

By EDWARD M. GOMEZ

In a globalized economy, comic books, toys, and other popular-culture products from Japan are no longer exotic—they're worldwide hits.

J-pop Goes the Market

Shibuya Station, Tokyo: Every day, dusk gives way to a riot of color lighting up whole façades of high-rise buildings filled with department stores, funky boutiques, hair salons, noodle shops, theme-décor bars, and restaurants. School kids, young adults, and plain-suited “salary men” (office workers) spill out of trains and buses, meet up with friends and fan out into the urban playground of the Japanese capital. For sheer urban energy, there is nothing like Shibuya anywhere in the world.

New York's Times Square is a mere Christmas-tree bulb compared with the cascades of neon and gigantic video screens that illuminate this and other dynamic sections of Tokyo. Among them: Shinjuku, with the

The world's second-largest economy has become known to a new generation of overseas consumers for its “soft” offerings: video games, Hello Kitty trinkets, Pokémon figurines, Yu-Gi-Oh! trading cards, and more.

endless enticements of its nighttime entertainment district, and Roppongi, with its chic shops and legions of trend-chasing fashionistas. Hot zones like these, as well as scores of stores, galleries, and gathering spots spread out around the city, define the cutting edge of an ultra-hip Japan whose outpouring of

unique pop-culture products—*manga* (comic books), *anime* (animated cartoons), Muji design products, outrageous street fashions—are being scooped up by enthusiastic admirers around the world.

Back after more than a decade of recession that hit when its fabled bubble economy burst at the start of the 1990s, Japan Inc. has revamped some of the monolithic corporations that have long been the bulwarks of its capitalist system. Sony, Mitsubishi, Nissan, Toyota, and instant-soup makers Nissin and Maruchan have ridden the wave of globalization with remarkable success in an era of multinational marketing. Even so, many Japanese brands had gone global with determination and skill long before globalization had a name.

Today, though, in a development the architects of Japan's post-World War II “economic miracle” probably never could have imagined, this export-dependent home of the world's second-largest economy has become known to a new generation of overseas consumers not so much for durable goods such as automobiles and electric appliances, but rather, like Hollywood, for its “soft” offerings: video games, Hello Kitty trinkets, Pokémon figurines, Yu-Gi-Oh! trading cards, and more. To their admirers, these products are irresistible, each an instant collector's item. For Japan's economy, they have become vitally important exports.

Sanrio Company Ltd., for example, sells nearly \$1 billion worth of Hello Kitty and other cute-character fancy goods each year;

15 percent of its profits are generated outside Japan. Excitement about Japanese pop-culture products—or “J-pop,” as they are collectively known—can become a mania. In July, more than 40,000 fans turned out for the fifteenth annual Anime Expo, in Anaheim, California, sponsored by the Society for the Promotion of Japanese Animation, a nonprofit organization based there. Many showed up dressed as their favorite *manga* or *anime* characters; among the trade fair's diverse offerings: a seminar about collectible, ball-jointed, *anime*-inspired figurines and a beginners' workshop called “J-pop Culture 101.”

Historically, for American consumers, the encounter with Japanese pop-culture products as we know them dates back to the post-World War II era. A major pop icon of those times whose fame crossed the Pacific was Gojira (“Godzilla” in the American market), the dinosaur-like monster with atomic powers who, as the story goes, was awakened from its prehistoric hibernation by U.S. nuclear testing in the South Pacific after the war. The giant creature made its debut in a 1954 Japanese feature film in which it laid waste to Tokyo. Gojira later appeared on American screens in adapted movie versions that dazzled—and terrified—theater-goers with innovative special effects. For Japanese viewers, though, the beast's rampaging image provided an eerie catharsis; in the immediate postwar era, they related the on-screen havoc to the devastation their country had recently suf-

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Peripatetic aesthetic: edgy fashions and youth-centered trends contribute to Japan's expanding cultural cachet



Edward M. Gomez

ferred, culminating in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Duke cultural-anthropology professor Anne Allison, who has examined the historical conditions in which certain J-pop merchandise has developed over the last half-century, has pointed out that the Gojira story and films were “conjured out of historical events that were deeply real and painfully remembered” in Japan after the war. In her new book, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (University of California Press), she revisits the World War II era to begin tracking the evolution of a variety of Japanese-made playthings and entertainment figures, their links to movies and mass media, and the marketing

plans their creators formulated for them.

Citing the rich sense of fantasy and myth-making that were essential elements of Gojira/Godzilla as a character, a story, and a movie franchise in Japan and the U.S., Allison looks back at that not-so-adorable monster and also at Japanese-created entertainments such as *Go Rangers*, the 1970s children’s television series that later became popular as *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* in foreign markets. The Power Rangers were a team of ordinary teenage boys and girls who became extraordinary cyberwarriors with notable spiritual qualities. For its time, Allison explains, the process of personal transformation the Power Rangers represented was something fresh

in children’s TV fare. For young viewers—who went on to consume a multitude of toys that were marketed in conjunction with the series—the Power Rangers’ heroism was “not only more collective” (a decidedly Japanese social trait), “but also ... more democratic,” Allison notes. With these newfangled characters, she adds, the empowerment of super-heroes became “open to everyone, even women.”

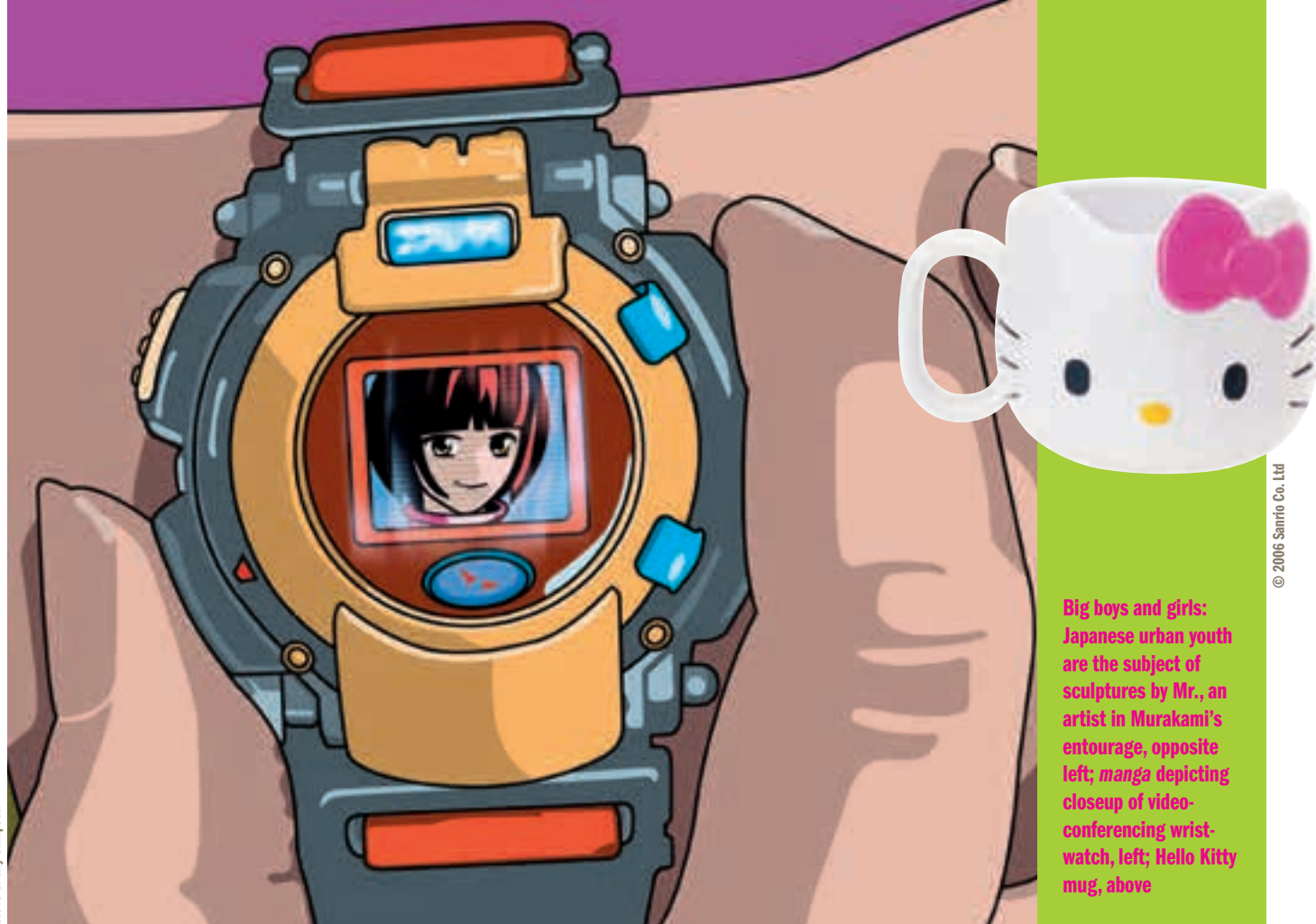
Uniquely Japanese-flavored fantasy could also be seen in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, a 1995-96 TV series that spawned several films. *Evangelion* creator-producer Hideaki Anno’s emotionally complex tales concerned the saving of a future Tokyo from deadly monsters by biomechanical superheroes. Thanks, in part, to the buzz J-pop fans generated on the Internet, *Evangelion* found a foreign audience much more quickly than *Mighty Morphin Power Rang-*

Enticing pop-culture creations today not only allow consumers to imbue them with their own emotion, but also to feel themselves part of the “stories” these products may suggest or explicitly express.

ers. Now, with the success of such entertainment products outside their home market, Allison writes, the “production of kids’ culture” is moving away from its long-standing, main-source market and culture, namely those of the United States. In effect, this production trend already has “decentered” and “recentered” the

international market for such entertainment material. Is there, as Allison points out, a uniquely Japanese aesthetic, mixed with some kind of “mass mythmaking,” that somehow manages to captivate audiences “with an emotional power that registers as ‘true’ while still remaining a fantasy”? If so, it certainly was evident during the Tamagotchi “virtual pets” fad

Steve & Ghy Sampson



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Big boys and girls: Japanese urban youth are the subject of sculptures by Mr., an artist in Murakami's entourage, opposite left; manga depicting closeup of video-conferencing wrist-watch, left; Hello Kitty mug, above

of the late 1990s. Shaped like an egg, Tamagotchi was an electronic gizmo that quickly became popular with children and young working women. Designed to fit in a user’s hand, the device had a little screen and buttons that allowed an owner to “feed” or “play” with it, as though it were a living organism. Tamagotchi’s owners could watch their “pets” develop into different characters during their “lifetimes,” as long as they gave them plenty of attention, like good parents.

Similarly, the use of many products—clothes, cars, fragrances, fast food—allows consumers to derive or project a sense of personal identity. However, Japan’s most enticing pop-culture creations today not only allow consumers to imbue them with

their own emotion, but also to feel themselves part of the “stories” these products may suggest or explicitly express.

Take, for example, Hello Kitty, the grand mistress and face of one of Japan’s all-time, most successful brands. As they do with the characters or stories found in *anime* or *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, consumers around the world can emotionally connect with the more than 20,000 items in the Hello Kitty product line: pencils, notebooks, hair clips, clocks, bed sheets, lamps, microwave ovens, and much more. (A quirky detail: Hello Kitty has no mouth, which makes her a kind of emotional *tab-*

ula rasa, ready for consumers to inscribe with feelings of their own.)

In fact, notes *New York Times* reporter Ken Belson, who, with Brian Bremner of *Business Week*, wrote *Hello Kitty: The Remarkable Story of Sanrio and the Billion Dollar Feline Phenomenon* (John Wiley & Sons, 2003), “Sanrio founder Shintaro Tsuji sees Hello Kitty and other ‘character goods’ as a form of social communication and as entertainment. He sees himself as a purveyor of goodness through the image of these products that are rooted in Japan’s gift-giving culture.” (Most “fancy goods” or “character goods” are designed to be affordable enough for children to easily purchase for themselves or their friends.)

J-POP MILESTONES

In the early postwar period, the first *Gojira* movie hits Japanese movie screens. Later, as *Godzilla*, the atomic monster would terrify American viewers, too.



1954



TV and later appears as Astro Boy on American small screens.

1963

Animator Osamu Tezuka's *Tetsuwan Atom* makes its debut on Japanese

In Japan, Sanrio Company Ltd. introduces Hello Kitty, the über-icon of cute, igniting the market for “fancy” or “character” goods and launching what would become an unstoppable, global brand.



1974

Go Rangers debuts on Japanese television. Years later, American producer Haim Saban discovers the show and revamps it for audiences in the U.S., where it first appears as *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, on the Fox Kids network, in 1993.



1975

Manga artist Go Nagai's stories of robotic Goldorak become a television series that, three years later, would begin airing in France, too.

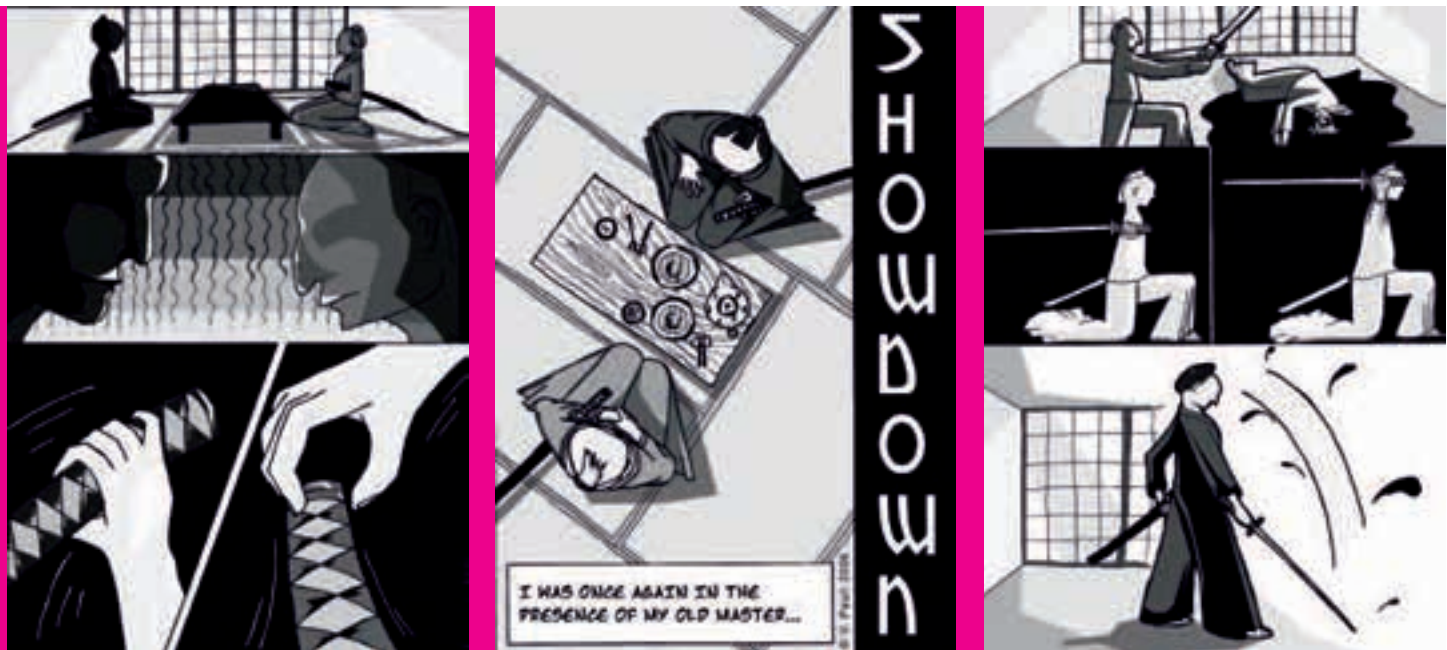


1975



Katsuhiro Otomo's ground-breaking film, *Akira*, is released in the U.S. a year after its debut in Japan. It features major advances in detailed animation techniques, stirring up a second wave of *anime* admiration outside Japan that would swell in the following decade.

1989



Visual identities: Japan's *manga* craze influences international artists such as the UK's Vicki Paull, a sample of whose work is shown above

Such products embody another quality associated with some of the most popular J-pop: cuteness. Known as *kawaii* ("cute things") in Japanese, with their brightly colored, round forms, Hello Kitty and her confrères—the penguin Badtz Maru, the puppy Purin, the baseball-playing frog Keroppi, and the bunny U*SA*HA*NA—are intended to be irresistibly adorable. Sanrio itself and a host of licensees have applied or adapted images of these characters to a profusion of products marketed around the world. All appear on school supplies, and all are conceived as collectibles. But Hello Kitty's mug has graced some more unusual offerings, too, including rice cookers, a Visa credit card, sexy underwear, a vibrator (Sanrio calls it a "personal massager"), and condoms.

"In Japan, there's a really wide range of what's considered *kawaii*," observes Christine Yano, a professor of anthro-

pology at the University of Hawaii who, like Allison, specializes in Japanese popular culture. "Anything can be *kawaii* if it's embraceable; the relationship between the user and the object is one of taking care of something. Even something ugly can be *kawaii*."

Allison notes in her book that, in Japan, even airlines have decorated aircraft with *Pokémon*'s bright-yellow Pikachu character. She cites research conducted by Dentsu, the Japanese advertising company, that has shown that using *kawaii* characters in marketing and merchandising "glues society"—especially a group-oriented society like Japan's—"at its roots." For the Japanese, Dentsu reports, a likable cartoon character (sometimes also called a mascot) functions as a "device for self-realization." It "accompanies the development of a group and becomes part of, and a symbol for, that identity."

Kawaii are ubiquitous in Japan; every bank, railway line, or department

store, as well as many cities and prefectures (provinces or states) have cute-character mascots that appear on posters, in TV commercials, or, in the form of plastic or plush toys, as promotional giveaways. (In turn, the collecting of character toys and figurines, whether they are associated with cartoon shows, films, or comic books—or not—has become a huge trend in Japan and abroad. In the U.S., magazines such as *Giant Robot* and *Juxtapoz* serve as clearinghouses for information about this field, whose showcases are the Kid Robot chain's retail stores in New York, San Francisco, and Santa Monica.)

For some close observers of Japanese society, though, the popular preoccupation with all things *kawaii* is uncomfortably echoed in the fetishization of pubescent and teenage girls in school uniforms (a standard theme in Japanese porn). They also see an unsettling strain of institutionalized cuteness in

the mannerisms young women are taught to affect in, for example, department-store greeter jobs. Dressed in conservative skirt suits, white gloves, and hats, these female store guides and elevator operators spend their days welcoming shoppers or chirping "Going up! Going down!" in high-pitched, unnatural, little-girl voices. (A darker side to the national fascination with *kawaii*: Some of the girls who pour out of Shibuya station after school routinely sell their sexual services to eager male customers. The considerable pocket money they earn presumably allows them to do their part for Japan's economy by buying designer handbags, *manga*, CDs, restaurant meals, and all those Hello Kitty tchotchkes.)

Perhaps inevitably, a backlash against what its detractors have called an unhealthy obsession with cuteness has emerged in Japan. One of its

most prominent critics has been the artist Takashi Murakami, who, for sheer prolificness, is Japan's answer to Andy Warhol. With a legion of assistants at his studios in Tokyo and New York working on an ever-expanding array of fine-art and mass-market projects—paintings, sculptures, plastic-model kits, decorative designs for Louis Vuitton handbags—Murakami is Japan's most famous living artist and something of an international brand in his own right.

Murakami is known as one of the major artist-theorists of what the American art historian Alexandra Munroe has called the "post-Hirohito generation." (The term refers to the emperor who ruled during World War II.) Munroe, an expert on Japanese modern art, is the curator of Asian art at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. In her pioneering research in the field, she has observed that, after Hirohito's death in 1989, young Japanese artists began to openly criti-

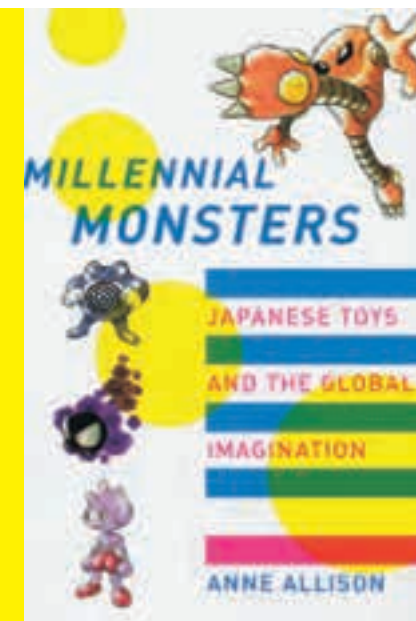
cize the hitherto off-limits, groupthink assumptions about national identity and history that had long prevailed in Japan.

Last year, Murakami curated an exhibition in which he put forth some of his own critical ideas about the popular attitudes that have characterized postwar Japan. Sponsored by Japan Society and the Public Art Fund in New York, "Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture" included site-specific works made by artists in Murakami's entourage and historical material from the decades after World War II. It traced the development of several aesthetic-emotional currents in Japanese popular culture since the war's end. Among them: a fascination among comic-book and animation creators with atomic destruction and the subservient position Japan has occupied in relation to the U.S. since it lost the war.

The exhibition's title, "Little Boy," referred to what Murakami has called "Japan's



Jon Gardiner



manga, anime, and other J-pop confections.

In Los Angeles, Eric Nakamura and Martin Wong found *Giant Robot*, a magazine devoted to

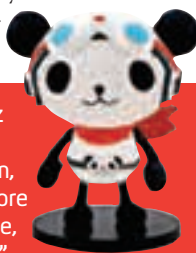
Bandai introduces the hand-held, electronic Tamagotchi "virtual pet" simultaneously in Japan and the U.S.



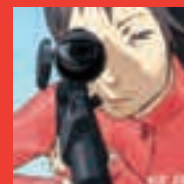
Hayao Miyazaki's animated feature film *Spirited Away* wins the grand prize at the Berlin International Film Festival and an Oscar in the U.S. *The New Yorker* later crowns the director the "auteur of anime."



Paul Budnitz founds Kidrobot.com, an online store for collectible, "urban-vinyl" figurines from Japan and East Asia, and similar toys inspired by East Asian pop culture. Today, there are three retail outlets in the U.S.



American director Quentin Tarantino includes an anime sequence in *Kill Bill, Vol. 1*, his kitschy-kooky martial-arts movie inspired by classic film genres.



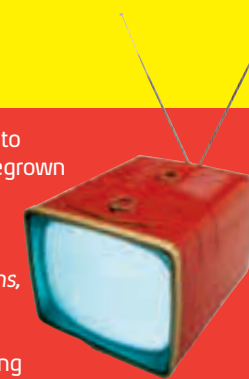
Japanese pop artist Takashi Murakami organizes "Little Boy," an exhibition that explored the darker side of J-pop, for Japan Society and the Public Art Fund in New York.



J-pop's influence spreads as Kong, a Kidrobot-like store, opens in Mexico City to sell Japanese figurines and original designs that mix Mexican and East Asian pop-cultural influences.



In an effort to boost homegrown animation companies, China bans *The Simpsons*, *Pokémon*, and Mickey Mouse during TV's prime-time hours.



1994

1997

1997

2002

2003

2005

2006

2006

enduring, infantile status in its relationship with the country that won the war—its former occupier—the United States.” He notes that Japan’s postwar defense treaty with the U.S., which allows its foreign “master” to keep military bases on its soil, perpetuates its inferior status. The exhibi-

tures of the *manga*-style figures *Hiropon* (1997), a buxom lass with exaggeratedly large breasts from which she squeezes out a jet-spray of milk, like water from a garden hose, and *My Lonesome Cowboy* (1998), a strapping youth who wields a lasso of his own ejaculate.

inspires it. Viewed more closely, its anti-*kawaii*, *otaku*-inspired nature becomes evident. Similarly, subverting cuteness has become a major theme in some of the contemporary art from Japan that in recent years has attracted serious critical attention at home and abroad. Like Murakami, artist

pologist, says, of the “decentering” effect of globalization. Worldwide marketing of the same products in many different countries means that, for entertainment, fashion, toy or pop-music producers, no one place can control a particular industry’s output or market anymore. Hollywood learned this, decades ago, with the rise of movies produced independently of its big-studio system.

In an essay in *Pikachu’s Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon* (Duke University Press, 2004), Koichi Iwabuchi, a professor of media and cultural studies at International Christian University in Tokyo, points out that J-pop entertainments such as Pokémon, *manga*, and *anime*, although created by artists in Japan, do not display “perceptible” signs of “Japaneseness.” On the one hand, Iwabuchi notes, this bleaching out of specific, recognizably ethnic, racial, or cultural references allows for easier “transnational cultural consumption” of such products. On the other hand, he adds, if the Japaneseness, such as it is, of today’s J-pop merchandise “is derived, consciously or unconsciously, from its erasure of physical signs” of its place of origin, then is the image of Japan that it offers merely “a de-ethnicized and cultureless, virtual version” of that country and its culture?

For J-pop aficionados and general audiences alike, an air of the familiar amid the strange wafted through *Lost in Translation*, Sofia Coppola’s 2003 film about an American actor who finds himself in Tokyo, jet-lagged and culturally adrift. From a Westerner’s point of view, the sense of bemusing dislocation that was, in large part, the subject of the film, may be a hallmark of a globalized-media, globalized-fast-food, globalized-everything age.

Dunkin’ Donuts, Kentucky Fried Chicken, or Starbucks in Mexico City, or MTV in Mumbai or London are the same enterprises offering the same fare they offer in their home markets—except, of course, that they are not. Not exactly. (Those are teriyaki burgers on the McDonald’s menu in Tokyo.) That’s because, as any good postmodernist knows, context is everything. The notion that the different contexts—cultural, historical, linguistic, political, economic, social—in which something is experienced will yield varying meanings of artworks, foods, fashions, language, or events is the very bedrock of postmodernist critical analysis.

So it is that Allison seems to savor



the different cultural contexts, beyond Japan, in which J-pop products have appeared and have become popular all over again. “I think things are shifting,” she says. “American power is not as admired as it used to be on account, for example, of the Iraq war. American-style fantasies are big and heroic, but the Japanese fantasies we see in *manga* and *anime* are bleaker. In these stories, people die.”

Still, she argues, they have their appeal. Indeed, the fact that they do not always offer bland, predictable, American-style romance and happy endings is precisely why they are so alluring.

The veteran special-events producer, illustrators’ agent, and pop-marketing guru Junko Wong, whose Cross World Connections Ltd. has offices in Tokyo and New York, similarly notes that many fans have been drawn to a combination of “innocence and rawness” in certain J-pop products. Aided by the Internet, she points out, they have built abiding communities of admiration around them.



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Girls, interrupted: the shadow side to Japan’s fascination with childlike imagery, the fetishization of pubescent and teenage girls, right; Fiberglass sculptures inspired by Japanese animation and *manga*, opposite, part of an exhibit by Murakami in New York’s Grand Central Station, 2001; Chococat, Hello Kitty’s friend, opposite below



tion’s title was symbolically significant, too: “Little Boy” was the name of the atomic bomb American forces dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945.

Speaking about the exhibition a few months before it opened, Murakami said that “contemporary Japan represents a version of George Orwell’s 1984: It’s a culture that is infantilized and impotent, perhaps even stunted.” Politically, modern Japan has not completely matured, he said. That is because, he explained, for all its economic and technological success, it is stuck in an “occupied” mode. (He also had in mind the country’s postwar, U.S.-imposed constitution, which revoked the emperor’s divine status and forbade Japan from maintaining an army or waging war.) Murakami observed: “Hello Kitty represents this infantilized country.”

Murakami’s art has taken direct aim at Japanese-style cuteness. Some versions of his own Mr. Dob character, a round-faced figure with Mickey Mouse-style ears, display a menacing, shark-toothed grin, a sinister antidote to Hello Kitty’s saccharine sweetness. Meant to be equally charming and subversive at the same time are his sculp-

Those Murakami works have been described as homages to the obsessions of Japan’s hermetic *otaku*. Mostly young males who have few friends and feel deeply uncomfortable in society, *otaku* (loosely translated as “geeks” or “nerds”) live in self-imposed isolation, rarely, if ever, leaving their bedrooms or tiny apartments. Glued to their computers and game consoles, they live in a “safe” fantasy world of video games, *manga*, and *anime*. They tend not to have sexual relationships but are commonly described as being obsessed with sex. Nevertheless, as “Little Boy” argued, together the subculture and sensibility of the *otaku* have become a discernible force in Japanese pop culture today. Who would have expected, the exhibition suggested, that some of the same escapist, darker-themed pop diversions the self-isolated *otaku* had long enjoyed would one day become mainstream pop hits?

At first glance, much of Murakami’s art is unmistakably cute, like the J-pop fare that

“Contemporary Japan represents a version of George Orwell’s 1984: It’s a culture that is infantilized and impotent, perhaps even stunted,” Japanese artist Takashi Murakami has said. “Hello Kitty represents this infantilized country.”

Yoshitomo Nara has gained international renown. His signature works include childlike pictures of not-so-innocent-looking little girls, usually seen from odd angles and set against plain backgrounds. If looks could kill, theirs would wipe out whole neighborhoods. At galleries in Tokyo, Los Angeles, New York, and London, Nara’s works, like Murakami’s, sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars. Other Japanese artists whose work either cri-

tiques varieties of cuteness or blends them with elements of retro-psychedelia or sex-charged urban angst include Chino Aoshima, Aya Takano, and Mahomi Kunikata. These three art-makers are all young women.

The fact that children—and adults—outside Japan can find pleasure and meaning in products from a culture that is sometimes dramatically different than their own is evidence, Allison, the Duke cultural anthro-

Thus, even as some Japanese companies offer an endless supply of inescapably adorable creations, the flip side of J-pop makes room for material of a darker nature. Is the “story” that a popular-entertainment product or toy offers consumers “in sync with people’s lives today?” Allison asks. If so, it will touch them, and they will buy, she says. Referring to the kinds of products the *otaku* have embraced at home and that have also found a wide foreign audience, she adds: “Other places, like Japan, are seen as edgier than Hollywood.”

Japanese kids in cultural hot spots like Shibuya may know this instinctively, too—and then again, they may not. But whatever new trend they are cooking up or hot, new product they are swooning over, it seems that, these days, the rest of the world wants to know about it, too—right now. ■

Gomez ’79, a former TIME staff writer and reporter in New York, Paris, and Tokyo and Fulbright Research Fellow in Japan, is the author of *New Design: Tokyo* (Rockport, 1999) and a co-author of *Yes: Yoko Ono* (Harry N. Abrams, 2000).