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Introduction

Does the idea of “Cool Japan” have a place in a post-3/11 world? The images of the tsunami and the ensuing devastation have been etched in the minds of people around the globe, and one wonders whether this singular event will permanently transform the image of Japan, both at home and abroad. In the wake of the “triple disaster,” could it be that Japan will go from *kakkoi* (cool) to *yabai* (dangerous)? This special issue of the *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, co-edited by researchers from Japan and the USA, draws together articles from both countries in an effort to imagine possible futures for analysis for these and other questions related to Japan’s global status. Taken together, the articles show that Cool Japan was never a singular designation, nor was it necessarily all that it seemed, and so the authors take different, though complementary, approaches. Each offers a critical perspective on various aspects of the popular in Japan, whether music, animation, manga, fashion, or art, to explore ways of re-evaluating “cool” in light of recent developments.

The article by Ian Condry uses examples from Japanese popular culture to examine the dynamic interplay between social contexts and cultural action. He argues that music provides a model for cultural movements that do not attack power directly, but rather operate through a slippery, insidious, “end-around” strategy of change that gains its force from recontextualizing social logics. The elements of “cool” are less important than the lessons to be taken from looking at how framing cultural production produces new kinds of value. Some features of music foreshadow a few of the contemporary developments in social media, and may point to untapped potentials for subverting,

and possibly transforming, enduring structures of power and inequality.

The next article by Laura Miller contributes to an understanding of gendered aspects of Cool Japan ideology as found in government-sponsored texts and imagery, as well as in other international arenas. She demonstrates that Cool Japan reifies and officially promotes male geek culture, by displacing to the margins female innovations and creativity in cultural production. This discussion shows that Cool Japan’s *otaku* (obsessive fan) ethos tends to erase, trivialize, or ignore women and girls who fail to conform to a narrow model of cute femininity. Cool Japan ideology, as promoted by government officials among others, thus promotes enduring structures of gender stratification.

The next two articles focus on the transnational production system of media and cultural products, and problematize the way in which the Japanese government naturalizes national borders. Yoshitaka Mōri draws attention to the transnational division of labor in the production of “Japanese” anime, examining how the anime industry developed since the mid-1960s to the present. The international connections in both production and consumption of Japanese popular culture indicate that we need more nuanced understandings of globalization and of meanings of the popular. Although anime is seen both as a cultural product from Japan and as an export in the recent Cool Japan promotion projects that the Japanese government is now pursuing, in fact, anime has been a very hybridized product in the transnational production system, in particular relying on workers in South Korea and China. As these countries develop their own animation industries,

there could be a further erosion in the already difficult position of Japanese animators.

The research conducted by Yuiko Fujita looks at another side of Cool Japan, namely, fashion, design, and contemporary art, based on in-depth interviews with young professional artists and designers working in London, New York, and Paris. She explores how these practitioners negotiate their cultural identities in subtle ways. They often resist the pressure to represent Japan, but they have to do so strategically given the constant expectation by those in the media and art worlds of the West, as well as those in Japan, which constantly remind the public that such artists are expected to be “Japanese.”

Finally, Jonathon E. Abel’s essay discusses the possibilities (and impossibilities) of a “Cool Japanology.” He offers a reading of different dimensions of “cool” and cautions against defining a field of study around Cool Japan, a stance, he notes, that instantly turns its object of study into something “uncool.” As an alternative, he uses the example of the 2009 anime film *Summer Wars* to give insight into thinking about *otaku*, *hikikomori* (shut-ins), and collective action. It is here that he finds reason for optimism.

What these essays share is an urge to go beyond the common formulations of Cool Japan that have been in circulation since 2002, when the journalist Douglas McGray coined the term “gross national cool.” At the time, he argued that the global strength of the nation’s popular culture meant that Japan was “reinventing superpower,” and some media watchers and government officials took him at his word. Meanwhile, in academia, widening efforts to include more media and popular culture in the formal study of Japan has been a welcome addition to more traditional approaches to the country through literature and cinema. But as the essays collected here make clear, the excitement over Japanese popular culture’s ability to connect people around the world

has been tempered by a realization that popularity can lead to new kinds of distortions as well. The goal of including more types of cultural production in the study of Japan has still left out many people, including young women and their creative provocations, as Miller points out. Similarly, an emphasis on anime as “Japanese” can in effect erase the substantial contributions other Asian people have made, and continue to make, to animation production. Fujita shows that Japan’s visibility on the global stage can limit the freedom of Japanese artists, some of whom feel hemmed in by stereotypical understandings of what the nation represents. Abel and Condry draw attention to the spaces around “cool” in an effort to track broader social dynamics.

The authors collected here represent only a small fraction of academic work worldwide that is interested in re-evaluating Cool Japan. We, the editors, hope this collection can make a small contribution to those broader efforts. We remain confident that a focus on global media and popular culture is a valuable direction for research, provided, of course, that we maintain a critical stance and keep a focus on the people most directly impacted by the kinds of analysis that unfolds. In that regard, the dynamics of Cool Japan, regardless of the longevity of the term itself, should provide clues for the cultural connections, dangerous distortions, and critical potential of popular culture in a way that can contribute to the rebuilding and rethinking of Japan’s challenges in the aftermath of 3/11. At least, that is our desire.

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Post-3/11 Japan and the Radical Recontextualization of Value: Music, Social Media, and End-Around Strategies for Cultural Action

IAN CONDRY

Abstract: The disasters of 3/11 provoked a global outpouring of emotion towards the suffering in Japan. In many ways, this singular event seemed to refigure the meanings of community and technology by drawing attention to the fragility of human control in times of disaster. Although the long-term consequences remain uncertain, this radical recontextualization of value points to a way of thinking about broader processes of change, a contrast to cultural analysis that proceeds by directly critiquing structures of power on their own terms. If we look to processes whereby a new context can be the impetus that undermines seemingly entrenched interests, we might find inspiration for alternative forms of critique and action. Music provides a model for cultural movements that do not attack power directly, but rather operate through this kind of slippery, insidious, “end-around” strategy of change that gains its force from recontextualizing social logics. These features of music foreshadow some of the contemporary developments in social media, and may point to untapped potentials for subverting, and possibly transforming, enduring structures of power and inequality.

Keywords: music, social media, cultural action

Introduction

In a recent essay, the novelist Junot Diaz discusses the power of natural disasters, especially in light of the Haiti earthquake of January 2010, in terms of their ability to open our eyes. They give us a chance, he says, “to see the aspects of our world that we as a society seek to run from, that we hide behind veils of denials” (Diaz, 2011). He notes that natural disasters are always “social disasters,” that is, disasters made possible by “the often-invisible societal choices that implicate more than those being drowned or buried in the rubble” (Diaz,

2011). With natural disasters we encounter a radical recontextualization of our daily assumptions. We are brought face-to-face with our precarious positions in an unpredictable world, and reminded of the importance of re-calibrating our understandings of the sources of our collective well-being.

If we are to identify innovative ways of bringing about social change, we might benefit by thinking of critique in terms of highlighting new contexts. We can see this by considering the dynamics of music, and by extension social media. Music and social media are similar in the sense that they both draw our attention away from media as

packaged or broadcast object, and towards questions of performativity and the networked interactions between artists, fans, and other participants in a community of shared interests and activity. Music slides fluidly between categories, a kind floating free radical that can attach to diverse projects: neoliberal copyright enforcement versus communitarian piracy networks, soundtracks with reactionary or progressive messages, local or global identity formations, almost always imbued with markers of race, class, and gender. In this respect, music provides a fascinating perspective on “social media” by showing us that the *social in media* is best viewed as an analytical approach on what media does, rather than as the capabilities of particular online platforms. Facebook no more defines “social media” than the compact disk defines “music.” Rather, Twitter, YouTube, Nico Nico Dôga and the rest give us a new sense of media not as something we watch, but as something we do, a “doing” that gains meaning from our embeddedness in specific social networks. If we view this as a change in context rather than a change in form, we might gain insight into new kinds of social dynamics that can emerge when unusual connections are made. In this essay, I want to explore what “radical recontextualization” might suggest for alternative routes to change.

Questions of context become especially significant in thinking about contemporary Japan following the 11 March 2011 earthquake. Nascent anti-nuclear power activism came to life in the context of Fukushima Daiichi’s ongoing crisis, and we might see in this a reminder that change can be nearer at hand than we might think. Radical shifts in our assumptions can alter what we value and how we act, sometimes through the linking of once-disparate spheres. In that spirit, I use an eclectic range of examples: disaster in Japan, new directions in Japanese hip-hop, the excesses of neoliberalism, and the unlikely success of a crowd-sourced

virtual idol. Overall, I am interested in end-around strategies for social change, and I am inspired by the ways radical recontextualization can force us to reconsider the workings of value within competing cultural logics.

Japan’s Triple Disaster

The people in Japan now face what is being called a “triple disaster” of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear crisis. The tsunami appears to have wreaked the most havoc, devastating entire communities in parts of Japan’s northeast (Tôhoku) region, killing around 25 000 people, and leaving hundreds of thousands homeless. Like so many people, I was stunned watching the video footage of a black wall of water, carrying burning houses, tossing around cars and boats, and pushing forward a liquid avalanche of debris that swallowed everything in its path (Fig. 1).

I was reminded that our existence on the human scale, where I spend most of my time thinking and living, is small and fragile when compared to the planetary scale of shifting tectonic plates and vast oceans. Additionally, the crisis at the Fukushima nuclear reactors highlights frightening limits of human control in dealing with complexities of nuclear fission. At the same time, while



Figure 1. Footage of the 11 March 2011 tsunami on YouTube

newspapers in the USA focus on the nuclear crisis and the disaster relief efforts in the north (or lack thereof), friends and colleagues who live in Tokyo reported that a different source of anxiety plagued them. Even more than fears of radioactivity, they found that the ongoing aftershocks, which in other times would be reported as major earthquakes, kept them constantly on edge. Something happens when our everyday frames of understanding are overrun by a radical shift in context.

Of course, the impacts of large-scale events like “natural disasters” depend tremendously on a history of human decision-making, economic development, and other social factors. Consider the contrast between the devastation from the 7.0 earthquake in January 2010 in Haiti, with estimates of between 100 000 and 300 000 dead, or the quake in the Sichuan region of China (at least 68 000 dead from an 8.0 quake), including the unthinkable tragedy of thousands of schoolchildren (almost all from one-child families) crushed in faulty school buildings. The massive tsunami caused by a 9.2 earthquake in the Indian Ocean in December 2004 is estimated to have caused around 227 000 deaths, mostly in Indonesia. In northeastern Japan, recent estimates of casualties are much lower, thanks in part to technological advances in earthquake-resistant buildings and tsunami warning systems. Economic and technological development may turn out to be a double-edged sword, as we wait to see how the nuclear crisis will unfold (Fig. 2).

In any event, these spectacles of human suffering across our television and computer screens clearly cause an outpouring of emotion, a sense that the world is not as it should be, and this prompts a desire to do something. As a “singular event” that will shape Japan for years, if not decades, to come, we have the opportunity to think about how moments like this can be catalysts for change. Since the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, I have often wondered, and



Figure 2. Radiation fears, *NY Times*, 19 March 2011, article by Ken Belson

now I am reminded again, of how things might be different if we viewed ourselves living in a post-tsunami world, rather than a post-9/11 world. What if America’s “war on terror” were instead a “war on human suffering”? How different would the US government’s policies around “security” and “global connectedness” be?

Natural disasters operate as focal points in media spectacles, and the volatility of emotional responses can ripple through the social and economic fabric of our world in unexpected ways. Media activist and scholar Stephen Duncombe argues that progressives could learn from the efficacy of utopian media spectacles, even adopting them as vehicles for progressive change through the portrayal of how people’s hopes and dreams can be realized (Duncombe, 2007). Social disasters are a different kind of revelation, portraying instead the human work that still needs to be done.

Many musicians worldwide responded to the disaster with lyrics about the emotional weight of the tragedy and hopes for a brighter future. For example, consider these lyrics from a rapper called Toshihiro in his collaboration with SIN (pronounced “shin”). They released this song “Rising Sun—Pray for Japan” for free online, later selling it on iTunes and donating the money to disaster relief.

SIN (Kaminari) "Rising Sun—Pray for Japan," first verse

大稔 (NCC) Toshihiro (NCC crew)

何が偽善？何が見える？ What's hypocrisy?
What can you see?

ジタンダ踏んでるMOTHA F*CKIN' DAYS mother
f*cking days of stomping, helpless
現状ため息混じりのBLESS mixed with a sigh,
because we also are blessed

。。。

今家族、仲間はどうなんだ？ how is my family
doing? where are my friends?

人混み彷徨う不安と孤独 the crowds wandering,
stressed and alone

早まる足と高まる鼓動 feet running faster, pulse
climbing higher

感情と情報が行き交う歩道 a back-and-forth of
emotion and information

忍び寄る恐怖の波が襲う a wave of fear sneaking
up unnoticed

あの時止まった時間と日常 when time and daily
life came to a stop

奪われた夢とか希望 stolen dreams and hopes

闇夜が照らす異常な地上 darkness lit by an
uncommon earth

ただ自問自答何が理想？ it's time to ask our-
selves, what matters?¹

The video shows many of the striking images of the disaster: burning houses floating in a black morass of tsunami water, the flooding of Sendai airport, the explosions at Fukushima Daiichi. As we hear in this song, there is a sense that the context for thinking about hopes and dreams has changed, and the rapper feels an urge to re-evaluate what really matters. It is this emphasis on value and rearranged contexts that is suggestive for thinking more broadly about cultural politics today.

How many billionaires does it take?

Traditional politics through governments seem increasingly ill-equipped for dealing

with the challenges facing the world's population today, whether with the microdynamics of global poverty or with macro-storms, such as climate change, on the horizon. In Japan, the failure of the government to deal with the scale and scope of the triple disaster reinforces the idea that political institutions are lacking in ability, even if they have good intentions. Meanwhile, the global order in recent decades has led to an intensification of a process that the songwriter Leonard Cohen identified years ago: "The poor stay poor, the rich get rich/That's how it goes, and everybody knows." Diaz's essay notes this widening inequality as well: the "World Bank reports that in 1960 the per capita GDP of the twenty richest countries was eighteen times greater than that of the twenty poorest. By 1995 that number had reached 37." Even within wealthy countries like the US and Japan, the divide between winners and losers is widening. We do not need more proof that globalization continues to be an engine of increasing inequality; the question is what to do about it.

Why not a direct redistribution of wealth? At MIT, Esther Duflo, Abhijit Banerjee and others have created the Poverty Action Lab, which aims to assess empirically the effects of different strategies for economic development among the very poor (povertyactionlab.org). In their book *Poor Economics*, their idea for a "radical rethinking of the way to fight global poverty" is described in terms of the importance of empirical studies of what works (Banerjee and Duflo, 2011), but could be read as well as a reminder of the need to look closely and sensitively at the desires and hopes of the poor themselves in the contexts in which they live. In other words, change comes by dealing with contexts as well as actions. In that spirit, I think we also need an Anti-Wealth Action Lab, which would work to take money from the ultra-rich to share with those less fortunate, or at least to do more to bring the discussion of the needs of the poor into conversation with the expansion of the super-

rich. *Forbes* magazine reported in 2010 that the world saw a growth in the number of billionaires, now 1011 of them, and that “last year’s economic wasteland has been a billionaire bonanza. Most of the richest people on the planet saw their fortunes soar in the past year” (Miller and Kroll, 2010). In whatever forms in which we imagine contemporary empire to take, surely this is one aspect of it. These spectacular outrages of excess accumulation continue, yet somehow the old idea of direct redistribution of this wealth never gets off the ground. It would be “naïve,” as people say.² The rich and powerful are simply too rich and powerful to allow change, at least that is the common argument.

I wonder, though, to what extent might this be learned helplessness? As I read David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, I get a clear sense of the interlocking forces that give ideas of “freedom,” especially the “free market,” such traction, but I am not sure that identifying these power structures is the best way to transform them (Harvey, 2005). The cultural logic begins to seem all-encompassing and all-powerful. We might learn from a loose reading of Karl Marx: he was right about capitalism, but wrong about revolution. He accurately describes the exploitation that arises from the concentration of power in the hands of those who control the means of production, but he was wrong in predicting that a clear understanding of this injustice would lead to proletarian revolt. Arguably, the Marxist critique of global capital is now accepted as commonsense. Corporations profit by extracting surplus value from the labor of workers. A statement like that doesn’t lead to revolt; it is viewed as corporations’ responsibility to improve “shareholder value” (Harvey, 2005; Ho, 2009). When critique becomes commonsense without initiating change, new forms of critique are needed.

An intriguing example of change involves policies and practices around smoking in

public spaces. I am still amazed to walk into music clubs in Boston and New York and find the air not filled with smoke. I never thought it would happen. For years, I had heard that the tobacco companies were too wealthy and powerful, and that they could use their lobbyists to control lawmakers in such a way that public policy would side with the industry on almost all issues. (This is something we hear about the US handgun industry as well.) At the risk of oversimplifying a more complicated process, “second-hand smoke” became a lightning rod that attracted attention and changed the equation of public smoking. What once was viewed as an individual right (to smoke and kill myself if I want to) became transformed into an infringement on the rights of others (to live and work in safe environments). It seemed like overnight that the music clubs where I often spend my time went from choking, smoke-filled boxes, to smoke-free spaces that now smell more like ammonia, rotting beer, and sweat. This change is spreading globally as well, albeit in fits and starts, and even in Japan, smokers are increasingly segregated into closed rooms at train stations and at work.

What’s most interesting is that the change came about without challenging the US tobacco lobby on its own terms. Anti-smoking activists didn’t accumulate a massive war chest of money to pay lobbyists to prod lawmakers to change their minds about smoking directly. Rather, the idea of “secondhand smoke” operated as a kind of end-around play (i.e., not charging up the middle of the defense, to use a football metaphor). If we want a change in the dynamics of global and local inequalities, the underlying issues of social disasters, then we need more of these game-changing solutions that not only assemble the “factors in the equation,” but change the very nature of the equation itself.

Social media offers numerous opportunities for similar kinds of end-around plays, enabling new kinds of organizing and com-

munication. We have seen that remarkably in the “Arab Spring,” especially in Egypt and Tunisia, albeit with long-term consequences very much uncertain. Still, we see that change depends not only on understanding the structures of power, but also on determining what alternative structures of action can emerge. It may mean looking in unlikely places, and it certainly means considering unintended consequences. (To be honest, I had always assumed that the USA would deal with its handgun problem—upwards of 50 000 deaths per year—before its problem of smoky bars and restaurants. I also wish the anti-smoking changes could have been less all-or-nothing; such radical shifts seem particularly unforgiving once set in motion.) Music, it seems to me, can provide clues to this by illustrating some of the potentials of social media for creating new sources of meaning by generating new contexts for discussion, sharing, and exchange.

An important analytical step then may be to consider competing formulations of value and action, and to see how they can be amplified, extended, and put to work. Along these lines, cultural anthropologist and anti-globalization activist David Graeber encourages us “to look at social systems as structures of creative action, and value, as how people measure the importance of their own actions within such structures” (Graeber, 2001: 230). Through this logical step, the terms of social change—system, structure, value, and action—become available for us to define in ways that need not take as their starting point “neoliberalism” or the “global system” as singular contexts for social life. “Value” as defined by the “free market” does a very poor job, in my opinion, of explaining the motivations for raising a child, participating in amateur sports, becoming an academic, or starting out as an artist. Arguably, we move through divergent universes of value at all times. Still, a caveat is in order. Graeber’s theoretical reformulation of “value” in relation to

structures of creative action only gives us a certain kind of tool, not the solution to our problems. It remains to be seen what can be done with these tools.

Transmedia Musicians and the Faltering Empire of Copyright

Music and neoliberalism intersect around questions of copyright. Much of the history of empire revolves around issues of control and profiteering, so too with copyright, and music is analytically slippery in this context. As many have noted, copyright rests uneasily on paradoxical goals of private rights and public progress (Lessig, 2004; Vaidhyathan, 2004; McLeod, 2005). According to the so-called copyright clause of the US Constitution, the idea is “To promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries” (Article 1, Section 8, Clause 8). In this, copyright confers a limited monopoly to creators, and also encodes a theory of cultural action. But is monopoly on property the best way to promote “Progress”? Even for those who answer “yes,” the affordances of our digital present mean that eliminating online sharing is really not an option.

Music is “slippery” because it does not choose sides. The recording industry made enormous profits in the 1990s with the peak of the compact disk, but music also led the way in illustrating the enthusiasm for (choose your characterization) Internet piracy/unauthorized sharing, which took off with Napster in 1999. After Napster was shut down by a court injunction, I recall a record industry executive quoted in a newspaper saying, “Napster seemed to good to be true, and it was.” Now, however, it looks like the CD was too good to be true for the

recording industry. When CDs first came out in 1982, the price for an album was set higher than the then-leading format cassette tapes. There was good reason. CDs were expensive to produce and they offered advantages over tapes, including “random access,” a more durable media package, and higher-fidelity sound. But when the cost of producing CDs dropped dramatically in the 1990s, the price to consumers went largely unchanged, and the cash flow within record companies increased dramatically. I am not saying the record companies “got what they deserved,” but we should be careful in how we interpret the difficulties faced by record companies today, especially if the 1990s are regarded as the norm.

For some copyleft activists, Napster and its spawn were reason to cheer. Decentralized, democratic, and anti-capitalist, the varieties of peer-to-peer file-sharing demonstrate some of the possibilities of crowdsourced goodness. A “celestial jukebox,” it was once called; now, the wisdom of the “cloud.” While the tech companies who enable this continue to change, the demise of Napster, Kazaa, and others has not led to the collapse of the *social*, that is to say human, networks that insist on sharing copyrighted materials, not just music, but also TV, film, video games, software, books, anime, manga, and of course porn. The platforms change, but as long as there are creators desired by audiences, media communication will continue. In this regard, music, which in media studies often seems relegated to the status of a lesser cousin seated behind film and television, may be better regarded as the predictive early adopter, a bellwether of the future. If that is the case, where might music be heading now?

Japanese Hip-Hop and Contexts for Creative Action

Hip-hop in Japan is an example of what many viewed as an unlikely emergence.

When I began my doctoral research on Japanese rap musicians in 1994, many experts, such as music magazine writers and record company professionals, told me that hip-hop would never take off in Japan. Some people find it odd that Japan has domestic, local-language rap musicians, often, I think, because these skeptics view the (stereotypical) culture of hip-hop, with its braggadocio, gun play, and drug use, as unsuited to the context of Japan’s (stereotypical) culture of reticence, non-violence, and inhibition. The implicit assumption is that culture is a set of patterns that we inhabit, rather than a kind of “field of debate,” that is, a living system of communication that is complexly linked to specific social and historical contexts. I found, however, that specific social contexts for performance, especially nightclubs, provide an explanation for cultural mixtures that some view as contradictory (Condry, 2006). In my fieldwork in Tokyo clubs and recording studios, for a year and a half starting in 1995, and with at least annual visits since then, I found that Japan’s rap music scene developed through competition between families of rap groups, who built followings over time through specific club events. These loose collectives gradually defined divergent trends in local hip-hop, such as party rap versus underground/hardcore styles, or regional variations between Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, Sapporo, and Okinawa (to name a few). Some of these artists broke into pop music stardom, but more generally the scene developed under the radar of mainstream media.

The flow of hip-hop around the world is an example of “globalization from below” in the sense of not being driven by major governments or corporations (at least at first). The paths of this globalization in Japan led through the nightclubs, where musicians, fans, writers, record company execs, and organizers came together to network, socialize, and have fun. These “*genba*” or “actual sites” constitute the contexts in which hip-hop is actualized through performance. In

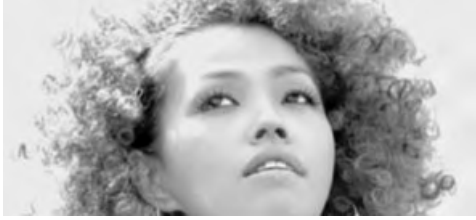


Figure 3. Miss Monday from music video “Believe” (2010)

these spaces, Japanese rappers appeal to images of global American blackness through their clothing, lyrical styles, physicality, sometimes even kinking their hair or tanning their skin, and this performativity of race is central to hip-hop (Fig. 3). What is instructive are the ways that performative contexts both enable and shape the kinds of cultural action taking place, giving value and meaning to such performances by young Japanese artists, and naturalizing their presence over time by producing devoted fans as well.

As the CD era gives way to a mobile, digital future, the power of record companies is on the wane, and musicians are increasingly broadening their connections across media platforms. In addition to a widening reliance on live events, musicians are increasingly working with other media outlets, such as video game companies and, in Japan, anime producers, in an effort to build transmedia alliances as a response to the decline in package (CD) sales. An online music consultancy called E-Talent Bank uses manga (comics) designed to be viewed on cell phones to portray in visual form the lyrics of musicians they want to promote. When I lived in Japan in the fall of 2010, a boom in “anime songs” (or *ani songu*) was highlighted by many record company analysts. Songs used in anime series as opening or closing theme songs, or songs inspired by certain series, bucked the trends and sold well, the theory goes, because anime fans are part of a collector culture that still



Figure 4. Miss Monday/Hello Kitty cross-branding

desires objects, so music is purchased along with figurines and other character-related merchandise. Whatever the reason, this development has helped push record labels and artists to consider the possibilities of non-traditional vehicles for music.

We can see this trend in individual musicians as well. Miss Monday, a female rapper whose career I have followed since 1995, went from being a backup dancer in the nineties to a solo artist in her own right in the 2000s, releasing eight albums and gradually building a fan base that buys her music across platforms. As CD sales declined in the early 2000s, Monday scored hits with two songs for mobile phone ringtones. At one point, when she was between record contracts, she and her manager worked with an independent design company called Floating Moon and cut a deal with San Rio to release Miss Monday/Hello Kitty-branded towels to sell at concerts. The design? Miss Monday’s signature perm afro was drawn onto Hello Kitty (Fig. 4). We should note that this recontextualization of the Afro as Hello Kitty merchandise risks disguising (or even erasing) the meaning of an Afro as a political statement in the USA. Again, we can see that new contexts involve both gain and loss.

In other ways, Miss Monday has sought to build connections away from music sales alone. A song she released in the summer of 2010 was written as the theme music for a Japanese professional basketball team, the

Hitachi Sun Rockers. As further evidence of a shift to new media styles, this was also the first song that she personally released on YouTube.

Media scholar Henry Jenkins has written persuasively about “transmedia storytelling” as a revolution in the ways stories are told through media, across platforms, such that each medium can do what it does best (Jenkins, 2006). For Jenkins, it is the “story” or the “world” that gives coherence across media platforms. I would argue that what we call “transmedia” might be better viewed as further evidence of the centrality of the *social* in media. Our connections to other people are naturally “transmedia;” we don’t think a person is different depending on whether we talk via phone or email. In other words, coherence may have more to do with the social relationships we have, rather than with something internal to a story or world. In fact, there need not even be a celebrity like Miss Monday herself at the center to attract attention; some forms of popular culture can emerge from the crowd itself.

Hatsune Miku: Virtual Idol as Social Media

Case in point: Hatsune Miku, Japan’s most successful virtual idol. She is 16-years-old, she has blue hair, and she doesn’t exist. Or rather, her existence comes from the energy of a community of people who created her songs and her music. She demonstrates new possibilities for an unusual model of musical production—the crowd-sourced idol—and also the value of *not* monopolizing control as a path to success. Others extol the virtues of free culture (Lessig, 2008), Wikipedia-like collaboration (Shirky, 2008), and the free software movement (Kelty, 2008), but Miku seems to be a somewhat different breed, and worth some consideration in her own right. She may be the harbinger of an emerging form of pop creativity.

Miku appeared in August 2007 as an expansion module associated with music synthesizer software called Vocaloid, initially released in 2004. Vocaloid is different than other music synth software in that you can type in words and melody to make music with computer-sung lyrics. Yamaha makes Vocaloid, but a small Sapporo-based company called Crypton Future Media developed the Miku voice. Miku was the first in Crypton’s “character vocal series,” and the release was accompanied by the posting of a cartoon character image with costume and some biographical details (Fig. 5). The site says that she is 16 years old, 158 cm tall (5’2”), and weighs 42 kg (92 lbs), and adds that her specialty is “idol pops and dance-style pop music.”

Significantly, Crypton decided not to control the use of this image, and instead encouraged Miku’s song creators to use the image for fan-made works. Over the past several years, a huge number of fans have made songs featuring Miku, and many of these are posted as music videos to the Japanese video-sharing site Nico Nico Dōga (a name that combines the Japanese word for “smile” with “moving pictures”). Nicodo, as it is sometimes called, is similar to YouTube, except that it encourages users to add comments to the videos themselves so that the comments scroll by as you watch the video. The most viewed Miku video has achieved more than 8 million views, and the comments form a kind of cloud over the images themselves (Fig. 6).

As Miku’s popularity grew, some musicians who created music using her voice began selling on iTunes. Crypton recently worked out a profit-sharing scheme so that fan-made Miku songs that become hits can be streamed to karaoke establishments in Japan. Various companies have been experimenting with their own virtual idols since Date Kyoko’s debut in 1996, but centralized production and control was not successful; crowd-sourced openness generated the first virtual idol star.



Figure 5. Miku’s physical details, Crypton’s site (accessed 31 March 2011)



Figure 6. Most-viewed Miku video, Nico Nico Dôga & comment cloud

It wasn't long before major media companies wanted in on the act. The Japanese video game powerhouse Sega created games under the "Project Diva" title that

built on the Miku phenomenon, including a series of games for the handheld Sony Playstation Portable (PSP) and an arcade game as well. In the fall of 2010, the new Project



Figure 7. Miku “live” on stage and fans with glowsticks. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTXO7KGHtjl> (accessed 4 April 2011)

Diva consoles at one of the Sega arcades in the Akihabara section of Tokyo were cordoned off with a rope to control the crowds, and there were also notebooks set out so fans could contribute their own illustrations of Miku for others to see. The games themselves are a variety of the rhythm genre where you push buttons in time with the music. In the arcade version of the game, the pretense is that you help Miku dance the correct moves (arms and legs) for her music videos.

One of the most remarkable elements of the Miku phenomenon, however, is the live show that Sega created to promote the video games. The concerts featured a hologram-like image projected on-stage while a live band (piano, drums, guitar, bass) played behind “her.” A video of the performance shows a crowd of thousands, many waving fluorescent glow sticks, going wild as she rises up out of the stage, and sings “The World is Mine,” which features lyrics of her scolding any would-be paramours to pay close attention to her needs and desires (Fig. 7).

The Miku phenomenon can be interpreted in many ways, but what jumps out at me is how the energy of a large community of people can gravitate towards something that is just an idea. This is social media in the sense that the connections and actions of a commu-

nity are more central than the “message” or the “means of transmission.” She is “trans-media,” certainly, but more importantly, she is social without being real.³ Rather, we as social beings are eager to give our own energy (both in creating and listening to Miku songs), and that energy is infectious and potentially empowering. Miku demonstrates that providing a means for participation, sharing and community can be a way to channel that energy into unexpected forms of creative action. The importance of Graeber’s definition of “value” and “structures of creative action” can be seen quite clearly in this case because if we work from traditional notions of what prompts creativity (authorial control of copyright, for example) we cannot easily explain this phenomenon. Instead, we need Graeber’s idea that value should be defined by how people gauge the importance of their own actions.

I would add, however, that there are worrisome elements about the directions this Miku creativity takes. I worry about the eroticized cartoon imagery for some of the same reasons that Laura Miller, in this issue, criticizes the “male geek culture” often used by government efforts to stand for “Cool Japan.” There is a risk that retrograde notions of femininity get reproduced and celebrated as if they stood for real women.

Nevertheless, once there is a context in which a critical mass of people cares about Miku, this alters the equation of creativity, opening a space for crowd-sourced innovation to develop under a system of value that is not, at least at first, driven by neoliberal greed.

In some ways, however, Miku is simply an outgrowth of fan practices that can be seen in many other realms as well. Consider the enormous fan convention Comic Market, which is held twice a year in Tokyo. The largest, during 3 days each year in August, draws upwards of half a million visitors who come to check out and purchase the fan-made works, mostly comic books but also video games, illustration books, posters, figurines etc., which are created by the upwards of 30 000 small groups that participate.

An ethnographic study of Comic Market by media scholar Nobushige Shichijo makes an interesting finding regarding the motivations of those who make things to sell. The organizers of the Comic Market describe the aim of the convention as providing a space for free expression. Comic book publishers I interviewed in Japan described the Comic Market as a place where people make money off copyrighted characters owned by others. Shichijo's findings, however, contradict both understandings of the engine of Comic Market. Instead, he found that participants identify their own motivation as primarily "It's fun to make the works themselves" (50%) or, second, "It's fun to have others see my works" (27%). Only 8% said it was because they had a "message they wanted to convey" And far fewer said they do it for money. In other words, the value of participation in a community (or circle of friends) that cares is what makes the fan-made works meaningful. Here are the responses to his survey question: "Why do you make fan-made (*dôjinshi*) works?"

- 作品を作ることそれ自体が楽しいから 49.8%
- Because making works itself is fun
- 作品を人に見てもらえることが楽しい 27.1%

- Because it's fun to have others see my works
- 主張や伝えたいメッセージがあるから 8.1%
- Because I have a message or something to emphasize
- 作品をきっかけに友人やファンを増やす 7.0%
- Because it's a chance to increase my number of friends or fans
- アート活動、表現活動として 5.3%
- As a kind of art activity, or as form of expression
- 作品を販売することで収入を得るため 0.8%
- To make money by selling my works
- その他 1.9%
- Other.

Source: (Shichijo, 2010: 23)

Anyone who participates in some of the do-it-yourself fan communities (anime music videos, fansubs, fan art etc.) may find this obvious. These insights are important, however, in helping us understand that creating a social context for creative action can lead to the emergence of new forms of value and practice. Miku illustrates another example of an end-around strategy to transformative success.

Conclusion

For Japan, 3/11 will stand as a singular event for years to come. Not unlike other disasters before, those of us at a distance awake with a new sensitivity to a vastness of human suffering. The people in the disaster zones, and those with family and friends there, face the most immediate trauma and uncertainty, creating ripples of concern through our social networks. Those of us further away may be more likely to experience the disaster as a kind of tragic spectacle, though one with obvious human reality. Emotions grip us, and they leave a mark. It is natural that we want to help, "natural" because we humans are social beings. But the disaster in Japan can also prompt feelings of helplessness, with many Americans wondering if a

\$10 text message to Red Cross is the best we can do. How might we transform our new media potentials to better take advantage of these feelings of solidarity tinged with a sense of impotence?

A positive step might be towards viewing social media as a shift in context rather than a transformation in content. Might this be a prompt to change our understanding of how we relate to the media around us? Television and YouTube can convey the visual episodes, spectacles of disaster and struggle, but what has altered is (hopefully, ideally) our ability to talk back, or to speak around, in ways that lead to deeper, more meaningful engagement. I see social media as a provocation to participate in new ways, even despite the limitations of the technology as it stands now. I share some of the same skepticism about social media as others—the superficiality of “friending” and the false satisfaction of “clicktivism”—but such critiques focus on the limitations within the system as it stands, not the way it creates new contexts for action that end-around strategies may be able to exploit.

The shift around smoking in public points to a radical recontextualization as well. Those who opposed Big Tobacco did not win by raising more money and hiring more influential lobbyists; the change came from a different direction. It is oversimplified, perhaps, but we might learn from how the innovative idea of “secondhand smoke” reframed the logic of harm (killing myself vs killing others), while maintaining a central logic of “freedom” and “rights.” “Context” is not the only way to view this shift, but somehow a changed context is related to this subversion from the side.

Other examples around transmedia musicians and a virtual idol give us a sense that discrimination and connectedness can be enacted in diverse ways. For musicians like Miss Monday and for others reaching fans through live performances and transmedia connections (manga, anime, games, pro sports), music offers a way to connect,

regardless of the technological platform itself. Hatsune Miku illustrates that crowd-sourced creativity can generate a movement, a celebrity in her own right, yet one whose rights are not owned by any individual or single corporate entity. Taken together, I see these “end-around” strategies as providing a form of social critique that works from radical recontextualization, rather than direct attack. Music’s ability to spread globally, sometimes in support of imperialisms and sometimes at odds with imperialists’ best efforts, reminds us that categories of action are fluid and unstable, and that change may be closer at hand than we commonly assume.

Notes

- 1 For full song/video visit: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0qV3zaPbPY>>.
- 2 Part of the problem, as anthropologist Karen Ho shows, is the cultural logic of (self-identified) “smart,” and usually white, workers at investment banks: they learn to celebrate “liquidation,” an idea and a practice that has led to massive downsizing and rampant job insecurity, as well as record corporate profits and soaring stock prices (Ho, 2009). The march towards shareholder value dominates political discussion, inside and outside companies, and hence the idea of changing that would be viewed as naïve, and “out of touch.”
- 3 In a way, it explains something that I always found mysterious about celebrities. Why can some musicians who seem to lack talent nevertheless become such powerhouses of celebrity? We always try to explain such idols’ success in terms of something special about them (even if it is just being “normal” or “typical,” the dream of the “singer next door”). In Japan, a common explanation for the success of unremarkable idols is that people can relate to someone without talent, and that makes them more likeable (Aoyagi, 2005). But the Miku phenomenon shows that neither internal talent nor an “approachable-ness” is necessary. An idol need not have any personal magnetism at all, indeed, may not even need to exist.

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