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The Angst of Youth in Contemporary Art Practice

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Abstract: The resurgence of the theme 'teenage angst' has become increasingly popular among contemporary artists, universally depicting aspects of alienation, loneliness, depression and even unrequited love. This paper will argue that Japanese manga and anime has become a major influencing factor in both Western and Eastern contemporary art practice as it bridges the gap between reality and fantasy. Arguably, this interface underlines how popular cultural imagery of the East, particularly Japan, has impacted upon both Eastern and Western artists worldwide. Masami Toku argues that Japanese manga allies' youth's identity construction with popular culture by creating an underlying narrative based on the interplay between fictional characters fantasising about their aspirations and desires, and echoing adolescent social rites of passage. My paper will reference and critically analyse the work of American artist Charlie White, Chinese artists Cao Fei and Chen Ke, and Japanese artist Aya Takano. It will show how, by adopting and reinterpreting this distinctive Japanese aesthetic, the artists create a reality that functions as a means of escape from socio-economic restraints while, at the same time, exploring other adult narratives in their work. It will highlight how childlike pictorial qualities provide an avenue for darker adult tropes to be investigated in a format more easily accepted by society.

Keywords: Contemporary Art Practice, The Influence of Japanese Manga and Anime, Youth Culture, Reality and Fantasy

Introduction

THIS PAPER WILL discuss the visual influence of Japanese manga and anime in contemporary Eastern and Western art practices. It will examine visual art practices whose works reflect adolescent social rites of passage expressing aspects of fantasy, alienation, and social outcasts. Originally, Japanese manga emerged initially after the Pacific War (WWII), and escalated primarily after 1960. This material was a form of cheap entertainment for an impoverished war-weary Japan. The development of manga during this time absorbed the impact of US comics with well-known titles such as Popeye and Mickey Mouse, and according to lecturer in Journalism, Media and Communications, Craig Norris (2009), "these comics had a significant impact on the style of manga created for children at the time and what manga we see today" (2009, p241). In her book, *Samurai from Outer Space: Understanding Japanese Animation* (1996), Antonia Levi points out that manga has multiple genres but in general, manga and anime stories typically quote the following features: a high tech look, fantasy worlds, human drama, complex characters, inner development and growth, sexy supernatural, and powerful female characters (Levi 1996, p.20). Interestingly, even though the inspiration of manga emerged out of 1960s American popular culture, especially US comics, this influence has recently been reversed; it is now manga and anime's aesthetics enthusing the West. According to Levi (1996).

Underground Western comics particularly American, are explicit about their debt to manga. It was in the 1990's that cartoonists really began to create comic books featuring Japanese themes, characters, and incorporating elements of manga in the drawings. (Levi 1996, p138)

Now it is not just the cartoon industry adopting this Eastern style, as visual artists around the world have embraced this artistic genre as well.

Japanese manga and anime have become a major influencing factor, in both Western and Eastern contemporary art practices, as they have created a new visual genre, which bridges the gap between reality and fantasy. Arguably, this interface underlines how popular cultural imagery of the East, particularly Japan, has impacted upon Western artists worldwide. According to Norris, Japanese manga can be loosely defined as Japanese comic books, while anime encompasses the breadth of Japanese animation (2009, p236). American academic, Professor Masami Toku, argues that Japanese manga “allies youth’s identity construction with popular culture by creating an underlying narrative based on the interplay between fictional characters fantasising about their aspirations and desires, echoing adolescent social rites of passage” (2001, pp11-17). The appropriation of this powerful medium has allowed contemporary art practitioners to reinterpret this visual style within a global context by combining their own heritage and their own narrative with distinctive Japanese aesthetics.

This paper will reinforce the significance of this genre as an appropriate medium to communicate fantasy -driven adolescent ideals from an adult perspective. Child psychologist, David Elkind (1998), argues that young people contrast an ideal world with the ugly realities of the experienced world in which they live (1998, p33). I believe that the artist’s pictorial expression has the ability to capture this paradox and to induce the audience’s sense of nostalgia, stirring childhood memories. In his book *All Grown up and no Place to go* (1998), Elkind highlights the construction of a mature identity is formulated through the surroundings in which adolescents live, which include the influence of popular culture. The cultural theorists, Susan Napier, Mio Bryce and Jason Davis, all argue that popular manga and anime themes can contribute to the construction of adolescence identities through narrative and the representations of reality and the dream. The impact is evident in the work of artists in the Asia Pacific region and the United States, amongst others.

The Influence of Japanese Manga and Anime

This “cute” graphic style that has evolved, has allowed international art practitioners to take illustrative elements of original manga and morph their own means of expression into a new contemporary style of art. It makes this newly formed genre a perfect match to narrate adolescent dreams, fantasies, and experiences. This can be seen in the work of many contemporary global artists, in particular, the American artist *Charlie White*, Chinese artists *Cao Fei* and *Chen Ke*, and Japanese artist *Aya Takano*. Jeff Fleming, a senior curator, explains that the Japanese are renowned for “mimicking their vision of another time and place, fabricating a synthetic reprieve from daily routines; it is their fantasy world” (2001, p15). Seemingly, this might explain why art practitioners find this style an appropriate medium to communicate adolescent ideas and subject matter, as manga-inspired similes are able to move between the real and the unreal, constructing and deconstructing a unique fantasy world. According to Mio Bryce and Jason Davis, manga and anime are a visual crafted ex-

perience which reflects the fluid and hybrid complexity of contemporary society through rich narratives (2009, p1). Fleming suggests that, by adopting this distinctive Japanese aesthetic, this format permits a reality that functions as an opportunity to escape from contemporary social circumstances but at the same time allows a thorough exploration into delicate social and economic conditions, and other adult narratives in their work. He suggests that, perhaps, the childlike pictorial qualities provide an avenue for the darker adult tales to transpire in a format more easily accepted by society.

Drawing a parallel between Fleming's analogy and the work of Charlie White, White reveals a slightly dark undertone of humanity in his work. Critiquing American culture, White draws on both Western and Eastern influences. The notions of entertainment, play, escapism, and futuristic technology found in manga and anime are evident in White's work. *Understanding Joshua* is a series of photographs of a creature that is meant to represent ontological insecurity. He injects this character into social situations experiencing different human relationships. White's methodology emphasizes the discomfort of those interactions, successfully juxtaposing reality with fiction. A large scale light-jet photographic print, *The Cocktail Party* (2000) (See fig. 1) which is part of this series, showcases a fabricated party scene featuring White's character *Joshua*. The image presents Joshua's awkward attempts to communicate with a woman. It could be read that Joshua's communication is a metaphor for a social outcast or misfit in society. In their essay, 'Behavioural Scientists' John Cacioppo and Louise Hawkley argue that "people can be a social outcast in their own minds even while living amongst others" (2005, p5), this is highlighted in *White's* work capturing the uncomfortable moment at the party. White lures the viewer in by identifying with this friendly but repulsive character creating a sense of nostalgia, perhaps triggering forgotten childhood memories of awkward social interactions and other extreme anxieties experienced during adolescence or even in adulthood.



Fig. 1: Charlie White, *The Cocktail Party*, 2000, Light het Chromomeric Print Mounted on Plexiglass, 36 x 60 inches (Fleming, J & Murakami, T 2001, *My Reality: Contemporary Art and the Culture of Japanese Animation*, Independent Curators International, New York)

Chinese Artist Cao Fei also places her characters in social situations but highlights the act of youthful role playing. While Fei uses multi-media techniques, her main methodology is based on the combination of video and photography, similar to White. Through the interplay of reality and fantasy, Fei experiments with the means by which to express youthful anxieties. The context of her work focuses on the fate of the individual and fuses it with a deep concern for China's social reality (Noe 2008, p49). Fei uses the neutral urban environment as a backdrop in her work, blurring the line between real space and constructed space, particularly in her video and photography series, the *Cosplayers* (2004). Her work is humorous, yet piercing, she critiques China's turbulent urbanisation which was "spurred on by Deng Xiaoping's late-1970s economic reforms" (Grieves 2009, p6). The work, *Un-Cosplayers* (2004) (see fig.2), is composed of shadowing adolescents dressed in manga-inspired fantasy characters who prowl around Guangzhou China, pretending to fight mock battles. On one hand, the images suggest self-made myths of role-playing and adventure and then alternatively, the same characters are represented again in a very different guise at home in a family-friendly environment (see fig.3).



Fig. 2: Cao Fei, *Un-Cosplayers-House Breaker*, 2006, 100 x 100cm ((Grieves, H 2009, Cao Fei Utopia, Institute of Modern Art, South Brisbane)



Fig. 3: Cao Fei, *Yan My at Home*, 2004, Chromogenic Print 30 x 40 Inches (Grieves, H 2009, Cao Fei Utopia, Institute of Modern Art, South Brisbane)

This gap in-between or the juxtaposition between the realistic cityscapes and the fantastic havens is where Fei has created a wonderful paradoxical tension. According to English Curator Karen Smith, “Cao Fei investigates a generation disenfranchised by reality, cocooning themselves in fantasies to better deal with and adapt to their monotonous daily lives” (Smith 2007, p1). For American philosopher and psychologist John Dewey (1934) human beings are not subjects or isolated individuals who have to build bridges to go over... ;human beings are... continually tied to their environment, organically related to it, changing it even as it changes them. Human beings are fundamentally attached to what surrounds them (1934, p45). In light of this, Fei draws on her own surroundings, even though her work is deeply political and based on Chinese culture.

Even though the influences of Japanese manga and anime in both Fei and White’s work are applied differently, the use of photography is their common denominator. Fei uses it to capture the individuals’ act of role-playing in the game, whether she displays the mock battle scenes, or the young people returning home. Similarly, White’s technique is also centred on the individual character. Both artists use these methods to exaggerate the inner turmoil of the fictional characters. Fei’s backdrop is set within a real urban environment allowing the figures to explore their alter ego within a cityscape; where White’s work constructs a social environment. Fei’s work employs numerous characters to communicate the importance of her theme focused on the contrast between adolescent identities within the context of peers and family and within a specific social context, commenting on popular culture and the implied need for adolescents to indulge in a fantastical world that is quickly changing. According to Chinese author of *Avatars and Antiheroes*, Claudia Albertini (2008), notes that Fei “explores and documents new social realities of daily life, by focusing on adolescent indifferences and the adolescent sense of alienation” (2008, p20). Her narratives oscillate between illusion and reality, and rationality and absurdity. Similarly, arts writer Pedro Alonza states that ‘tensions exists in capturing the dualities and extremes of human nature’ (2008, p142).

Like White, Chen Ke also uses a singular figure to display the extremities of adolescent anxieties. Chen’s work creates whimsical dreamscapes with minimalistic gestures. Her melancholy figures articulate her own memories of childhood of loneliness and despondency. According to Albertini, Chen believes that her characters are somewhat sad, isolated, and powerless and confides that ‘this is how she felt at times during her teenage years...’ (2008, p14). She demonstrates this by placing her character in isolation, encapsulating the feelings of loneliness which can be seen in her work *Play Ground* (2010) (see fig. 4) where the child is placed on her own, playing on an indoor chair. The hand at the bottom of the image seems to symbolise the presence of an adult, suggesting that the girl is at the mercy of parental actions.



Fig. 4: *Chen Ke, Play Ground*, 2010, Oil on Canvas, 200cm Diameter (Arthag, n.d, image, Viewed on 16 November 2010, < <http://arthag.ypprepad.com/a./6aoil571160e4a970c01348745a8ab970c-pi>>)

Whereas, White and Fei uses photography to stage adolescent anxieties, Ke draws on a combination of techniques, which include painting, installation, and sculpture to generate increased experimentation in her work. Primarily, Chen's work does not focus on society or the urban environment but is more concerned with her private emotional world. Chen's style reflects an influence from both Japanese and Western pop culture imports. Her mixing of contemporary imagery with painterly skill shares a similar approach to the well known contemporary Japanese artist Yoshitomo Nara. Chen believes that the cartoon culture of Japan is a kind of escapism for the contemporary individual in a modern society where rapid changes have brought about a sense of emotional emptiness. In addition, Li Xu, an arts writer, argues that "it is not just cartoons and pop culture that influence Chen Ke's fantastical visions of childhood but European folklore, Victorian novels and Chinese mythology" (2008, p147). Arguably, this combination of multi-cultural influences makes Chen's artwork more engaging in a universal sense, by adding multi-leveled and multi-cultural access points in her work. In methodological terms, she uses modeling paste, oil paints, fabrics, canvas, and even constructs three-dimensional pieces at times. She expresses her inner worlds on various surfaces, using her distinctive popular culture images as her central means of communication.

In aesthetic terms, Japanese artist, Aya Takano also shares a similarity with Japanese manga in her work. Takano's work is motivated by her vivid imagination and expresses her everyday musings by referencing alternate states of reality through the exploration of the

dilemmas of human sexuality, the cultivation of technology and the exploitation of untapped spiritual capabilities. Takano investigates the destruction of the natural environment and the subsequent survival of such devastations. In her essay 'Four Faces of the Young Female', Susan Napier argues that 'Japanese manga as a medium...allows for a variety of story formats, often of a notably fantastic variety' (1998, P93). Like Japanese manga, her work allows for versatility and diversity in the construction of characterisation and narratives.

Takano's concepts and imagery share similarities with the popular genre, *cyberpunk*. Napier argues that "the *cyberpunk* genre focuses on dystopian futures in which humans struggle in an overpowering technological world, where the difference between human and machine is increasingly amorphous" (2005, p10). This type of reference can be seen in her painting *She sees a world that envelops the entire stratosphere* (2007) (see fig.5). In this work, Takano imagines a tribe of people living in *Yume-no-Shima*, (translating to *the Island of Dreams*). *Yume-no-Shima* is an artificial island in Tokyo Bay completely made of trash, which is represented in the work as bag- like shapes. Originally, it was a government initiative to help Tokyo's metropolis area to dispose of their accumulated tonnes of rubbish. It is now a reclaimed landfill and this piece speaks of the current state of the island.



Fig.5: Aya Takano, *She sees a World that Envelops the Entire Stratosphere*, 2007, Acrylic on Canvas, 290.8 x 436 cm, (Perrotin Galerie, n.d, Image, Viewed on the March 12 2010, <http://www.perrotin.com/fiche.php?nom_&&idart=15&&dossier=Aya_Takano&&num=36&&p=3>)

Ivan Vartanian describes features of the figures as ‘willowy, androgynous girls with rosy-coloured cheeks, knees, hands and feet, streaming hair and round otherworldly eyes’ (2005, p88). Aesthetically, the obvious parallel between the work of Takano, Chen and White is the continuous childlike character that materialises in every image. The persistence of the same figure creates a serial format and allows for a thorough exploration of multiple tropes ranging from personal experiences to social commentary. Interestingly, there is a touch of mysticism in Takano’s work that makes her images feel simultaneously ancient and futuristic.

Conclusion

Art history has a long tradition of borrowing styles and forms that have gone before. The appropriation of manga and anime as a methodology has provided a cutting-edge genre for artists to create new means of expression. It has taught us that cultural appropriation makes way for new underground visual ideas and movements. Original Japanese manga and anime has provided a window through which contemporary artists can re-interpret visual elements and depict universal themes of adolescent anxieties through narrative. Playing an important role globally, it has produced an art form which integrates both traditional and contemporary ideas. By referencing the artist’s own culture, this new genre reaches across aesthetic boundaries to strike significant artistic and psychological chords which go beyond trans-generational and trans-national popularity.

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Publishing

The Humanities Community enables members to publish through three media. First, by participating in the Humanities Conference, community members can enter a world of journal publication unlike the traditional academic publishing forums – a result of the responsive, non-hierarchical and constructive nature of the peer review process. [The International Journal of the Humanities](#) provides a framework for double-blind peer review, enabling authors to publish into an academic journal of the highest standard.

The second publication medium is through a book series [The Humanities](#), publishing cutting edge books in print and electronic formats. Publication proposals and manuscript submissions are welcome.

The third major publishing medium is our [news blog](#), constantly publishing short news updates from the Humanities community, as well as major developments in the humanities. You can also join this conversation at [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) or subscribe to our email [Newsletter](#).

Common Ground Publishing Journals

AGING Aging and Society: An Interdisciplinary Journal Website: http://AgingAndSociety.com/journal/	ARTS The International Journal of the Arts in Society. Website: www.Arts-Journal.com
BOOK The International Journal of the Book Website: www.Book-Journal.com	CLIMATE CHANGE The International Journal of Climate Change: Impacts and Responses Website: www.Climate-Journal.com
CONSTRUCTED ENVIRONMENT The International Journal of the Constructed Environment Website: www.ConstructedEnvironment.com/journal	DESIGN Design Principles and Practices: An International Journal Website: www.Design-Journal.com
DIVERSITY The International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities and Nations Website: www.Diversity-Journal.com	FOOD Food Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal Website: http://Food-Studies.com/journal/
GLOBAL STUDIES The Global Studies Journal Website: www.GlobalStudiesJournal.com	HEALTH The International Journal of Health, Wellness and Society Website: www.HealthandSociety.com/journal
HUMANITIES The International Journal of the Humanities Website: www.Humanities-Journal.com	IMAGE The International Journal of the Image Website: www.OntheImage.com/journal
LEARNING The International Journal of Learning. Website: www.Learning-Journal.com	MANAGEMENT The International Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Change Management. Website: www.Management-Journal.com
MUSEUM The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum Website: www.Museum-Journal.com	RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society Website: www.Religion-Journal.com
SCIENCE IN SOCIETY The International Journal of Science in Society Website: www.ScienceinSocietyJournal.com	SOCIAL SCIENCES The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences Website: www.SocialSciences-Journal.com
SPACES AND FLOWS Spaces and Flows: An International Journal of Urban and ExtraUrban Studies Website: www.SpacesJournal.com	SPORT AND SOCIETY The International Journal of Sport and Society Website: www.sportandsociety.com/journal
SUSTAINABILITY The International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability Website: www.Sustainability-Journal.com	TECHNOLOGY The International Journal of Technology, Knowledge and Society Website: www.Technology-Journal.com
UBIQUITOUS LEARNING Ubiquitous Learning: An International Journal Website: www.ubi-learn.com/journal/	UNIVERSITIES Journal of the World Universities Forum Website: www.Universities-Journal.com

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