FROM "GAME-LIFE REALISM" TO THE "IMAGINATION-ORIENTED AESTHETIC":

Reconsidering Bourdieu's Contribution to Fan Studies in the Light of Japanese Manga and Otaku Theory[1]

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Abstract

Following Casey Brienza's call for drawing on Japanese "otaku theory" in order to further comics studies, the present article demonstrates how the wider interrelated discourse around anime, manga, and otaku can be productively related to fields such as Western fan studies. Focusing on Azuma Hiroki's book *The Birth of Game-like Realism* this paper both highlights the theoretical richness of works which have yet to be translated into English, and emphasizes the importance of manga research – in this case Itō Gō's book *Tezuka is Dead* – beyond the confines of manga/comics studies. Building on a novel reading of Azuma's framework introduced in the present article the now mostly overlooked tension in fan cultural practices pointed out by Henry Jenkins in *Textual Poachers* in relation to Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of pure and popular aesthetic disposition is reexamined. Drawing on the framework of game-like realism, this paper introduces the imagination-oriented aesthetic disposition, and demonstrates how this disposition could account for the mix of characteristics found in fan practices. The relevance of such a reevaluation of Bourdieu's possible contribution to fan studies lies in the potential to move beyond the currently dominant frameworks of psychology and psychoanalysis when addressing the problem of fantasy and reality in relation to fan engagement.

Keywords

fan research, imagination, manga studies, otaku studies

About the Author

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INTRODUCTION

The Japanese cultural industry has played an increasingly larger and ever more visible role in the global youth cultural market during the past twenty years, and as such it has been garnering more and more attention from the wider Western geek culture since the mid-1990s onwards. Japan's anime, manga, merchandising, and game industries have also given rise to a theoretical discourse related to the production and consumption of these goods (e.g. Azuma 2007, 2009 [2001], Itō 2005, Ōtsuka 2010 [1989]), and to their fans known as *otaku*[2] (e.g. Azuma 2009 [2001]), as well as topics as wide ranging as urban space and architecture (Morikawa 2012 [2003]), the public sphere, and politics (Kitada 2012 [2005]). This discourse has slowly started to cross language barriers with the publication of translated key texts (Azuma 2009 [2001], Saitō 2011 [2000]) and excerpts thereof (Itō 2006 [2005], 2011 [2005], Kitada 2012 [2005], Morikawa 2012 [2003], Ōtsuka 2010 [1989]). At the same time, a growing number of English-language works building in part on this Japanese theoretical discourse have appeared and enriched the debate about anime (Condry 2013, Lamarre 2009, Suan 2013), manga (Berndt 2008, 2010, 2013, 2014, Johnson-Woods 2010), otaku (Condry 2013, Galbraith et al. 2015), toys, and the Japanese "media mix" (Allison 2006, Steinberg 2012). In the following I will refer to both the Japanese and English language works within this area as AMO (anime, manga, and otaku) discourse, as these works, despite their different foci and theoretical as well as methodological approaches, occupy a common discursive field with a large number of cross-references, shared concepts, and empirical anchor points.

While the *Mechademia* series has been at the forefront of furthering both the awareness of Japanese theoretical works and their introduction to English audiences, its *Fanthropologies* issue (2010) and the collection *Fandom Unbound* (Ito et al. 2012) have been especially noteworthy attempts to bridge the divide between Western fan studies and AMO studies. This is important because it is not only linguistic territories which prove hard to cross (Brienza), but also disciplinary and even subdisciplinary boundaries. And although there is a healthy growth in both Western fan studies and Japanese otaku (fan) studies, the two seem to be tackling with often parallel phenomena while staying clearly within their own well-bounded discursive spaces.

Brienza argues for the way Japanese "otaku theory" can help reinvigorate comics studies. This article is in part inspired by her call. While comics studies has a lot to benefit from "otaku theory," I would like to widen the appeal along two lines. On the one hand, I would like to emphasize the importance not only of "otaku theory" but the wider field of AMO-related works (the international dialogue in relation to comics research has already made significant strides towards this goal; see Berndt,

Comics Worlds and the World of Comics). On the other hand, I would like to suggest that it is not only comics studies that would benefit from such dialogue, but most areas of research to which AMO works pertain, for instance cultural industries research[3] and fan studies[4] as well.

In order to highlight the possibility of interrelating Japanese scholarship on AMO subjects with Western fan studies, I will apply Azuma Hiroki's[5] framework of *game-like realism* (2007) to reappraise a now mostly overlooked aspect of Bourdieu's contribution to fan studies within Jenkins' seminal *Textual Poachers* (1992). Furthermore, I also wish to highlight the critical potential of manga studies for fields beyond comics research. As I will demonstrate, Azuma's main argument in relation to game-like realism depends on Itō Gō's *Tezuka is Dead: Opening Up Theoretical Approaches to Manga Representation* (2005), one of the most important interventions in Japanese manga criticism and research during the past decade.[6] Thus, the engaged analysis of graphic narratives can offer results with implications beyond the medium itself.

GAME-LIKE REALISM: TOWARDS A GENERALIZATION OF THE METAFICTIONAL NATURE OF CHARACTERS

Azuma's *The Birth of Game-Like Realism: Animalizing Postmodern 2* was published in 2007 as a sequel to his 2001 book *Animalizing Postmodern: Looking at Japanese Society through Otaku*, translated as *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (2009). In contrast to the first book which focuses on the social implications of the shifts in content consumption and production, with otaku representing the vanguard of those changes, the second book is more concerned with the changes in contemporary Japanese literature, at least at first glance. But on closer inspection, the concept of game-like realism is just as much engaged with mapping the emergence of "a new model for subject formation" (Azuma, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* 74) as the first book was.

In order to unpack the central theme of the book, I would like to suggest that the introduction of the concept of game-like realism hinges upon a threefold nested deconstructive reading in which, first, Azuma reads Ōtsuka's theory of "character novels" with the help of, second, Itō's reading of Tezuka's *The Mysterious Underground Men* (*Chiteikoku no kaijin*)—which is also in part related to Ōtsuka's interpretation of Tezuka—and thus widens the scope of the possible implications of, third, Ōtsuka's reading of the modern novel.[7] Below, I shall reconstruct crucial elements of the book's argument[8] in order to explicate a conclusion which Azuma himself leaves implicit in both his theoretical framework and his textual analyses.

What are Light Novels?

Azuma takes the boom of the Japanese light novel in the late nineties as his starting point. The common perception of light novels is that they are works of entertainment containing manga or anime-like illustrations, targeted at middle and high school students, mostly appearing in paperback form and sold not only at book stores but also comics sales points (*Gēmuteki riarizmu no tanjō* 27). As such, it would seem that light novels are distinguished mainly based on outward elements such as packaging, modes of circulation, publishers, and imprints. However, even these outward elements do not constitute a clear distinction, as some works have also been appreciated as "light novel-like" novels by readers, although having been released by a publisher dealing in regular novels and exclude any illustrations (32).

Azuma suggests that the real particularity of light novels can be grasped not by looking at the outside (such as modes of production and circulation) or the inside (e.g. story), but rather the interrelations between such publications. Among the individual works there exists an imaginationscape, which is none other than the "character database"[9] (45)—a developing set of reusable character elements and templates shared among different authors and works. Hence "*moe* literacy,"[10] the understanding of invoked codes, is a prerequisite on the side of both author and reader in the creation and consumption of such works (46). However, defining light novels by their dependence on the character database leads away from the mode of representational realism.

"Manga and Anime-Like Realism" and the "I" as Character

Building on Ōtsuka's work, Azuma asserts that light novels are not invested in representing our reality but rather the fantastical worlds of anime and manga (*Gēmuteki riarizmu no tanjō* 56). Instead of representational realism, *manga and anime-like realism* is their distinguishing feature. Furthermore, Azuma also takes on board Ōtsuka's view that light novels should be called character novels as characters replace the "I" of representational realism (Azuma, *Gēmuteki riarizmu no tanjō* 58).

However, manga and anime-like realism does not only bear the mark of manga and anime, but also that of literature. Azuma traces Ōtsuka's argument regarding the appearance of the fictional "I" in Japanese literature as a result of the unification of written and spoken Japanese language (*genbun itchi*) around 1900. The possibility of the "'I' as character" also emerges at the same time, precisely because the literary "I" is just a fiction. The "I" particular to the I-novel (*shishōsetu*)[11] seals off the inherent contradiction, and thus the fiction of the "I" as corresponding to reality is

favored while the possibility of the "I" as character becomes suppressed. Against this backdrop, manga and anime-like realism can be seen to break the seal or, in Azuma's words, to appear as the "return of the repressed" (*Gēmuteki riarizmu no tanjō* 83–86).

"Anime and Manga-Like Novels" and "Game-Like Novels"

Returning to the definition of light novels, Azuma points out that Ōtsuka identifies three sources of this literary form: traditional youth literature from before the seventies, girls' novels appearing in the seventies, and "game-like novels" modeled on tabletop role-playing games from the mid-eighties onwards (*Gēmuteki riarizmu no tanjō* 111). For Azuma's own argument the crucial point here is the way Ōtsuka makes a clear distinction between game-like novels and "anime and manga-like novels." Both forms are character novels; however, the former do not contain the inevitability of death—due to the possibility of resets, replays, and alternative endings—and are thus considered inferior by Ōtsuka, according to Azuma's interpretation (*Gēmuteki riarizmu no tanjō* 118–20).

Ōtsuka's conception of the nature of characters in manga has been concerned with characters' mortality. To him, Tezuka's early manga *Until the Day of Victory* (*Shōri no hi made*, 1945), which features a character being hit by bullets and then bleeding, is the watershed moment for the development of modern manga. Both Azuma and Itō stress that, according to Ōtsuka, manga characters' double nature is Tezuka's major innovation in that he has endowed mere signs with a body that bleeds and can die. It is thus the starting point of realism in manga (Itō *Tezuka izu deddo* 129–130) as well as the foundation of manga and anime-like realism (*Gēmuteki riarizmu no tanjō* 90).

From here Azuma begins his own elaboration of game-like realism. Not only in the case of light novels but for most materials consumed and produced by otaku, characters can be freely taken out of context and placed in another. In this way, characters function like nodes, which by their simple presence and existence may open up a metafictional imagination. Since characters can be freely extracted from stories and relocated, and new story endings can be created, this mode of consumption does not differ from games, irrespective of whether the original work from which the character comes is a game or not. Even if authors suppress the metafictional property of characters by recounting only one ending, consumers are free to explore the characters' metafictional aspect. This is the reason why characters inherently demonstrate a game-like existence and a corresponding metafictional quality (Azuma, *Gēmuteki riarizmu no tanjō* 125–127). Azuma then turns to Itō's distinction between proto-character (*kyara*) and character (*kyarakutā*)[12] in order

to demonstrate that the game-like metafictional property of characters does not oppose the very nature of characters—as Ōtsuka's interpretation would suggest—but is in fact at the heart of the possibility of characters themselves.

Two Different Approaches to the Double Nature of Characters

According to Itō, the traditional notion of character actually implies two separate concepts: the *kyara* and the *kyarakutā*. The *kyarakutā* symbolizes the body that has a personality, much like an actual person. The *kyara*, on the other hand, is a more abstract concept, an iconic line drawing, which has a name proper, and which *seems* to possess a personality. Potentially, it can become independent of the text, exhibiting a quality of self-sameness as it moves across different texts. Furthermore, there is a historical and hierarchical relationship between the two: the emergence of *kyara* precedes that of *kyarakutā* within manga, and the latter requires all the traits of *kyara* in order to function as *kyarakutā* (Itō, *Tezuka izu deddo* 109–111).

According to Itō, this double nature of the *kyarakutā* has only recently become visible again, namely, with the re-emerging dominance of the *kyara* form, which also signals the end of the modern and the start of the postmodern within manga (*Tezuka izu deddo* 120–121). At the other end of the period, argues Itō, the beginning of modern "story manga" in the strict sense is marked by the publication of Tezuka's *The Mysterious Underground Men* (*Tezuka izu deddo* 141). One of the protagonists of this work is a rabbit called Mimio (meaning "ear boy") whose intelligence is enhanced by scientific means and who thus even learns to talk.

> Mimio is a proto-character (*kyara*), a drawn image not rooted in real life. As such, he can only pretend to have a body and an inner self. Yet, under certain conditions, this spurious creature morphs into a realist novel-like character (*kyarakuta*). In fact, as Tezuka's narrative evolves, Mimio's ears become invisible, pictorially as well as metaphorically, until they recur when he dies after saving the earth. Asked for a last word, he wants his humanhood to be confirmed by his fellow characters. (Berndt, "*Ghostly*" 376, italics in the original)

Mimio's death is important for both Itō and Ōtsuka, but from different perspectives. For Ōtsuka, Mimio's death is a reconfirmation of the centrality of the "dying semiotic *manga* body" (Itō, "Manga History Viewed through Proto-Characteristics" 111, emphasis in the original). Itō points out how his own framework is indebted to Ōtsuka's ideas, in particular that the concept of the *kyarakutā* can be seen to correspond to the corporeal element and the *kyara* to the purely semiotic nature of characters in Ōtsuka's duality (Itō, *Tezuka izu deddo* 131). However, Itō's reading of Mimio's story and death provides a significantly different view on the

relationship between metafictionality and characters than that of the duality of the semiotic and the mortal body.

For Itō, Mimio's position shifts between *kyara* and *kyarakutā* in various ways, and this shifting as well as the implied double nature itself is literally unmasked during Mimio's death scene. During the course of the narrative, Mimio takes on two disguises, first that of a street urchin and then that of a girl engineer. On her death bed, the girl engineer's wig is removed, revealing the character to be the cap-wearing street urchin, and when his cap is also removed, he is finally recognized as Mimio. Such a transformation would be impossible if Mimio were a photorealistic rabbit figure with a furry face (*Tezuka izu deddo* 137). As a result, his *kyara* nature is reconfirmed, while through the words constituting his dying wish to be human, he enters again the realm of *kyarakutā* (135). Thereby he appears to have been a *kyarakutā* all along (125). According to Itō's analysis, Tezuka's *The Mysterious Underground Men* is thus an allegory of the way modern manga in the narrow sense is predicated upon both the sublimation of the duality of *kyara/kyarakutā* within the *kyarakutā* and the concurrent concealment of this sublimation (141).

For Azuma, the double nature of characters hinges on the metafictional imagination and its suppression, whereas Ōtsuka—while affirming the "sign/body" duality of characters—would deny their metafictional quality. In this way Ōtsuka's conception of the double nature of characters in manga and his distinction between anime and manga-like and game-like novels apparently reflects the very suppression at work in the structure of modern manga. Itō's interpretation, however, suggests that the multiplication of deaths and stories—that is, the possibility of game-like works—has always been latently present in modern manga (Azuma, *Gēmuteki riarizmu no tanjō* 136–138).

Itō's reading of *The Mysterious Underground Men* is not only central to Azuma's argument; in fact, Azuma actually goes on to generalize the *kyara/kyarakutā* framework in a way that surpasses its originally intended range of application. While Itō's definition of *kyara* relies upon a visual medium (*Tezuka izu deddo* 115–6), Azuma suggests that the iconic quality of the simple line drawing can be replaced by the highly stylized elements of the character database which makes it possible to apply the *kyara/kyarakutā* duality to the light novel as well (Itō et al., "'*Kyara/kyarakutā' gainen no kanōsei*" 132–8).

Game-Like Realism and Its Implications

Game-like realism is therefore borne out of the intrusion of metafictional imagination into narratives with only a single starting point and end (Azuma,

Gēmuteki riarizmu no tanjō 140). While game-like realism utilizes manga and anime-like realism (chiefly through characters), it also undoes the central meaning of Ōtsuka's manga and anime-like realism—that of characters' mortality—through the proliferation of stories, the multiplication of characters' lives and the possibility of reset overcoming death (142).

In order to show how game-like realism is made the subject of and reflected upon by contemporary works of fiction, Azuma analyzes in detail the light novel *All You Need Is Kill* by Sakurazaka Hiroshi, the *bishōjo* games[13] *ONE: To the Radiant Season* (*ONE: Kagayaku kisetsu e*) by Tactics, *Ever17: The Out of Infinity* by KID, *When the Cicadas Cry* (*Higurashi no naku koro ni*)[14] by 07th Expansion, and the metafictional novel *Tsukumo Jūku*[15] by Maijō Ōtarō based on the world and characters of meta-mystery novelist Seiryōin Ryūsui.

Without going into detail concerning the individual analyses, we may note that Azuma's most important point applies to the way his examples model the experience of the gamer playing a character, in other words, the experience of reading metafiction. This distinction is crucial to understanding such works, which speak to a postmodern audience's experience, and which are more complex than the mere focus on clichéd plot elements and characters would suggest. These works build on the duality of player/character in different ways, but all share the element of moving the locus of empathy from the level of the story to the metafictional level, and correspondingly from character to player (*Gēmuteki riarizmu no tanjō* 275). In some cases, the experience of the player and the character are depicted as being concurrently present in the character (*All You Need Is Kill*, *ONE*), or this double nature of the player/character can become the central object of reflection (*Tsukumo Jūku*). In other cases, the player itself is invoked within the narrative through either a proxy character standing in for the player (*Higurashi no naku koro ni*), or even implying the entry of the player within the fictional world itself (*Ever17*). To Azuma, such works are game-like novels (*All You Need Is Kill*) and novel-like games or even "game-like novel"-like games (*Higurashi no naku koro ni*). In the case of *Tsukumo Jūku*, things become even more complex, as this is a novel about game-like novels, meaning it explicitly unpacks the workings of game-like realism and the duality of the player/character as well as its relationship to metafictionality.

Let us now return to the interpretation of the argument in *The Birth of Game-Like Realism* offered at the very beginning of this section, positing that the theoretical explication is built around a series of nested deconstructive moves. On closer inspection, this series of steps from Ōtsuka to Azuma via Itō actually contains a missing link: Although not explicated by Azuma, the way in which the above works invoke the experience of the player (or reader) and the metafictional level, clearly *corresponds* to the extension of Ōtsuka's "I" as character.

Ōtsuka identifies the suppressed possibility of the fictional "I" as character in the modern Japanese novel; Itō identifies the suppressed double nature of characters in modern manga; and generalizing Itō's argument, Azuma maintains that all character novels are actually game-like novels. Following the implications of all three backward operations, we find that they lead us back to the possibility of the fictional "I" as character already being game-like in nature. But if the "I" of the modern novel is also a game-like character, and the modern novel is supposed to represent reality as opposed to character novels, then the possibility of the real "I" being experienced as a character—and life as a story—also presents itself.

We arrive at a similar horizon when approaching the issue from the aspect of the analyzed works. If the experience of the player (reader) is made the subject of a work, often to the point of incorporating her/him into the world of the fiction/metafiction itself, then the player (reader) is also implicated in the fiction/metafiction as a character her/himself. Thus the same properties, which are necessary for a character to be a character, will also apply to the player (reader). The possibility of regarding life as folding into fiction and the joys of such a view are most clearly dealt with in *Higurashi no naku koro ni*, according to Azuma (*Gēmuteki riarizmu no tanjō* 245). This is not to imply that players (readers) are unable to discern between fiction and reality. Instead, the case is quite the opposite (see Saitō, *Beautiful Fighting Girl*). Otaku (or involved fans) are very well aware of the difference between fiction and reality. However, the pleasures opened up just by the possibility of meshing fiction and reality, and the existential quandaries entailed by such a way of looking at the world (as demonstrated by Azuma's analysis) are very real indeed.

In this way, game-like realism explicitly represents and problematizes the *non-fictional "I" as character*; it allows for the non-fictional "I" to be considered as a character and the non-fictional life as a story.[16] Certain works go so far as to introduce the player/reader directly into the world of the narrative, which is precisely the potential affirmed by the arrival of the non-fictional "I" as character. And this relationship between fiction and reality as understood through the lens of game-like realism will now help us reappraise a forgotten aspect of what Bourdieu has to offer fan studies.

BOURDIEU IN FAN STUDIES: FROM "GAME-LIKE REALISM" TO "IMAGINATION-ORIENTED AESTHETIC"

Bourdieu has been one of the most influential thinkers within sociology in the late twentieth century, particularly well-received within Anglophone cultural studies. Consequently, he has been one of the theoretical sources for early fan studies as well. The interest in Bourdieu's concepts has, however, dropped off

after an initial wave of popularity. Following the "fandom is beautiful" phase of the arguably first wave of fan studies (including Jenkins), the second-wave scholars attempted to show how fandom is riddled with internal hierarchies and can also function as a locus where external societal inequalities are reproduced (Gray et al. 6). These scholars drew heavily upon Bourdieu's ideas of distinction and forms of capital, but once this work had been completed, interest in Bourdieu's work receded to the background.

As is evident from the way fan studies scholars reconstruct the development of their field,[17] an element of Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus has become overlooked, one which proves to be important to the argument put forward in Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* (1992), the quasi-founding text of Western fan studies: the dual concepts of "pure aesthetic disposition" and "popular aesthetic disposition" underlying Bourdieu's analysis in *Distinction* and providing one of the most compelling attempts at bridging sociological and aesthetic arguments.

For Bourdieu, the way we perceive the world and the way we operate within it is defined by our dispositions which make up our habitus. The class habitus is "the internalized form of class condition and of the conditionings it entails" (101) shaped by material and social conditions as well as the corresponding habitual modes of thought of one's immediate social world. In order to provide a scale of differences in relation to different habitus belonging to various class positions and class factions as demonstrated through patterns of cultural consumption, Bourdieu draws on the central dichotomy between the pure aesthetic disposition and the popular aesthetic disposition.

The "pure aesthetic," which is the aesthetic regime underlying the bourgeois disposition in relation to art and aesthetic appreciation, is, firstly, predicated on a denial of the continuum between art and life, which results in detaching art from both utility and morality, and in prioritizing form over all other aspects of evaluation. Secondly, it is based upon a mode of appreciation informed by art-historical knowledge, and thirdly, it is characterized by reserved contemplative reverie as the archetypal mode of appreciation (Bourdieu 28–53).

The "popular aesthetic" can be seen as the mirror opposite of all that the pure aesthetic stands for: It affirms the continuum between life and art. Therefore, it falls back on standards of utility and morality when approaching works of art, and it regards form as secondary if noteworthy at all. It is oblivious to art history, and it is characterized by a desire for participation, by contact and emotional enthusiasm instead of distance and restraint (Bourdieu 28–53).

In *Textual Poachers*, although Jenkins does not explicitly express such, he alludes to the reason that fan practices are policed within various mainstream discourses, namely because they invoke elements of *both* the popular and the pure aesthetic disposition. According to Jenkins, fandom is regarded as "a scandalous category" (16) precisely because it seems to muddle socially consecrated hierarchies of taste and distinction, in two ways. On the one hand it does so by applying what would seem to be misplaced significance:

> As Bourdieu (1980) suggests, "The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated" (253). Fan culture muddies those boundaries, treating popular texts as if they merited the same degree of attention and appreciation as canonical texts. Reading practices (close scrutiny, elaborate exegesis, repeated and prolonged rereading, etc.) acceptable in confronting a work of "serious merit" seem perversely misapplied to the more "disposable" texts of mass culture. (Jenkins 17)

On the other hand, it jettisons the detached reverie proper to the pure aesthetic disposition; instead, "fans enthusiastically embrace favored texts and attempt to integrate media representations into their own social experience" (Jenkins 18). Thus, it is not only the misplaced use of the pure aesthetic mode of appreciation, but also the simultaneous invocation of elements of both the popular and the pure aesthetic modes of appreciation that characterizes fan reading (and writing) practices.

This tension between the elements of the popular and the pure aesthetic modes within interpretative and productive fan practices has remained widely unexplored within fan studies. But in truth it is considerably indicative of a specific form of fan attachment and activity found, for instance, among involved fans of cult media texts, such as those described by Jenkins. It goes without saying, nevertheless, that not all fan practices subscribe to this mode of operation. Indeed, as pointed out by Gray et al., early works like *Textual Poachers* focused on the subcultural core of media fan communities. In reality, we are likely to find varied discourses, activities, and modes of perception based on both the level of intensity of involvement and the different foci of interest.

Fan practice would, however, not elicit the kind of hostility and denigration coming from mainstream society that they regularly encounter, if it were only the popular aesthetic mode of appreciation that governed their particular modes of engagement.[18] The dominant faction of society would merely view it as another form of popular activity, and the dominated faction would recognize it as one of their kind. The extent, however, to which fan modes of engagement has met with denigration from both the dominant and dominated levels of mainstream society

indicates that a break is at work here, similar to the one between the popular and pure aesthetic. And this break points to the very core of fan modes of engagement.

The reason for the tension felt in relation to the unclassifiable aesthetic disposition at work within certain fan cultures may not merely be the result of the simultaneous presence of both aesthetic dispositions, but rather the presence of a different one. Azuma's argument with respect to game-like realism offers a possible lead to understanding this new type of aesthetic disposition.

The reading/writing practices of fans studied by Jenkins conform to the very modes of operation identified in relation to game-like realism. As demonstrated above, game-like realism involves not only the unhinging of characters and the multiplication of possible lives (and deaths) but also the simultaneous invocation of the character/player duality, which results in the implication of the reader-player-consumer within the fictional narrative or meta-narrative. Compared to Jenkins' description of fan activities, we can see a surprisingly good fit:

> Fans seemingly blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, speaking of characters as if they had an existence apart from their textual manifestations, entering into the realm of the fiction as if it were a tangible place they can inhabit and explore. (18)

Producers and consumers of fan art, videos, and even filk songs understand and appreciate the multiple possibilities with regard to characters, settings, and story lines. Furthermore, they ostensibly cross the boundaries between reality and fiction through practices ranging from cosplay (dressing up as characters) to "Mary Sue" fanfiction in which the fan writer or their avatars are written into the story in a way that allows for their interaction with the setting and characters.

In my view, this correspondence between fan activities and the properties of game-like realism is no mere coincidence. The latter correspond to a particular sensibility on the part of the reader-player-consumer. This sensibility represents a third type of aesthetic disposition, which I shall call the "imagination-oriented aesthetic."[19] And to uncover its inner logic, we need only relate game-like realism to fan modes of appreciation.

The issue of the non-fictional "I" as character and the practice of what seems to be the blurring of boundaries between fiction and reality in fandom provides a key. To begin with, the imagination-oriented aesthetic and the popular aesthetic are so easy to equate because they both affirm the continuum between life and art. But if this affirmation would be exactly the same in both cases, then invocations of the imagination-oriented aesthetic would not trigger the kind of resentment they do, from those who are aligned with the popular aesthetic disposition. The distinction

lies in the emphasis put on life or art respectively. According to Bourdieu, the popular aesthetic disposition gives preference to life in its attempt to relate the work of art back to life. The imagination-oriented aesthetic disposition, on the other hand, emphasizes art, or fiction. In turn, this forms its primary characteristic, from which all further properties stem. Like the popular aesthetic oblivious to consecrated art history and traditions, it is very much preoccupied with its *own* history and traditions. This is one of the reasons why fans are often found to be engaged in the kind of knowledge accumulation and analysis reminiscent of the pure aesthetic disposition, while their focus lies beyond that which has been already consecrated regarding both subject matter and the questions pursued.

In addition, the interest in form, style, and self-reflexivity as well as intertextual play seems to be another facet of similarity in relation to the pure aesthetic disposition. Finally, the imagination-oriented aesthetic disposition is characterized by a desire for participation and emotional engagement just as the popular aesthetic disposition is, but this engagement and participation is focused on the fictional world ("art") as opposed to everyday life—and consequently often labeled "escapist"—which, according to Azuma, is one of the central themes explored by works of game-like realism.

Such a different aesthetic disposition is noteworthy because it allows us to approach the issue—the relation of fantasy and reality in fan practices—from both an aesthetic and sociological perspective as opposed to the psychological and often psychoanalytical take. The latter have seen a certain predominance within fan studies (for example Hills; Sandvoss), but apparently there are still facets of the problem of fantasy within fan cultures, which might be more readily engaged with through a different disciplinary approach.

SUMMARY

Following Brienza's call for drawing on Japanese "otaku theory" in order to further comics studies, I attempted to demonstrate that not only otaku theory, but the wider field of AMO discourse can be productively related to fields such as Western fan studies. Focusing on Azuma's *The Birth of Game-Like Realism*, I wished to both highlight the theoretical richness of works which have yet to be translated into English, and to underline the importance of manga research—in this case Itō's *Tezuka is Dead*—beyond the confines of manga/comics studies.

In relation to the concept of game-like realism, I outlined that Azuma's argument can be read as leaning on three nested deconstructive operations, one of which is Itō's understanding of manga characters' double nature—as proto-character

(*kyara*) and character (*kyarakutā*). If consequently thought through, the arguments introduced above lead to the possibility of imagining the non-fictional "I" as a character. This reading aligns well with Azuma's analysis of actual works, especially his mapping of the duality of player/character within works of game-like realism.

In the final section of this article, I re-examined Bourdieu's concepts of pure and popular aesthetic disposition in relation to the discussion of fan culture in Jenkins' *Textual Poachers*, highlighting a now mostly overlooked tension. Drawing upon the framework of game-like realism, I introduced the imagination-oriented aesthetic disposition and demonstrated how this disposition could account for the mix of characteristics found in fan practices. Furthermore, I suggested that the relevance of such a reevaluation of Bourdieu's contribution with regard to fan studies lies in the potential to move beyond the now dominant frameworks of psychology and psychoanalysis when addressing the problem of fantasy and reality in relation to fan engagement.

Notes

1. The author would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Julius Rezler Foundation and the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, and would also like to thank Jaqueline Berndt for her kind help in relation to the research undertaken for this article.

2. The connotations of the term otaku within Japan have undergone a number of changes since its first appearance in public discourse in 1983; for an overview of its history see for instance Brienza ("Taking Otaku Theory Overseas") or Ito (Introduction, *Fandom Unbound*). For a more sociological discussion of the difficulties implied in trying to identify the meaning of the concept in Japan see Kam ("The Common Sense that Makes the 'Otaku'") and Galbraith et al. (*Debating Otaku in Contemporary Japan*). The word "otaku" has also been invoked by Western fans of Japanese anime, manga, games and related goods as a term of self-identification.

3. See for example the works of Condry (*The Soul of Anime*) and Mihara (*Haruhi in USA*), who have applied Ōtsuka's theory of world setting and narrative consumption to anthropological research in relation to media production and mediation.

4. Applying AMO frameworks to fan studies would seem especially appropriate since "otaku culture references a constellation of "fannish" cultural logics, platforms, and practices that cluster around anime, manga, and Japanese games and are in turn associated with a more generalized set of dispositions toward passionate and participatory engagement with popular culture and technology in a networked world" (Ito, Introduction xi). Azuma himself does not think of otaku culture as being specifically Japanese in nature either (*Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* 10), and his translators also stress Azuma's potential for the cross-cultural analysis of fandoms (Abel & Kono xix).

5. Japanese names are written according to the Japanese order of surname first throughout the article, except for the bibliography section where they are written according to the English order.

6. For a discussion of Japanese manga discourse see Berndt ("Considering Manga Discourse"; "Manga Studies #1: Introduction").

7. Both Itō's and Azuma's arguments are indebted to the prolific ideas of manga creator, editor, critic and author Ōtsuka Eiji. While Ōtsuka is often not considered a theorist proper, his arguments have had a profound effect on both the practice of cultural production within Japan and its discourse. As will become apparent in the following, Ōtsuka's ideas are engaged with at almost every turn of the central argument in relation to game-like realism. For more on Ōtsuka, his works and his significance see Steinberg (Translator's Introduction, "Ōtsuka Eiji and Narrative Consumption"; *Anime's Media Mix*; "Realism in the Animation Media Environment").

8. *The birth of game-like realism* offers a wide-ranging argument, and the exploration of all its facets would go beyond the confines of this article; for another discussion of its implications with slightly different accents see Steinberg ("Realism in the Animation Media Environment").

9. The term was introduced in Azuma (*Gēmuteki riarizmu no tanjō*).

10. *Moe* refers to the affective response engendered by a large subset of elements within the character database; for a more detailed discussion see Azuma (*Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*).

11. Developed around 1900 and relying on the first person perspective, the I-novel is a form of (pseudo)-autobiographical literature inspired by Western naturalism.

12. In order to avoid confusion in relation to use of terminology, I will use the terms *kyara* and *kyarakutā* in the following when discussing Itō's work and the implications thereof.

13. Also referred to as dating simulation games, or visual novels, these games center around developing romantic relationships with the games' characters (most often pretty young girls, or *bishōjo* in Japanese) through the course of text-based branching narratives illustrated mostly by static manga-animesque pictures.

14. English versions of the franchise have been released under the title *Higurashi When They Cry* and also simply *When They Cry*.

15. Name of the title character.

16. Itō also alludes to the problem of the "I" as *kyara* (*Tezuka izu deddo* 244), but concludes that this is one of the problems he had not been able to adequately address in his book (292).

17. See for example Gray et al. Introduction: Why Study Fans?; Hills, *Fan Cultures*; and Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*.

18. In the Western world, too, much has changed since the writing of the book, similar to the mainstreaming of otaku modes of cultural production and consumption in Japan.

19. The word imagination has been used in relation to fan studies (see for example Hills, Fan Cultures; Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*) and AMO works (e.g. Dollase, "Ribbons Undone"; Wong, "Globalizing Manga") with regard to Anderson's concept of *imagined communities* (*Imagined Communities*). Hills even suggests introducing the term *community of imagination* to refer to "a community which, rather than merely imagining itself as coexistent in empty clocked time, constitutes itself precisely through a common affective engagement, and thereby through a common respect for a specific potential space" (180). Along these lines Azuma's character database could be approached as a form of shared language within the fan culture, mirroring some of Anderson's claims in relation to the role of language in constituting forms of belonging (I am grateful to one of my anonymous reviewers for pointing this out). While I would definitely agree with the applicability of Anderson's theoretical framework in relation to various forms of subcultural and fannish identification and feelings of community and belonging, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the current choice of the expression "imagination" does not intend to allude to this avenue of thought.

Although my current argument is in no way incompatible with such an approach, inquiries building on the framework of imagined communities are about ways of constructing and experiencing community—that is, about relations between participants—, whereas my present discussion, and extension of Bourdieu's framework of aesthetic dispositions, is focused on the possible ways of experiencing the relationship between fantasy or art and reality, and the connection thereof to the way fannish practices are often disparaged both from culturally privileged and popular mainstream positions.

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