-related activities in the mass media in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Subsequently, the astounding financial success of otaku-related goods associated with Gainax’s *Neon Genesis Evangelion* in the mid-1990s, in conjunction with the increased international visibility of anime, manga, and video games meant that such activities could not be ignored, for commercial and diplomatic reasons, even if the mass media remained somewhat suspicious about what otaku were really doing. The success of *Densha Otoko* (*Train Man*) as a film and TV series in 2005 signaled the possibility of a complete redemption and mass appropriation of the otaku phenomenon. On the one hand, it told the story of an otaku who managed to overcome the anti-social qualities associated with “otakudom” and win the girl, while, on the other hand, it had the cachet of emerging from informal Internet

exchanges and proliferating across mass media with great commercial success.

But telling the story of otaku as exclusion followed by acceptance and redemption is not entirely satisfactory in that it presumes a succession of stages, by reference almost exclusively to mass media and the nation. There are, in fact, many different channels of communication and ways of communicating. So, even as the government acknowledges the importance of male otaku and strives to pin it down in its public policies, many otaku-related groups refuse to accept the new discourses and definitions. The history of otaku, then, is not one of an initial misunderstanding and rejection, followed by recognition and success. There is a continuing negotiation between different paths of communication, some of which are mass-targeted, some of which are localized and intimate. In other words, the meaning of otaku has changed significantly in government policies and mass media, yet prior meanings persist, and new articulations are emerging.

PG: Otaku are today often imagined as men, especially Japanese otaku. This is strange, because Nakamori Akio’s definition, the starting point for much of the discourse on otaku, included men and women. Female fans were and are a major presence in *dōjinshi* culture, after all. However, we now seem to suffer from collective amnesia. The image of otaku as male spread rapidly along with media reports on Miyazaki Tsutomu. This is incidentally also where the connotations of otaku being lost in virtual reality and sexually suspect, even predatory, come in. The rising profile of female otaku and *fujoshi*, the so-called “rotten girls” who produce and consume stories about romance between beautiful boys, compels us to begin reconsidering gendered stereotypes of fandom in Japan.

It is a little unnerving just how loose the use of “otaku” really is, while at the same time how contested it is. When we say “otaku,” there are myriad possible meanings. Otaku starts as

just a way to say “you” with the original kanji character “taku” and honorific “o” (お宅) and then takes on the meaning of subculture when rendered in hiragana (おたく). This is most often used in a negative way, since it is tied to Nakamori Akio and Miyazaki Tsutomu. Otaku can also refer to foreign fans of Japanese popular culture when written in roman letters (otaku). At first, it was positive. Fred Schodt points out that the word *otaku* appeared on the cover of *Wired* magazine in 1993, and the United States has a convention, Otacon, a documentary, *Otaku Unite!* and a magazine, *Otaku USA*, that evoke the imagined community. Finally, “otaku” loses its “cultural odor” when written in katakana (オタク). This last iteration was popularized by Okada’s *Otakugaku no Nyūmon* (Introduction to otakuology) in 1996 and was part of his attempt to jettison associations with the heinous crimes of Miyazaki Tsutomu. At the same time, katakana tends to be used for foreign loanwords, new language, or slang. This is how the word *otaku* appears in media and government reports on “cool Japan,” thus making otaku appear international. The word *otaku* evokes multiple contradictory discourses and images. No one definition is sufficient, and all are based in stereotypes that essentialize some “otaku” and exclude others. Some Japanese scholars are very critical of the internationalization of “otaku.” In your experience, what are the differences and similarities between otaku in Japan and abroad?

TL: If we look at the otaku phenomenon in terms of the emergence of a new mode of social existence that is related to transformations in capitalism and in technologies, then the enthusiastic reception of Japanese otaku activities in other sites around the globe is not so surprising. Again, in contrast with discussions of otaku that see in them nonordinary or excessive consumption that at the same time adheres to national boundaries, which tends to push discussion in the direction of national

morality and comparison of national values, I think that the otaku mode is not only ordinary but also transnational at heart. The actual conventions of expression, technologies, and flows of capital are transnational, and this particular intersection of capital and technology tends to address and define people as populations. As a result, the otaku mode acts in terms of multiplicities, building them into its operative logic. This means that the phenomenon cannot be confined to one territory. Even if we can identify territorial variations, the otaku mode is not entirely localizable, and thus entails a constant deterritorialization.

Put another way, otaku forms are *opened in translation*. We’re accustomed to thinking in terms of something being lost in translation, some sort of ineffable essence. This is because we’re still under the sway of national language paradigms in thinking translation, which is thoroughly anachronistic in the context of otaku and global circulation. Certainly, translations of otaku forms of expression from the Japanese involve changing the original, and there are also questions about the localization of Japanese products. Yet, as Japanese debates about otaku suggest in their concerns about the loss of a national and world historical framework, otaku cultures are not primarily a matter of nations communicating with nations but of locales communicating via the global.

Needless to say, nations and the international mechanisms of sovereignty have not disappeared from the scene, and there is thus a continual interplay between them and transnational mechanisms. Crudely put, it boils down to interplay between national language translation and transnational media circulation, in which circulation implies other registers of material translation—file conversion, for instance. This interplay has to be taken into account when considering the differences between otaku in Japan and outside Japan. We need to think translation beyond the linguistic register, even though language, in the narrow sense of

national speech, has a tendency to “overcode” other material registers, for historical as well as psychological reasons. Your example of the katakana transformation of the term “otaku” into a foreign loanword within national policy speaks to this overcoding of otaku activities by reference to a distinction between native and foreign. The persistent tendency toward linguistic overcoding of material activities makes the dynamics of fansub and scanlation groups very interesting and important in gauging the interplay of the international and transnational. In sum, the national form has not been surpassed, nor is it irrelevant. In fact, it often steps in to police such transnational flows, building an alliance between security and population control and national sovereignty.

PG: Matt Hills suggests the word *otaku* has become a “shifter,” or “a mobile sign of self and other.” Stereotypical images such as “Japan,” “the West,” “otaku” and “non-otaku,” are activated and deactivated as part of the ongoing process of making meaning. Even as we talk about transnational flows, receivers can reinscribe boundaries even as they transgress them. This sort of boundary play might be part of the appeal. As you mentioned, we want to read Studio Ghibli as Japanese, and they capitalize on that desire, but we also read universal values into it. And there is no shortage of people in Japan who want to assert that this global popular culture is Japanese in origin. Hills is talking about how anime fans interact with “Japan” and use the otaku label outside Japan, but I think his points are also relevant for considering the situation inside Japan.

At the same time, some otaku today describe themselves as “*wotaku*” (ヲタク) in a conscious effort to break free of associations with subculture and pop culture, to cast off the domestic and international baggage attached to “otaku.” They are media savvy and information hungry, with a flair for fan productions, and appear almost random or chaotic in their pursuit

of “*moe*,” a euphoric response to fictional characters. Okada finds this group so reprehensible that he wrote a book to them in 2008 titled *Otaku wa sudeni shindeiru*, which translates to “you are already dead.” Inside, he refers to the cultural death of otaku, or what he perceives as a break between otaku of his generation and otaku today. Given that sci-fi fans of Okada’s generation likely weren’t calling themselves otaku, or might have used it as an insult, this seems an almost predictable conclusion. Ironically, Okada became a public “otaku” figure, and he was in many ways tied to the growing media discourse on otaku and the growing sense of community among anime and manga fans in the 1990s. What’s your opinion on his stance?

TL: It seems to me that, at one level, discourses on otaku in Japan have placed so much emphasis on generational differences that the idea of radical ruptures is always central to how otaku cultures are imagined. So it is not surprising that, rather than imagine yet another generation of otaku, Okada would propose a radical break with otaku itself, the death of otaku. The idea of radical generational breaks is built into the discourse, and media commentators in Japan are adept at proclaiming new breaks and generating new types. Recently, the effect of generating new types has been largely to castigate youth for a perceived decline in Japan’s status. Similarly, Okada detects a loss of engagement, commitment and pride among would-be otaku that for him signals cultural demise.

At another level, Okada is also reacting against the mass media and government appropriation of otaku activities, which brings them into the public sphere and recodes them in terms of national values. Okada went to great lengths to legitimate otaku activities, but he apparently does not want otaku to become too big or too mainstream. One of the underlying assumptions of Okada’s discussion of otaku is that community depends on numerical smallness, and community ceases to exist when it

is no longer quantitatively small. At the same time, smallness for Okada becomes too small when it does not appear cohesive or coherent and thus creative. If otaku are for him already dead, it is because they have become at once too big and too small, without community and creativity, and thus chaotic and incomprehensible as a population.

Okada's remarks bring us to the limits of thinking otaku in terms of generations, to the point where we might productively shift from the quantitative to the qualitative, and look at the otaku mode of social existence in terms of the intimacy of its media connection and social relations. Genuine intimacy and sociality would demand that something be at risk. In effect, however indirectly, Okada is posing a question about what is at risk, or what is at stake, in certain modes of media consumption today. This is not a trivial question. But it cannot be answered simply by referring to the death of otaku, or by insisting, as other commentators do, that the irresponsibility of youth is responsible for a perceived decline of the Japanese nation.

PG: A perceived loss of creativity and community is central to Okada's argument. His ideas come out of personal experiences with "otaku" culture. As Japanese academics have until recently been reluctant to take up the topic of otaku, these sorts of narrative accounts are all most people have to go on, and a shared cultural experience is extrapolated, or imagined, from them. The problem is not that this is presented as otaku history but that it is accepted to be the only otaku history—a history that positions older generations as "aristocrats" (*kizoku*) and "elites" (*erīto*) and dismisses younger generations. The problem I have with Okada declaring otaku officially dead is that he in effect silences them. The younger generation does not have the authority to write its own narrative. If the older generation abandons them, they are at the mercy of the mass media. This contributes to misunderstanding. Claiming there are no otaku

at a time when otaku are increasingly entering the public debate effectively reduces them into an invisible presence, which can be obscured or revealed selectively.

Also, to make one's personal history into the otaku history tends to limit what experiences are included. Okada tends to omit *dōjinshi*, for instance. As a result, he overlooks an important site of creativity and community. Patterns of consumption may be broader and less focused because of the vast amounts of media and material available to otaku, but the younger generation does not differ dramatically in the intensity and duration of its activities. They are savvy at mixing media and making cultural citations. Theirs may be a different pattern of consumption and production, but it is increasingly prevalent. How do you think otaku will fare from now on?

TL: The otaku mode today is poised between futures. On the one hand, as the site of articulation of relations between capital and technologies, the otaku mode points to an expansion and intensification of "human capital." Human capital refers to the knowledge and skills acquired through education and experience. It was common in dominant postwar analyses of human capital, which culminate in Gary Becker's *Human Capital*, to cite the example of Japan. A nation without resources other than the skills and knowledge of its populace nevertheless succeeded due to its human capital. The emphasis on human capital is central to economic liberalism and neoliberalism. At a time when neoliberalism enjoys a certain degree of privilege, it isn't surprising that the skills acquired through the otaku mode of reception/production of technologized commodities are often seen as assets for the workplace and even as the ground for a new business model. The danger is that the otaku mode of social existence will come to mesh smoothly with the formation of new regimes of flexible labor, and the otaku's "productive modes of consumption"

will contribute to the formation of a labor pool that lends itself to retraining for new tasks as businesses change, without any economic security or social clout.

On the other hand, awareness is emerging in certain regions of the otaku experience that there is the connection between the otaku mode and labor politics—crudely put, between otaku and freeter (those who make a living stringing together part-time work) or NEET (those Not in Education, Employment or Training). Your own essay in this volume explores the emergence of the “Akihabara Liberation Demonstration,” wherein otaku contest policies that limit otaku activities. More generally, the precariat movement described in Amamiya Karin’s essay presents some important points of intersection with otaku modes. In other words, there are signs that, if otaku consumption is frequently seized at the level of its productivity, as human capital, then new social movements can arise within the otaku mode of social existence that take questions about flexible work and forms of immaterial labor as their ground.

PG: It is common to dismiss play activity among youth as escape rather than engagement, but I think that the possibilities for otaku politics deserve attention. For example, Honda Tōru called for otaku to quit “love capitalism” and find “pure love” with a two-dimensional character. He was a vocal critic of *Densha Otoko*, which he claimed was message to otaku to grow up and learn how to buy gifts for others, groom themselves and go on expensive dates, to succeed within love capitalism. Honda submitted that the capitalist system was the problem, not the guys who couldn’t find dates. Whether entirely serious or not, Honda is drawing our attention to a perceived problem and encouraging debate.

In a different context, that of the Akihabara Liberation Demonstration, it is true that many participants were not explicitly aware of the motivations of the organizers. Many joined

this demonstration in the spirit of *matsuri*, to have fun, to cosplay. What is more, the numbers swelled as the march continued and bystanders joined. Some commentators, such as Morikawa Kaichirō, took this to be just another example of the street performances that were popular in Akihabara at the time. For critics, Akihabara had become a media stage, and these people were playing to the cameras. They were performing otaku-ness. But I think that there is a politics to spontaneous pleasures. Whatever the motivations of participants, they succeeded in making something visible. They achieved a certain degree of solidarity, common purpose, and action. While the actual march, in the spirit of *matsuri*, did not last, it definitely had an effect. This is regardless of the causes. The radical, political potential of otaku movement might be an avenue for further research. What direction will your research take?

TL: In keeping with your comments about otaku politics, I feel it is important to avoid an exclusively cause-and-effect definition of political action in the context of otaku, as well as imperative conclusions of the sort “we otaku must do this or that.” Often we don’t exactly know why we’re in the streets marching, and, even when we do, we find that our “cause” may change dramatically through the encounter, the event, and its effects. In my research on otaku, I want to find a way to trace the field of possibilities that arise around specific sets of material orientations in order to generate discussion about the ways in which power is exercised. In this respect, I tend to agree with Michel Foucault’s emphasis on the politics of truth, on mechanisms of “verisdiction,” because, even though we are to some extent caught up in imperatives and totalities as teachers, students, and researchers, nonetheless an ongoing exploration of what counts as truth has the virtue of leading us into fields of analysis with some sense of what matters for us.

The question of otaku for me is about the

advent of a relation to commodities based on the prolongation of media events and thus the production of worlds. The concept of *matsuri* fits such a politics well. Festival has long provided an alternative in Marxist theory to the emphasis on revolution, offering a different sense of the role of the body and performance in imagining and enacting sociohistorical change. In the instance of the Akihabara Liberation Demonstration, we might say that, if such marches, like other otaku activities, are conceived on the model of the *matsuri* event, then, even though

the march did not last, it may repeat and renew itself. What would invite us to take risks to prolong such an event or world?

PG: We might also want to consider the potential of the *matsuri* event to open up new spaces and new notions of self and sociality. But that is a discussion that will have to wait until our next encounter. Thank you very much for a stimulating discussion.

TL: Thank you.