

## Is the Otaku Becoming-Overman?

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*Consider Japan : there's a country that deliberately protected itself from history during three centuries ; it put a barrier between history and itself, so well that it perhaps permits us to foresee our own future ... Now, what Japan teaches us, is that one can democratise snobbery... Next to the Japanese, English high society is a bunch of drunken sailors (Kojève, 1968, see Nichols, 2007, p.85).*

*La civilisation japonaise 'posthistorique' s'est engagée dans des voies diamétralement opposées à la voie américaine (see Baudrillard, 1994, p.58).*

I shall investigate<sup>2</sup> Kojève's aesthetic turn to snobism through situating Nietzsche's overman at the end of a *particular* unfolding of Western history, which was envisioned by Hegel and later re-read by Kojève, who argued that Hegel's end point was the last man's horizon. Yet, it will be seen that 'snobism' disrupts this foregone eschatological conclusion drawn by Francis Fukuyama (1990). Writing in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Fukuyama forecast the dissolution of historical *telos*, finally realised in liberal democracy and capitalism, and concretised in the postmodern man, the last man, the man at the precipice of nothingness. Fukuyama reads Nietzsche as looking upon the last man with disgust and dismay. As we know, in the prologue of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1995), Nietzsche through Zarathustra utters his diagnosis of modernity thus :

*The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small. His race is as in-eradicable as the flea beetle ; the last man lives longest.*

Why is it that in 1959, Japan becomes a rival to America, the posited final stage of communism? In trying to account for this profoundly offhand, nutty proclamation about Japan, I argue that Kojève revealed something

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more, succumbed to something more than a certain ‘peremptory diagnoses’ of expertise after returning from a faraway land, or what Niethammer (1992, p.68) describes as a ‘tourist fantasy’. It is something more than another narrative of the empire of signs (Barthes, 1982). We can appreciate the historical relevance of the snobism thesis more clearly when we think about the bubble years in Japan, when commentators and intellectuals looked eastwards with trepidation, when Japan’s prosperity and hypermodernity in the 1980s, transfixed the West and turned lusting eyes *once again* to the coveted Orient. On the cusp of an era of outlandish capital de-territorialisation, at a time when Tokyo became one of, if not the, richest technopoles on earth, it is perhaps true to say that theoreticians and writers—at home in Japan and abroad (see Ishihara<sup>3</sup>) got a little bit carried away with what they saw as possibilities inherent in the futurity of an exoticised, phantasmagorical other. They succumbed to and became transfixed by a sense of the *aesthetic japonisme* (Morley & Robins, 1995, p.147).

We shall also see that the Kojevian aesthetic turn survives; resuscitated in a different way by Hiroki Azuma (2009) to explain the snobism inherent in otaku or geek culture. The otaku in developing micro-narratives and local histories is read as becoming animal in the Hegelian sense—or what Azuma’s calls a *doubutsuka* or animalisation. Azuma’s idea of animalisation helps us to ask again whether contemporary socio-political existence in Japan is posthistorical in any meaningful sense.

While we acknowledge a residual theme of irony in many parts of Kojève’s work, the postscript on Japan promises another narrative, the Owl of Minerva flying again at dusk, rising from the ashes. Yet, for some commentators, the social and cultural history of ‘Japan’ is unthinkable in Kojevian terms and consequently the notion of a distinctly Japanese end to history makes little sense (Haigh, 1991, p.110). The argument is that the Japanese cannot become fully self-conscious in terms of the unfolding of the Hegelian spirit because their culture is essentially arborescent.<sup>4</sup> For Haigh, the master-slave dialectic cannot operate in such a vertically striated socius of *oyabun-kobun* relations, as the dialectic of master and slave in the end plays out a quintessentially Hegelian and European dilemma and fantasy (Haigh, 1991, p.114). Yet, in some not altogether clear sense, Haigh argues that the Japan thesis makes little sense precisely because Japan has always been culturally *nonmodern* (it is clear Haigh has not read his Marx). Equating modernity with the West, Japan is read as a non-Western civilization which became modern without becoming Western at the same time. Yet, for Darby (1982, p.220), Japan has been uniquely postmodern through resisting the universality of the Idea, in the same sense that Hegel excluded Japan from the realisation of the Spirit. On this strict line of argument, Japan and her Asian neighbours do not have a role in the unfurling of the Hegelian, Eurocentric, dialectic of Spirit, as they did not experience the Western, Enlightenment period. From this point of view, it follows that Japan cannot form part of the universal and homogeneous state. As Kojève’s stages of history are therefore largely irrelevant to Japan, and because the Japanese have pursued an altogether different, more insular, extra-historical path during the Edo period (1603-1868), she is unable to shed her old armour and remains locked in a quintessentially feudal mode of existence or what Marx called the Asiatic mode of production (see Krader, 1975). In Marx’s historical materialism, there is

also a recognition of a different trajectory at work.<sup>5</sup>

Playfully perhaps one might counter such possible skepticism towards the Japan postscript when we understand how and why Kojève developed the notion of snobbery more clearly. After several trips to Japan in the 1940s and 1950s, Kojève conjectured that the Japanese had been living at the theoretical end of history for over 250 years during the Edo period, without crucially losing their humanity or returning to animals. The end of history is not the death of animal existence *per se* but of human existence as negativity or action. During a long a relatively peaceful period of history, the Japanese, Kojève argued, formed an interesting way of spending time *at the end of history*, a kind of pure snobbism of forms, concretised in such practices as the tea ceremony, calligraphy, haiku, ikebana (flower arrangement), and the Noh play-examples of a graceful, albeit empty, activity, or what Baudrillard (1994) would designate as the aesthetics of meaninglessness (see Mathy, 1993). Kojève finds in Edo, unique characteristics, formal values—a type of human life that was anything but animal—a different particularity to contest Western claims to universality. This seemingly out-of-synch difference allows the Japanese to enjoy a peculiar repulsion and attraction to modernity ; a peculiar becoming beyond the end of the end. Such culturally and geographically autochthonic practices signify the rejection of a transcendent God, the future *at the end of history* and the identity of Time and the Concept.

The latter view is considered Hegel's great discovery by Kojève. Hegel's historical time is human, finite time. Kojève followed the logic to its final end and concluded that Hegel's thought constituted not just the end of history but also the end of human Time. It follows, Kojève conjectured as did Fukuyama, that after Hegel and Napoleon, nothing *new* on earth would appear. This stoppage—if one can call it that - of time is read as the end of history. Bizarrely, after the Battle of Jena (1806) and Napoleon's victory over Prussia, history ends, thus spoke Hegel. In thinking through the principles of the French Revolution and their universal applicability, and attracted by the cult of World Historical Personality, Hegel sees in Napoleon, the *Weltseele* or world soul. He sees the world spirit 'on horseback'.

*Hegel (Pinkard, 2000) writes : "I saw the Emperor - this soul of the world - go out from the city to survey his reign ; it is a truly wonderful sensation to see such an individual, who, concentrating on one point while seated on a horse, stretches over the world and dominates it."*

Kojève (Strauss *et al*, 2000, xv) finds in Hegel's interpretation of the historical meaning of Robespierre-Bonapartism a compulsion in post-Napoleonic Europe 'to accelerate the elimination of the numerous more or less anachronistic remainders of its pre-revolutionary past'. Kojève goes on to conjecture that perhaps it is the United States which has already reached the final stage of Marxist 'communism' because the members of a 'classless society' can, for all practical purposes, 'acquire whatever they please, whenever they please, without having to work for it any more than they are inclined to do' (Strauss *et al*, 2000, xv).

However, matters are complicated further because it should be remembered that in Hegel's *Philosophy of History* (2007), America is determined to belong to the category of 'unhistorical History' and as such should be excluded from Hegel's philosophical forecast of both modern European history and philosophy. But here Hegel's system appears not as hermetic as the proclamations about Napoleon suggest, because, rather presciently perhaps, Hegel also grants future roles in world history for America (and Russia). Hegel defines America, alongside Russia, as 'lands of the future'. He writes (2007, p.87) : " America is therefore the land of the future, where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of the World's History shall reveal itself - perhaps in a contest between North and South America. It is a land of desire for all those who are weary of the historical lumber-room of old Europe." The point is important because it extricates the differing sense of Hegelian, Marxist, anthropocentric or Sinocentric and Western nationalistic historiographies.<sup>6</sup>

From here, we ask : in what sense of historical action and negativity can one imagine a war to the death between the snobs and the last men? In Japan, Kojève did not discern religion, morals, or politics in the European or historical sense but a form of snobbery in its pure state. Writing in 1959, he says that all Japanese without exception are currently in a position to live according to totally formalised values, which are completely empty of all human content in the historical sense (Wettergreen, 1973). In his interpretation of Edo culture, Kojève found a way of life among the upper classes without the need for them to risk their lives for prestige, as in the majestic struggle for mutual recognition in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977). It is argued that as Japan was essentially free from civil and foreign war for centuries.<sup>7</sup> As such and with no reason to work as a slave, the Japanese remained human. The Japanese made art, though not in the 'European' or 'historical' sense as that would demand a cause and negation. As life in Edo did not bear witness to the struggle for Hegelian mutual recognition, the Japanese are the last men, the ones who for Nietzsche were the bridge to the overman. From the seemingly ahistorical and romantic perspective of Kojève, they live according to pure snobbery and nothing else. For Kojève, during the Edo period, progress as a modern ideal completed its cycle (an essentially western, Enlightenment ideal transplanted on Japan) and introverted snobbery flourished.<sup>8</sup> So, in a sense, Edo has always already been postmodern, seemingly outside the dialectic of History. For Kojève, since no animal can be a snob, a 'Japanised' post-historical period would be specifically human. And if this is accepted, then the interaction between Japan and the Western world is not one of the rebarbarisation of the Japanese but the 'Japanisation' of the West, including the Russians. Taken to its limit and extreme, the argument leads to the view that the Japanese are in principle capable of committing, from a purely snobbish point of view, a perfectly gratuitous suicide. In the late 1960s, in an interview with Lapouge, Kojève remarked : Don't forget that snobbery goes a long way. One dies with snobbery as with kamakazis (kamikazis) - (see Darby, 1982, p.176).

However, and to return to Hegel, as Napoleon is the particular man actualised as truly universal cause, he is a truly satisfied man. From this conclusion, Hegel views himself *qua* philosopher as Napoleon's own self-consciousness realised. For Hegel then, the embodiment of the Logos is Napoleon in the flesh - the 'true'

Christ. On this point, Kojève, according to Descombes (1980), is read as expounding a terrorist conception of history through his affirmation of the violence of Robespierre (1758-1794), leader of the Jacobins and architect of the Reign of Terror. For Kojève, what follows from this interpretation is that nothing of historical significance has happened since Hegel's day. As for the Chinese and Russian ways of life competing for hegemonic prowess in the 1950s, Kojève (1969, p.161) claims :

*If the Americans give the appearance of rich Sino-Soviets, it is because the Russians and the Chinese are only Americans who are still poor but are rapidly proceeding to get richer.*

And again in a 1968 interview with Gilles Lapouge, Kojève says the Chinese revolution of 1949 signalled the bringing of the Napoleonic Code to China. As he says (see Drury, p.44) :

*Since this time (1806), what has happened? Nothing at all, the alignment of the provinces. The Chinese revolution is only the introduction of the Napoleonic Code into China.*

### **The Postscript in detail**

If man returns to his animality, art and play become purely natural. In this sense men would construct their edifices and works of art as birds build their nests and spiders spin their webs. Man performs musical concerts in the manner of frogs and cicadas and plays like young animals and indulges in love like adult beasts (Kojève, 1969, p.159). The end of history also means the end of philosophy, as being no longer undergoes transformation and discourse about the world has been actualised in wisdom or knowledge of the whole. Here, Kojève looks for wise men, not philosophers. Yet this point puts Kojève at odds with Marx (1974) who believed that in the realm of *true freedom* men would 'hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fishermen, shepherd or critic'.

However, the question is whether one can say that all this makes man happy. For Fukuyama, post-history signifies the cessation of action and that means the disappearance of wars and bloody revolutions. Fine in theory but the post-1989 world shows a different reality. While satiated homo sapiens live in abundance and security, desire dies in the negating, active sense. Artistic, erotic and playful behaviour do not negate in the Hegelian sense, as all are satisfied and satiated. At the end of history, 'healthy' automata are 'satisfied' through personal pleasures - sports, art, eroticism - while and the 'sick' ones get locked up in the madhouse. As for those who are not satisfied with their 'purposeless' activity, they are the philosophers (who can attain wisdom if they 'contemplate' enough).

Kojève in his later writings, and thinking from the standpoint of a communist and leftwing critic, contended that humanity was witnessing the ultimate trivialisation of man and the return to the merely animal order.

Contra the emptied formalism of the Japanese snob was the powerful American consumer equipped ready-at-hand with the machines of the universe, pulsating with pure standing reserve. According to Bloom, editor of Kojève's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (1969), the *agon* between Japanese snobbery as graceful empty activity and the rampant consumerism of the Americans was an issue at heart of the universal homogenous state.

### **Snobbery**

Snobbery *qua* formal value is the repetition of the same, outside of time, or, if you will, in the duration of time experienced as intensity. It is the Zen of the cracked and intense moment. At the end of history there is the formal repetition of the *kata* in myriad forms – golf or baseball swing, shopping in the Ginza, martial arts. Here we can see an interesting comparison between Kojève and Japanese philosopher Kuki Shūzō (1980) on the imagery site of Edo. Edo is the prism or fragment of memory for perceiving and describing the semiotics of hyper-logical consumption. It is reused again and again, mixed, cut, inverted, pixelised to satiate the [Occidental] desire to know the traditional, the exotic - the Other. Vlastos (1998) even claims that Shūzō virtually hallucinated a new cultural Edo in the tradition of taste he identified as *iki* (粋), a term used to refer to a structure of existence in the Edo pleasure quarters, usually associated with nonattachment. It is also similar to Baudrillard's view (1994, p.257) who argues :

*When the real no longer is what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality : of secondhand truth, objectivity, and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of lived experience, a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. And there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production : this is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us - a strategy of the real, neo-real, and hyperreal, whose universal double is a strategy of deterrence.*

### **Intermezzo 1 : The End of the History and the Last Samurai**

It is over 150 years since Commodore Perry (1794–1858) and his ominous black ships made land near Kurihama, near Yokohama in Japan. In 1853, the landing of foreign powers effectively ended three centuries of voluntary seclusion and began the process of opening Japan to the world. With the arrival of Perry, the Tokugawa shogunate's rule is thrown into disarray. This is how the modern narrative of runs. With the new emperor Meiji, comes a rush, a frenzy to modernise, to understand Western technology and science, to play catch up and surpass.

Yet Japan's postmodern ruse, or clever sleight-of-hand, which conceals the posthistorical nature of the Japanese socius, is captured cinematically, smuggled into Edward Zwick's film (2004) *The Last Samurai*. In this Hollywood blockbuster, Tom Cruise inadvertently discloses the truth that Japan has always been postmod-

ern. The idea finds its perfect incarnation as the concrete entity of Edo culture. The opening up to the West is but a ruse as the Japanese retain their postmodern trajectory regardless of adorning Western garb. In the film, Captain Nathan Algren (Tom Cruise), a 36-year old mercenary, lands on Japanese shores in 1876. He comes to teach the Japanese how to fight. After nearly a month at sea, he disembarks at Yokohama docks to find – with his Western eyes - Japan at the cusp of a new historic era. The port reflects this frenzy, with new languages, looks, smells and sounds - with change. But Algren is somehow captured by samurai and after many days of travel taken to a magical, mythical place in the Japanese countryside. There, Algren learns the ways of the samurai in a kind of pure *sakoku* haze. Each day, he says, he is confounded by their strange customs, contradictions and savagery – which run side by side, with beauty, elegance and clam. Algren later in conversation with long-term resident Graham suggests Japan is buying the future by enlisting the services of foreign experts in a bid to modernise. Graham retorts that Japan could be selling the past in doing so. Here we see both succumbing to the pea-and-thimble trick of the postmodern – those three mysterious entities, thesis, antithesis, and synthesis (see Orwell, 1958).

## **Intermezzo 2 : Stereotypes**

In a chapter entitled ‘TechnoOrientalism : Japan Panic’, Morley and Rovins (1995) argue that Western stereotypes of the Japanese continue to prevail in the media and beyond. The authors contend that the media designates the Japanese as inhuman, unfeeling, detached, and argue that the association of technology and Japan serves to reinforce the image of a culture that is cold, impersonal and machine-like - an authoritarian culture lacking emotional connection to the rest of the world. As an archetypical typology, the otaku generation is lost to everyday life through the immersion in computer reality. Children reject physical contact and prefer technical communication and the realm of reproduction and simulation in general (Morley and Rovins, 1995, p.169-170). Morley and Rovins suggest that stereotypes abound that Japanese children are mutating into machines. As such, they represent a kind of cybernetic mode of being for the future. In manufacturing images of the Japanese as inhuman, the political and cultural unconscious of the West perceives Japan as the figure of an empty and dehumanising technological power. Commenting on Japan in particular, and capturing a sense of trans-human, Baudrillard (1988, p.76), suggests that the future seems to have shifted towards artificial satellites. This site of hyperreality is the home of the otaku, a double world of simulacra and database. Moreover, Baudrillard saw in Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel and Japan, the omnipresence of simulacra or signs without referents. In Japan, he discerns an unintelligible paradox, the capacity to transform feudalism and territoriality into weightlessness and deterritoriality. Japan not only is located geographically somewhere else, but is projected chronologically. The depiction labels Japan as the alienated and dystopian representation of capitalist progress. The Japanese emerge from the future as unfeeling aliens, cyborgs and replicants. From this, some draw the inference that the otaku are *of* the postmodern. Otaku on this reading *are* becoming-overman. While the US is described as the

only great, 'primitive' society of modern times, Baudrillard says Japan is a satellite in orbit and the future of technology. Developing the point a little more, Darby spells out the link with Japan and Hegel. He writes (1982, p.200) writes : "It is the planet infused and charged with the epitome of the West : our technology. It is the Universal and Homogenous States. It is cybernetised Hegelianism. It belongs to the completion of time as history concretised in that part of the system that is the state."

Critical of this stance, Karatani (1993) suggests the 'Orient' is neither a cultural, religious or linguistic unity as its identity lies precisely outside of itself. What endows it with some vague sense of unity is that the Orient is that which is excluded and objectified by the West, in the service of its historical progress. From the outset the Orient is a shadow of the West (see Árnason *et al*, 1995). In a move not altogether dissimilar and reflecting this enthrallment with Japanese technology, science-fiction writer William Gibson (2009) writes :

*If you believe as I do, that all cultural change is essentially technologically driven, you pay attention to the Japanese. The postmodern era will be the Pacific era. Japan is the future, and it is a future that seems to be transcending and displacing Western modernity.*

Furthermore, infatuation with Japan is found in Felix Guattari's writings (1995, p.4), who visited the island nation on several occasions in the 1990s. Guattari was interested with the dialectic of the archaic and modern in a country which was seen as having progressed from premodern archaism to postmodern hybridity with no apparently discernible, long-lasting, modernity in between. Guattari said the lack of modernity made machinic junkies out of the infantile, 'childlike' Japanese. Japan exhibited a certain unique penchant for the machine, for the machinic relationship to technology. He also drew attention to the always-already mixed nature of the elements that form subjectivity, for example, those archaic attachments to cultural traditions that nonetheless aspire to the technological and scientific modernity characterising the contemporary subjective cocktail. Guattari (1996, p.105) writes :

*Look at Japan, the prototypical model of new capitalist subjectivities. Not enough emphasis has been placed on the fact that one of the essential ingredients of the miracle mix showcased for visitors to Japan is that the collective subjectivity produced there on a massive scale combines the highest of high-tech components with feudalisms and archaisms inherited from the mists of time.*

## **Azuma**

Hiroki Azuma (2009/2001) adopts an otaku perspective on Japanese society and produces a novel update of the snobbery thesis. He claims otaku culture represents a new orientation towards a large database, somehow and something outside of the story of grand narratives of which Lyotard (1979) speaks, outside the story of

modernity. For Azuma, postmodernism reveals the structure of otaku. What Azuma means by database is often far from clear but it is used as a structure to rival Western tales of the grand narrative. Azuma says animals differ from humans in the sense that animals cannot distinguish between their needs (*yokkyū*) and desires (*yokubū*). Reading much into this, Azuma heralds the arrival of an animalised postmodern, particularly in otaku culture, where needs and desires become indistinguishable. Here the otaku and the snob serve as synecdoche for Japan and the Japanese. The figure of the otaku pinpoints, materially, the excrescent revelation of an abnormal outgrowth. Interlinked with the narrative of the otaku is the notion of the superflat (Murakami, 2005) and its relationship with architecture. The discourse of the otaku operates in the conspicuous absence of Japan, a space for invention or rediscovery. The figure of the otaku works as a phantasmagoria of the spectacle and bears witness to the hypertrophy of the inner life. In one sense, it appears closer to Bataille's man of unemployed negativity than to Nietzsche's last man. If the end of history the human being is unemployed negativity, for Bataille (Letter to X), human negativity does not disappear but becomes 'unemployed' (see Noys, 2000, p.77). More critically, we might say, the otaku is an expression and logical outcome of commodity fetishism. Yet, for Azuma, otaku culture is not a subculture unique to Japan. Although the concept denotes *your* home, *your* family, as in the Japanese home, it is not strictly a Japanese phenomenon, it is transnational enjoying a presence across Asia, Europe and the Americas. Otaku is no longer a derogatory term. To be otaku is in a sense to be hip. Otaku have evolved. The otaku is undergoing, a bridge to the overman. For example, so-called third generation otaku, born in the 1980s, have developed a new sensibility and a methodology of communication over the internet.

Since the 1970s, the postmodern suggests a rupture in culture, a desire for small narratives (*chiisana monogatari*) or simulacra ; the desire for a grand non-narrative at the level of the database is a structural characteristic of postmodern society. The otaku leads informatic capitalist society, according to Okada (1996). Oriental culture for Okada begins as an amalgam of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism derived from Japan's Asian neighbours. This process of becoming oriental continues with Zen and the tea ceremony, before being realised in *ukiyo-e*, and more contemporarily in anime, special effects films, video games and costume play (*cosplay*). The otaku perceives with three eyes or modes of visual appreciation : *iki*, *takumi*, and *tsuu*. Here otaku is linked to the aforementioned notion of *iki* of the Edo era. This idea is used elsewhere by Marc Steinberg who discusses the use of Edo as a trope for Japanese postmodernity. Steinberg (2004) suggests Edo is deployed to situate Japanese visual artist and theorist Murakami Takashi's 2000-1 exhibition, Superflat. He contends that the superflat itself is guided by the logic of compositing informed by contemporary modes of digital imaging rather than the quasi-historisation that characterized the use of Edo in Japan's postmodern 1980s and 1990s.

Drawing on Okada's study, Azuma builds a theory of the otaku from works in Japanese, which link the unique compositions of animator Kaneda Yoshinori to the eccentricities of Edo painters. Azuma is at his most perceptive when he disrupts the received fantasy that otaku culture and otaku-like sensibilities are *unique* to the Yamato race. To the apparent chagrin of hardline otaku fans, he says the emergence of otaku culture is not a

uniquely Japanese phenomenon as it was imported from the US after the trauma of defeat in World War II.

The early history of otaku culture is about adaption and domestication. Otaku may well have a unique aesthetic and cybernetic-hybrid imaginary but it is one drawn genealogically from overseas and one built on a certain *ressentiment* of desire drawn from dark places, from a perceived sense of inferiority *vis-à-vis* the US. Edo is but one among many invented others in relation to which modernity posits itself. Postmodern Edo is the designated space both phenomenologically and epistemologically distinct from European modernity, a trope for an imagined world, that is to say, an unspoilt, rural idyll, the authentic Japan, the site for isolation, outside of modernity. So at the end of history, there is form stripped of content and the otaku nestles in between the dyad of West and Japan (Azuma, 2009, p.11). The Japanese aspects of otaku culture are disconnected from postmodern Japan but remain implicated in the Americanisation of Japanese society. And it is this point on the lingering and embedded effects of the logic of consumer society which complicates a strong reading of the Kojève-Japan thesis. In fact, Azuma contends the disappearance of Japanese tradition led ironically to a rekindling of obsession with Japan or pseudo-Japan in otaku culture (ibid, p.77). Pseudo-Japan is a manufacture of US-produced material. By rejecting the paradigm of Edo commodity culture to explain Japan in the 1980s and 1990s, Azuma questions the self-orientalising impulse in Japan where Japanese view themselves and Japan through the prism of Occidental desire. He reads onto this a bunker psychological mentality to hide the Americanisation of Japan and loss and defeat after World War II. As he says, Japan is an imaginary and imagined space, 'a quasi-Japan created from American materials' (ibid, p.77).

Japanese postmodernism is connected with a certain sense of narcissism as it was an expression of an atypical modernisation process. She was different not because she suffered a defect or loss but precisely because she brought something inaugural and vital. With no modern sense of humanity built on Enlightenment ideals, the collapse of sovereign subjectivity was not something to be mourned but celebrated as the Japanese could unite consumerism and technological progress. In summa : if modernity is a Western notion ; postmodernism is a Japanese idea. For advocates of this line of reasoning, to be Japanese in the 1980s was to be of the avant-garde.

And on another level, under one Kojévian reading of posthistoire, if the animalisation of society was an American outcome, snobbery was a Japanese conclusion. Snobbery is a formal value, a value empty of all rational (historical) social and political content. Kojève's argument suggests that a way out of the animality or rebarbarisation of American life was the Japanisation of the West. And euphoria over this idea did get the better of some astute cultural critics. Takashi Murakami (ibid, p.77) wrote that perhaps Japan was the future of the world. The formation of otaku culture can be seen as an expression of this self-gratifying narcissism. For Azuma, the existence of otaku reflects the fragility of the Japanese identity. He is critical of the unthinking suggestion that Japan was at the cutting edge because it could harness ultramodern technology and everyday customs.

Otaku culture essentially is a database of derivative works of amateurs. It is postmodern in the sense that it

reproduces simulacrum, neither original nor copy, without aura or place. Otaku operate within a cultural realm permeated by the omnipresence of simulacra and the dysfunction of grand narratives. The resolution for the otaku is to expend life for any absurd purpose. For Azuma, against a backdrop of the loss of grand narrative, and the resultant mushrooming of many singular narratives, otaku culture places importance on fiction. Moreover, they are more susceptible to the otherworldly as they struggle to mark out the difference between the other and transcendental difference. If the deep layer of hidden meaning has seemingly disappeared, leaving mere appearances and surfaces, otaku culture obsesses with smaller narratives as fragments of a grand narrative – a non-narrative consumption. The internet is a paradigm of database activity because with no centre, no hidden grand narrative, a mere world of outer signs, it is rhizomatic as there is a double layer structure at once accumulating encoded information and individual webpages. It is operable as a database, a reading up model. The arborescent model stands in opposition to the database model of the postmodern world image (Azuma, *ibid*, p.77). With the collapse of the tree structure, the database takes its place. By conjoining the database model and Eiji Otsuka's narrative consumption model, Azuma discerns a double structure of settings and small narratives and thinks this as representing a double layer structure of information and appearance. At times, Azuma writes as an ironist at once uttering statements of a Hegelian (Azuma says Hegel's historical perspective is difficult to refute), of a fully-fledged postmodernist (grand narratives are anachronistic) and then on behalf of others (Japanese youth lack the desire for the grand narrative image of the world because database operations, now more perspectival than omniscient, see no currency in forgeries even as a subculture (Azuma, *ibid*, p.36). Repeating the poststructural mantra of the erasure of the author and authorship, Azuma claims with neither original nor copy, what matters for the otaku is the settings created anonymously (Azuma, *ibid*, p.53-54). A copy is not judged according to the distance from the original but distance from the database. What are the ramifications of database consumption and double layer structure of postmodernity?<sup>9</sup>

While Azuma's thesis is insightful, it seems to fail to make good on the radicality of its initial assumptions and project. We therefore need to go further. At the beginning of Azuma's work, he asks after what becomes of the humanity of human beings at the end? By the finale of book, he seems somehow off from answering this fundamental question. Is Azuma really saying that solitude is the answer to life – is meaningful in an historic sense - at the end of history? Is he suggesting that it is in the quasi-pataphysical figure of the undergoing *hikikomori*, that there is a sign of hope and difference? It is also pertinent to question the necessity of substituting the concept of rhizome for the database as even Azuma acknowledges that the rhizome model can be seen as synonymous with the database mode (Azuma, *ibid*, p.31).

If snobbery is concretised in the postmodern animal era in the formalised detachment of the otaku (*ibid*, p.69), is Azuma here suggesting the last man or posthistorical man is exemplified in the otaku as pure idle spectator? Do the otaku personify a way of life depicted in Kojève's fantasy? Azuma suggests that the world of the otaku contains a certain degree of truth. However, does this truth pertain to the posthistorical? Following Žižek's

snobbery as cynicism thesis in the *Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), Azuma argues that we think otherwise even when we believe nonetheless in something because of the twisted relation between form and substance evinced in snobbery. Cynical subjects do not believe in the material value of the world (Azuma, 2009, p.70).

For Azuma, the post-1995 era is that of the animal age (Azuma, *ibid*, p.80). He cites the way charamoe (moe toward characters) is a microcosm of otaku culture of the 1990s and postmodern consumer behaviour in general. Charamoe is not explained away as mere fanatical consumer behaviour. It is sustained rather by movements back and forth between the characters (the simulacra) and the moe-elements (the database). Entwined within the feeling moe for a character, or 'blind obsession', there is a peculiarly cool, detached dimension engineered from destructuring the object into moe-elements and objectifying them within a database. The narrative animal of modernity satisfies the desire for meaning analogically through sociality, through small narratives.

What Azuma seems to be saying is that at the end of history the question of man *qua* animal is answered by the otaku who deals with emotive concerns at the level of animalistic processing, that is to say, in solitude. The point seems to be that there is no room for grand empathy. The otaku clan is adrift materially, living seemingly meaningless lives. For Azuma, moe-elements function in a similar fashion to Prozac or psychotropic drugs. The otaku is a drug addict. The question here is whether the otaku body is that of the Body without Organs. While noting it is the small narratives in the surface outer layer that grant meaning for life to the otaku (Azuma, *ibid*, p.94-95), otaku behaviour is akin to the lifestyle choices of drug abuse, watching Hollywood films and listening to techno music. The otaku here appear akin to the postmodern characters of Haruki Murakami, leading essentially haphazard lives, with splintered meaning, but lives protected with a style and obsession to survive. Another writer, Ryu Murakami (2000), who has explored the underside of *hikikomori*, describes the phenomenon as social withdrawal or 'a state of anomie, those socially withdrawn people, who find it extremely painful to communicate with the outside world, and thus they turn to the tools that bring virtual reality into their closed rooms'. Socially withdrawn adults refuse to have any contact with the outside world. Some own computers or mobile phones, but most have few or no friends. Their digital 'funk' can last for months, even years in extreme cases. He argues rather apocalyptically that if Japanese culture cannot adjust it may well drown in 'a tsunami of technology' and end up sinking ever deeper into a 'labyrinth of confusion'. Yet even after these stark remarks, he puts aside the *telos* of apocalypse, and says that Japan's *hikikomori* could be harbingers of a new way of life. On this register, could it be that their *undergoing* is preparatory for the overman to come?

### **Intermezzo 3 : A walk in the Ginza**

Fukuyama's evangelical and eschatological prophecy and paeon to ultra-capitalism rings true in Tokyo, where consumerism, capitalism and conspicuous consumption are produced as an art form to *the nth degree*. In the Ginza, the Japanese retain their own clear sense of humanity, without becoming animals in the Hegelian

sense. They shop *aesthetically*. For Kojève, the West has much to learn from Japan and may escape the animalisation of man or rebarbarisation through a 'Japanisation' of the world. Does this mean that the West must learn shop *aesthetically*? Critics are right to be sceptical of the linear conception or narrative of Western history which ends in Japan, which reifies as unique the topography of the Japanese. Contrary to the linear conception of history, we might say that Japan is rather more a pastiche of anachronistic elements, ranging from the post-modern to the 'protohistoric'. Kojève's identification of snobbery as a uniquely Japanese posthistorical phenomenon can be read as a heuristic device for contesting the unblinking affirmation of Fukuyama's proclamations. As posthistorical man slumps back into reanimalization, he is reabsorbed. The parallel between Kojève's 'protoman' concept and Zen absorption in the practice of the kata is not coincidental. Not difference but the repetition of the same.

### **Conclusion : The spectre of Fukuyama is haunting Europe**

Fukuyama (2002, 2011) has conceded that his 1989 thesis is *now* anachronistic. He argues that there can be no end of history without an end of modern natural science and technology. Humanity's control of its own evolution will have a great and possibly terrible effect on liberal democracies. He has reflected on the seemingly feverish desire to align Western capitalism and democracy with the end of history, describing it as a symptom of the anxiety to ensure the death of Marx. Indeed, others have said the same thing but more harshly. According to Bauman (1992, p.183), Western society has neither effective enemies inside nor barbarians knocking at the gates, only adulators and imitators. It has practically (and apparently irrevocably) delegitimized all alternatives to itself. Elsewhere, and reworking Kojève, Agamben (2004) thinks the Japanese retain human subjectivity through separating form and content of action in the most radical manner. It is the formation of rules and values stripped of utilitarian purpose that forges a sense of snobbery without content. But for Agamben, and contra Fukuyama, the posthuman future is the control of the biosphere (Agamben, 2004, p.76). With history depleted of *telos*, humanity becomes animal again but with nothing left to do but depoliticise the socius by means of the unconditioned unfolding of the *oikonomia*, or the taking on of biological life itself as the supreme political task. For Agamben, the animalisation process signifies the lapse and lack of historical tasks for men. He goes on to say that people have been on a course to disappear since the end of the First World War. For the Italian philosopher, the question of the animal is now one of the management of bare life. It is a question of the depoliticisation of the socius or tackling biological life itself (ibid, p.77). Agamben says that what is left *at the end* is the ominous total management of biological life or the animality of man. So sharing the concern of Fukuyama, the tasks before mankind is how the genome is mapped, how planetary capitalism is unfurled and how best to disseminate humanitarian ideology. The total humanisation of the animal coincides with a total animalisation of man. Taken in another sense and in a way critical of Fukuyama, Agamben challenges the collapse of the animal and the human into the so-called zone of indifference. While Fukuyama's biological turn highlights

the dangers to the end of history, Agamben identifies the biogenetic threat to render obsolete the free autonomous subject of liberal democracy at the end of history. He discerns this in Fukuyama's realisation of the dark obverse of his idealised image of liberal democracy. The free market has the capacity to rip apart quite literally the very being of the human being, to imperil the notion of what it means to be human. This is why the Japan snobbery thesis reruns. Žižek says the future will be Hegelian either in the guise of a conservative capitalism with Asian values as in Singapore or China or a Hegel in Haiti (Žižek, 2004, p.132). The question of Hegelian history remains timely, because, and contra Fukuyama who wants to put Hegel and the political question of how best to organise society to bed, Žižek critiques this arrogant position, arguing instead that in reading Hegel we understand what we are, what our contemporary situation might be, and, in his eyes, how our epoch would appear to his thought.

In terms of Kojève's Marxist convictions, we can say he was looking for a way beyond American style mass consumption in which the end of history becomes an iron cage in which human animals engage in riskless inactivity. Endless consumption replaces the struggle for recognition, as the repetition of animalistic sameness replaces historical change. The end of history thesis remains timely and pertinent. There is a need to think alternatives to the miserable plight the vast body of mankind endures day to day. Thinking Kojève's anthropocentric reading of Hegel's speculative end of history thesis alongside Fukuyama's desire to expunge any alternative tales, and Azuma's otaku theory we have seen that Kojève's postscript is something more than a mere jotting in the margins, crossed out, erased or repressed. Fukuyama's thesis needs this erasure. His thesis cannot function as pure celebration and enthusiasm for capitalism and liberal democracy with it present. However, Kojève's postscript suggests more than Fukuyama allows. It is a provocation to pose and question alternative models to capital, whether diametrically opposed systems or hyperlogical, excrescent models as in Japan. There are more thought-provoking things to be said of the snobism thesis. We must read it therefore again amidst the backdrop of prevalent terror and fear. We must read and understand it against claims that it makes little sense to talk about Japan as an alternative to Western capital and history. We interpret the postscript therefore seriously whilst acknowledging Kojève's penchant for irony and wit (Kojève, 1969, p.169).

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Aislinn O'Donnell explains that Nick Land's question 'what abstract machine selected the human?' helps to think through the possibility of an anti-human humanism with 'humility'.  
See. O'Donnell, A., & University of Warwick. (2001). *An ethics of the pre individual*. Coventry : University of Warwick. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, p.57.
- <sup>2</sup> The attentive reader will notice the deliberate rhizomatic play in the text, exemplified by the three intermez-zos. Since on some poststructural readings the author of the text is splintered and fragmented, it follows that the construction of the text in some way will reflect this flow of identity and intensity. My 'I' therefore writes traversed by all manner of strange becomings – and is comprised of flows of knowledge which come from a plethora of different textualities - literature, movies, poetry etc. This aphoristic and funicular writing goes some way, not to mirror as such, but to skim the meniscus of an atonal, dissonant reality.
- <sup>3</sup> Today, the modern era is in its terminal phase. An awareness of its imminent demise has made Americans, the most powerful Caucasians since World War II, increasingly emotional, almost hysterical, about Japan (Shintaro Ishihara, 1991).
- <sup>4</sup> Deleuze & Guattari use the term arborescence to describe a dominated image in Western thought which operates through hierarchy, the domination of one term over another in binary oppositions and the will to totality as in Hegel. It is contrasted with the notion of the rhizome which signifies a play of difference, the haphazard and the serendipitous in horizontal interconnectivity.
- <sup>5</sup> With more space and time, it would be interesting to think through and draw inferences from Marx's claims that Japan's purely feudal organisation of landed property and developed small-scale agriculture presents 'a much truer picture' of the European Middle Ages than the historical commentary available at that time. It would be thought-provoking to think this comment in relation to Deleuze & Guattari's critique of universal history (1994, p.93) and their Braudel-inspired question Why capitalism in the West rather than in China in the 3rd Century, or even in the 8th?
- <sup>6</sup> We also find Kojève writing in 1945 about the future of the European Union and the fight of the French against the German and 'Anglo-Saxon Empire'. He suggests the need for a Latin Union – an amalgam of Catholic and Latin civilisations - to forge a rival political entity and economic unity (Kojève, 2004). And prior to this, Kojève writing in 1937 saw in Stalin the arrival of world consciousness on the historical stage. What Kojève finds in Stalin is an industrialised Napoleon (See Filoni, 2010).
- <sup>7</sup> This is an argument which fails on many levels to account for the political and social unrest in Japan (differences of culture (Ainu culture), political unrest (the Ryukyu Kingdom) etc).
- <sup>8</sup> This point does not really account for the improvement in literacy, transportation, irrigation and urban-planning which flourished during Edo.
- <sup>9</sup> It would be interesting here to think through the connection between the database and the meaning of Disneyland. As we know, Baudrillard says Disneyland is not a simulacrum of the real. It hides the fact that

America (one can add Japan as well) is a simulacrum of itself, hiding the fact that there is nothing behind the images – no real to get at. The enclosure of Disneyland is there to hide that the whole country is without object. Disneyland is the order of a third-order simulation, to hide the fact that the “real” country, all of “real” America, is Disneyland. Disneyland is imaginary to save the reality principle because America is no longer real, but rather of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. Disneyland is constructed as an infantile world to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere. In fact, Baudrillard says, real childishness is everywhere, ‘particularly among those adults who go there to act the child in order to foster illusions of their real childishness’ (see Baudrillard, J., & Poster, M. (1988). Selected writings. Stanford, Calif : Stanford University Press, p.172)

## 【Abstract】

## オタクは超人への生成変化？

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本論文では、アレクサンドル・コジェーヴの第2版の作品『ヘーゲル読解入門—『精神現象学』を読む』の中の有名な脚注で、なぜ日本の江戸時代及びオタク文化論に言及しているのかを探求したものである。日本の歴史の終わりという予測と江戸時代の日本的な「スノッブ根性」という概念の相互関係を検討した。問題の分析にあたって重視したのは、オタクは超人への生成過程という観点である。重点的に考察したのは以下の諸点である。1) *post-histoire* とポストモダニズムとの関係は何か。2) 動物化とは何か。  
キーワード：コジェーヴ、スノッブ、動物化、オタク、ヘーゲル

This paper scrutinises and contests the legacy, legitimacy and enduring relevance of a postscript added to a footnote in the second edition of *The Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* by Alexandre Kojève (1902-1968). In this Marxist and 'anthropocentric' reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the postscript pertains to Japan and the Japanese and speaks to the West, enticing it to foresee its own futural becoming. With the interjection of the Japanese 'snob' thesis, I shall analyse the postscript in the sense of the 'cunning of reason' which interrupts the linear, grand narrative of Western history. My reading will draw on European philosophy and Japanese cultural theory to explain the disruption to the Fukuyama's *end of history* thesis – the much-lauded paean to capitalism made in 1989, a moment in history prior to the deep, endemic recession which currently plagues many of the world's economies. I conclude by suggesting that while the 'snob' thesis is in the end a thought-experiment, it is one which works well when one resurrects and begins to think what is meant by the claim of Nick Land (1992, p.222) that the overman is the cyborg.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords** : Kojève, snob, animalisation, otaku, Hegel

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