Otaku consumption, superflat art and the return to Edo

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Abstract: This paper addresses the use of Edo as a trope for Japanese post-modernity in the 1980s and 1990s and its transformation at the turn of the millennium in order to better situate Japanese visual artist and theorist Murakami Takashi’s 2000–1 exhibition, ‘Superflat’. Is Murakami’s ‘Superflat’ – which links contemporary anime and anime-influenced art to the works of Edo-period artists Kano Sansetsu and Katsushika Hokusai – merely another expression of the Edo boom of the 1980s and 1990s? Or does it present a different use of Edo from that which came before? In order to address this question, this article looks at the works of Ōtsuka Eiji, Ōkada Toshio and Karatani Kōjin, a group of writers to whose works theorist Azuma Hiroki links Murakami’s genealogical endeavors, and takes up Azuma’s critique of these writers and Murakami himself. Finally, turning to Nara Yoshitomo’s and Murakami’s works themselves, seen through the lens of Azuma’s arguments in his recent The Animalizing Postmodern, this article argues that their art – and in turn the Superflat itself – is guided by a logic of compositing that is far more informed by contemporary modes of digital imaging than by the mode of appropriation and quasi-historization that characterized the use of Edo in Japan’s postmodern 1980s and 1990s.

Keywords: Superflat, Murakami Takashi, Edo, Nara Yoshitomo, otaku, anime, Azuma, Ōtsuka, Karatani, Ōkada

There was an Edo boom in the Japan of the 1980s and 1990s. In television, in manga, in literature and in critical theory, the Edo period caught hold of the popular imagination. Edo was the site of the lost-but-not-forgotten authentic Japan, the pre-Western ‘outside’ of modernity. It was also, conversely, the precursor and reflection of Japan’s consumerist, postmodern present. A similar trend characterized the cultural climate of the early twentieth century:

During the 1920’s and early 1930’s there was an inordinate impulse to recapture the image of a unified cultural order in Edo Japan and its spoilage by capitalism. We might call this move ‘Edoviewing’. It was driven as much by a general dissatisfaction with modernity as it was by nostalgia.

(Harootunian 2000: 198)
In both the Edo viewing of the 1920s and 1930s, and the Edo boom of the 1980s and 1990s, Edo functioned as ‘the invented other in relation to which modernity posited itself’ (Gluck 1998: 262). Edo, Carol Gluck continues, ‘became not only a historical time but a cultural space, a repository of traditions (dentsu) associated with Japanese distinctiveness’ (1998: 263). Yet there are important differences between the Edo-viewing of the 1920s and 1930s and that of the 1980s and 1990s; while the two periods share an impulse to find an ‘outside’ to modernity and, for some, a state of ostensibly pure Japaneseness, the mode of nostalgia and the sense of temporality governing each is, I would argue, profoundly different. Where the Edo of the 1920s and 1930s is figured as a disappearing past which is nevertheless still capable of resurrection in one form or another, the 1980s and 1990s Edo is both completely past and completely present. It is a past present: temporally it is the precursor of and yet simultaneous with the present. In other words by the 1980s and 1990s Edo can be accessed only in terms of its relation to the present. Edo, now more than ever, functions as a way of thinking about the present; a mirror, perhaps, by which the present beholds itself.

It is within this phenomenon of the Edo boom that we can situate Japanese visual artist and curator Murakami Takashi’s exhibition, the ‘Superflat’.1 In its first manifestation in the Parco Galleries of Tokyo and Nagoya (spring and summer 2000), and in its later manifestations at the MOCA in Los Angeles (January to May 2001), the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (July to October 2001) and the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle (November 2001 to March 2002), the ‘Superflat’ brought together a wide array of contemporary Japanese artists, most of whose works have some relation to contemporary mass culture – whether in the form of fashion, manga (comics), anime (animation), figurines or video games. Despite this common link to mass culture, the logic guiding their assemblage in this exhibition was not only that they were all of the moment and currently of interest to Japanese and North American audiences alike – though indeed they were. It was, rather, that they all displayed a certain flatness and a mobility of the gaze whose influence Murakami traces back to Edo-period painters, such as Kano Sansetsu and Itō Jakuchū, and woodblock artists, such as Katsushika Hokusai. Superflatness, Murakami writes, is a ‘sensibility that has contributed to and continues to contribute to the construction of Japanese culture, as a worldview, and...is an original concept that links the past with the present with the future’ (Murakami 2000: 5). This sensibility, expressed in the planarity of the works and ‘the way that a picture controls the speed of its observer’s gaze’ (Murakami 2000: 9), ties together premodern and contemporary art and visual artifacts in a continuity of form. How this conceptual and formal linkage of past, present and future artifacts operates – i.e. the logic behind Murakami’s assemblage of works as inflected by theories of consumption influenced by the mirror of Edo – is one of my principal concerns in this paper.2

Thus it is not the validity or invalidity of Murakami’s theory that I want to address here, but rather the cultural and intellectual currents informing the
organization of Murakami’s exhibition. Edo has been a site around which various
theories of consumption and production have been elaborated—a viewfinder of
sorts used to apprehend present patterns of consumption said to mirror those of
Edo. Perhaps more than a nationalistic desire to posit a continuity in Japanese
aesthetic sensibility, it is these theories of consumption that inform not only
Murakami’s return to Edo, but his very approach to works of art in his theory
of the superflat. It would be easy to write off Murakami’s theory as simply a res-
urrection of the nihonga project or as yet another attempt to posit the Japanese
particular against the Western universal (as much for his Western audiences as for
his Japanese audiences, as his critics have noted). Yet Murakami’s approach to
Edo is both more complicated than this and inflected by a mode of consumption
that has itself been theorized by writers and artists who have in recent years turned
to Edo and whose works this paper will explore.

The *otaku* revolution: producing-consuming and the return
to Edo

In ‘The invention of Edo’, Gluck identifies three main ‘positional forms’ of what
she calls Edo-memory: the narration of the nation-state, in which Edo figures as
‘an impediment to or a resource for the modern nation-state’; oppositional Edo,
whereby Edo-memories constitute a ‘heritage of protest’ that animates the strug-
gle against the modern nation-state and its hegemonic power formations; and
commodified Edo, ‘which possessed, in quantity and reach, perhaps the largest
share of the memory business’. In this last form, Edo figures as ‘commodified nos-
talgia’, ‘the favored site in the terrain of popular memory, whether in commercial
media, historical fiction, museum and monuments, or the theming of Japan in
history-lands’ (Gluck 1998: 264–5). To these three forms we can add a fourth
which, while complementary to the third form (Edo-for-consumption), is in some
ways its inversion. This is the Edo-of-consumption. For the writers and artists we
will encounter here, Edo functions as a site that mirrors contemporary forms of
consumption and a site from which these forms can be theorized. If the Edo of
these theorists’ imagining is no less fanciful or fantastic for being so, it nevertheless
does serve more as a productive site of theorization—of commodification and its
site of emergence, the surface—than as a reproductive site of nostalgia. While, as
Gluck notes, Edo has a tendency to be used as an ‘outside’ to the modern and as a
site of the regeneration of Japanese tradition—what she inelegantly but accurately
calls the ‘un-pre-proto-post-modern’ (1998: 283)—and while this tendency is at
times present in the work of the writers and artists discussed here, Edo is finally
less important as a site of exteriority to Western modernity than as a site that
parallels or mirrors the postmodern present.

The relation between Japanese consumerism of the 1980s and Edo sensibilities
is drawn out by Ōtsuka Eiji in his insightful book on transformations in patterns of
consumption of youth in 1980s Japan, *Monogatari shōhiron* (On the consumption
of narrative), which was originally published in 1989. Ōtsuka, a prolific writer and theorist of manga, animation and literature, argues in this work that it is no longer the products themselves that Japanese consumers seek out, but rather the ‘grand narrative’ (ōkina monogatari) that subtends them. The grand narrative is the ‘world-view’ or ‘order’ that is consumed through the ‘small narratives’ (chisisana monogatari) which the products constitute: ‘Whether comics or toys, it is not the things in themselves that are consumed, but rather the grand narrative or order which is contained therein’ (Ōtsuka 2001a: 36). Moreover, the more a certain product is consumed, the closer the consumer gets to the grand narrative which underlies it. And the closer the consumer gets to the grand narrative which underlies the small narratives or products, the greater the productive role of the consumer herself. In other words, having accumulated enough pieces of the grand narrative (world-view) through the consumption of small narratives (products), the consumer begins to be able to produce her own small narratives and produces to the extent that she consumes. The representative site of production-consumption is, of course, the amateur market of the ‘Comike’ (or Comic Market), a massive biannual market-place which draws 100,000 to 200,000 people and whose largest body of amateur work consists of ‘rewrites’ (it would be inaccurate to call them parodies, though some indeed are parodic) of the grand narratives of mainstream comics and animation.

Ōtsuka sees this completion of the circle of production and consumption as the final stage of the consumption of narrative: ‘this points to a state of affairs where the production and consumption of the “product” are unified. All that will be left will be a multitude of consumers who produce and consume products made by their own hands’ (2001a: 39). Significantly, Ōtsuka discovers a precursor to this process of the consumer’s appropriation of the grand narrative and subsequent production of small narratives in the Edo period performance art of Kabuki, whose terms Ōtsuka uses to describe the relations between grand and small narratives. Ōtsuka associates grand narrative with the Kabuki term sekai (‘world’ or ‘world-view’; the world or age or event in and around which the play is set, including all the characters, their relations, and the basic premises of this world). Similarly, he associates ‘small narrative’ with the term shukō (the variation or new elements within this set world). Whereas in Kabuki the same stories may be told over and over again (this being the same sekai or world), it is the shukō or variation which provides the newness and stimulates spectatorial interest (Ōtsuka 2001b: 18–19). To put it plainly, sekai—in Ōtsuka’s contemporary terms, the grand narrative—is the repetition, and shukō—the small narrative—is the difference. It is to Kabuki and Edo modes of consumption that Ōtsuka looks in order to theorize the turn, in the 1980s, away from a passive model of consumption towards an active one—in other words, towards a model of consumption as production, or producing-consuming.5

Here let us turn to one of the more polemical theorists of the continuity between Edo and contemporary forms of popular/mass culture: Okada Toshio—the self-styled ‘Otakingu’, or ‘Otaku King’. Incorporating Ōtsuka’s analysis of the
consumption patterns of youth in the 1980s, and drawing on Edo terminology and cultural forms, Ōkada formulates a theory of the *otaku*, whom he describes as a ‘new type’ of advanced life form who ‘leads informatic capitalist society’ (Ōkada 1996: 10, 36). The term *otaku*, which was coined in 1982 and came into popular usage by 1989, is usually translated as ‘geek’ or ‘aficionado,’ and refers to a group of people who ‘take refuge in a world of fantasy, drinking in the images supplied by the modern media – usually from television, magazines and comic books, but also computer images or video games’ (Baral 1999: 22). Reproached for their inability to communicate and the difficulty they have in functioning in everyday life, *otaku* are sometimes taken to task as symbolic of the anomic of contemporary Japan. Over the past few years, however, the *otaku* have come to be recognized as veritable subcultural heroes, ones, moreover, who are unique to Japan. Ōkada has been a central figure in this celebration of the *otaku*, asserting that the *otaku* not only represent a new type of media-savvy human endowed with superior sensory faculties, but are also the true inheritors and propagators of traditional Japanese culture.

In his *Otaku-gaku nyūmon* (Introduction to otakuology, as he translates it) Ōkada writes that the *otaku* is distinguished by its three ‘eyes’. These ‘eyes’ are ways of seeing, or modes of visual appreciation and discernment when approaching cultural products, such as film, *anime* and *manga*: the eye of *iki*; the eye of *takumi*; and the eye of *tsū*. All three of these terms—*iki*, *takumi*, and *tsū*—are borrowed from Edo-period town culture or, perhaps, from the twentieth-century philosopher Kuki Shūzō’s 1930 tract on Edo-era sensibilities, *Iki no kozō* (The structure of *iki*), a work influenced in a large part by continental European philosophy and in which, as Gluck puts it, Kuki ‘virtually hallucinated a new cultural Edo in the tradition of taste he identified as *iki*’ (1998: 271). Emerging out of an economy of expenditure found especially in Edo’s pleasure quarters, the *tsū* or *tsūjin* ‘was a specialist in the knowledge of pleasure who knew how to navigate the pleasure quarters’ a player or dandy ‘who was known for his possession of an elusive style called *iki*’ (Harootunian 1991: 24, 23). *Iki* is a term used to refer to a philosophy or structure of existence in the Edo pleasure quarters, usually associated with non-attachment. In Ōkada’s contemporary reworking of the terms, *tsū* is interpreted as the eye of the connoisseur; it is the knowledge of what went into the making of the film, of the actors, the budgetary constraints and all the behind-the-scenes politics, scandals and gossip that accompany any cultural production (Ōkada 1996: 85, 176–7). The eye of *takumi* is the clever or skilful eye; it is the ‘regard of the scientist who analyses the work theoretically and sees through its structure. And at the same time it is the regard of the craftsperson who penetrates the workmanship in order to steal it’ (Ōkada 1996: 82). The skilful eye is that which, in viewing *anime*, recognizes the difference in the quality of movement between Japan’s limited animation and Disney’s full animation and is that which discerns the superimposition of layers in its production (Ōkada 1996: 129, 134). Finally, the eye of *iki*, the regard of chic or style, is your ‘own individual viewpoint.
from which you discover the work’s beauty, watch the creator’s growth and enjoy the work’ (Ôkada 1996: 80). It is the playful viewpoint necessary to discover the cool of Japan’s tokusatsu or special effects films which have none of the realism of their Hollywood SFX counterparts. In his discussion of the eye of iki, Ôkada takes up the terms sekai (world) and shukô (variation) to describe the otaku’s relation to manga and anime, describing a logic of consumption-as-production similar to that sketched by Ôtsuka. According to Ôkada, rather than searching for originality or autonomy in an animated feature or series, what otaku seek is variation within a singular world-view. Thus the format of the genre ‘Robot anime’ has remained the same for the last twenty-five years; whether it be Majinga Z, Gundam or the more recent Evangelion, the basic premise and plot—the world or sekai—is the same. It is the variation of this world that makes an anime interesting and it is this variation that otaku look for when watching anime. It is also the circulation of variation that animates otaku consumption-production in sites such as the Comic Market described above.

These three modes of perception of the otaku, and the latter’s engagement in the circle of production-consumption along the lines of sekai and shukô, lead Ôkada to suggest that otaku are the true successors of the craftspeople of Edo consumer culture. ‘Otaku are Japanese culture’s rightful inheritors’, as Ôkada entitles the last chapter of his book. With their beauty-discovering eye of chic, their craftsper-son-like ability to evaluate technique and artistry with their eye of skill, and their grasp of a work’s social context (technological and budgetary constraints, cast politics etc.) through their eye of connoisseurship, the otaku are veritable suijin—people of the world and of refined taste after the fashion of the Edo flâneur (Ôkada 1996: 227).

The repressed returns: Karatani’s Edo and Japanese postmodernity

Edo not only figured as an important site for the description of 1980s and 1990s modes of consumption and subcultures, but was also trumpeted as a precursor of Japanese postmodernity, as a space phenomenologically and epistemologically exterior to Western modernity (for Japan-gazing Westerners) yet also epistemologically simultaneous to Japan’s present (for people in Japan). Karatani Kôjin, one of the most widely read and translated of Japanese critical theorists, is an interesting figure to turn to at this point for, though Gluck criticizes him in ‘The invention of Edo’ for positing a ‘somewhat silly’ simultaneity of premodern Edo with postmodern Japan (1998: 274), he is nevertheless much more careful in his use of Edo than Ôkada cares to be and even more radical in his conclusions. While Ôtsuka uses terms drawn from Kabuki to emphasize that the contemporary mode of consumption-production is not wholly novel and Ôkada contents himself with boldly proclaiming that otaku are the only true Japanese left in Japan (and thus the saviors of Japanese culture), Karatani argues that Japan’s nineteenth century
(the culmination of Edo) is in fact present in its late twentieth-century-present. That is, Japan's postmodern is the re-emergence of the semiotic constellation of nineteenth-century Edo.

Discussing the relation between Edo and postmodern Japan in his essay, ‘One spirit, two nineteenth centuries’, Karatani contrasts the European nineteenth century with that of Edo Japan. Nineteenth-century Europeans, looking for an escape from their modernity, ‘found in “Japanism” [sic] a way out of their own century: they discovered a world without a point of view (a subject), one indifferent to all meaning’ (1989: 262). ‘Japan’ offered an epistemological outside for these Europeans, a way out of their century and out of modernity’s system of interiority/exteriority, subjectivity and meaning. A similar impulse motivated Barthes’ meditation on twentieth-century Japan in *Empire of Signs*, within which the elements evoked are ‘almost all products of this nineteenth century’. Karatani continues:

What Barthes praises is the absence of ‘man’, of the thinking subject. What he discovers, as did the Impressionists, is the ‘exteriority’ of the Western world within the Japanese nineteenth century. . . . He sought to discover a ‘Japan’ situated outside the life and thought of the West, a ‘Japan’ which was other than that life and thought and which was, of course, non-existent. Barthes would have written the same thing had he seen the Japan of today, sliding, without any resistance, into postindustrial society. The Japanese nineteenth century may have been an impediment to ‘modernization’, but it promises to be an accelerating factor for a postmodern society.

(Karatani 1989: 265)

We must take note of the ambivalence in this passage; the Japan that Barthes evokes is that of the nineteenth century, a time which represents the culmination and full maturation of Edo. Japan as absolute exteriority is, of course, a fantasy that Barthes was well aware he was engaging in; this Japan is non-existent. Yet if Barthes had written the same thing today, it would not have been because he was similarly (if self-consciously) deluded, but rather because contemporary Japan is witnessing the unprecedented re-emergence of its repressed nineteenth century. If the nineteenth century promises to be an ‘accelerating factor for postmodern society’ it is not because the nineteenth century was ‘already’ postmodern but rather because Japan’s postindustrial era is seeing the re-emergence of the social structure and semiotic constellation that characterizes Japan’s nineteenth century. In other words, Japanese postmodernism is really nineteenth-century Edoism. While it would be easy to criticize Barthes *et al.* for their orientalism, Karatani argues that this would not resolve the problem. Why? Karatani explains:

Japanese literature and thought in general—I think we could call it postmodernism—appear to be influenced by the West and appear to stand at the level of advanced capitalism and yet, at the same time, [they] are nothing but the
disclosure of an Edo literature that was found, at the most, only eighty years ago after peeling off the outer layer, that is, the ground of Edo literature was exposed.

(Karatani 1999a: 276)

Japanese postmodernism, in short, is an age in which repressed Edo sensibilities fully re-emerge – as the ‘ground’ of contemporary Japan.

Karatani thus agrees with Western writers who saw in (nineteenth-century) Japan a lack of meaning and depth and the negation of perspective, but argues this was not the result of underdevelopment but rather the outcome of a process whereby logos in Japan was deconstructed: ‘what stubbornly resisted the “modern-ization” of Japanese thought and literature in the twentieth century was not simply a premodern sensibility but a mode of thought which in some senses had already transcended the modern’ (1989: 271). Characterized by its consumer society, its play with language and the reign of the superficial – what Karatani describes as a ‘lightness’ – the Edo of nineteenth-century Japan ‘was not a situation of underdeveloped belatedness in need of modernization, however, but, in a sense, a perfectly refined formation that could hardly be further perfected’ (1999a, 272). It is this formation that has re-emerged in Japan’s postmodernity, where the reign of information-as-difference (1999a: 271) and its consumer society regenerate the lightness of Edo’s nineteenth century.

What Karatani is describing is thus a specific kind of semiotic regime, marked not by its imperfection in relation to (Western) modernity, but rather by its own form of completion or consistency; a regime, moreover, that did not disappear with Japan’s modernization and the movement in literature (in the third decade of the Meiji era) to develop the form of interiority that characterized Western literature, but rather submerged, only to re-emerge in the 1930s in the form of the I-novel (as a form of writing that reacted against the perspectival trend of modern (Western) literature) and then again in the 1980s and 1990s in what is known as postmodernism. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari define a semiotic regime or regime of signs as ‘any specific formalization of expression’ (1987: 111), but add that this expression need not be simply linguistic, but can also be visual. Regimes of signs can be thought of as the intersection of epistemological, social and power formations of a certain period or age. The two intersecting semiotics that characterize modernity for Deleuze and Guattari are the axes of signification and subjectification, which, in Karatani’s terms, are the ‘semiotic constellations’ that guarantee meaning, depth and interiority. Indeed, in a peculiar yet interesting confluence – for they were writing at the same time – Deleuze and Guattari, on the one hand, and Karatani, on the other, link modernity and its system of interiority to both landscape and face – as guarantors or sites of expression of what Karatani calls the ‘discovery of interiority’.7 As the latter writes in his Origins of Modern Japanese Literature, ‘Interiority was not something that had always existed, but only appeared as the result of the inversion of a semiotic constellation.'
No sooner had it appeared than it was seen as “expressed” by the naked face’ (1993: 57).

In other words, interiority – generated by what Deleuze and Guattari call the intersection of the semiotic regimes of signification and subjectification – is a system that, in Japan, was grafted onto or over Japan’s nineteenth century. And while the Edo of this nineteenth century lay buried for some time, it surfaced periodically, with its latest emergence occurring over the last twenty years, informing contemporary modes of consumption, linguistic play, lightness and superficiality.

**Between Edo and Japan: Azuma**

Azuma Hiroki – a theorist who, while originally a Derridean scholar, has gained some renown for his connections with Murakami and for his work on *otaku* subjectivity and Japanese postmodernity – takes Ōtsuka, Ōkada and Karatani to task for their reliance on the Edo paradigm as an explanatory framework for the present. Yet, despite their disagreements over the subject of Edo, Azuma’s theorization of Japan’s present cultural logic relies heavily on these writers’ work and expands it in interesting directions.

In the last chapter of *Otaku-gaku nyūmon*, Ōkada includes a diagram that traces the genealogy of two major cultural constituencies of contemporary Japan. On the one hand, there is the ‘Western Culture’ stream, which includes Greek philosophy, Christianity, Renaissance arts and science, as well as its oppositional movements of punk, ‘sex&drugs’ and Warhol. In Japan, such oppositional movements lead to ‘fashion under the name of opposition’ or ‘ape-imitation subculture’. On the other hand, there is what Ōkada calls ‘Oriental Culture’, which begins with the importation of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism from the Asian continent, continues with Zen and the tea ceremony, then moves to *ukiyo-e*, Edo townspeople’s culture and craftspeople’s culture and segues into the *otaku* culture of *anime*, special effects films, video games and *cosplay* (‘costume play’). However, between Edo culture and *otaku* culture there lies a large black ‘gap’ indicated temporally, on the one side, by the arrival of Commodore Perry’s Black Ships and, on the other, by the mushroom cloud that symbolizes Japanese defeat at the end of the Pacific War.

Azuma begins his history of *otaku* culture at this very same mushroom cloud. However, for Azuma, the divide which, in Ōkada’s account, lies between Japanese culture and its rightful inheritors – the *otaku* – is insurmountable. Although Azuma adopts Ōtsuka’s terms ‘grand narrative’ and ‘small narrative’ as well as the latter’s analysis of commodity culture to discuss the consumption-production cycle in *otaku* culture, he rejects Ōtsuka’s and Ōkada’s reliance on Edo commodity culture in their writings on 1980s and 1990s Japan. He similarly rejects Karatani’s equation of postmodern subjectivity with an already-deconstructed Edo subjectivity. Finally, he locates Murakami’s reference to Edo pictorial traditions within this general ‘return’ to Edo, and critiques it as such.
Azuma (re)inserts what he sees as the missing term in the above theorists’ configurations of the Japanese postmodern: America. As Azuma writes: ‘otaku are quite possibly the inheritors of Edo culture, however, these two are by no means continuous. Sandwiched between otaku and Japan is America’ (2001a: 20). Azuma sees two impulses at work in the tendency of cultural critics to mobilize Edo in order to explain Japan’s postmodern present and otaku culture. The first involves an appropriation of the Orientalist discourse of Euramerican writers:

Japan has long been represented as a mixture of premodernity and postmodernity in Western discourse. . . . This kind of ‘Orientalism’ was imported back into Japanese society in the 1980s and since then the Japanese themselves have begun to explain their postmodern reality as based on their premodern tradition going back to the Edo era. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the deepest psychosocial element beneath this tendency is the (impossible) desire to deny postwar American cultural influence. Postmodernity came from the U.S. although the Japanese want to reclaim it as their national tradition. (Azuma 2001b)

For Azuma what is at stake is both an auto-orientalizing impulse whereby Japan views itself as if through the eyes of the exoticizing West and a desire on the part of these critics to reverse the inferiority complex felt since the loss of the Pacific War and Japan’s subsequent Americanization. The attempt to inscribe ‘Japaneseness’ in otaku – by Ōtsuka, Ōkada and Murakami – is an attempt to negate the post-war influence of America on Japanese culture. Moreover, this affirmation of otaku culture and Japan in general is linked to the 1980s ‘delusion’ that, if modernization was the equivalent of Europeanization, then postmodernization was manifested in two forms (either Americanization or Japanization) and that world history had chosen Japanization (Azuma 2001a: 29, 100). Azuma feels that this is simply a narcissistic delusion inspired by the bubble economy of 1980s Japan and inextricably linked to a desire to transcend and efface the scars of defeat in the Pacific War. In this configuration, the ‘Edo’ appealed to is not the ‘real’ Edo, but simply a Japan that existed prior to American influence. Azuma insists that this ‘Japan’ is merely an imaginary and imagined space, a ‘quasi-Japan created from American materials’ (2001a: 32). Instead of returning to Edo in search of anime and the otaku’s roots, or the origins of postmodernity, one should look to the post-war American Occupation and the importation of American subcultures into Japan in the post-war period. In short, if on the one hand America is implicated in the birth of otaku culture, on the other hand this Americanization of Japan was essentially its postmodernization: ‘the otaku’s “Japanese space” is impossible to narrate without the invasion of America. And America’s invasion, in the latter half of the twentieth century, is the invasion of the postmodern’ (Azuma 2001c).

Azuma’s critique of the historical amnesia of some of the writers discussed above is an interesting one. It situates their accounts as products of the 1980s
bubble economy (or its legacy) and the desire to generate a positive image of Japan, to transcend the memories of the war associated with defeat and the influx of American influence and to create a new sense of identity. It exposes the lack of a historical consciousness in these writers’ accounts and suggests their proximity to neo-nationalistic rhetoric. Yet, ultimately, Azuma’s account is not without its own problems. First, if Ōkada’s account of otaku as the cultural successors of Edo culture is premised on a gap across which Japanese culture somehow ‘leaped’, Azuma’s account, while more conscious of the politics of evoking historical periods to explain the present, evokes the same gap, over which Edo culture could not leap, but into which American culture – and postmodernity with it – flowed. Azuma replaces Ōkada’s genealogy of otaku culture with a periodization in which America occupies the same totalizing place of Edo in Ōkada’s account. Second, and perhaps more important, Azuma’s account misses its mark on several levels. It misses the fact that Ōtsuka asserted a parallelism between forms of consumption-production rather than a historical continuity. It misses the overwhelmingly ironical tone of Ōkada’s work and his propensity for polemics. It also misses the care with which Karatani sets about uncovering what he sees as a continuing resistance to the semiotic constellation of modernity, with its emphasis on depth and interiority, and the subterranean persistence of a premodern semiotic emphasizing surface and word-play from Japan’s nineteenth century onwards (a semiotic that once again surfaces in Japan’s postmodern present).

Having registered Azuma’s critique of the Edo-viewers and the problems with this critique, it is worth noting that Azuma draws a great deal from Ōkada’s, Ōtsuka’s and Karatani’s theorization of production-consumption and the importance of surface in the consideration of contemporary cultural forms. Indeed, regardless of their use of Edo, these three theorists’ works – and especially that of Ōtsuka – on modes of consumption in contemporary Japan provide important points of departure for Azuma’s own work on consumption in his Dōbutsuka suru posutomodan (The animalizing postmodern). This is a book which has as its goal the analysis of the emergent consumption patterns of 1990s otaku, patterns which Azuma sees as representative of transformations in consumption in postmodern society as a whole. The consumption environment of 1990s otaku is characterized by the ‘rise of the media mix’ in which there is no longer the linear, orderly procession of products (from manga to anime to goods related to the latter) that characterized the 1980s otaku market. Rather what we find in the ‘media mix’ is a nonlinear and often simultaneous product loop generated between trading cards, anime, figurines, TV series and related goods (Azuma 2001a: 63). Moreover, what ties all these products together is no longer the ‘grand narrative’ that Ōtsuka argued was the basis of ‘the consumption of narrative’, but rather what Azuma calls the ‘grand non-narrative’ whose anchoring element is the character (kyara – referring to the fictionalized character of the anime or manga series, but also to the non-narrative product mascot or figure). Instead of narrative, it is the character
that forms the ground from which spring the ‘small narratives’ or what Azuma calls ‘simulacra’ (in an inflected usage of the term popularized by Baudrillard). The setting or world-view of Ōtsuka’s theory is now the non-narrative ‘database’ of characters, a database from whose ‘information different artist/producers draw to materialize their individual products (simulacra)’ (Azuma 2001a: 63). In this system, narrative is secondary to the types of affinity that consumers show towards characters; it is thus the characters (as the grand non-narratives) that sustain interest in products (the simulacra) – the TV series, the comics, the figurines and toys and the related products which are spun from the database of the characters.

However, there is a second level at which Azuma proposes to think through this system of consumption. Instead of reading the characters as the grand non-narrative or database and the materialized products as the simulacra, he suggests reading the characters themselves as the simulacra or products, and the compositional elements of these characters as the database from which the characters-as-simulacra are materialized (2001a: 77). Azuma calls these compositional elements moe yōso (desire elements or elements that trigger the desire of the viewer or user), which he defines as ‘signs developed to stimulate effectively the desire [moe] of the consumer’ (2001a: 66). While these elements are primarily graphical (including maid or sailor uniforms, tails, cat-style ears, hair colour and shape of the eyes), they also include non-graphical elements (such as favorite phrases, ways of talking or the typological development of the narrative) (2001a: 67). Moreover, unlike the system of consumption of narrative where the grand narrative could only be accessed through the small narratives or simulacra, in the consumption of database as Azuma describes it, the database itself – or rather the growth elements that compose it – can be accessed by the consumer, both through the products in which they appear and through search engines, such as that available at tinami.com where the consumer can search through characters based on their compositional elements (such as ‘animal’, ‘maid clothes’, ‘tail’ and so on).

What we find within this double, two-tiered structure (where, on one level, products = simulacra and characters = database; and, on the other, characters = simulacra and desire elements = database) is a new world-view accompanied by a new form of consumption-production linked intimately with the ‘reading’ of information itself. If ‘information = difference’, as Karatani notes (1999a: 271), is indeed the basis of contemporary consumer society, we now see that it is the modes of reading/accessing this information that distinguish the contemporary age and its cycles of production-consumption from those of nineteenth-century, Edo Japan. Furthermore, it is the Internet, which binds the operations of reading and writing so closely together in the function of the search engine, that provides the model and the medium for the new relations of production-consumption – a fact which Ōtsuka retrospectively acknowledges in his afterward to the 2001 republication of his Monogatari shōhiron. Here Ōtsuka reflects that the reason for the continued relevance of his analyses in this book is that the desire to be a
producer of information or narrative systematized in the Comic Market was in fact a premonition of the communication medium that was to come: the Internet. The Comike and other forms of the production of narrative which reflect the desire to be a ‘sender of information’ were thus systematizations of a ‘internet-desire’ that preceded the arrival of the Internet itself (Ôtsuka 2001b: 322). As Azuma succinctly writes, ‘In the movement from modernity to postmodernity, our image of the world has seen a great shift from one supported by a cinematic world-view to a world that is read/written (yomikomu) through a database-ic, interface-ial search engine’ (2001a: 78).

The simultaneity of writing-reading and consuming-producing implied in the term ‘yomikomu’ and in the very act of accessing the database itself allows us to conceive of a selection-consumption which is itself simultaneously a form of production. As such, it is both an extension of Ôkada’s description of otaku modes of seeing (especially the eye of takumi) and a reconceptualization of Ôtsuka’s model of consumption-production. It is also a model that will help us theorize the logic of assemblage that characterizes the superflat. However, before turning to Murakami himself, I should like to turn to one of his contemporaries, another popular artist who has worked on Edo, and who will help us approach Murakami’s work, Nara Yoshitomo.

**Compositing Edo: Nara’s *Ukiyo***

Nara is a contemporary artist who, like Murakami, has gained considerable recognition both in Japan and abroad. In fact, in terms of their age, their popularity and their media-star status, Nara and Murakami are more partners than mere contemporaries. They have appeared on the cover of *Brutus* together, have spoken together at conferences and on television and have created a joint website, the Narakami General Store, from which to sell both their individual and their collaborative merchandise. However, despite their closeness, and despite his inclusion in the *Super Flat* catalogue, Nara differs considerably from Murakami in his position on the relation between his art and Japan. Where Murakami maintains at the very least an ambiguously cozy relationship with the concept of a Japanese aesthetics, Nara adamantly refuses to see his works appended to a narrative of Japanese painting. In short, Nara asserts that his works are influenced not so much by anime, manga or nihonga as by children’s books worldwide; they depict a universal childhood that cannot be recuperated by either nation or culture. Nara explains his position in the following interview:

While a student in Japan I studied Western Art History, but I feel now that classification by region is basically irrelevant except in respect to living customs . . . So for me, Western and Eastern Art Histories are no more than relics of the past. We probably need some other name for what is now ongoing in the world. For my own works too, it would seem incomplete to represent them
only in the context of Japan and Asia, but of course they cannot be discussed in terms of the West either.

(Nara 2001: 317)

Or, as he says elsewhere:

When I look at my work relatively calmly, I don’t think that the part of my work that’s esteemed abroad is the part that is Japanese. I’d like to think that it is not about whether it’s Japanese or Western, but that there’s something more fundamental that is conveyed [in my work].

(Nara 2000: 44)

What is this fundamental something that his works convey? Nara replies that it is the mode of expression of emotions – of sadness and anger.

In the light of the international appeal of his works, and his rejection of Japan as an explanatory framework for them, it is interesting to take up a book Nara published in 1999, which is titled, simply, Ukiyo. The first section of this book, given the English title ‘in the floating world’, is a series of sixteen drawings, all of which are created using ukiyo-e prints. Ukiyo-e (translated as ‘pictures of the floating world’) are woodblock prints that have come to be considered as the representative art form of the Edo period; an art form, moreover, that was bound up with the vibrant consumer culture of the pleasure quarters. Over the recognizable masterworks of ukiyo-e artists Utagawa, Kitagawa Utamarō and Katsushika Hokusai among others, Nara paints the punk-kid figures for which he has become renowned: sometimes grimacing, knife-wielding, bloody and energetic, sometimes serene or blasé and sometimes quietly threatening. These are figures of girls (and occasionally dogs) with oversized heads and glaring eyes, often menacing, sometimes cute and usually accompanied by some textual commentary. These works, like those included in the ‘Superflat’ exhibition, feature completely two-dimensional, disproportional figures, drawn in the absence of any background. This emphasis on figure and lack of interest in background – a rejection of the vocation of painting as a so-called ‘window on the world’ – are indeed two tendencies found in the work of many of the contemporary artists included in the ‘Superflat’ exhibition, including Mr Takano Aya, Enlightenment, as well as Murakami himself. Emphasis on figure and rejection of background are also guiding impulses in Nara’s transformation of the woodblock prints in his Ukiyo. In these drawings, Nara’s preliminary work involves erasing any complexity, dimensionality or depth present in the original print. For, despite Murakami’s assertions to the contrary, it is impossible to deny the presence of a certain dimensionality in Japanese art, especially in ukiyo-e, many of which actually used, albeit selectively, the principles of perspective.13

Nara erases depth in two ways: by painting over the original ukiyo-e with white paint and by painting his punk girl figures into and over the original. In the first image of the book,14 Nara takes Under the Wave off Kanagawa (Great Wave) from...
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Hokusai’s *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* collection, paints over the creases in the waves and the distant Mount Fuji with white and turns the giant wave in the foreground into the hair of a knife-wielding figure (see Figure 1). In so doing, Nara flattens the foreground-background opposition that orients the viewer in the original and transforms the entire print into a single plane: that of the figure. In the second picture, Nara paints over almost the entire surface, upon which he draws a girl with nails in her head. In the third, the huge head poking out of the water disrupts the flow of what was the leftmost panel of Hiroshige’s triptych, *View of Naruto Strait in Awa*, obscuring the background and thereby leaving only the foreground with which the figure becomes contiguous. In all the drawings, Nara blurs the fine lines and blocks of colour that create a sense of spatial depth in the original in favor of an uneven, splotchy yet uniplanar surface on which he paints his punk figures.

Nara’s transfiguration of these Edo prints can only be seen as a playful reconfiguration or metamorphosing of Edo; a process whereby he reads out the elements that are of interest to him and writes in his characters as his reconfiguration of the prints. Indeed, the sensibility that animates Nara’s reconfiguration of the prints is very similar to that described by Azuma above. Nara approaches the paintings as if they were a database of elements from which he then composes his own work, inflected by his own predilection towards planarity, flatness and figure. As such, Nara does not claim that Edo is contiguous with the present or that the postmodern period is the continuation of premodern Edo. Nara makes no attempt to inscribe Edo into a narrative of Japaneseness. What animates Nara’s work on the prints is what Azuma describes as a logic of the consumption of database, a logic that can be re-articulated in terms of the visual logic or operation of compositing.

Compositing, or digital compositing, is defined by new media theorist Lev Manovich as ‘the process of combining a number of moving image sequences, and possibly stills, into a single sequence’ (2001: 136–7). Digital compositing, Manovich continues, ‘exemplifies a more general operation of computer culture – assembling together a number of elements to create a single seamless object’ (2001: 139). As an operation that includes both the selection of elements or layers and their writing-fusion into a single plane or surface, this notion of compositing describes succinctly the process that animates Nara’s creation of his *Ukiyo* series, as well as Murakami’s own work in his 727, *Mt. Fuji* and *Manji Fuji*.

In *Manji Fuji*, for example (see Figure 2), Murakami’s ‘Oval’ characters, one sitting atop the other, float in the crook of a tree with the outline of Mount Fuji in the background. The tree, Mount Fuji and the inscription on the lower left-hand side of the image are drawn in a traditional style. The Oval characters and the writing at the top left are composed in colors and a digital style that is both contemporary and distinctively Murakami. The two styles are different, yet not conflicting. As disjunctive as they may seem, there is a strange interaction between
Figure 1 Nara Yoshitomo *Slash with a Knife*, courtesy of Tomio Koyama Gallery.
the layers of the contemporary and the traditional. Oval sits remarkably comfortably over the relatively smooth, monotone background. Indeed, this background is very reminiscent of the smooth, featureless backgrounds of Murakami’s other paintings. Manji Fuji works because the traditional work with which it is composed already has the aesthetic of smooth-surface background which characterizes Murakami’s other works. Oval does not ‘fit’ into Japan’s pictorial past so much as Japan’s pictorial past ‘fits’ into Oval’s present – and Murakami’s style. As in Nara’s works, the characters are not simply positioned on top of the existing painting, but are drawn into it. Here we find again the dual operation that characterizes Nara’s Ukiyo works: element-selection/reading/consuming from the database (in this case the premodern painting or ukiyo-e print) and compositing/writing/producing using the character. To restate these two operations in terms of Deleuze and Guattari’s description of ‘double-articulation’, we can say that the first operation consists in sorting or selecting elements and the second operation in folding or compositing them into a single compound (1987: 40–1).15 We can line up these elements and the operations that correspond to them in this table.

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Figure 2 Murakami Takashi Manji Fuji © Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd/All rights reserved.
Compositing, generalized as the logic of folding, is a product of the media mix of the 1990s that Azuma describes and reflects the mode of reading-writing or consuming-producing that he analyses in his Dōbutsuka suru posutomodan. Inasmuch as compositing involves a process of selection, followed by a process of folding, this logic patently informs Nara’s production of his Ukiyo works, where he uncovers elements within the paintings (what Azuma would call moe yōso) which allow him to generate his own works, according to his own aesthetic. In other words, and in this he resembles Ōtsuka and Ōkada, his works are not so much about Edo as they are about a particular mode of consumption, expressed in his re-working of the ukiyo-e prints, but anchored in the present. Nara is not drawing Edo into his present but rather is drawing his present through Edo. There is scant assertion of continuity between premodern and postmodern, but rather a process of consumption-production, selection-folding that speaks more about contemporary sensibilities than about Edo. The same must be said of Murakami’s work in Manji Fuji and 727. And it should come as no surprise that in both of these artists’ works it is characters that anchor their process of consumption-production, for characters, as Azuma notes, form the basis of this emergent mode of consumption. Here I should like to return to the superflat in order to suggest that it is this process of selection-folding that motivates and informs Murakami’s use of Edo.

**Selection-folding and the operational logic of the superflat**

Murakami’s theory of superflat art is a kind of stylistic genealogy that operates between a limited set of works; his mode of argumentation functions through the visual juxtaposition of analogical forms. In sensing the impossibility of giving “Japan” a fixed shape or discerning ‘what “art” really is’ Murakami opts to ‘solve the problem by lining up a series of images in a powerful procession that words could not clarify’ (2000: 9). What he constructs through this juxtaposition is thus not a history in the usual sense, but rather a diagram of relations; a diagram which produces these relations even as it draws them out. There is the similarity in form and lines between stills of Kanada’s Galaxy Express 999 (1979) and one of Hokusai’s Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji: Yamashita shiro ame (1831): the zigzagging lines over a curved form (earth in one case, Mount Fuji in the other) and the use of colour to differentiate forms and orient the viewer rather than technologies of depth (such as one-point perspective). There are the lines of movement between vib-ribbon (1999) and a twelfth-century picture scroll, Chōjū jinbutsu giga, related again by the simplicity of the lines which define their forms and the sequential unfolding across the length of a single surface. There is the foregrounding of the
female figure and its separation from the fantastical background in both Aoshima Chiho’s *building* (1999) (where the effect of the extreme convergence of the two buildings is the formation of a flat surface against which the figure is defined) and Bakusen Tsuchida’s *Maiko Girl in a Garden* (1924) (Murakami 2000: 28-9, 63, 44-5). Murakami establishes productive analogies between images separated by centuries, in some cases, and by decades, in others.

 Granted, this mode of argumentation through the juxtaposition of images is common enough in art history that it might be dismissed as merely pedagogical. Whatever its associations with the pedagogy of art history, however, there is something in its method that warrants further consideration. The way this mode of juxtaposition functions in the *Super Flat* catalogue reflects, I would argue, the mode of reading-writing or selecting-folding that informs both Murakami’s own work and that of Nara in his *Ukiyo*. While there are elements of Japanese nationalism and exceptionalism present in Murakami’s ‘Theory of super flat Japanese art’, and even traces of a *nihonga* heritage in his project (especially in his proposed attempt to generate a national aesthetics), the ‘powerful procession’ of images Murakami orchestrates under the rubric of the superflat is finally less about defining Japan than about establishing certain formal relations between works of art; works of art whose relations are constituted through the very operation of selecting-folding that reflects contemporary patterns of consumption and that characterize Japan’s media-mix. What Murakami ultimately does in his superflat catalogue is establish multiple series of double-articulations. In other words, he finds commonalities in compositional elements or content between two historically disparate works of art (these common elements can be on the level of figure, line or theme) and draws these elements out through the compositing of the works, their juxtaposition in the *Super Flat* catalogue. What he ultimately establishes, however, is not formal continuity between eras, but rather compositional or ‘element-al’ continuity between two works of art. He also displays, on a meta-level, the dominance of the database mode of consumption. Thus we find again an element-based mode of reading-writing whereby Edo works are folded into works from Japan’s present. Edo thus exists for Murakami only in terms of the specific works he assembles – whereby the works are consumed according to their compositional elements, their *moe yōso*. Edo is less a historical period than the series of specific relations he creates between a particular premodern work and a particular contemporary work. Edo is a database of elements capable of being composited with elements from the contemporary work with which it is juxtaposed (here the operation of compositing is performed as much by the reader of the catalogue as through Murakami’s own juxtaposition of the images).

 That Murakami chooses only works from Japan’s past should not, of course, be ignored. However, this decision should be regarded as secondary to the more constitutive logic of folding and compositing that informs the ‘Superflat’ (both as exhibition and as theory). The nationalistic appeal to Japanese tradition—or a unique Japanese sensibility—is a marketing strategy, a selling point (as Asada
Akira (2000) argues, an atmospheric effect available in a cultural climate of Edo—everything and perhaps even a hangover from Murakami’s own studies in nihonga. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to miss the ambivalence of Murakami’s nationalism and to neglect the more prevalent cultural logic of consumption that subtends both Murakami’s art and his assemblage in the Super Flat catalogue. This is the cultural logic of selecting-composing, of sorting-folding, of the database and the ways in which it is consumed.

In the end Edo itself has moved to the periphery. It is not so much the continuity between Edo and the present that is at stake as modes of consumption that are thought through by turning to the Edo period. Karatani is the exception to this generalization, since he would perhaps argue that these modes of information-interface are themselves products of the emergence of Japan’s nineteenth century. Yet without negating the possibility of the persistence of a nineteenth-century semiotic constellation, I have nevertheless tried to argue here that, far more than an attempt to establish Edo’s presence, what is involved in the return to Edo by the writers and artists examined in this paper is a contemporary semiotic of consumption—what Azuma has called the consumption of the database—and its extension into the aesthetic field in the work of Nara and Murakami. Edo thereby functions as a theoretical lens or tool for perceiving and describing the semiotic of consumption that characterizes the media-mix culture of contemporary Japan, and as the occasional object of this consumption. Edo’s ontological existence or persistence is, in this sense, besides the point.

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Notes

1. While “Superflat” was originally romanized as ‘Super Flat’ (from Sūpāfuratto), I have chosen to use the former (followed by Azuma Hiroki, and, later, the Los Angeles Museum of Modern Art) when referring to the exhibition, Super Flat when discussing the catalogue that accompanied it, and superflat when discussing the concept that both articulate.

2. Although Murakami did not have the luxury of including premodern works in his Superflat exhibition, the relation between contemporary and traditional art was outlined both in the pamphlets distributed at the exhibition and in the explanation of the superflat (as concept) written on the exhibition walls. However, I should note that my interpretation of Murakami’s project will be based far more on the catalogue, Super Flat, published in conjunction with the original Parco Galleries exhibit, as it is here that the relations between works present and past are made explicit and here that Murakami’s mode of argumentation through juxtaposition is demonstrated.
Nihonga literally means ‘Japanese painting’ and, though presaged by the term yamatoe, it came into use in the mid-Meiji period contemporaneously with, and in direct opposition to, yōga (Western painting). As Stefan Tanaka writes, it is important to recognize that ‘it is only with the presence of yōga (Western art) that a nihonga (Japanese art) emerges’. Nihonga is a relational term used to distinguish ‘contemporary traditional practices from Western-influenced Japanese painting’ (1994: 27). Nihonga became the organ of the Japanese state in its representation of a national aesthetics in world exhibitions and, eventually, through its co-optation by the militarized state during the Pacific War. Significantly, Murakami was trained as a nihonga painter and completed his PhD on nihonga. In the sense that nihonga was constituted relationally, and was an attempt to formulate a national aesthetics, it functions according to the logic of ‘ “Japan seen by the world” … seen by Japan’ (nihon kara mita… sekai kara mita nihon), like Murakami’s own work as Mita Itaru describes it (1999: 63).

See, for example Asada Akira’s ‘Sūpūfuratto aironi’.

Michel De Certeau makes a similar shift to a model of consumption as production in his influential The Practice of Everyday Life, although I would suggest that, whereas De Certeau conceptualizes this as a form of resistance or subversion (consuming differently, thereby producing new modes of consumption), Ōtsuka sees this more as a form of participation or co-production – participation in the creation of narrative and thus, on some level, equivalent to the ‘original’ producers themselves.

It is worth noting, however, that this variation occurs within strictly delimited parameters. When an anime director breaks from these parameters – as Anno Hideaki did in the later episodes of his Evangelion – fans tend to react with the vengeance of those cheated of what was promised to them (Azuma 1999: 141).


Azuma first published his work in a number of articles serialized in the journal Eureka from January 2001 to July 2001. These essays were then collected and published in a slightly different form as Dōbutsuka suru posutomodan: Otaku kara mita nihon shakai (The animalizing postmodern: Japanese society seen from the otaku, 2001).

While Azuma thereby avoids the accusations of neo-nationalistic culturalism that can easily be levied at Ōkada, there is nevertheless a homologous totalization operative here that is, on another level, equally objectionable.

The term yonihon refers to both the act of inputting information into a computer and the computer’s reading of this information, thus implying a simultaneity of the operations of reading and writing, consuming and producing.

www.narakami.com, now defunct but linked to http://www.lammfromm.jp/, a store that sells Nara and Murakami’s products.

Their star status is reflected in the fact that, as Kay Itoi notes, 2001 was known, in the art world at least, as the ‘year of Narakami’, a recently coined term that is shorthand for Nara and Murakami (2001, unpaginated).

See, for example, Inaga (1983) and Screech (1996).

The works are untitled and the book is non-paginated.

Azuma sees these terms within the consumption of database as relatively unanchored and relational rather than fixed – as evinced in his doubly two-tiered structure. While, in the modern system, the visible (small narrative) and invisible (grand narrative) are firmly fixed, the lines between the visible and invisible – the simulacra and the database – in late 1990s postmodernity are fluid. Indeed, the invisible itself is relative and operates according to levels and contexts
rather than by absolutes. Azuma uses the example of a webpage where what is seen not only depends on one’s operating system and browser, etc., but where one can choose to view the code that structures the visible. In other words, there is a slippery slope that leads from the visible (simulacra) to the invisible (database), within which system the database is itself accessible and almost visible, but which, whenever seen enters the realm of the simulacra (Azuma 2001a: 156, 160). Thus, while I have laid out these terms and their correlations in the table, they should be understood as essentially relational rather than fixed.

16. See also Takahata (1999), for an in-depth discussion of the relation between twelfth-century picture scrolls and contemporary animation.

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