

The digital sublime in *Naruto*: a fictional Japan as metaphor for the terror and attraction of digital technologies

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Mukokuseki*: modernity and traditional values in *Naruto

In his book *Recentring globalization* (2002) Koichi Iwabuchi discusses the issue of globalization and the role that Japan is playing in this phenomenon. Iwabuchi (2002: 28) ascribes the popularity of Japanese exports to a phenomenon he calls *mukokuseki*, an odourlessness or lack of cultural specificity. I would like to investigate his theory with comparison to *Naruto*¹. I would like to refer to the environment, or 'scenic surroundings' depicted in the series as an instance of a particular viewpoint of Japan. Such a viewpoint exists in the Western popular imagination, where Japan is the site of anxiety around exotic attraction and uncanny repulsion. This relationship is perhaps echoed by the Western relationship to digital mass media in the context of modernity and post-modernity. I believe that the idyllic village of Konoha (in which *Naruto* is set) is then a specific metaphor for the Western relationship to Japan, and in some instances the digital mass media.

Before one can discuss notions of interaction between the West and Japan it is necessary to clarify these concepts. The West is loosely understood here as parts of the world that follow Eurocentric or American-centric ideologies and lifestyles. The West is not a geographical location, but rather a reference to worldviews relating to the concepts of Enlightenment, modernity and postmodernity. Japan as concept is tinged with exoticist myths. For the purposes of this paper it refers to geographic location and the Western imaginary conception of it, evidenced in art (Japonism) and critical theory (Orientalism)².

Fig. 1.³

Iwabuchi's assertion that products such as *anime*⁴ lack cultural specificity may perhaps be seen in the appearance of *anime* characters, their big eyes and coloured hair which do not seem Japanese or Asian in appearance. *Naruto* himself has yellow hair and blue eyes that may denote an Arian appearance rather than Asian (fig. 1). While *anime* such as *Naruto* may be premised on erasing cultural signifiers from its appearance, as Iwabuchi asserts, this *mukokuseki* appearance is strangely what has become known as Japanese in the West. It is paradoxically *Naruto*'s more European appearance that seems thoroughly Japanese to the Western viewer. There are also Japanese cultural

¹ An animated series by Masashi Kishimoto, released as *manga* in 1999, and *anime* 2002.

² Wichmann (1985) discusses this phenomenon in nineteenth century Western art in the relationship between Western painters and Japanese printmakers in his book titled Japonisme: the Japanese influence on western art in the 19th and 29th centuries. Edward Said (1978) is known for his thesis on Orientalism as a romanticizing of the Western conception of the "East".

³ NARUTO © 2002 MASASHI KISHIMOTO

⁴ *Anime* is the term used to refer to popular animated Japanese "comics" (Brehm 2002: 16).

motifs among the Western motifs, which further serve to communicate a Japanese identity in the series.

Japanese popular culture thus assimilates and adapts Western cultural motifs to represent Japaneseness. I would like to argue that Japan also provides a mirror to the West in its conception of modernity. Some of the popular Western conceptions around the country imagine Japan at the forefront of technological development (Sato 2004: 335-376). One may refer to their economic prowess among other Asian nations, as well as their large export relationship with the West in computer hardware (Ching 1994: 198-219). The Japanese drive towards modernity largely became manifest during the Sino-Japanese war. To Western imagination this ambition towards technological progress colours Japan as the land of futuristic science-fiction, because of its “anachronistic faith” in technological and economic progress. Western culture has arguably abandoned the “project of modernity”, with the advent of post-modernism (Habermas 1981). I simplify greatly by saying that the West has become disillusioned with technological progress and especially the mass media and digital technologies. This is evidenced in the writing of Marx and the Frankfurt School, and authors such as Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard and Baudrillard. Japan in this context uncannily mirrors the thwarted pinnacle of certain bygone Western modernities. Such views of Japan are based on the assumption that Japan ostensibly embraces technological progress unquestioningly and without critical qualms.

On the other hand Japan’s exotic identity as a country uniquely (and paradoxically) in touch with its traditional (non-Western) heritage has become popularized. In this sense the country is seen in an almost primitivist light (Sato 2004), often in touch with a spirituality that is fundamentally alien to Western religious ideology.

It seems that there are two aspects to the appeal of the idea of Japan in the West. On the one hand it is ostensibly technologically advanced to the point of being utopian. On the other Japan is seen as being fiercely protective of its traditions and spirituality. Both these views are echoed in Japanese popular culture. The latter is often seen in *anime* that recall battle traditions such as the warrior samurai and the ninja assassins of the pre-Meiji era. *Naruto* also refers to the ancient teachings of *ninjitsu*. As entertainment both these aspects of Japanese culture are idealized and popularized in a manner that is comparable to tourist practices. In other words, it seems that there is an uncanny doubling of modernist fantasy as well as a picturesque⁵ fantasy that underpins the *mukokuseki* appearance of Japan in much of its popular culture. It is this exotic attraction and uncanny repulsion that may begin to constitute a digital sublime in Japan’s popular culture, and in *Naruto*.

The uncanny and the digital sublime of “Japan”

⁵ The picturesque landscape tradition is here referred to as Malcolm Andrews (1999: 129-149) refers to it, as a tradition that derives from the sublime landscape tradition and renders it a commodity, essentially un-sublime, a tourist landscape.

One may now investigate the notion of the digital sublime in *Naruto*. The main character, after whom the series is titled, lives in the Hidden Leaf Village (Konoha Village). This village is a mixture of American ideological influence and exoticised Japanese tradition. The leaders of the village have a tradition of carving the faces of the village Hokage (leaders) into the face of Konoha mountain, much like Mount Rushmore in the USA. The faces in the mountain mimic Mount Rushmore but may be taken to represent much more. Konoha village in its American and European references is an instance of Japan as Lacanian uncanny (Dolar 1991: 6) to the West. Beneath the pleasant and idealized landscape of Konoha is the threat of Japan as impostor, threatening to subsume Western culture in its assimilation thereof (Sato 2004). As such Mount Rushmore is perhaps an Occidental myth transposed onto *Naruto*.

Fig. 2

The simulated Mount Rushmore in *Naruto* (called Hokage Rock) may refer to the American Mount Rushmore, as a symbol of human prowess. David Nye (1994) interprets the power of humanity to create something equal to natural power as a technological sublime. In *Naruto* the technological sublime of Mount Rushmore is rendered impotent in the picturesque elements of its transposition (Andrews 1999: 129-149). The picturesque landscape tradition is a trope prevalent in the eighteenth century, and commercialises the sublime landscape tradition as it attempts to recreate such landscape paintings in a more consumable guise. In decontextualising the image of Mount Rushmore as American memorial site into Konoha, and also in its history as a tourist location, the technological sublime is neutralized in *Naruto*, because the sublime can never be familiar or recognisable. It is always shocking and disorientating (Kant 1790-99: 26).

Konoha's mountain can also be understood along the lines of Lyotard's (1984) argument on the sublime, however. He speaks of the sublime "now", the moment that manifests in the face of privation. In terms of digital media the void of information beneath the familiar trappings of the computer or television screen is that privation. This abyss cannot be represented, it only appears in infinite screen-sized fragments. George Hartley (2003) writes about representation as incommensurable in the face of the object. As such, representation has its own implicit sublime abyss (the site where the representation falls short of the object). With screen media, this abyss exists in the representation on the screen, which the user knows is always fragmentary. At the same time the shock of the sublime moment, when the viewer realizes the impossible magnitude of digital information beyond the screen (Lyotard's "now"), is placated into a distracted lull, because the screen always requires prolonged attention and interaction. The moment on screen becomes the eternal moment on the edge of the abyss where the end is always nigh but is never "now". As such any conception of a digital sublime is lacking in the element of shock, because the screen conceals its sublimity under layers of the familiar picturesque. The uncanny appearance of this picturesque may give the viewer an entry point into the digital sublime, however. The picturesque landscape tradition is premised on the notion of familiarity, but this may be dialectical. In terms of the *unheimliche*, one may deconstruct the term as

Freud (1919) does. *Unheimlich* contains the word *heimlich*, that which is familiar, homely and safe. The word *heimlich* also has connotations of that which is hidden, secret and dangerous, and perhaps this is how one should approach the picturesque appearance of Konoha village. The village itself is no longer only a representation of familiarity, but also of the uncanny that may lie beyond it.

The pleasant, tourist world of Japan in *Naruto* is a metaphor for the lethargic crisis relationship the West has with the virtual world. On interface level the surroundings are familiar, benign, just as Mount Rushmore is a tourist image that is familiar to many audiences. Beneath this is a brooding abyss of information that can barely be contained within its small manifestations on millions of computer and television screens across the globe, just as the physical Mount Rushmore is a confrontation with the incommensurability of the human faculties in the face of great creations. Konoha can never be physical, the flesh and blood of it consists of computer hardware and software, binary code. Similarly Mount Rushmore can no longer escape its tourist legacy, not even in its physical presence. Konoha is the metaphorical site of this conflict. It is a familiar place “of old” (Freud 1919: 621-624), that we return to, where we seek shelter. The other side of this familiar place is the uncanny Japan, which will threaten to engulf the West, by usurping Western cultural identity and bleaching it until we are all the same, *mukokuseki*. It is also this uncanny which serves as a marker, reminding the viewer of what lies beneath the screen.

Exploring Japan: digital colonialism

With Japanese pop culture prevalent globally (Ching 1994) it seems that a new escapism, is emerging as an entertainment genre. It provides refuge from the abyss of virtual overload⁶, and also adventure for the virtual explorer, the promise of the last frontier. One may look at the evidence of this trend in media and more specifically *anime* and *manga*, but also at the Japanese commitment to globalization. Media and popular culture form a large part of Japan’s exports. As such, Japan is not the passive recipient of exoticist Western conceptions of it, but is marketing itself as tourist “location”, the exotic, idyllic site of Orientalism that only the adventurous dare to encounter.

As such the resemblance of Konoha mountain to Mount Rushmore is significant. The latter was created in 1927 (Wikipedia 2008) to create an influx of tourism in South Dakota. Sculptor Gutzon Borglum, apparently said of the site that “*America will march along that skyline.*”. The memorial honours the America presidents George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln. One may say that it represents a view of America as a free nation, and as such it represents a patriotic modernist agenda. This viewpoint becomes uncanny when it is transposed onto the imaginary Konoha village. The town comes to signify at once the “American dream” as transplanted into Japan, and turns Konoha into a tourist fantasy (Andrews 1999: 129-149). Mount Rushmore may be interpreted with comparison to the picturesque landscape

⁶ Baudrillard (1993) theorises extensively on the experience of digital media as virulent, cyclic and eternally reinventing itself for the purpose of sheer proliferation.

tradition in Western art as Malcolm Andrews discusses it. This trope of landscape painting represents awe-inspiring landscapes in a popularised form. As a tourist location Mount Rushmore and images thereof attain this easy familiarity to global viewers, but also retain some of the sublime fascination that it may hold as a man-made wonder of the world. When the motif of the memorial appears in Japanese popular culture it simply fulfills its tourist obligation, it is decontextualised and represents tourism for the sake of it.

Conclusion

Konoha village is the culmination of various strands of visual culture. It represents a frontier, but also a homely place, which global audiences may find familiar and comfortable in its combination of Occidental and Oriental references. As such the Japan portrayed in *Naruto* is not the real Japan, nor a Westernised Japan. It is an exoticised Japan, that also depicts Occidental fantasies in its assimilation of Western cultural motifs such as Mount Rushmore. The seamless integration of these disparate elements is not only picturesque in its tourist connotations, but also uncanny in its strangeness. It remains uncanny to Western audiences because it is also a metaphor for the Western relationship to digital media. The latter is regarded with suspicion and awe by thinkers such as Benjamin, Adorno, Lyotard and Baudrillard throughout modernity and postmodernity. Japan in its seemingly unproblematic relationship to digital media, its even ecstatic union with these technologies, now attains another level of Orientalist fascination, which may begin to explain the popularity and immersive power of its exported visual culture in the West.

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