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**INNOVATORS
PROJECT**

“A conversation between Hiroki Azuma and Doug McGray
on literature, anime, and otaku culture in contemporary Japan”

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DM: What are you working on?

HA: My interests can be divided into two themes. One is "otaku" culture, like anime, manga, and video games. The other is information society studies. Right now, I'm organizing a symposium at GLOCOM, called ISED <<http://www.glocom.jp/ised/>>. I have gathered an interdisciplinary group—lawyers, entrepreneurs, sociologists—to think about the ethics and design of information societies. For instance, one item on our agenda is to discuss how to construct a public sphere in Japanese online networks.

DM: There is really no public sphere? No forums, or blogs?

HA: There is a very popular bulletin board called 2-Channel, but 2Channel is anarchy. ICED members are very young, they are all in 20s or 30s, so of course they are posting on 2-Channel or blogs, but this cannot be regarded as a true public sphere.

DM: Why not?

HA: In Korea or the United States, citizen journalists express important political opinions online. Few Japanese networks are interested in political opinion, they're interested in posturing, in mocking. One of ISED's members, Kitada Akihiro has a theory that these attitudes are rooted in 1980s TV culture. Our generation was in its teens in the 1980s, when Japanese TV culture bred a kind of irony. It encouraged people to laugh at everything, and believe in nothing. That kind of irony remains very strong in our generation, and it infects Japanese networks. On 2-Channel, everyone can laugh at anything, everyone questions mass media messages, but there is no object to it. Maybe in Korea or the United States, the point of questioning by bloggers is to develop alternative political opinions, or an alternative worldview. But in Japan, questioning itself the object.

DM: So it's not very productive.

HA: No. And it creates a new kind of nationalism. In Japan now, many posters on these networks criticize Korea—in Japanese, they are called "Kenkan." But their feelings are not the same as traditional nationalism. The object of traditional nationalism is to make Japan better, or to make Japan prouder. But this new generation of Japanese nationalist, they don't seem interested in Japanese national identity, they just want to laugh at foreigners. So they mock Korean historical views about Japanese colonialism, and say Koreans eat dogs, and the trivial and serious comments are equivalent.

DM: Do you see the influence of 1980s culture in your own interests?

HA: In the 1980s, Japanese were just economic animals, enjoying consumer society. Japanese seemed paralyzed when it came to political discussion or military discussion. But this situation made otaku culture flourish. Also design, architecture, and literature. These things were very rich in the 1980s compared with the 1990s.

DM: What happened?

HA: 1995 was very important year in Japan. In January, there was a very big earthquake in Kobe. Then in March, the terrorists Aum Shinrikyo attacked Tokyo. Before 1995, few Japanese could dream of such danger in their lives. After that, Japanese were changed. But this realism made youth culture very monotonous. The profile of Japanese literature and manga began to shrink. And most of it focused on the young generation's psychological problems, or suicide, or youth crime. It was very dark.

DM: A couple of Toyota design managers told me about a series of focus groups they held with young European consumers, asking them for words they associated with Japan. Some were predictable: "cutting edge," "sushi," "sumo." One I didn't expect to hear was "violent." Could the otaku culture Japan exports today give a warped impression of Japanese society?

HA: Before 1995, otaku culture was only fantasy. There were very violent themes, like war or assassination, but all in the context of fantasy. After 1995, the violence can be regarded as a more realistic reflection of Japanese society. Maybe Japan is very safe compared with Europe or the United States, even now, but we Japanese do not feel so. After 1995, Japan seemed to get worse and worse, more and more dangerous. If some European or U.S. young people absorb otaku works and think Japanese society is very dangerous, maybe that is our reality.

DM: You began your career studying traditional philosophy and criticism. Your Suntory-prize winning book, "Ontological, Postal," focused on the work of Jacques Derrida. Did you face resistance from your academic colleagues when you started writing about pop culture?

HA: There are two or three generations of otaku culture, with very big gaps between the first and third generation. First generation otaku stayed outside of society. Their culture was regarded as childish, and fringe. Now, the youngest generation of otakus, people in their teens or 20s, think of otaku culture as mass culture. Older generation intellectuals may not use e-mail, they do not play video games, they know nothing about otaku culture. But the younger generation grew up with anime and games; to them, anime is a hero of Japanese culture. So it is natural for them, if they are interested in sociology or networking or postmodernism, to study anime or games.

DM: Is that what drew you to the topic?

HA: In the United States and in Europe, there is an academic field called "cultural studies." Japanese academics imported it. They talked about hip hop, rap, London hooligan culture, extreme subcultures, but they know nothing about otaku culture. When I was a PhD candidate at Tokyo University, my friends and colleagues knew all about postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and gender studies. But I was so frustrated by their ignorance of Japanese pop culture.

DM: Why didn't they pay more attention?

HA: Because cultural studies was a U.S. and European field. As a result, its methods did not apply well to otaku culture. In Japan, for instance, there are very few conflicts due to race. But academics who adopt a European cultural studies approach may look for ethnic or racial conflict in Japanese anime. When they don't find it, they may conclude that Japanese anime has no political meaning. But that's not true. To analyze Japanese pop culture, we need to invent new kinds of discourse, and criticism.

DM: How have otaku received your work?

HA: Until the middle of my 20s, I kept myself distant from the otaku community. It is like a closed village. I find that kind of behavior disgusting. But I changed my mind. The otaku community has some problems, but participation is necessary to analyze otaku culture. So I decided to go to parties, and connect with editors and directors. Then I wrote a small book called *Animalizing Postmodernity*. It was a kind of psychosocial analysis of otaku culture—a Japanese version of pop culture studies. For academics, I proposed new methodology for cultural studies. And for otaku readers, I proposed a new way of enjoying works. Otaku often think the experience of

seeing anime, or listening to music, or reading comics is spoiled by criticism. But I think criticism and analysis is another way of enjoying culture.

DM: Compare your approach to traditional cultural studies.

HA: Cultural studies focuses on themes of work, but I set themes aside. My analysis focuses on how otakus consume anime or manga or games, and what they get out of them. The older otaku generation, and also cultural studies academics, think recent otaku culture is empty, because their stories and characters are very superficial. But Japanese anime or games can be analyzed as a combination of former works. Almost all characters or game plots are actually a combination of earlier characters and plots.

DM: You've written that, in this way, the grand narrative in contemporary Japanese culture has been replaced by a grand database—a world of references and remixes. How would you explain this shift?

HA: I think it represents a change in Japanese society. The period from 1970, the year of the Osaka Exposition, to 1995, was a very strange age in Japanese history. Until 1970, Japanese believed in economic growth, they wanted to be more like U.S. society, and they worked very hard. They shared a grand narrative. In the 1970s, and 1980s, and early 90s, they got richer and richer, but they lost their objectives, their ideologies. The younger generation, meanwhile, believed in less and less. But they still needed some kind of grand narrative. In the 80s, otaku works made up for a lack of Japanese national objectives. They had big themes: law, or justice, or a kind of nationalism. Works like Space Battleship Yamato or Gundam can be analyzed as a kind of supplement.

DM: And young people no longer need that?

HA: They don't need narratives, they don't need objectives. They need communication. I think they want a kind of entertainment infrastructure, a way to kill time and chat on the internet. Maybe otaku entertainment is now only a kind of platform. From this point of view, otaku works since the 1990s represent a long history of Japanese losing their grand narratives. With a few very minor exceptions, Japanese otaku works today have no themes, no political implications; but this lack of political meaning *has* political meaning.

DM: Is the situation still evolving? What comes next?

HA: I feel a kind of naïve political movement beginning. But many in the young generation remain paralyzed. Otaku culture is a paralyzing influence. Since I published *Animalizing Postmodernity*, many people have asked me if I support, or oppose, this paralyzing culture. It is difficult to decide. If I support it, of course, I feel we have no future. But if I oppose it, that is too simple a position: don't watch anime, don't play games. So I am writing a sequel to *Animalizing Postmodernity*, focusing on story writers and game creators who are struggling to make real narratives in this paralyzing reality. It is very frustrating work. Publishers and consumers deconstruct their ideas and change them into a platform—some kind of card game, or cell phone strap.

DM: Any favorites?

HA: Maijo Otarō writes very complicated novels, which we might call metafiction "detective stories," and he is enthusiastically supported by the Japanese younger generation. He is a genius.

DM: Can a few creators really undo the nihilism, the paralysis, you see in Japan's youth culture?

HA: We probably cannot reverse this flow easily. Some creators can challenge it and do challenge it. But a little paralysis is the logical result of human nature. In the 19th and 20th centuries, we needed big ideologies, big nationalism, to manage big communities. But we now have information technology, we now have very sophisticated social institutions, so maybe we don't need ideology. A paralyzed, animalized society is a kind of dystopia, but perhaps it can be a kind of utopia too.

DM: Because young people are finally free to care about nothing?

HA: As you know, there is a famous novel from the 1930s, *Brave New World*. *Brave New World* is very different from *1984*. In *1984*, Big Brother is watching you, so your desires are very restricted. In *Brave New World*, everyone's desires are met, everyone is happy, but those desires are very sophisticatedly controlled by the government. I think the 21st century may be a bit similar to *Brave New World*. Of course, the controlling agent is not government.

DM: What is it, then?

HA: Perhaps information technology. A leftist activist might say this is a kind of capitalist domination by big companies, like Microsoft or Google, but I don't think so. Google's platform does, however, supply people's scope of knowledge, people's worldview. An affirmation of people's desires and needs can coexist with some kind of strong control. I'm interested in this coexistence of freedom and control, organization and restriction.

DM: For instance?

HA: Leftists are worried about control society, or surveillance society, but the same technology can also empower individuals. In Japan, we are now applying ubiquitous networking technology to ordinary life. Maybe ten or twenty years from now, it will be natural to track our children with GPS, or some other technology, 24 hours a day. But maybe this technology will liberate children, because now, we restrict them to a very small area, where we can watch them with human eyes.

DM: Earlier this year, I spoke with the editor of the literary journal *The Shincho*. He recalled how Japanese would line up outside Tokyo bookstores for the newest work by Martin Heidegger, the way people line up today for a new Gameboy title. He worried about a rapidly shrinking audience for serious writing. Do you share his concern?

HA: Many editors in Japan say that 20 years ago, even 10 years ago, philosophical books sold better than they do now, because young readers are no longer interested in philosophy. But I don't think so. Asada Akira is an economist and cultural critic at Kyoto university. He published a bestseller in the 1980s, maybe he is a good symbol of the philosophy bestseller. His audience got smaller and smaller in 1990s. Some Japanese readers see this phenomenon and conclude that the younger generation is not interested in philosophy and criticism. But times were changing: They should have started paying attention to the new generation of intellectuals, and they did not. Literary and social criticism can still make for bestsellers. In *Animalizing Postmodernity*, for instance, I mention Otsuka Eiji and Miyada Shinji. Miyada is a sociologist, and Otsuka is a comic writer, but their work is key to understanding 90s Japanese society.

DM: Neither of those authors has been translated into English, unfortunately.

HA: My impression is that nobody has introduced Japan's critical and intellectual writing of the 1990s to the United States. That makes it very difficult for Americans to understand contemporary Japan. Japanese high literature is known in the US, because of Japanese government funding. Manga get exported, but they have no context, they are just commodities. Murakami Takashi introduced himself to the US, but Americans know nothing about the 90s context that made Murakami, so they see Murakami as a symbol of otaku culture—a very simple view, in my opinion. It is not enough to see the art or otaku works around Murakami; it is necessary to investigate the discursive context, or historical context of otaku culture in 90s Japanese society, including the work of 90s intellectuals.

DM: In certain societies and certain eras, philosophers have been highly public figures. Elsewhere, and in other eras, they are invisible outside of university life. What is the place of philosophy in Japan today? How do you see your role?

HA: Academic philosophy is not so popular. In fact, it has not been so successful in Japanese history. The only exception was maybe the Kyoto School, in prewar Japan. But in Japan, perhaps the main philosophical tradition is literary criticism. I, personally, was influenced by literary critics more than philosophers. In this sense, philosophers should be public, they should

be writing criticism. But, I think there can be many ways of philosophizing. I particularly respect Gottfried Leibniz, the 17th century philosopher. Leibniz was, for almost all of his life, some kind of bureaucrat, in politics or culture, but he was also a very smart philosopher. His thinking has had real historical importance. That style of philosophy is my ideal.