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Cool governance: Japan’s ubiquitous society, surveillance, and creative industries

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ABSTRACT
The rapid reform of the Akihabara district of Tokyo during the first decade of the twenty-first century, in conjunction with the Japanese government’s policy on the global promotion of Cool Japan, has been envisioned under the Japanese government’s new direction of becoming a ‘ubiquitous society’. From the postwar period when Akihabara became the techno-gadgetry hub of Tokyo, into the twenty-first century where it transforms itself into the Mecca of anime and video games, Akihabara has become the embodiment of national hope and technological future. Noticeably, what also implemented alongside this advance of techno-future is a new form of governance and surveillance. After Katō Tomohiro’s murderous rampage in Akihabara in 2008, numerous CCTVs have been installed to secure the neighbourhood from crime and news of this solution became a spectacle in international media. This form of ubiquitous techno-governance integrated as part of everyday life had already been imagined in anime such as Dennō Koiru (Coil A Circle of Children), which broadcast on Japan’s national broadcast station NHK in 2007. In light of the concerted effort of the Japanese government’s promotion of anime to the global consumers seamlessly integrating the urban developmental project of Akihabara, the production of Dennō Koiru at that historical juncture presents a pertinent foreshadowing of Japan’s ‘society of control’. This article will examine the notion of ubiquitous society and surveillance in Dennō Koiru and situate its production against the backdrop of Japan’s growing techno-governance vis-à-vis its creative industries in the twenty-first century.

Surveillance has become a part of our everyday lives. Jeremy Bentham’s vision of the panopticon, analysed by Michele Foucault, has become a lived reality as witnessed in the aftermath of incidents such as Rupert Murdoch’s News International admitting in 2011 to phone tapping, the United States National Security Agency (NSA) intercepting private citizens’ phone calls exposed by Edward Snowden in 2013, and WikiLeaks revealing in 2017 that the CIA surveils televisions, smartphones and computers. Popular depictions of societies run by governmental surveillance often appear in either dystopian futures under the logic to maintain utopian calm, seen in futuristic science fiction films such as Gattaca (1997), Minority Report (2002), Equilibrium (2002), and V for Vendetta (2006),
or in conspiracy-thrillers such as *Enemy of the State* (1998), *The Bourne Identity* (2002), *Eagle Eye* (2008), and *Furious 7* (2015) that dramatise the depth of surveillance in the present. In particular the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks has brought forth a global alliance on the war against terror led by the United States, enforcing strict surveillance mechanisms at airports and communication devices and technologies (Lyon 2009, 2004: 143). The duality of Western societies against the terrorists from certain regions in the world has created a pan-global fear, anxiety and heightened awareness of the ever-shifting body of the ‘other’. What is striking in this process is the different treatments, or modes of surveillance, that have emerged out of countries such as Japan, which have not experienced international terror attacks on their soils.

Unlike Western countries’ heightened security and surveillance to counter both domestic and international terrorism, Japan’s recent developments or modes of surveillance are embedded in its futurist vision of ubiquitous society, its promotion of creative industries as well as the ambivalent relationship of these industries with ‘internal others’ such as the otaku, and their cultural appeal to global consumers. Since 2008, various locales in Japan have begun to install CCTV to ensure safety for its citizens, mostly through private enterprises. However, no other space has created such a national spectacle in its installation of a CCTV system than Akihabara, a neighbourhood on the east side of the city of Tokyo. Akihabara is known as ‘Japan’s Silicon Valley’, which historically contributed to the development of Japan’s software industries (Ibata-Arens 2005: 138). Also termed the ‘electric city’ (*denkigai/dennōgai*), Akihabara is the primary space where ‘major electronic companies such as Sony, Panasonic and Hitachi, to name a few, all release their products for consumer testing on the streets’ (DiMarco 2004: 45). Utilising the term ‘city’ when describing the neighbourhood of Akihabara indicates the special positionality placed upon this particular space in terms of marketing and consumer dynamics. What is more, since the turn of the new millennium, Akihabara has also become the locus of the manga, anime and video games industries’ vitality, making it into a unique testing ground for varied visions of Japan’s techno-futurity, conjured up by both governmental and private sectors, to compete, collide, synthesise and materialise for both domestic and international consumption. Owing to the Japanese government’s global promotion of popular culture and creative industries, guided under the banner *Cool Japan* since the mid-2000s, the space of Akihabara has gathered much attention from global consumers of Japanese popular cultures. After the 2008 Akihabara massacre and the subsequent installation of CCTV cameras, the space of Akihabara was further transformed into the harbinger of Japan’s society of control where surveillance is seamlessly integrated into the free-flowing imagination of the creative industries and the global consumption of Japanese popular culture. Interestingly, this kind of everyday ubiquitous techno-governance and consumerism had already been envisioned in the anime *Dennō Koiru* (Coil A Circle of Children, 2007), making it an exemplary cultural text for thinking through the entangled desires and fears associated with the Japanese government’s embrace of ubiquitous society, surveillance and soft power.

### The new vision of Akihabara

Akihabara, which first began as a district where one could purchase radio and television parts in the postwar era of Japan, quickly emerged as the centre of attraction for many
foreigners (Senoh 2007: 14–5). What used to be viewed as the techno-gadget district of Akihabara has transformed itself into the Mecca of anime, video games and maid cafes in the twenty-first century – in other words, a special enclave for ‘otaku’, a Japanese term for ‘geeks’ – which now attracts many foreign otaku tourists as well (Akiba Keizai Shimbun 2007: 6). Post-2005, Akihabara witnessed a rise of visitors that created what is called ‘hokōsha tengoku’ (pedestrian heaven), or ‘hokoten’, owing to the popular film Densha Otoko (2005) and the opening of mega electronic store Yodobashi Camera (geek 2008: 10) (see Figure 1 and 2). As an extension of Akihabara, Tokyo has become the headquarter of Japan’s soft power in regards to the shifting socio-economic as well as political landscape of the production and global consumption of anime, manga and video games.

In the early 2000s, the city planned to rebuild Akihabara into a digital media centre by forming intellectual alliances with academic institutions. The Digital Hollywood University was established in 1994, which was sponsored by major corporations in various industries, including Hitachi, Ltd., Uchida Yoko Co., Ltd., TAITO CORP., Kansai Telecasting Corporation, and NAMCO LTD. In 2001, the highly esteemed Keio University established research institutions in Akihabara, turning it into a new geographic hub for partnership between universities and industries. The prestigious University of Tokyo also set up a branch campus in Akihabara to train IT specialists and promote the industry through ‘academia tie-ups in research, product development, and test-marketing’ (Stefik and Stefik 2004: 205).

With these changes came the new urban development of housing, corporate architectures and train stations. Tsukuba Express was built in 2005, which linked Tokyo to Tsukuba city in Ibaraki Prefecture located 50 km northeast of Tokyo. Tsukuba was a city that underwent an overhaul during the 1960s and was reborn as a ‘science city’.

Figure 1. Major electronic store in Akihabara, November 2017 (photo taken by author).
At the heart of the new project was the newly established University of Tsukuba, envisioned to contribute to Japan’s leading science and technological innovations. The belated 2005 Tsukuba Express was to accelerate transportation between Tokyo and Tsukuba, and noteworthy is the fact that the main station in Tokyo is located in Akihabara. The existing Akihabara subway and train stations were also refurbished in the mid-2000s, which further accelerated the pace of the ever-changing landscape of Akihabara as a whole.

The population that transited through Akihabara station increased from 120,000–130,000 per day in 2001 to 200,000 in 2005 (Senoh 2007: 20) and television programmes began to broadcast on the changed image of Akihabara. Moreover, the Tokyo Animation Center and The Association of Japanese Animations (AJA) are housed in the newly constructed UDX building, located immediately across from the train station, attracting many anime fans from both Japan and abroad. Foreign visitors to Akihabara also increased from the mid-2000s owing to the global recognition of Japanese popular culture (officially

**Figure 2.** A woman advertising for a maid café in Akihabara, November 2017 (photo taken by author). Faces intentionally blurred to protect subject privacy and identity.
referred to as the ‘Content industry’). Subsequently, to the Japanese policy makers, Akihabara became a space that could attract global consumers as well as promote Japan’s creative industries abroad.

**Governmental promotion of Japanese popular culture**

Stemming from the Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō’s 2002 Intellectual Property Act, the Japanese government passed a bill in 2004 to promote the creative industries, consolidated under the title *Content industry*,¹ which at the time covered creative industry media such as manga, anime, video games, film, television and popular music. The key motivation behind the new support of popular culture was the rise of the Western market since the mid-1990s (Choo 2012: 85). Owing to the global popularity of anime series such as *Sailor Moon* (1992), *Pokémon* (1997) and *Spirited Away* (2001), the Japanese government began to focus on promoting the Content industry to international markets. Since there were already waves of Japanese popular culture circulating throughout the Asian markets since the late 1980s (Iwabuchi 2002), the Japanese government’s drastic attitude shift towards supporting popular culture in the early 2000s was a clear response to the Western market’s rising potential at the time.

The new official promotion has since been referred to as *Cool Japan*, utilising a Western term appealing to the targeted consumers. The Tokyo Metropolitan Government has created various international venues such as media and film festivals where foreign consumers and investors can get direct access to the most up-to-date productions. Many festivals and events have been consolidated under the larger Japan International Contents Festival (COFESTA), offering cohesive presentations and access to Content for both domestic and global consumers and industries. As a result, the city of Tokyo has been transformed into the Mecca of Japanese popular culture and with these changes came increased flows of foreign tourists and capital, as well as various changes in the Content industry business infrastructures and urban landscapes.

Most significant is the government’s support toward the anime industry. In the initial stages, the government’s promotion focused on the video game industry for its high economic returns. However, after positive reports on attitudinal changes among young Asian consumers of Japanese popular culture towards Japan, government officials strategised Content promotion into ‘image promotion’, which heavily revolved around the anime industry (Choo 2012: 88). As a result, not only has there been an enormous increase in foreign attraction to anime but the city planning around areas such as Akihabara confirms the government’s increased support of the anime industry. Once denied as a ‘proper’ culture, both manga and anime have now become an industry worthy of support by the Ministry of Economic, Trade and Industry (*Keizaisangyōshō*, METI). In fact, manga was elevated to the status of ‘traditional’ culture by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (*Monbukagakushō*, MEXT henceforth) in 2000 (Choo 2012: 86). Following this governmental shift was the new image promotion centring on the district of Akihabara where most of the anime fans and consumers of the Content industry conglomerate.

¹The ‘Content industry’ is a special term utilized by the Japanese government. The term embodies a particularity that encompasses a broader notion of various media contents, platforms and infrastructures vis-à-vis *Cool Japan*. Therefore, to be faithful to its Japanese terminology, I have capitalized the term ‘Content’ throughout this essay.
As the Japanese governmental support of the anime industry propelled anime to become the face of Cool Japan in the twenty-first century both internationally and domestically, the cityscape of Akihabara (and to an extent Tokyo at large) has also increasingly become a simulacrum of anime itself. Morikawa Kaichirō analyses how Akihabara has transformed into a ‘personapolis’ where the subjectivity of the otaku desire has manifested onto the cityscape (Morikawa 2003). One can easily spot a plethora of anime imagery plastered onto the urban cityscape when visiting Akihabara (Figure 3). In other words, the internal fantasies and desires, or what Morikawa asserts as ‘hobbies (shūmi)’, of the

Figure 3. Anime and game images on buildings in Akihabara, November 2017 (photo taken by author). Faces intentionally blurred to protect subject privacy and identity.
otaku consumers have translated into power to alter the external reality. In conjunction with the governmental support of the Content industry, especially anime, the velocity of changes witnessed in Akihabara has been remarkable during the first decade of the twenty-first century. It can be argued that the Japanese government’s new policy has not only transformed the Content industry but has also visually and physically shaped the urban spaces in Tokyo. This very notion can be witnessed in the narratives and images of the Content itself, creating an interminable cycle of mutual influence between the imagined Content and the constructed realities.

**Ubiquitous network society, surveillance and safe space for otaku**

In addition to the promotion of the Content industry and its transformative impact on Akihabara, creating a ‘ubiquitous society’ has been another major project mapped out by the Japanese government since the turn of the new millennium. The notion of ubiquitous society was first introduced to Japan by engineers in the late 1990s. However, not until the 2003 ‘e-Japan’ strategy planning did Japanese research institutes and government start to utilise the term. The e-Japan project was a plan to layout broadband infrastructure throughout Japan. Developing upon this e-Japan was the new vision of creating ‘u-Japan’ (ubiquitous Japan) where information network technology and infrastructure would correspond smoothly throughout the entire country. Ever since, the Japanese government has been investing to actualise a ubiquitous network society through the development of ICT (information and communication technology) infrastructure and the promotion of ICT utilisation. By 2007, about 25 per cent of the Japanese population heard and knew about the concept of ‘ubiquitous society’, which was understood to be ‘everywhere or in many places at the same time’ (Murakami 2007: 10).

Directly involved in this project were the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIAC) and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI). MIAC instigated the Ubiquitous Network Society Strategy Program (UNS) in 2005 and the main goal of this new strategy was to build ubiquitous and faster mobility in telecommunications, ubiquitous platforms, secure networks and safety sensing devices (Murakami 2007: 13). The government’s plan has been to solve matters such as the aging population, decreasing child birth, medical problems, unemployment, global environmental issues, etc. through establishing a ubiquitous network society (Murakami 2007: 13). In other words, the ubiquitous digital network society in Japan is understood to preserve human dignity by improving people’s daily lives. Although most of the claims for the importance of creating a ubiquitous society have been linked to the notion of service solutions for the aging population, where ubiquitous home appliances, automobiles, sidewalks and housing would benefit the elderly and disabled, benefits for the Content industry has also been noted: ‘If there are platforms, terminals and networks, you can do a lot of business, and contents (sic) industries will be the first to use that as well as the ubiquitous electronic industries’ (Murakami 2007: 13). It was calculated that if the Content industry could utilise the ubiquitous network, it would then in return benefit the country as the Content industry was one of the ‘top five strategic industries of the twenty-first century’ that the Japanese government designated (METI Report 2004). Furthermore, the 2006 government planning report on the ‘u-Japan’ project listed three main points for its development: first, to integrate the communication networks including broadcasting; second, to build Japan’s soft
power that would increase economic growth and competition; third, to establish a ubiquitous society to ensure safety and security (MIAC u-Japan Development Plan 2006). Here is where the vision of ubiquitous society seamlessly integrates with the development of the Content industry; a nation where both the young (Content consumers) and the old (the aging population) could benefit from a shared network of digital information technology. Yet what is missing in the government’s portrayal of technological determination toward a ubiquitous society is the surveillance factor that would follow. Overly positive rhetoric of ubiquitous digital technology controlling every aspect of the urban cityscape and ordinary citizens within that space has created an unrealistic, utopian image of Japan’s digital future landscape. Akihabara has been the forerunner of that optimistic vision owing to the booming Content industry. Not only would Akihabara be the leading force behind the digital revolution but it would also attract foreign ‘otaku’ capital that would bolster Japan’s economy. However, that confidence was almost shattered overnight, at least in the minds of the Japanese.

In June 2008, a 25-year old male named Katō Tomohiro was captured after running a truck into the central streets of Akihabara and then randomly stabbing people, killing seven and injuring ten. This incident reminded Japan of the 1989 incident when the pedophilic serial killer Miyazaki Tsutomu was captured. Thousands of pornographic anime tapes of young girls were found in Miyazaki’s apartment, creating a wave of social backlash and bias against the otaku communities. When the Akihabara massacre occurred in 2008, concerns that the incident would tarnish the image of Akihabara, and subsequently Japan, which would hinder attracting valuable foreign capital into the Content industry, superseded concerns over Katō as an individual or the possible backlash that the domestic otaku would incur. The aftermath of Katō’s rampage saw 16 surveillance cameras installed in the district of Akihabara in January 2010. News media noted that ‘The cameras were also installed with hopes that the heightened security would provide a feeling of safety and stave off crime, attracting more people to the area’. However, since Akihabara has long been known to domestic consumers in Japan as a place that attracts specific groups of people – the purported techno-gadget, anime, manga and game otaku – who in general have not posed prominent harm to the public (compared to the more realistic threats caused by organised crime elements, for example), the reasoning behind the city’s decision to install surveillance CCTV cameras in Akihabara becomes all the more poignant; the rationale behind establishing Akihabara as a ‘safe place’ by installing surveillance systems was not only to appeal to the global audiences over the domestic ones but also to fulfil the scheme to create a ‘ubiquitous society’ that was in line with the Content industry.

As mentioned earlier, the digital ubiquitous network that Japan envisions includes not only daily appliances but also public spaces such as digitally monitored street blocks that may assist electronic wheel chairs for disabled people (Ernst 2004: 213). In such cases, the ubiquitous network system and ubiquitous media converges. Bodily subjectivity is monitored and becomes public data. As Douglas Kellner argues, in a ubiquitous media society, ‘there seems to be nothing sacred or immune from media scrutiny, leading to an implosion of private and public life’ (2003: 102). Furthermore, the city of Tokyo’s attempt to

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2Katō Tomohiro incident has been referred to as the ‘Akihabara tōrima jiken’ (Akihabara random massacre).

maintain the image of Japan through Akihabara as a safe environment indicates that the
district is under the ‘politics of surveillance’ (Haggerty and Ericson 2006) where the
private space is controlled for the good of the public. Yet, the logic to prevent crime in
Akihabara by installing CCTV cameras may not be as effective as anticipated by the gov-
ernment as it becomes a lazy form of control and may rather create further indifference by
the public. Nicholas Mirzoeff warns us as follows:

The ubiquitous surveillance cameras of today’s society in no way seek to prevent crime or the
breaches of social norms, nor do they claim any moralizing effect on the individual … [it
becomes] simply a well-publicized example of the indifference of contemporary surveillance
to the individual. (2006: 342)

Once people register contemporary surveillance as indifferent, they become desensitised to
the system as banal every day surroundings.

With the understanding of Japan’s intent to create a ubiquitous media-led society in the
twenty-first century that integrates with the Content industry, I will next examine the sig-
nificance of the popular anime series Dennō Koiru (Coil A Circle of Children, 2007) that
aired on the Japanese national broadcast television station, NHK, in 2007. According to
Jeffrey Sconce, over the past 150 years, the cultural imagination in relation to emerging
new technologies follows three patterns of narratives: first, narratives of ‘disembodiment’
where the subject leaves the body through electronic means (whether physically or
through imagination); second, narratives of the subject entering a ‘sovereign electronic
world’ that has been created by telecommunications technology; and finally, narratives
of anthropomorphised media technology, often depicted through androids/cyborgs
(2000: 8–10). Interestingly, Dennō Koiru follows all three of these narrative patterns.
Sconce further asserts that:

there are tremendous differences in the actual social, cultural and political “content” of these
stories within differing historical and technological contexts … Tales of paranormal media
are important, then, not as timeless expressions of some undying electronic superstition,
but as a permeable language in which to express a culture’s changing social relationship to
a historical sequence of technologies. (2000: 10)

In line with this view, Dennō Koiru, I argue, magnifies how Japan’s ambitious endeavour to
create a ubiquitous society merged with the governmental support of the Content industry
during the height of initiating both policies and encapsulates the crux of Japan’s techno-
logical ambitions, aspirations and anxieties at the historical juncture of its production.
NHK being the national television station makes this anime series pertinent in terms of
how public media manifest multifaceted desires and fears regarding the future of Japan
as a ubiquitous society. Moreover, the storyline becomes a fascinating case study on
how globalisation, digital technology and urban spaces have been reconfigured, reima-
gined, and renegotiated by the creative Content industry and consumer/otaku culture.

**Dennō Koiru (Coil A Circle of Children, 2007)**

Created by Iso Mitsuo, the 26 episode Dennō Koiru (henceforth Coil) produced by Mad-
house Inc. animation studio aired during the 6:30 pm slot on Saturdays on NHK Edu-
cational Broadcast Station (NHK E-Tele) from 12 May to 1 December 2007. The entire
series was rebroadcast immediately starting from 8 December 2007. Animations aired
on NHK E-Tele are considered for younger children, but in the case of *Coil*, with its sophisticated plot structures, the target audience was upper elementary school children and older. *Coil* won the Excellence Award in Animation at the 2007 Japan Media Arts Festival held by the Agency for the Cultural Affairs, a subdivision of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and also won the Japan SF Grand

**Figure 4.** Augmented reality glasses in *Dennō Koiru*. The two female protagonists Yasako (right) and Amasawa (left) get caught up on a larger conspiracy revolving the virtual reality city of Daikoku. ©Mitsuo Iso / Tokuma Shoten – CyberCoil Production Committee.
Prize in 2008. The narrative of *Coil* revolves around a virtual reality city called Daikoku. The city’s name derives from one of Japan’s seven lucky gods, *Daikokuten* (great blackness), who came to represent wealth and fortune through its name also resonating with the Japanese term ‘great nation’ (*Daikoku/Taikoku*).

In Daikoku city, the landscape infrastructure consists of digital data and the Internet that can be accessed through special ‘augmented reality’ glasses (Figure 4). However, the viewers do not realise that the spaces that the characters reside in are holographic urban spaces until the latter part of the series. Yet, unlike visually limited holograms, the virtual reality in which the characters live is physically accessible. The story focuses on a special group of elementary school children, who constantly live in a shared virtual reality space by wearing their special glasses on a daily basis. The glasses become tools to manipulate the data surrounding their everyday lives. The glasses function as not only to access the Internet, but also as digital weapons (when engaging with other video game players). And the virtual spaces that they enter and control become their own reality.

The main female protagonist Okonogi Yūko, who prefers to be called by her nickname Yasako (written as ‘kind child’ in *kanji* characters), is a transfer student who moves to the city of Daikoku because of her father’s work. Daikoku is also where her grandmother lives. After exploring the neighbourhood, Yasako and her younger sister Kyōko discover mysterious ‘black spaces’ called ‘coil domain’ throughout the area, which turn out to be remnants of old data that have not been ‘formatted’ into the current city space. Yasako’s digital bulldog Densuke accidentally gets stuck in one of the black spaces and therefore faces the danger of being formatted and erased by the city’s surveillance robots called Satchi (*searchmatons*) (Figure 5). Satchi do not discriminate at whom they shoot their digital guns.

![Figure 5. Satchi machines chasing after Yasako and her pet dog. ©Mitsuo Iso / Tokuma Shoten – Cyber-Coil Production Committee.](image)

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4A similar autonomous surveillance robot was developed in the United States in 2013 (https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/innovation/hiring-r2d2-protect-your-mall-or-campus-all-6-25-n262796).
beams, and the only spaces safe from them are the old temples. A passer-by, whose name is Hashimoto Fumie, instructs the two neighbourhood newcomers on how to escape from Satchi. Fumie also opens up cracks in the coil domain, which leads to Densuke’s rescue (Figure 6).

Yasako and Fumie become good friends after Yasako transfers to a new school where they become classmates. Most of the children in the class wear their special augmented reality glasses. The children access the Internet, play online games, and do online shopping with their glasses (Figures 7 and 8). Their hands function as gadgets while wearing these glasses; e.g., typing into air in order to access the Internet and spreading their thumb and pinkie finger to use as a phone receiver. The physical body becomes tuned in to the virtual reality spaces. The children’s playtime also involves war games, in which each character can instantaneously purchase online digital weaponry (digital beams) or protection shields. The battle scenes resemble those of online role-playing games. Thus, the anime portrays network games becoming integrated into physical reality, similar to the Pokémon Go game that the world has witnessed in recent years. Yasako’s bespectacled Grandmother, fittingly named Megabaa (a combination of Japanese words for eyeglasses and grandmother), owns a digital data candy shop where one can purchase various shields, data boosters, and antidotes to network viruses created out of ‘metatags’, which are fragments of digital data. They are portrayed in a manner resembling traditional Japanese/Chinese talismans (ofuda) written on paper (Figure 9). However, these metatags become ‘absorbed’ into the virtual body and function as digital antivirus programmes.

In Yasako’s surroundings, temporal and spatial realities have no boundaries. The blurring of the digital and the physical environment alters the linear notion of space and time. It is later revealed that Yasako’s grandmother Megabaa is a legendary hacker whose knowledge of the digital database space surpasses even the city’s officials, who built, maintain and surveil Daikoku. Megabaa organises a group called Dennô Coil Investigation

![Figure 6. Fumie (Left) sends her digital pet Oyaji into the coil domain to rescue Densuke, Yasako’s digital pet dog. ©Mitsuo Iso / Tokuma Shoten – CyberCoil Production Committee.](image-url)
Agency where Yasako’s friend Fumie is a member. Yasako also joins in order to figure out the mystery behind the unexplained black spaces.

After another female student, whose name is coincidentally also Yūko, transfers to Yasako’s class, the plot deepens. The new Yūko (whose kanji name is ‘brave child’) is given a nickname ‘Isako’ (brave child) by her classmates, but goes by her surname Amasawa. She appears as an indifferent but aggressive person who does not get along

Figure 7. Children can instantaneously download image files and view them. ©Mitsuo Iso / Tokuma Shoten – CyberCoil Production Committee.

Figure 8. A similar concept is witnessed in Google Glass released in 2013. Courtesy Google, https://www.google.com/glass/help/.

After another female student, whose name is coincidentally also Yūko, transfers to Yasako’s class, the plot deepens. The new Yūko (whose kanji name is ‘brave child’) is given a nickname ‘Isako’ (brave child) by her classmates, but goes by her surname Amasawa. She appears as an indifferent but aggressive person who does not get along
with anybody. As the story unfolds, we encounter a larger conspiracy that the city has been trying to conceal the danger of the newly developed virtual technology, which is responsible for creating entities called ‘ghosts’. These ‘ghosts’ are revealed to be remnants of the left over old data, which could also include the ‘ghost’ of humans who died while wearing the augmented reality glasses. In fact, Amasawa’s brother was part of a digital experiment conducted by the city a few years back. He fell victim to the new technology and is in a coma. In attempts to bring back her brother, whose ‘soul’ is assumed to be stuck in the old database coil domain space, Amasawa tries to open up a larger portion of the black space. This goes against Daikoku city’s policy which is to completely eliminate any existing unformatted space. Amasawa becomes an underground resistance activist against the city’s formatting policy. She becomes a fugitive from authorities whilst gathering data boosters in order to upgrade her ‘digital’ strength. Amasawa uses her classmates as pawns to rapidly gather metatags.

The audience witnesses Yasako’s childhood memories and learns how they are linked to Amasawa’s comatose brother. Yasako tries to prevent Amasawa from her illegal actions in vain. Amasawa’s determination eventually leads to a massive opening of the coil domain, and in the process, both Amasawa and Yasako get stuck in it. Within the old database space, Amasawa and Yasako encounter their old ‘ghosts’. Yasako sees her own childhood where she is talking to Amasawa’s brother at a shrine, and Amasawa meets Michiko, an urban legend ghost character that is widely known among school children in Daikoku. Later, Amasawa realises that her own grief, anger and hatred are the source of Michiko’s creation. When Amasawa finally encounters her brother in the coil domain, she comes to terms with the idea that it is only appropriate to let go of her desire to relive her childhood with her brother. After realising this, Michiko, the manifestation of Amasawa’s angst, disappears, and both Amasawa and Yasako return to reality.

In the final episode, we are exposed to the entire city landscape of Daikoku as being that of a virtual reality space witnessed from the children’s perspectives while wearing their
glasses. The virtual city of Daikoku is projected upon a normal suburban neighbourhood under a different name that one can easily encounter in Japan. The space of Daikoku was produced by the special glasses, but their experiences are visceral and ‘real’. If one gets a digital beam attack while in Daikoku, then one’s physical body suffers. If the attack is severe enough, then a person can even lose their life. Yasako’s digital pet Densuke, which dies in the middle of the series, is not visible to the human eye without wearing the glasses. Nevertheless, Densuke’s death deeply affects Yasako, as much as the urban legend of Michiko’s existence scares the children. The sentiments resulting from the virtual world profoundly affects the protagonists’ realities. The entire series of Coil ends with either parents confiscating the children’s glasses or the children taking off their glasses voluntarily. In the end, Yasako enjoys walking in nature along with her sister Kyōko, and both see Densuke standing in the middle of a neighbourhood street, even without their augmented reality glasses.

**Database, knowledge and anime**

Although Coil ends on a moralistic and idealistic note, probably due to it being broadcast on NHK, it raises imperative questions about the current state of how digital technology is imagined to intertwine with the everyday lives of the younger generation in Japan, especially in regard to otaku culture. Paul Roquet analyses Coil as a narrative that ‘presents childhood as a critical period for learning to navigate the interface between the composit ed self and the augmented environment’ and that ‘the show presents [augmented reality] athleticism as the *only* option for a successful childhood’ (2016: 240–1). Here, the athleticism that Roquet asserts is related to the augmented labour that the children have to physically, intellectually, and emotionally experience (2016: 241). However, I argue that in Coil, the Foucauldian notion of power heavily relies on data-based knowledge. Thus, Yasako’s grandmother Magebaa becomes the pinnacle of computer knowledge because of her understanding of old computer technology, which has given her a master-like understanding of the entire network society’s structure. In the final episode, Yasako’s father is also revealed to be a specialist in database network systems, positioning the older generations as more knowledgeable and thus ‘powerful’. The same can be said with Yasako’s classmates. Whoever has more access to or knowledge of online databases or merchandise, especially during digital warfare, holds power.

According to Azuma Hiroki (2001), Japanese anime and its avid otaku fans have created a space where modes of communication and consumption have been altered into a postmodern ‘database-like’ structure. The signified are codified into bits and pieces of information that are condensed into the notion of ‘moe’, a term that summarises an appealing and exciting element in a character. Moe elements do not have a linear history that can add up to the characters’ attractiveness. Azuma asserts that the characters themselves become an embodiment of the entire history of anime character development and thus, become transcending figures of the otaku culture. In other words, contemporary anime and its characters are produced with prior creations as stepping stones, only to further blur the boundaries of narratives, visuality and the history of the medium itself. Therefore, the entire genre of anime becomes an agglomeration of postmodern pastiche and stereotypes. Azuma’s conceptualisation of otaku ‘data-base consumption’ and production is epitomised in anime such as Coil. For example, character designs in Coil
resemble those created by the famous auteur anime film maker Miyazaki Hayao. Additionally, Yasako and her sister Kyōko evoke the sister relationship in Miyazaki’s anime *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988). However, unlike Miyazaki’s emphasis on nature as the primary and redemptive element in his anime films, *Coil* centres on the digital virtual reality and its consumption that is far from the natural environment, which is more in line with the science fiction tradition of Japanese anime.  

Evoking the trite bias of techno-Orientalism, Daikoku (which reminds us of the omnipresent god Daikokuten and also echoes the term ‘great nation’ in Japanese) as a virtual reality city replicates the notion of great economic and technological development that Japan once represented during the Cold War and bubble economy era. According to director Iso, Daikoku city was designed as an amalgam of Hachiōji city (a satellite city about an hour west of Tokyo) and Kanazawa city (a city on the west coast of Japan that boasts rich traditional cultures and architectures) but set in a basin. In the narrative, however, Daikoku city is set as a seaside city near Kanazawa. Owing to not being attacked during World War II, Kanazawa has many traditional shrines and temples intact from the Edo period. This becomes a significant trope throughout the anime series. When data virus-eliminating Satchi machines sweep the cityscape, the only spaces to which the children can safely evacuate are the old temple sites. Here, we can witness the tension among the past, present and the future intertwined with the various narrative structures and pastiched images. Miki Daliot-Bul explains that the Japanese governmental policy to promote popular culture has been heading towards the direction of ‘neo-Japonism’ where the international promotion of Japanese culture itself may revert back to the age-old self-Orientalisation associated with the promotion of traditional arts in the early twentieth century (2009: 252). The fact that the traditional shrine and temple sites within *Coil* are the only spaces safe from the threat of new computer technology offers interesting insight into how twenty-first century Japan is envisioned and self-Orientalised, especially after the promotion of the Content industry. To present traditional sites in conjunction with the high-tech science fiction elements within the anime narrative echoes the Japanese government’s incorporating manga and anime as part of traditional arts. Considering this, the production of *Coil* during the height of the government’s global promotion of Content renders it pertinent in the history of Japanese anime as a whole. The desires and anxieties toward technology in *Coil* are represented through the ‘cool’ lifestyle of the residents in the city of Daikoku, replete with techno-futuristic gadgetry, including the Satchi machines, yet on the other hand, the ‘return to nature’ at the end of the story exemplifies the laden ambivalence. The appeal of anime, both inside and outside Japan, is often that it depicts Japan as a techno-futuristic country, which is precisely a major attraction of *Coil*. The anime becomes a meme of its own, a database congregate of *Totoro* in futuristic Japan.  

As Azuma might see it, database-like knowledge is equivalent to power in *Coil*. The manner in which one consumes the urban space of Akihabara parallels that of how an

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5 The ending of *Coil*, however, calls for a return to nature, which is similar to the overarching theme of Miyazaki Hayao’s anime films.

6 Japan became the world’s second largest economy by the 1980s but there developed an economic bubble from 1986 when real estate and stock prices became inflated. This bubble burst in 1992 and Japan’s economy has suffered since. China surpassed Japan as the second world economic power in 2013.

7 A similar theme can be witnessed in the anime film *Summer Wars* (2009) by Hosoda Mamoru. In *Summer Wars*, a traditional former samurai clan family living in rural Japan joins forces to fight against a high-tech hacking virus that threatens a global social network platform.
anime otaku retrieves knowledge from the vast anime database history. Akihabara is a space premised upon its previous image of being an electronic city, thus creating invisible conceptual boundaries around it. Thus protected from the outer shields of Tokyo, Akihabara, like the virtual reality basin city Daikoku, is confined to its fantasy realm. Paradoxically, by being excluded as a particular, Akihabara becomes included into the larger imagination of the ‘great nation (daikoku) Japan’, and by its very association with Akihabara, the once alienated otaku subjectivity becomes incorporated into mainstream Japan in this process.

The image of otaku has changed over time. Caught at the crossroads of Japan’s vision of ubiquitous society and its promotion of creative industries, the public discourse concerning otaku has shifted dramatically in the new millennium. However, both negative and positive images of otaku and their culture continue to co-exist in Japanese society today. As mentioned earlier, the 2008 installation and spectacle of CCTV surveillance in Akihabara was part of the government’s effort to create a ubiquitous society of control in the name of protecting and attracting global otaku consumers. Before that, a discernible social attitude change towards domestic otaku in Japan, mostly imagined as men, came with the popularity of the film Densha Otoko (Train Man, 2005). This title first became widely consumed as a novel, based on a live thread on an Internet mega-bulletin board called 2channel, then through a theatrical film, and further branched out into television dramas. Popular variety television shows broadcast experimental programmes that rated the level of ‘manliness’ among Akihabara otaku men:

On August 24, 2005, the Fuji television program Toribia no Izumi (Fountain of Trivia) broadcast an experiment involving 100 otaku men who shopped in Akihabara. The experiment was to see how many men would try to rescue a female who was being attacked by a hooligan in the back allies of Akihabara. According to the program, 69 out of the 100 men went out of their way to rescue a female in distress. (Choo 2012: 100)

This episode cannot be an accurate measurement of otaku masculinity, nor should it be viewed as a symptom limited to the space of Akihabara. What can be discerned from this experiment, however, is the fact that one of the most popular Japanese television series of the time conveyed the image of otaku as positive, or becoming ‘masculine’. This notion is premised upon the general understanding that otaku male subjectivity is precisely not that of an ‘ideal’ masculinity, in image that has been delegated to the ‘salary men’ since the postwar Japan developmental period (Slater & Galbraith 2011). Without this prior knowledge, one would not appreciate the television programme’s so-called ‘humorous’ attempt to measure otaku manliness and therefore, would be excluded from the surprising results that showed almost 70 per cent of otaku men displaying courageous, or conventionally imagined as heteronormative masculine, traits. Once regarded as marginal and socially less-than-desirable, otaku masculinity has not only become mainstream, but it has also come to represent the new-found virility of Japan’s neoliberal capitalism in the twenty-first century owing to the government’s effort to boost its economy via the creative industries; in other words, the otaku are now responsible for motivating the 12

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8Galbraith (2010) notes the tension that arose among the Japanese ‘real otaku’ population against the rise of global popularity of Akihabara.
billion dollar Content industry. As one Western scholar has observed, ‘The losers are now winning, and they are changing Japan along the way’ (Leheny 2006: 220). Although the 2008 Akihabara massacre created a temporary backlash against the otaku communities, the overall image of otaku continues to improve and, as discussed above, Akihabara, the Mecca of otaku culture, has become the harbinger of Japan’s ‘society of control’.

**Governance over content bodies**

The very confinement to the space of Akihabara has dramatically transformed the otaku subjects into the new face of Japan. When one consumes the space of Akihabara as representing Japan, similar to consuming the entire history of anime through pastiched works of narratives and images, the space of Akihabara, as a result, performs and ‘wears’ Cool Japan for the audience. Although Morikawa (2003) is correct in pointing out that the cityscape of Akihabara has increasingly been shaped by the otaku subjectivities’ personal desires, I would argue that it is the national desire of Cool Japan that has propelled the rapid transformation of Akihabara into the Mecca of Japanese popular culture as well as the harbinger of a ubiquitous society. Akihabara has become the primary locus for both free-floating global consumerism and governmental surveillance. As Mark Steinberg has argued, early anime characters tie up with merchandise stickers created precursors to contemporary Japan’s ‘media ubiquity’ and ‘media mix’ (2009: 116). In addition to the long tradition of anime and manga characters as platforms of media ubiquity in Japan, the Japanese government’s vision of ‘ubiquitous society’, as explained earlier, focuses on the control and surveillance of the body through managing data and the physical space, which has been envisioned and critiqued in Cool. Gilles Deleuze, by citing Félix Guattari, notes the following:

> The conception of a control mechanism, giving the position of any element with an open environment at any given instant … is not necessarily one of science fiction. Félix Guattari has imagined a city where one would be able to leave one’s apartment, one’s street, one’s neighborhood, thanks to one’s (dividual) electronic card that raises a given barrier; but the card could just as easily be rejected on a given day or between certain hours; what counts is not the barrier but the computer that tracks each person’s position—licit or illicit—and effects a universal modulation. (1992:7)

In other words, bodies within the controlled urban space become data bits in relation to dividual interactions, and the notion of individuality as irreducible unit has become questionable for individuals who are now increasingly ‘divided’ and reduced to the smallest units by technologies and digital network interfaces. In November 2016, the city of Iruma, Saitama Prefecture in Japan, initiated a project to keep track of the elderly with dementia by tagging them with a scannable barcode sticker.10 This is a pertinent example of how individuals become data-coded ubiquitous bodies in Japan. Subsuming the unruly dementia body under the surveillance of the city, the dividual gets absorbed into the larger platform of data control under the guise of individual caring. A similar mechanism can be witnessed in the case of the Japanese government’s control of Akihabara.

The international spectacle of the city of Tokyo installing CCTV cameras in 2010 after Kato’s murderous rampage sent out the message to the world that the unruly otaku,

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regardless of whether Katō was an actual otaku or not, was under control. The incident’s location in Akihabara itself created a myth of Katō’s otaku positionality. Important to remember is that the image of the ‘benevolent’ otaku in the media that burgeoned since the mid-2000s was partly motivated by the Japanese government’s Cool Japan policies. Otaku became positive forces as they were deemed as contributing to the wealth of the nation by attracting global, mostly Western, fans to Japan. However, the reality in Japan is that there is what can be described as a ‘one-strike-you-are-out’ rule that permeates throughout society. Ever since the 1989 Miyazaki incident, the otaku have been under scrutiny and the modicum of positive perception that the otaku had been enjoying until 2010 was immediately threatened by Katō’s murder spree. Naturally, a concerted effort by otaku intellectuals to shield and distance the otaku and their sacred space Akihabara from Katō emerged.

Scholars in Japan point to the problematics of the media calling the incident the ‘Akihabara Random Massacre’ instead of the ‘Katō Incident’ as encoding bias against and ‘scapegoating’ of the otaku (Morikawa 2008: 104). Some even assert that Katō chose Akihabara precisely because it is where the ‘powerless peaceful sheep – otaku – gather’ and that Katō’s statement that ‘it didn’t matter who I killed’ was a symptom of Katō’s extreme selfishness crushed under diminishing employment opportunities and his deceitful misdirected anger of not being able to kill his own parents, driven by neoliberal pragmatism (Yoshida 2008: 30–31). From these critical accounts, one can see Katō as a non-otaku who victimised the safe space of the otaku and Akihabara rather than an otaku gone wild. In short, by emphasising the location where the murders occurred over Katō as an individual, the media was able to conveniently sensationalise the incident, harking back to the 1989 otaku Miyazaki serial killings. In this process, the most important issue surrounding Katō’s rage, the precarious labour conditions of contemporary Japanese youth, was pushed back into obscurity. At the same time, the Katō incident was a stark reminder to the cautious and suspicious Japanese public that the otaku were not to be trusted, and thus must be ‘governed’. ‘Tagging’ Katō as an otaku and the subsequent installation of CCTV surveillance by the city of Tokyo enabled the illusory performance of ubiquitous control over unruly elements, like the ‘broken data bits’ in Coil, in Akihabara.

Interestingly, the Japanese government’s desire to create a ubiquitous society and to appeal to global consumers is haunted by many contradictions and the glaring gap from its current digital infrastructure including Internet/cell phone connection and other service industries. Japan may boast the international image of being high-tech, but its bureaucracy continues to pose a serious challenge to the development of a faster and better ubiquitous society. For example, it may still take up to a month to get a new Internet connection in Tokyo (half the time of what it used to take in the mid-2000s) and purchasing a new cell phone is as strenuous as, if not more stringent than, opening a credit card account. At the same time, Japanese smart phones cannot be easily unlocked for international usage. The Internet infrastructure was widely laid out during the early to

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11This ‘one-strike-you-are-out’ practice applies to other aspects of Japanese society at large (the massive bullying culture in Japan is also affected by this rule; e.g., if one does not use chopsticks ‘correctly’ or smile ‘correctly’, etc. then they are often blacklisted and thus justified to be bullied). This invisible and internalised pressure, I argue, may contribute to the effectiveness of surveillance in Japan.

12Slater and Galbraith (2011) examine the online discourse surrounding Katō’s murderous rampage and postulate that Katō was depicted as a victim by sympathetic voices. However, the mainstream media in Japan did not cover Katō as a victim.
mid-2000s, and was behind many other developed countries around the world at the time. This national project anticipated the development of the Content industry (shared digital content) as well as ubiquitous society (shared digital network) in the twenty-first century. With this, many forms of governance were discussed by the government, including issues of content copyrights and digital piracy. One other example of governance in relation to the Content industry can be seen in the Tokyo Metropolitan Government’s 2010 attempt to ‘clean up’ the image of manga and anime through passing an ordinance to censor unethical and pornographic images of ‘non-existing youths’ (hijitsuzai seishōnen).

Although the Japanese national government excluded manga and anime from the list of media censorship regarding child pornography in 2014, Tokyo holds its own regulation against the freedom of sexual expression in creative narratives. Manga and anime involving incest or vaguely defined ‘inappropriate’ sexual behaviour is considered harming the youth’s moral compass and should be banned. Evoking the Satchi searchmatons in *Cow* that run around the city to erase ‘dangerous’ data bits that could open doors to the black space that could contaminate the minds of the city dwellers, the city of Tokyo’s effort to restrict access to ‘dangerous’ Content (in whose eyes?) under the ploy to protect the youth population hides the fact that it was the incentive to attract global consumers that motivated the city to this highly contested regulation. Ironically, Tokyo’s censorship to desexualise the Content industry contradicts the national government’s approach on how to attract global Content consumers.

In 2009, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which oversees the global promotion of anime abroad, designated three female ‘cute’ (kawaii) ambassadors, replacing the previous popular culture ambassadors such as the fictional female cat *Hello Kitty* and the futuristic male robot cat *Doraemon*. Although the term for these female ambassadors was only one year, as popular anime images heavily focus on preadolescent-looking girls that appear in high school uniforms or Victorian doll outfits (known as gothic Lolita or gosurori), the utilisation of live female bodies to promote the fictional realm of anime by the Japanese government raises serious questions about the governance of female subjectivity in relation to nation branding. According to Laura Miller, the selection of these three females was determined solely by one male bureaucrat (2011: 20). The new female ambassadors, dressed as a high school student, a gothic Lolita, and a Harajuku girl (gyaru), visited Japanese embassies around the world and posed in front of avid foreign anime fans. Online sites such as Youtube.com present us with their performances. In London, 2010, the gothic Lolita character Kera appeared on stage and simply twirled around. One scholar who attended one of the cute ambassadors’ events reported that a Japanese government official verbally ordered the cute ambassadors to ‘twirl round and round!’ (kuru kuru mawatte!).

Presenting live female bodies as visually appealing ‘dolls’, as in the aforementioned case of Kera, informs us of the ubiquitous gender governance the Japanese government is practicing in relation to the Content industry. My research on the Content industry during the mid-late 2000s, including numerous interviews with Japanese government officials and

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15This information was presented at a Sophia University workshop in Tokyo, Japan, August 2009.
bureaucrats, reveals that the global fandom of anime imagined by the Japanese policy makers is essentially white males, a possible projection of the imagined homogeneity of Japanese otaku population onto a global scale. In contrast, the image of the Japanese school girl is replete with fetishistic sexual imagination (Miller 2011: 22) and the fashion of the Harajuku girl conjures the image of young sex workers near Shibuya/Harajuku due to the concentration of love hotels and sex workers in the Dōgenzaka area next to Shibuya station. Hence, the designation of ‘cute’ female ambassadors may have appeared to be an attractive strategy to those bureaucrats who did not realise the limitations, let alone the offensiveness, of sexualising the Content industry into three young female bodies, an approach that Miller aptly defines as the ‘pimping of Japan’ (Miller 2011). This practice also grossly ignores the heterogeneous global consumers’ desires and preferences in relation to the vast array of anime genres. Presenting anime as Japanese feminine, embodied in live, sexualised and fantasy-evoking female bodies further confirms the long-lasting Western stereotypes of Japanese women being confined to the realm of ‘sex and submission’, a century-old image stemming from the narrative of Madame Butterfly (Klein 2003: 146).

On the one hand, the government’s policy to promote Cool Japan to a global audience has united with the vision of a ubiquitous network society where digital content and platforms are integrated to support the Content industry. On the other, this visionary plan has not only reconfigured the urban spaces of Akihabara and Tokyo through the celebratory transformation of otaku male subjectivity, but has also utilised female bodies in anticipation of the imagined global fans’ (a.k.a. white males) desires. In other words, Japanese female bodies are to entice global male fans to Japan, and Akihabara as the centre of the creative industries – a virtual register of fantasy and surveillance within Japan – becomes their final destination where they can celebrate their otaku masculinity. As a result, the ‘great nation’ Japan, as imagined in Coil, is ironically built upon the Japanese government’s desire to be desired by the white male consumer subjectivity, facilitated by the late neoliberal state of global capitalism.

This point is further evidenced in the explosive increase of Japanese television programmes that feature predominantly Western foreigners either living, visiting or desiring to visit Japan. While programmes such as Amazing Jipangu! (Ame-jipangu!, 2014 on TBS), Why did you come to Japan? (You wa nani shi ni nihon he?, 2013, TV Tokyo) were created to offer constant confirmation of Japan’s attractiveness to foreigners, titles like Found in the world village! Japanese in places like this (Sekai no mura de hakken! Konna tokoro ni nihonjin, 2013, Asahi TV) and Why in the world there? Japanese (Sekai naze soko ni? Nihonjin, 2012, TV Tokyo) were designed to explore remote places around the world where Japanese, predominantly women, have settled, often through marriage, and become active in local communities. In one programme, the entire television crew travels for days to a remote town in India to find the one and only Japanese woman living there. She is married to an Indian man and runs a small hostel, and she has become the ‘face’ of Japan in that town. Another episode shows a woman in a similar situation, the only difference being that she lives in Africa. Comparable programmes exploring how foreigners view Japan existed in the past, but this purported ‘Japan Is Great!’ phenomenon, according to Tomomi Yamaguchi, was strengthened visibly after Abe Shinzo’s political revival and the nationalist turn in 2012 (2017: 3). Additionally, the International Olympic Committee’s 2013 announcement for Tokyo to host the 2020 summer
Olympics game clearly contributed to the increase of these types of programmes. The constant affirmation from ‘Western’ foreigners that Japan seeks as a nation through these programmes appears to be unquenchable. Interestingly, the majority of the programmes mediate the West through the Japanese female body, mirroring how the Japanese government utilised the cute ambassadors to promote the Content industry. Yet, underneath the message that ‘Japan is loved by everybody around the world’ exists another layer of ‘Japanese are everywhere (even in the deep lands of India and Africa)’, which conjures up an illusion of Japan as a truly ubiquitous nation, in a safe and unthreatening manner.

Conclusion

The Japanese government’s new promotional policy towards the creative Content industries such as anime, manga and video games in the twenty-first century stemmed mostly from the larger neoliberal capitalist mode of free market flows as part of the process of globalisation during the 1990s. However, as it became combined with the larger governmental plan to actualise a ubiquitous society, the Content industry and the otaku space of Akihabara fell under the larger schema of governance. In order to facilitate a ubiquitous society, the Japanese government has shown little concern for individual subjectivity and privacy. The resulting surveillance of the urban landscape and the pervasive data collection, as seen in the case of Akihabara’s CCTVs and the futuristic depiction in the television anime series *Dennō Kōiru*, has yet to be challenged by critical discourses both inside and outside of Japan. The Japanese government may imagine a utopian system under the banners of *Cool Japan* and *Ubiquitous Society*. However, living in Japan informs one that Japan is far from actualising this utopian goal. Information and experiences are diverse and fragmented, and navigating through the city can sometimes be as schizophrenic an experience as Fredric Jameson would describe as ‘fragmented and schizophrenic decentering and dispersion of [the subject]’ (1991: 413).

The broader notion of control in relation to establishing a ubiquitous society has been overshadowed by the celebratory visions of creating a user-friendly environment for the aging population in Japan. However, when the ubiquitous surveillance occurs in spaces such as Akihabara, with the larger awareness/expectation of the global ‘male’ gaze upon its space, then for whom is the control asserted? As Japan tries to rebuild its past economic glory through the promotion of the Content industry, with the increasing emphasis on traditional culture that appears as rehashing old policies that resulted in self-Orientalisation, the ubiquitous society it envisions may result in total surveillance driven by external sources. This may, far from how the Japanese government imagines, hinder the process of creating ‘better lives’ for the people who live within the virtual space they have created called ‘Japan’.

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