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## Beyond Utopia: New Politics, the Politics of Knowledge, and the Science Fictional Field of Japan<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract:

Recognizing that, since the end of the Cold War, political theorists around the world have embarked upon a deliberate quest for difference and innovation in their discipline, triggered by the apparently 'world historic' victory of liberal capitalism, this five-year project (2009-2014) aims to uncover a series of sites of difference and innovation. In particular, it locates itself in two kinds of distancing: *geo-cultural* (ie. in the non-European space of Japan) and *medial* (ie. in innovative expressive media). Utilizing the 'techno-media' of anime, manga and videogames, and focusing on the radical potentials of the genre of speculative

science fiction, this project aims to analyze and model a series of political visions as potential alternatives to liberal capitalism, hence contributing to the field of political thought.



Furthermore, acknowledging that these widely popular

techno-medial products utilize different grammars of expression from conventional, text-based media, this project seeks to formulate a research methodology for scholars to employ for critical interventions into these fields. Accepting that the dimensions of the public sphere change with time and technological developments, and hypothesizing that the public sphere in many contemporary societies is now informed by this techno-politics, at stake is the ability of scholars to remain in touch with (and persuasive in) political realities: new forms of literacy are required if scholars seek to remain involved in the new public sphere. This project attempts to outline those forms of literacy, as implied by the rapidly globalizing force of Japanese anime, manga and videogames.

**Key words:** *techno-politics, digital media, science fiction, Japan, political thought*

### Overall aim and key objectives:

This project locates itself at the intersection of a number of pressing issues for contemporary society, and simultaneously in an interdisciplinary and multi-medial space between several academic fields of inquiry. In its most general form, the central thread of the interlinked sub-projects is concerned with the matrix of relationships between evolving conceptions of politics, literacy and technology (particularly digital technology). In each case, first and foremost, the concern is with the way in which these shifting categories interact with, challenge, and actually constitute the 'humanity' of individuals in contemporary society and the way in which they interact politically.

For a cluster of historical and cultural (as well as practical) reasons, the project as a whole is framed within what I term the 'science fictional field of Japan.' However, Japan is not treated in isolated or essentialistic terms, but rather it is configured comparatively and fluidly within the world around it. It is a particular instantiation of flux in the politics-literacy-technology matrix, but it is also an important and unique emblem of a possible future for the development of this matrix elsewhere: in various ways, Japan is figured as science fictional (Goto-Jones 2008b). Hence, whilst some of the conclusions of this project aim towards furthering our knowledge of human experience in modern Japan, many of them should be of relevance for any technologically advanced (or advancing) society.

Recognizing that, since the end of the Cold War, political theorists around the world have embarked upon a deliberate quest for 'difference and innovation' in their discipline, triggered by the apparently 'world historic' victory of liberal capitalism and hence the so-called 'end of history,' as well as the end of political philosophy (Fukuyama 1992; Dallmayr 1999; Freedman 2007b), this project seeks to combine the rapidly emerging media of anime, manga (animanga), and videogames with the field of political thought. It contends that reading these cultural products as modes of political thought in Japan (and elsewhere) assists historians of political thought who are increasingly searching for alternatives to visions of the liberal political order in a constellation of new locations: 1) within European history (but outside of the conventional canon of texts, eg. Runciman 2001); 2) within European history (but outside the conventional media of expression of political thought, including in literature and science fiction eg. Jameson 2005, Simona 2006); 3) outside of European history altogether (eg. Bakshi 1988,

2006; Goto-Jones 2005b). In other words, this project seeks new political ideas via a dual differentiation from convention: *geo-cultural distance* (the non-European) and *medial difference* (expressive forms that are not conventional 'treatises').

It is important to realize at the outset that anime, manga and videogames are not genres but media. Hence, they each contain a range of products that reach across all of the genres familiar to literature and film. Like other media, they also contain products aimed at different audiences and commercial purposes: some are unapologetically 'pulp fictions,' while others have more serious intent. In other words, to talk about animanga or videogames *in general* risks vacuity. With this in mind, this project will limit its interest in these media to the genre of serious, speculative Science Fiction (SF), which cuts across them all.

The reasons for this choice are captured by a fourfold politics of knowledge: the first is *historical* – SF is one of the most popular genres for these media in Japan; the second is *expositional* – recent literature in political thought suggests that SF is the most promising site for the alternative expression of political ideas; the third is *representational* – an recognisable techno-orientalist (Ueno 1996) tendency in the West (and in Japan) identifies Japan as a science fictional realm that is somehow in the technological future and hence a model for development elsewhere; and the fourth is *comparative* – by focusing on a common genre across diverse places and media, it becomes possible to identify the specific themes of interest in particular geo-cultural and medial locations, and also to codify the expressive and rhetorical devices particular to each media.

Finally, an implication of this research agenda is that anime, manga and videogames have identifiable grammars that enable them as expressive media, and that these grammars and devices actually facilitate the development and deployment of political thought in ways inexpressible (or even unthinkable) in other media. Taking this seriously demands twin responses from the scholarly community: the first is *critique* – we must employ literacy in these grammars and skill-sets to affect sophisticated political criticism of these media; and the second is *participatory* – as responsible intellectuals, we must be able to employ these grammars and skill-sets to intervene in political arguments and the public sphere ourselves. Hence, in addition to conventional research products (*three PhD theses and two monographs*), this project also aims to produce a series of *political manga, short*

anime, and a simple videogame expressive of concepts from Japanese science fiction.



*Final Fantasy XIII, concept art, Square Enix, 2009*

### Scientific background:

#### General relevance:

In parallel to the crisis of political thought that followed the end of the Cold War, 1990s-2000s saw explosive growth of interest in Japanese anime (animated movies), manga (graphic fiction/sequential art), and videogames in the West as well as in Japan. The Japanese anime industry has revenues of 250 billion yen annually; the retail market for associated 'character goods' is 1.61 trillion yen; 60% of animation broadcast on TV worldwide is Japanese; Japanese companies Sony and Nintendo dominate the international games market, selling over 100 million units of each of the last generation of consoles – the Pokemon franchise alone is worth over \$250 billion worldwide (MOFA 2007). In the twenty-first century, the Japanese government has officially endorsed these media (grouped as 'techno-culture') as amongst Japan's most important contributions to world culture.

These contemporary media-forms are now major cultural forces in East Asia, Europe and the USA, yet serious research into the political significance of these media is in its infancy; the majority of work remains 'fan literature,' uninformed by scholarly method-

ologies. The Western academy has tended to be dismissive of the value of these sources, finding them populist and childish. However, the Japanese academy has been much less reticent, and sophisticated work in this field has been appearing since the late 1990s. Some, such as Azuma Hiroki (2001, 2007), even identify these media as the necessary forms of cultural and political expression of a postmodern society that has abandoned the myths of modernist grand narratives. Azuma identifies Anno Hideaki's 1995-6 anime masterpiece, *Shinseiki ebuangerion* (*Neon-Genesis Evangelion*), as a key turning point in post-war Japanese culture and social development. Indeed, the importance of this title (which is now a cross-medial franchise involving anime, manga and videogames) is emphasized and theorized by many other commentators (Kotani 1997). In other words, especially since the 1990s, techno-cultural products have formed an increasingly visible and important part of the Japanese public sphere. Japan is not only an object of inquiry in this field, but also an important source of theoretical insight.

With this in mind, this project will explore the parameters of the political sphere concept, since it enables conceptual thinking about the changing dynamics of state/society relations and the intersections between politics and culture: 'it provides a way of conceptualizing an expanded notion of the political. It forces us to look for politics in other social places' (Eley 2002: 231). Indeed, the notion of the public sphere is a useful way to move conceptually from everyday life to political agency and action (ie. to conceptions of the political) – it is a space in which politics can occur without it having to be subsumed by the conventional institutions of the political.

The significance and meaning of concepts within the public sphere are necessarily governed by a historical sociology of concept formation: 'concepts are words in their sites' (Somers 1995: 113). In other words, the public sphere concept already contains the imperative for reflexivity from scholars: it relies on the ability of social and political theorists 'to recognize that the categories and concepts [they] use to explain the social world can themselves be fruitfully made the objects of analysis' (Somers 1995: 114), and hence that they are constantly open to challenge from new or alternative technologies of expression. In the quest for difference and innovation in political theory following the end of the Cold War, a creative and comparative analysis of the public sphere in different political-cultures provides the promise of conceptual and medial revolution. As a recognisable site, situated and the boundary between the state and civil

society, the public sphere has the distinct advantage of being an empirical domain that is ripe for research.

A key issue when it comes to accessing this domain involves the question of literacy. Whilst sequential art has been employed in Japan for philosophical, political and religious expression for centuries (ranging from the 12<sup>th</sup> century Zen-classic 'ox herding' sequence (Yamada 1985) to the official political manga and anime of the Japanese government in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Kinsella 2000)), these media have less of a 'serious' political tradition in the West, where (with a number of important exceptions) graphic representations have been largely limited to satire. In Japan, certain types of anime are deliberately produced and read as political treaties (eg. Kobayashi 1995 or Rachi.go.jp 2008), and they discourse with an audience (including the intelligentsia) that is already literate in (and participate in) their conventions and practices. In general, European and American academics lack this literacy: although there is a reasonably well-developed tradition of graphic narrative and critique in the West (eg. Carrier 2000; Hadju 2008; or even Eisner 1985/2006), its emphasis has tended to remain on narrative techniques rather than political expression; in addition the conventions and grammar of manga and anime differ from those of 'comics' and 'cartoons.'

As we will see later, in the specific case of videogames the problem of literacy is even greater, both within Japan and in the West. Videogames require a radically new set of interrogative and compositional tools, as well as interactive skills, in order to access their meanings properly and hence to understand (or participate in) their role in the public sphere. In general, academics do not cultivate these skills. Indeed, the most specialized and skillful access to videogame content is often by members of youthful subcultures rather than academics, which inverts the traditional hierarchies of knowledge that society usually associates with access to textual forms of expression and hence with persuasion in the public sphere. In Japan, the cultural critic Okada Toshio has gone so far as to argue that the emergence of an 'otaku' (geek?) subculture since the 1990s effectively represents the emergence of a 'new species' of super-information-processing-citizens (1996); the otaku, readily conversant in the grammar of techno-culture, has the power to dominate Japan's public sphere in the era of techno-politics precisely because the traditional intelligentsia is not literate in the required rhetorical devices. In this model, the techno-cultural transformation of the public sphere should provide for radical voices in a tradi-

tionally conservative Japanese polity. But what are these voices saying and who can understand them?



*Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children, Square Enix, 2005*

#### *New Politics – literacy, techno-politics, and the new (digital) public sphere*

There is a clear (if complex) connection between technological development, the realm of politics, and the dimensions of the public sphere/civil society. One of the cultural mechanisms that connect these sites is the idea of literacy: in order to engage in political discourse, members of society must have access to a site of discussion, and must be literate in the language (and technologies) of that discussion. In this mode, literacy is obviously related to (albeit importantly distinct from) education itself.

In classical Greece, for instance, if we can talk of the existence of a *res publica* or public sphere at all, the technology of political discourse was literally the *spoken word* in the restricted space of the public forum. Of course, access to this forum was circumscribed by various social norms and technologies: gender, economic status, education, literacy etc. Participation in the forum was restricted to a subset of the population at the intersection of these criteria.

However, for most commentators after Habermas (1962), modern political cultures are (or should be) characterized by a more expansive public sphere: they are comprised of a discursive space in which people congregate to discuss issues of common concern, to reach shared judgements, and hence to influence political action. Unlike Aristotle's exclusive forum, which is effectively part of the mechanics of the state, this inclusive public sphere need not be a physical location, but rather exists as the adjudicator between the boundaries of state and society. A common example of this kind of public sphere is the institution of the mass media, which

(for Habermas in the 1950s) was premised largely upon technologies of print and distribution, and hence its principle of 'inclusivity' was contingent upon education and literacy in *written forms of language*. In an ideal democracy, this public sphere should include everyone equally – although, for Habermas, inequalities of wealth and privilege in capitalism provide for unequal access to the public sphere (ie. to its technologies and necessary literacy) in practice. Critics such as Nancy Fraser (1992) have argued that the public sphere is always more exclusive than Habermas allowed: it is circumscribed by the hegemonic values of any given society.

It is important to note that hegemonic values also function to govern the acceptable media of expression, not just the profile of participants. This realization contains the potential for a fracturing of the public sphere into multiple sites characterized by different logics and technologies of participation. A key political issue is therefore which of these spheres retains *power* (or relatively more power) to influence political outcomes, and how this power-balance between spheres changes (perhaps in accordance with technological developments). In the contemporary world, for example, we might ask about the extent to which academic treatises inform the public sphere and set this against the extent to which videogames like *Final Fantasy* or *Pokemon* have penetrated public consciousness. Which of these products (and which media) reach more people? Which influence more people (and how)? Which exert more power? Is it conceivable that academics are marginalizing themselves (or may be beginning to become marginal) from participation in the mainstream of the public sphere not only because of issues of advanced education (which is part of the essential nature of academia) but also because of medial anachronism? If it is the goal of an intellectual and of scholarship to change society for the better (which I insist it should be), then techno-political literacy becomes an obligation for scholars. Of course, it is never the case that previous spheres of engagement vanish or are replaced, but the balance of power between them shifts constantly: it becomes a strategic and tactical choice (ie. a political issue) in which sphere or spheres you participate (assuming that you have the necessary literacies in all).

Interestingly, in the early postwar period, political scientists like Maruyama Masao (1956) complained that Japan lacked a meaningful public sphere, precisely because of the absence of the kinds of texts that defined that sphere in Europe and the USA. In more recent years, however, the place of alternative media in a flour-

ishing Japanese public sphere, such as manga, has been acknowledged. Following the resignation of PM Fukuda in September 2008, the front-runner to replace him, Aso Taro, announced himself to be a 'proud manga reader.'

There is a wide and well-known literature about the dependency relation between democracy and education, but here I am more interested in the technology of literacy (and literacy of technology) itself. Indeed, as new communication technologies develop, the dimensions of the public sphere (or spheres), and hence the criteria for inclusion in it, also change. Chief amongst these developments in the twentieth century was the advent of radio, movies, and television. These admixtures to the mass media changed the landscape of the public sphere in modern societies across the world.

On the one hand, these broadcast media expanded the reach of discussions to those who may lack the necessary written literacy to participate in print media, but on the other hand the technological (and financial) barriers to active participation in (rather than critique or even merely passive consumption of) these new media were prohibitive to the vast majority.

Twentieth century figures as diverse as Walter Benjamin (1969) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1974: esp. 77) have called attention to the potential political crisis occasioned by this technological transformation of the public sphere, focusing on the way in which it dehumanizes the public by rendering it into a consumer of ideologies rather than a partner in a genuinely discursive site. These postwar critiques tended to focus on the need to confront the totalizing and epistemically violent nature of fascist films, which emphasized technologies of speed (Virilio 1977, 1989). Indeed, progressive and radical intellectuals have persistently expressed anxiety about the way that these technologies have tended to exclude the possibility of dissent in the civil society by reconfiguring sectors of the public sphere into technologically exclusive spaces.

Sartre himself called on intellectuals to participate in radio and television – indeed, he suggested that it was their responsibility to do so in order to preserve the public sphere and to enjoin discussion with the forces of capital. His call was partly one for *literacy in the devices and mechanisms of these media* and their technologies (and hence a call for *critique*), but it was also partly a call for the appropriation of the productive technologies themselves by the wider public sphere. The political significance of the latter was contingent on the former: *literacy in the conventions of radio and film* were essential prerequisites to entering political debates via

those media. Subsequently, we have seen a blossoming of political critique of radio and film but also of politically conscious and expressive broadcasting. Film Studies is now an unexceptional part of the curriculum in many Political Science programmes around the world.

However, technology appears to develop faster than society's appreciation of its political implications, and certainly faster than the academy is able to respond to the new literacies that technological change demands. Whilst some intellectuals remain dubious even about the need for cinematic literacy as a professional skill in the field of political inquiry, preferring instead to emphasize the central (or even exclusive) importance of print literacy, film is no longer new media. The dimensions of the new public sphere are now being stretched and reconfigured by digital technologies. Techno-politics has changed profoundly in the twenty-first century. For important reasons, I am *not* talking chiefly about the Internet but rather about interactive and immersive digital environments such as videogames.

For understandable reasons, a great deal of literature has been written about the political implications and uses of the Internet, both in the West and in Asia (Hughes 2003; Coates & Holroyd 2003; Anderson 2002; Mossberger, Tolbert & McNeal, 2007) but, as Chadwick (2006) observes, much of this literature really emphasizes the ways in which the Internet is really a technology that has transformed political *communication* and information *distribution*. Of course, this technology can be empowering and politically transformative (Zheng 2007). However, the media of *expression* (and hence the literacy skills involved in interrogating or participating in internet politics) remains predominantly textual or hypertextual (although filmic information is also increasingly prevalent). Indeed, the familiarity of the medium of text is partly why it is immediately so accessible to so many people: the essential literacy demanded of those who wish to participate in, analyze, or influence this discursive site remains rather traditional. Indeed, we might hypothesize that it is partially for this reason that the heavily text-based academy has been able to accommodate the Internet into its research agenda so readily: academics in the humanities are society's experts in text literacy. The technological innovation here is not *medial* but *distributive*: Internet texts instantly facilitate bi- or even omni-directional communication between unprecedented numbers of people in diverse locations around the world. This may facilitate a 'cyber-democracy,' wider and more liberal education, or even constitute a de-nationalising of the public sphere, encouraging new levels

of macro- and micro-political concern, but is it really an innovation in expressive media?<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the so-called Internet revolution does not seem to represent a close analogy to the medial shift in the public sphere that came with the advent of radio and film. The technology does not require new literacies to the same extent. However, the medium of the videogame does demand a new set of interrogative and compositional skills – the ability to intelligently read, criticize and compose politically conscious videogames – and its place in the public sphere has been largely neglected by the academy, which has focused its attentions on the Internet as the great technological revolution of our time. The twenty-first century analogy to Sartre's call for committed intellectuals to involve themselves in film and radio might be a call for intellectuals to involve themselves in videogames, both as critics and as programmers. Unlike the internet, which facilitates the distribution of other expressive forms, videogames are themselves a medium of expression that give rise to new and original expressive potentials that are not present in text, radio or film.

Videogames are importantly different from (although not unrelated to) computer simulations and models of political behaviours, which derive from Game Theory, such as Axelrod (1984). Such models are particularly popular in International Relations Theory and Conflict Analysis (Myerson 1997). Computer simulations are also used by political parties and think tanks to predict electoral behaviour and social movements. The crucial difference is that videogames do not seek to *predict* the outcome of real world political processes (ie. they are not simulations of real-world politics) but rather they are able to *express* or even *embody* political views or realities in themselves (ie. they are postmodern simulacra, in Baudrillard's terms (1985)). Like politics itself, videogames are complex systems in which a human agent participates.

The expressive (or even persuasive) force of videogames is a constant source of media speculation, with a particular focus on the possible effects of interactive violence on the development of children (Anderson, Gentile & Buckley, 2007). Indeed, there is a real 'moral panic' emerging around the question of violence in videogames (Cohen 1972), fuelled in the West by events such as the Virginia Tech shootings (April 2007) or in Japan by the Akihabara stabbings (June 2008). A number of prefectures in Japan have even banned the sale of Gand Theft Auto in response, and the National Police Agency has set up a task force to study the effects of

violent games on Japanese citizens. In many ways, concern over videogames has replaced the so-called 'otaku panic' of the 1990s in Japan (Kinsella, 1998), which revolved around the allegedly anti-social effect of anime and manga fandom, especially following the Miyazaki Tsutomu Incident of 1989.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, increasing attention is also being paid to the potential (and actual) educational value of these products (Gee 2007).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Nintendo is increasingly marketing its handheld DS console as an educational device, especially in Japan. In 2004 a consortium of European learning and development agencies conducted a joint investigation into the education potentials of videogames (Mitchell & Savill-Smith 2004).

If it's the case that videogames might exert the kinds of dramatic influence over their players that their critics claim (eg. causing children to shoot their classmates at school), then surely it is plausible and even inevitable that they also exert a series of more subtle influences on their consumers. Indeed, part of the 'moral panic' about Japanese techno-culture has been in the form of American parents' concerns about the ethical content of Poekmon (Yano 2004). Unfortunately, research into the rhetorical or expressive force of videogames is in its infancy. Even less developed is the conception of the deliberately political videogame (ie. the videogame authored with a specific political intention). To this extent, the medium of the videogame approximates the condition of film in the early twentieth century: with the possible exception of the issue of violence, political critique of videogames is directed to rhetoric that seems largely unintended or authorless. This situation does not challenge the power or potential of the medium, but merely calls attention to the need for further intellectual engagement.

The innovative scholar of videogames Ian Bogost (2007) is perhaps the first to attempt to design explicitly political videogames: his game 'Howard Deans for Iowa' (Persuasive Games, 2003), which enabled players to run an election campaign for US Democratic Party member Howard Deans, was a landmark in this respect. In 2004 he was commissioned by Illinois House Republicans to build a game that would communicate to the electorate the complexities of their policies on medical malpractice, local development and educational standards. Since then, a number of other election games have appeared, including one from a major publisher Ubi-soft (2004), *The Political Machine*, and it has become relatively commonplace for political parties and candidates in the USA to commission their own games at election

time.

The rhetorical force of these political games is based on the idea that videogames allow players to *embody* and *experience* the actions and positions of another, and hence (depending on the success of the particular rhetorical devices employed) the game might actually *change* the player (and her politics). There is a fascinating and potentially powerful 'politics of becoming' waiting to be explored here. Hence, controlling the feedback that a player receives following her actions is a delicate process of persuasion; this is the key to expressing political intent in this media.

At present, there is very little work on videogames from the perspective of political theory. The field is far behind that of film or literary studies, where the intersections between the particularities of the media and political discursivity have been creatively and critically explored. By extension, there is very little work that seeks to tackle questions of how videogames operate on or within the new techno-political public sphere. And finally, there is no body of theoretical literature that provides the tools of literacy for political expression in this medium: there is no guide to critiquing or programming political intent in a videogame.

One of the goals of this project will be to fill in some of these gaps, drawing findings from the science fictional field of Japan. The results will take the form of the development of a methodology for the critique of videogames as political expression; the analysis of a corpus of science fictional games in Japan to sketch the contours of the field's political landscape; an analysis of how this medial landscape interacts with the Japanese public sphere; and finally the development of a simple, original science fiction game that expresses a distinctly Japanese vision of future politics. These results should contribute to a greater understanding of contemporary Japanese society, to the dimensions of the emerging techno-political public sphere in other technologically advanced societies, and to the ability of the academy to intervene in this important new political media.



Final Fantasy X, Square Enix, 2001

*The science fictional field:*

When I talk about the science fictional field that will be used to delimit this project's investigations into the new politics and new public sphere in Japan, I am embracing an established tradition of utilizing the genre of science fiction (SF) as a site for political expression and critique. Since its inception as a field of academic inquiry, scholarship has focused on SF as an exercise in 'cognitive estrangement' (Suvín 1969), emphasizing its radical political mission to build 'imaginative frameworks that are alternative to the author's empirical environment' (Suvín 1988:37). Indeed, early attempts to establish the canon (or 'megatext', Broderick 1994:xiii) were guided by the principle that all significant literature must be anti-capitalist (Suvín 1988:10) and must contribute to the demystification of the people of capitalist polities. Since the end of the Cold War, amidst the 'crisis of political theory' in which political theorists are searching for alternatives to a pervasive liberal-capitalism (Dallmayr 1999; Goto-Jones 2007; Freedman 2007), Fredric Jameson has argued that in the face of 'the invincible universalism of capitalism' there was only one theoretical opportunity for innovation and Difference (in the West): 'there is no alternative to Utopia' (Jameson 2005:xii).

Utopias and other science fictions serve a dual function: first, to provide visible evidence of the possibility of difference from the present status quo (with varying degrees of possibility, realism and fantasy); and second, to speculate on the various forms (and the political implications of those forms) of alternative political schemas. Indeed, the place of fictional utopias and dystopias in political thinking is well-established (Simona 2006; Parrinder 1999; Moylan 2000; Baccolini 2003; Davis 2005), but their urgency in the context of a political crisis is new. The ways in which people interact with these visions will be contingent upon their medium of expression.

Given the emphasis of SF on the 'encounter with the Other,' it is particularly fitting that the field should also consider non-European visions. However, like the rest of writing on SF (and on political theory), the nature and content of non-Western (especially Japanese) utopias and dystopias is largely overlooked. Nonetheless, just as George Orwell and Karel Capek utilised SF in Europe, so creatives like Shirow Masamune and Oshii Mamoru utilise animanga in modern Japan, providing carefully considered and intricately political futurities. Indeed, Shirow's *Appleseed* animanga saga (1985-2007) is perhaps the most fully realised vision of a future society

in any country; but how is its rhetorical force different in its variations forms across different media?

Cognitive estrangement also functions meta-physically in SF, exploring the limits of the human through the (imaginative) development of new technologies (Schneider 2008; Myers 1989; Goto-Jones 2008a). In this way, SF investigates the foundations of human selfhood, the integrity of the body, the nature of consciousness, as well as questions of gender and race (Bukatman 1993; Attebery 2002; Larbalestier 2006; DeGraw 2006; Tucker 2004). In Europe this discourse has placed Mary Shelly, HG Wells and George Orwell into the company of Max Weber (the 'iron-cage' of mechanized society) and Martin Heidegger (the self-alienation of Being in the face of *techne*); in Japan an entire sub-genre of SF has evolved (the 'mecha') that continues from the politico-metaphysical positions of great modern philosophers such as Miki Kiyoshi and Nishida Kitarô (Driscoll 1994). In many cases, SF speculations are triggered by the possibilities of real scientific advances, and hence express possible futurities or political configurations (Hayles 1999; Haraway 1991; Broderick 2002). Indeed, Fukuyama, who once heralded the end of (political) history (1992), argues that it is technology that moves us into the posthuman future (2002) and hence calls for an analysis of competing visions of that future.



Aramaki Shinji, *Appleseed*, 2004

**Significance (potential contribution to science, technology and/or society):**

The development of new technologies changes the dimensions of the public sphere and demands new types of literacy from those who want to engage (or who are responsible for engaging) in it. In different geo-cultural and medial sites, the political content of the public sphere will utilize different technologies and grammars to express potentially innovative political ideas. Following the end of the Cold War, the field of political thought has been searching for difference and innovation in new places.

This project aims to provide a new methodology to define literacy in techno-cultural products (anime, manga, videogames), which are characteristic of a new public sphere in Japan (and emanating from it around the world); it aims to analyse this techno-culture as it is manifested within the field of science fiction – itself an established part of the public sphere – and hence to provide sophisticated critiques of the political force and potentials of these voices in contemporary society. Using a common genre to cross medial boundaries also enables this project to critically assess the particular rhetoric and grammar of each media, and hence help to provide coherent and useful definitions of these slippery categories.

The results should deepen our knowledge of human experience and political consciousness in modern Japan, but they should also be of relevance for any technologically advanced (or advancing) society. Furthermore, the identification of literacy standards in diverse techno-cultural media will facilitate the intervention of academia within burgeoning areas of the public sphere from which it is largely excluded at present. Hence, the project ultimately aims to diversify our sense of political rhetoric, and our ability to comprehend and express political positions in persuasive ways. This new politics should help to end irrational ‘moral panics’ (or at least transform them into rational ones!) and encourage creative and constructive engagement.

Dealing with new media from a non-European context requires the development of a new set of methodological tools, and this development is a central task of the project. However, the process need not start from nothing, since there are already a number of leads to follow. Most particularly, as already discussed, there is an interesting and sophisticated critical literature about animanga and videogames in Japan itself: for this project, then, Japan is not merely the location of case studies, but

also a course of theoretical innovation about globalized cultural products.

Of particular interest here is the work of Azuma Hiroki and his notion of ‘gamic-realism’ (2007), which is a way of interrogating *meaning* rather than *narrative* in (what he takes to be) postmodern Japan. Indeed, he insists that a central characteristic of (serious) animanga and videogames since 1995 (the moment at which *Shinseiki ebuangerion* was released) is the collapse of grand narrative and the evocation of what he terms the visual database. Rather than searching for a subterranean narrative that is hidden behind the images of animanga or videogames, he argues that the ‘otaku’ draws meanings directly from the unit-images themselves. He associates this with the radical flattening of hierarchies that characterizes the ‘superflat’ art movement (which has been made famous worldwide by Murakami Takashi (2000) and others). In other words, Azuma eschews the top-down unificatory principles of systemic narratives, and argues rather that Japanese techno-culture should properly be considered as a bottom-up constellation of floating units that are ordered in the process of participation with them: meaning becomes an effect rather than a cause of the images. In this model, the author vanishes as a principle of systematism (or at least is drawn into complicity with the viewer). This means that there is a sense in which all Japanese techno-culture is interactive, not only games. Furthermore, it means that ‘audiences’ interact with these media in terms of units of meaning rather narratives. Azuma is able to show, for instance, that otaku use internet search engines to assemble databases of common elements from different animanga: big eyes, fluffy ears, mechanical (mecha) bodies etc. This ‘databasification’ of the audience’s engagement with techno-culture has radical consequences for the study of meaning and rhetoric in the public sphere.

Interesting, there is some common ground between Azuma’s vision of a postmodern techno-culture and recent work in Videogames Studies in the USA. In particular, the work of Ian Bogost (2006) on so-called ‘unit operations’ as a method for critiquing videogames resonates closely with Azuma, albeit without approaching postmodern principles. For Bogost, the ongoing debate in the literature of Videogames Studies (between methods that emphasise narrative and those that focus on ludology) misses the point that videogames are a new media that require new methods and literacies to access. Rather than trying to push videogames into the confines of methods developed for other media, Bogost suggests

that meaning in videogames should be drawn from their 'unit operations,' by which he means identifiable units of function or action. He differentiates *active* readings of 'unit operations' from *static* readings of 'system operations'; this differentiation approximates Azuma's distinction between the bottom-up database and the top-down narrative. It also echoes Heidegger's (1977) distinction between the totalizing and stagnating process of Gestell (Enframing) and the active, haptic process of Bringing-forth or poesis. In addition, this model has the advantage of mirroring the 'object oriented' nature of modern computer programming languages, like C++ and Java, and hence it approaches an approach to critique that reflects the process of authorship.

The result is that Bogost is able to conceive of a method to compare videogames in terms of critical rhetoric: looking at (say) the ballistics model in Final Fantasy (Square Enix) against the ballistics model in Pokemon (Nintendo), how does each affect the experience of game-play and hence what does each communicate to the player? Does shooting someone require patience, skill and timing, or does a simple and careless button press do the trick? When you shoot, what is fired from your gun? Was it a gun or a spitting-flower? Is the effect of killing someone always to your advantage, or do you need to be selective? Do people die? How does it happen? Are the ballistic models actually the same (ie. powered by the same 'engine code' as a licensed IP)?<sup>5</sup> By collecting together answers to these unit operations from various videogames, it is possible to affect a model of possibilities and their rhetorical force. In many ways, this approximates Azuma's 'databasification.'

If Azuma and Bogost suggest the beginnings of a method for interrogating all techno-cultural products in the same way, it must also be remembered that there are important differences between the media involved. It is simply untrue to maintain that narrative is no longer important in any anime or manga (although its place in videogames is certainly problematic). Hence, narrative does often provide part of the rhetorical force of these media, and thus narratology becomes an important aspect of this project. In addition, treating all of the media together risks obfuscating the characteristics that make them unique (in comparison with each other, and in general): the static but sequential imagery of manga; the animated artistry of anime; and the interactive nature of videogames. Hence, each of the subprojects in this VICI will focus on a specific medium (anime, manga or videogames), trying to understand the ways in which these various approaches can complement each other in mak-

ing a sophisticated reading: unit operations, narrative and interactivity will be combined in appropriate ways for each medium.

In order to facilitate the development of this plural methodology, the research team will meet at regular workshops to discuss their findings about the state of the art in terms of methodology in their medium, and also to test their findings about the rhetorical force of key unit operations and narrative themes in their own projects. Because the science fictional field of Japan circumscribes all of the projects, such comparisons should be practicable.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that political discussion does not only take place within specific products or even within particular media, but also that it takes place between them. In some cases, franchises transcend specific media (Pokemon and Final Fantasy, for instance, are now anime, manga, videogames, trading cards, miniatures, toys, jewelry etc.). On the one hand, this means that the team needs to be sensitive to the ways in which meanings are disputed *within* this technological public sphere, rather than merely translating the meanings into academic prose (eg. following debates about the impact of digital technology on democracy as it blossoms between especially influential presentations in specific manga, to anime, and to videogames). And on the other hand, the team needs to be aware of the way in which these media 'converge' into giant multiple-media super-products with rhetorical powers of their own (Jenkins 2006).

In each case, believing that an important way of understanding how meanings are implemented in techno-culture is to construct those meanings yourself, the research team will jointly work on a short series of political manga, anime shorts, and a simple videogame in an object-oriented language. Success here will mean that the team will be able to participate in the techno-cultural public sphere rather than simply critique it from without. An exhibition at the end of the project will showcase the results, alongside more conventional publications.



Armaki Shinji, *Appleseed*, 2004

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<sup>2</sup> In some ways, this communication technology assists in the transformation of the public sphere into a denationalized 'rhetorical sphere,' premised on issues rather than the identity of the 'public' involved in discussion. This is part of the globalization debate.

<sup>3</sup> Between 1988 and 1989, Miyazaki kidnapped, mutilated and killed four young girls. The press emphasised that his house was full of anime and manga, and he became known as 'the otaku murderer.' The link between his interest in these media and his crimes was never formally established. He was executed on 17 June 2008, just nine days after the so-called Akihabara Massacre, which saw a series of stabbings and murders take place in the video-game/animanga centre of Tokyo.

<sup>4</sup> In recent years, videogames such as the controversial Grand Theft Auto series (Rockstar Games) have also been recognized as art, and the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) now as an annual Video-games Awards.

<sup>5</sup> Intriguingly, it is also possible that the same 'game' engine codes might be used in some CGI animated features, opening up the possibility that, for instance, Major Kusanagi (Ghost in the Shell) fires her weapons under the same laws of physics in different media: but what would the effect of this be on the audience? Do they expect physics engines to be the same in anime, manga and videogames? What happens if they are different?



Established in September 2007, Asiascape.net is the home of the Contemporary East Asian Media Centre (CEAMC). It is an attempt to build a new international research coalition in the rapidly emerging fields of cyberculture (New Media, Convergence Culture, Video Games and other related media, such as fan-culture) and animanga (Anime and Manga), especially as they relate to (or originate from) East Asia.

It is well known that a large proportion of this type of media emerges from the East Asian region (Japan, China and Korea), and Asiascape seeks to sponsor and organize research into the importance of these media as a series of transformative, cutting edge, transnational global commodities, and/or as a series of cultural products that reveal much about East Asia itself.

There is a scattered (and growing) group of international researchers working in this field and, in addition to conducting its own original research, Asiascape aims to provide a hub for the organization and direction of this rapidly emerging field. With an international advisory board of leading scholars, Asiascape will sponsor a series of 'state of the field' conferences and disseminate research using new and old media, including via this website and its associated news-blog, vistas: <http://vistas.asiascape.net>

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