

The Third Biannual Conference of  
The Israeli Association for Japanese Studies (IAJS)

*Galapagosizing Japan?*

*The Challenges of Participation and the Costs of Isolation*

*May 12-13, 2015, Tel Aviv University*

*Keynote Address*

**Escape to Saga Stories in Japan's Subculture<sup>1</sup>**

Eiji Otsuka

Manga Scenario Artist

International Research Center for Japanese Studies, Kyoto

Tokyo University Graduate School of Interdisciplinary Information Studies

1

The theme of my lecture today is how Japanese subcultures and literature in the 1980s moved to create "fictitious histories." It is as if they were going against Jean-François Lyotard's (1984) [postmodern] theory on "the collapse of the grand narrative" through "language games" [the multiplicity of meanings], or, as if they were trying to compensate for the loss of such [a grand narrative of] history by creating "fictitious histories." At the same time, this lecture is also about the starting point of the current situation in Japan in which Japan confines itself to historical revisionism in an attempt to return to those interpretations of history which cannot be shared

---

<sup>1</sup>This lecture was translated from Japanese by Dr. Mika Levy-Yamamori (Tel Aviv University) and Dr. Michal (Miki) Daliot-Bul (The University of Haifa). It was edited by Dr. Michal Daliot-Bul. All errors which may have occurred in interpreting, translating and editing the original manuscript are ours. Square brackets include additional comments that we hope will facilitate reading the text.

with other Asian countries. My aim, in short, is to locate the origins of today's historical revisionism in Japan's popular culture of the 1980s.

Products of pop culture and literature from the 1980s in Japan have two common characteristics: first, underlying each story is a saga-based narrative that can also be termed a "fictitious history"; second, each novel, manga or animation has a very simple structure. Kojin Karatani called this latter characteristic: "stories with nothing but structure."

Examples of animations or games with the former characteristic, namely a saga-based narrative, include the animations *Mobile Suit Gundam* by Yoshiyuki Tomino and Yoshikazu Yasuhiko (1979-), *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* by Hayao Miyazaki (1982-) and the computer games *Dragon Quest* (1986-), *Final Fantasy* (1987-), and *Record of Lodoss War* (1988-), the latter becoming the first RPG-inspired light novel in Japan.

Moving on to literature, the same characteristic can be found in the first three works by Haruki Murakami, *Hear the Wind Sing* (1979), *Pinball 1973* (1980), and *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1982) [also referred to as the Trilogy of the Rat]. Some may argue that Murakami's early works do not seem to be based on a shared "grand narrative." However, a mere glimpse at the many meaningless historical references to the actual Gregorian calendar in the novels [thus placing them within a grand narrative] is enough to offer a counterargument. Examples of these references in his works include: the completion of the first pinball machine in 1952 (*Pinball 1973*, 1980); the fictitious author Derek Heartfield's leap from the roof of the Empire State Building "with a portrait of Hitler in his right hand and expanded umbrella in his left hand" in "June 1938" (*Hear the Wind Sing*, 1979); and the fact that "the sheep ranch of Dr. Sheep was commandeered as maneuvering ground by the US Occupation Force in 1946" (*A Wild Sheep Chase*, 1982).

Somewhat similarly, novels of Kenji Nakagami have been repeatedly constructed as part of a larger saga. A collection of works by Kenji Nakagami called *Kishu Saga*—which was inspired by Kenzaburo Oe's *The Silent Cry* and Faulkner's *Yoknapatawpha Saga* (the story is set in Jefferson in the fictitious Yoknapatawpha County)—describes a fictitious chronology and genealogical table in the mythological world of Kishu which starts out in the *roji*, a

discriminated small neighborhood. At the beginning of the 1990s, just before his death, Kenji Nakagami wrote a manga scenario called *The Tropic of Capricorn* in the form of *gekiga* [comic strips of dramatic stories]. The story describes the saga of a boy, a descendant of an Indonesian king, who is intended to be the king who will unify the Asia-Pacific region. It is thus apparent that both Japan's subcultures and "sub-culturized" literature of the 1980s showed a tendency to create "fictitious sagas" as a reaction to the emerging postmodern era.

Let us now consider the second characteristic of 1980's pop cultures and literature, namely, that of "stories with nothing but structure." Shigehiko Hasumi, a Japanese literary critic, pointed out that novels written around 1980, such as *A Wild Sheep Chase* by Haruki Murakami, *Kimigayo to Sing in a Falsetto* by Saiichi Maruya, *Coin Locker Babies* by Ryu Murakami and *Kirikiri-jin* by Hisashi Inoue, have a structure which is remarkably similar to the one discussed in Otto Rank's *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero: A Psychological Interpretation of Mythology*.

Actually, Haruki Murakami hinted that he adopted the structure of "detective stories" in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, the third of his first three works. Murakami chose for this work a structuralized, simple story under the influence of [the structuralist] narrative theories of Vladimir Propp and Joseph Campbell that were popular in Japan at the time. In an essay published in 1981 [in the literary magazine UMI] as part of the essay series "America as the Contemporary"—and which unlike other essays by Murakami were not published in book form—Murakami wrote about the return to narratives with strong formalistic attributes and to literary forms which exhibit a narrative theory, by referring to Stephen King's technique of bringing a simple scheme of good and evil dualism to his fictitious sagas.

Somewhat similarly, in a lecture which was published after his death, Kenji Nakagami cited *Star Wars* as an example of how novels can be created by subjugating their story to a narrative theory. While creating complicated sagas, both writers intended to return to simple narratives/stories created to some extent systematically. It is thus that in the 1980s, alongside the the "saga-izing" of Japanese literature, a return to "simplified narratives/stories," progressed as well.

Now, let us call the manga, novels and films which were developed within these "fictitious sagas" and structured as "simple narratives/stories": FANTASY. [Put differently, within the context of my talk], works of fantasy are not merely a reference to unrealistic narratives; each of them should be analyzed as a "simple narrative/story," framed by a "grand narrative" that can stand for a "fictitious history." In my book, entitled *A Theory of Narrative Consumption* [*Monogatari Shohiron*], I referred to these fictitious "grand narratives" as "worldviews."

In view of Lyotard's argument about the "end of history," we may ask whether the emergence of "fictitious sagas" in Japan in the 1980s is a phenomenon unique to Japan. [In the Euro-American West,] fantasy as the combination of "fictitious history" and "simple narrative/story" began earlier with saga-based works such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Lucas's *Star Wars*. In Japan, before the 1980s, people thought that "fantasy" in animation, manga and novels was a minor genre that would never become a hit and was unlikely to become a commercial success. [Surprisingly perhaps, it soon became a fashion in Japan, while remaining a niche in the Euro-American West]. Today, the greater part of Japan's pop culture products is "fantasy," but fantasy is also being produced en-masse by Hollywood. The excellent young adult literature which debuted in the UK is rendered into fantasy by Hollywood. Likewise, Hollywood is turning Marvel characters [Marvell fantasy] into sagas. Hollywood-made sagas are flooding the entire world. [In other words, the timeline of the fantasy-boom in Japan can be seen as unique to Japan.]

The global transformation of fantasy from niche to mass market happened in the following way. The genre of fantasy was established in North America in the 1970s with the end of the Vietnam War. After the year 2000, probably because of 9.11, there was a worldwide "revival of fantasy" with Hollywood movies as the axis of this revival. The whole world was now escaping from history to fantasy. This escape to fantasy became a trend that enabled people to face huge mistakes [done in real life] by using fantasy as a means of accessing world knowledge. For example, in the war between Islam and the West, both sides have been using the word "crusade" carelessly. This type of mythic metaphor frames the real unfortunate war as

fantasy, making it harder to realize the real nature of the problems at stake. I feel that after 9.11, the world lost touch with "history" and is presently engaged in the process of turning reality into fantasy.

Let me now focus on how this [global] process of turning reality into fantasy happened in Japan in a way that actually preceded this [larger, worldwide] current trend.

From the very early "formation of fantasy" in Japan, Japanese fantasy was directly and strongly affected by North American pop culture. (Non-Japanese researchers of Japan's pop culture often fail to notice this influence). It was probably *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien (1954), the board game *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) and *Star Wars* episodes 4-6 (1977-1983) among others that directly affected the formation of "fictitious sagas" in Japan in the 1980s. In America *The Lord of the Rings* boom happened in the middle of the 1960's. Its Japanese translation was published between 1975 ~ 1977. *Dungeons & Dragons* was translated into Japanese in 1985, but Japanese enthusiasts were playing the English version as early as 1980.

In other words, the desire for "fictitious chronicles," invented by North American pop culture between the late '60s and the '70s, was imported to Japan in the 1980s, inspiring the production of similar Japanese works. Put simply, Japan's pop culture and literature in the 1980s were "Star Wars-ified." This phenomenon of "Star Wars-ification" is expressed in two aspects [or, characteristics, which I highlighted earlier as the characteristics of Japanese literature and pop culture products since the 1980s]. First, it gave direction to the production of "sagas." Second, each novel or animation was written with a very simple story structure. These two aspects of "saga" and "simple story/narrative structure" are common to all globalized fantasies, such as Harry Potter or Disney movies after *Lion King*.

At this point we need to pay attention to a fact which is peculiar to Japan. In Japan all the authors of "fictitious chronicles" are the "losers" of Japan's students' movement that subsided at the beginning of the 1970s. It is well known that Yasuhiko Yoshikazu and Toshio Suzuki (who is the actual producer of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*) started working in the field of animation after leaving the New Left political movement. As for Nakagami and Murakami,

although they distanced themselves from the student movement during the student movement era, it greatly affected their outlook. It may be too delicate a topic to discuss in Israel, but movie director Masao Adachi who was the Japanese Red Army member who called for the "liberation of Palestine" was the university *sempai* of Yoshiyuki Tomino, the director of *Gundam*. Palestine is in fact a hidden motif of the first *Gundam* series, but the creators just used "Palestine" as material for creating the saga with no other political agenda.

Many of the students who "lost" [their battle] when they took part in the left-wing student movement's attempt to participate in the history of the real world, turned out to be supporters of Japan's conservative politics in the sense that they regarded daily life as their highest priority. However some of the "losers"—those who rejected the idea of collaborating with Japan's conservative politics—turned to the field of pop culture and started composing "history" in "fictitious worlds."

In short, we can say that [unlike their North American Inspiration] the "fictitious chronicles" that appeared in Japan in the 1980s were "conversion literature" by left-wing activists who lost their ideological battle at the beginning of 1970s.

This trend of writing "fictitious histories" affected Japan [or, Japanese media and Japanese media aficionados] after 1980s in two ways: first, as pioneered by the *Gundam* model, it became possible to create countless sequels based on "one fictitious grand narrative" launching the method of the so-called media mix. Japan established the mass-produced media model of "fictitious histories" and related merchandising during the blank period [of fantasy in Hollywood] which lasted from *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* (1983) to *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* (1999).

Second, encouraged by the ongoing consumption of fictitious histories, fans of pop culture adopted [as if] naturally an attitude of escapism from real history. In "real history," I mean both an interest in the history of the "past" as well as the history of the "unfolding present." Moreover, if we agree that the 1980s is the period during which Japan entered the postmodern era, this attitude towards history should be also seen as a reaction to it: while facing directly [the

postmodern] end of the "grand narratives, "both the senders [i.e. the producers] and the receivers [i.e. the consumers] of Japan's pop culture resisted it by shutting themselves in "fictitious histories." These "fictitious histories," or these "fantasies," can be called "the Galapagos Islands" of the contemporary "Galapagosized Japan."

It is in this way that Japan's pop culture resisted the arrival of the post-modern [condition] (which is, of course, also a myth), and [in particular] the end of the "grand narratives" in 1980s. Interestingly, as I mentioned previously, after the year 2000, particularly after 9.11, the whole world began atoning for the end of history with Hollywood-made sagas. While history and the world are complicated, fantasy narratives are simple narratives comprising battles between good and evil and ending with the victories of the heroes. Both Japan and Hollywood narrate this kind of simple stories.

## 2

Of course if "fantasy" stays within the realm of pop culture, and people remain calm and neutral towards history and retain an imagination which is considerate of others, then there are no problems whatsoever with anything conveyed by pop culture. However, a problem may arise when fantasy invites an intellectual laziness which itself invites an understanding of reality as just another simple and fictitious chronicle, in short, as a fantasy. In Japan, a symbolic affair in which fantasy or a fictitious chronicle enabled historical revisionism was the Aum Shinrikyō incident, namely, the sarin gas attack in Tokyo's subways in 1995. What became a distinctive feature of this incident is that products of pop culture, such as animation, were part of the religious imagination of Aum believers, and they created their religious worldview as if it too was an animation or a game. Keywords like "Armageddon" or "cosmo-cleaner" were scattered in their religious doctrine and statements. They used media mix methods for spreading their religious doctrines with animation, comics and idols. Shoko Asahara [the leader of Aum

Shinrikyō] talked about the future as if it was the plot of a game or a light novel. Masami Tsuchiya, the sect member who developed the sarin gas for them, wrote down Asahara's prophecies in his notebook.

This is how Asahara described the future. (The contents are too silly and discomfoting for those who live in Israel, so please excuse me). The real existence of Asahara's supernatural power will be proved during Asahara's trial, when Japanese society will turn to Aum Shinrikyō and all the Japanese will become believers. Aum's power will be stronger than the power of the state in 1995, and by 1996-1998 Aum will replace the state. At the same time, Aum aims to be "the top world religion" and will invade Jerusalem three times—in the middle of 1990s, at the end of 1990s, and around 2030—in order to carry out a religious war against Islam. It is decreed that Tsuchiya himself will play a very active part in this religious war. He will be caught [by the enemy] together with the Guru [Asahara], but Aum's army will save them both. In that battle, Tsuchiya, in order to protect the Guru, will kill two or three people. During Aum's third invasion of Jerusalem, Tsuchiya will establish the Temple of Aum together with the Guru. However, on reaching the outskirts of Jerusalem, the Guru will pass away [from physical life]. For some reason, Tsuchiya will not be on time for the Aum founder's death. Asahara will pass away, calling "where is Tsuchiya?" and soon thereafter, Armageddon will begin. Most of the disciples will die one after the other, but Tsuchiya will live to the age 92 and will "establish the base for the one thousand years' kingdom." When his time comes, however, Tsuchiya will die as a martyr either because of heathens or because of "internal dissension."

In this way, Tsuchiya was positioned as the hero of "simple story/narrative" which is part of a fictitious saga.

Using anime and games as their inspiration, Aum members created a "fictitious history" by mixing "conspiratorial interpretations of history" of the sort that had inspired subcultural products in both North America and in Japan. In that history, Aum believers were given roles, rather like anime characters, by Asahara. In short, what was particular about Aum was the way in which Aum believers identified with a fictitious history which replaced the actual history. You may wonder how people can be seduced by a cult through such a simple trick. At the time,

young Japanese were living their lives with no sense of history and without the ability to establish a [solid] self nonetheless. Asahara gave his believers a self [re]located within history.

To put in more explicit terms, Aum was arguably the earliest movement of historical revisionism [in postwar Japan]. In 1989 the Berlin Wall fell and the Shōwa emperor passed away. Japan lost sight of that which has defined the post-WWII. [Because of this rupture caused by global events and the death of the Shōwa emperor] we can maybe even say that the Japanese people were exceptional in their deep grasp of postmodernity. It was then that historical revisionism in Japan emerged as was clearly expressed by the contemporaneous media-driven critique of history textbooks. What enabled it was the same mentality that facilitated the rush of some young Japanese to join Aum.

"Historical revisionism" is a simple narrative in which you can be a hero, in which you are righteous. The fabricated history that goes along with it is exactly like fantasy. The bottom line is that people in Japan were not liberated from [the need for] "a grand narrative." While they were searching for a grand narrative, the historical revisionism of animations and games was waiting for them.

Interestingly, around 1990, Kenji Nakagami used the restoration of the Great East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere as a motif in his *gekiga* scenario *The Tropic of Capricorn*. If Nakagami was still alive, this text might have become a revisionist text. Thinking about it now, it seems that Haruki Murakami was maybe the only person who was critical about these cultural processes. Murakami's sagas, which were composed of events organized along meaningless Gregorian dates, indicated that a "fictitious chronicle" is exactly that: fictitious. Although the author himself said that he was influenced by Derek Heartfield [*Hear the Wind Sing*], Derek Heartfield never existed. Boku [*boku* means "I" in Japanese, and is the only reference to the otherwise unnamed protagonist of *A Wild Sheep Chase*] lives a "simple story/narrative" in a fictitious saga, and Boku—the hero of the story—is not even able to recover his own name. The hero lives a simple, meaningless story/narrative in a meaningless saga. *A Wild Sheep Chase*, is a "simple story/narrative" that begins as a "once upon a time" tale comprised of characters with names like "Boku", "Wife", "Rat", "Dr. Sheep" and "Girl with perfect ears." By the end of this "chase," these

characters who have only symbolic names do not gain "names"; I mean they never fully mature and earn their own personal attributes. Only "Cat" earns a name... "Sardine."

Murakami saw the "saga" and the "simple narrative" of Aum, which were based on a medley of pop culture "junk," and he was disappointed because he felt like he was looking at his own literature. Murakami then acknowledged that his works were not critical enough. It requires courage for an author to do that. In Japan, I always criticize his works. I was once told that Otsuka and Kawamura, the two cats who were killed in *Kafka on the Shore*, are references to Eiji Otsuka and Minato Kawamura who always criticize Murakami's novels. But... I don't think it's true... Anyway, while in this foreign country, I would like to praise the critical nature of Murakami's works.

[Another cultural icon that may have realized this process in which reality is being fictionalized in Japan is Hayao Miyazaki]. Hayao Miyazaki retired from his work as an animator two years ago. He gave up the creation of fantasy for ethical reasons. I think that what he hated was this kind of close relationship between fantasy and historical revisionism, but he couldn't prevent it.

As mentioned above, after 9.11, fantasy based on "saga" and "simple stories/narratives," like *The Lord of the Rings*, was mass-produced by Hollywood. I will leave you to think about the implications of this.

3

Finally, I would like to talk about one product of Japanese popular culture that reflects most accurately current historical consciousness in Japan: *Attack on Titan* by Hajime Isayama. The very setting of this work mirrors the historical revisionism prevalent in Japanese society, although it seems that the author did not intend it this way (the series is therefore just a reflection of the situation and not its critique).

It is quite obvious that this work comprises a "saga," however, let's pay some attention to the framework of the story:

- 1) People live inside the wall. Outside the wall there is a world which conforms to the laws of the jungle<sup>2</sup> in which people are eaten by Titans. This symbolizes that neo-liberalism has reached Japan.
- 2) The people who live inside the wall have an army, but whoever is inside the wall is protected by the wall. It is the wall that keeps the peace on the inside. This expresses the same logic as that of right-wing politicians. It reflects the frustration of some Japanese that, according to Article 9 of the constitution, Japan has renounced war and has an army that cannot fight.
- 3) The Titans took by force the land that once belonged to those living inside the wall. I think that this reflects the "victim consciousness" of the Japanese who lost Asian territories following their defeat in World War II.
- 4) And now, the "Titans" are invading what remains of their territory. This was enabled because the people who live inside the wall lack a "sense of impending crisis." In other words, [I think that the Titans represent how] neo-liberalism is invading Japan, but Japan's young people probably associate these "Titans" with China's invasion of Senkaku Islands. In Japan, the fear of neo-liberal invasion is replaced with the fear of China.
- 5) The main characters in the series volunteer for military service in order to fight the Titans. This implies that Japan will choose to become a country that uses military force.

This is present day Japan.

From the above, we understand that the setting of this work is very close to the nationalistic consciousness of young people and politicians in Japan. However, it is narrated as a pop culture "fantasy." Another interesting interpretation of this series is that , while it is the reflection of a political design, the young protagonists of the series are portrayed as the victims

---

<sup>2</sup> The stronger ones eat the weaker ones.

of violence, belonging to the lowest strata in the law of the jungle hierarchy of the series. At this point, they become also the victims of those "dirty adults." For this reason the "Titans" can only be represented as ugly adults, and the young characters are able to fight them only by transforming into "Titans" themselves. However the Titans into which the young characters transform don't have the bodies of "ugly adults," but the beautiful bodies of young people.

While it seems that the background story of *Attack on Titan* is original and mysterious, it actually tells a very "simple story." It is the mentality of so called "online right-wingers" in contemporary Japan who see a vulnerable self-consciousness and the [vulnerable] image of the state as one and the same.

*Attack on Titan* therefore presents a story that parallels how youth society in contemporary Japan has a victims' consciousness and how it views itself as being victimized by foreign countries, its territory having been invaded (Just to remind you that I argued earlier that neo-liberalism transformed youth into losers and not left-wing politics or China). *Attack on Titan* gives us clues to understand the process through which young people or *otaku* are attracted to [and identify with] historical revisionism.

What is important to note here is that just as I read in *Attack on Titan* a withdrawal into historical revisionism in present day Japan, this anime can be read critically as an "allegory" [of similar processes occurring] in different countries or cultures anywhere around the world.

How would you read this "fantasy" in Israel?

Thus, "fantasy" composed of "saga" and "simple stories," in the form of Hollywood movies and the products of Japan's pop culture, crosses borders and cultures throughout the world. Hollywood movies and the products of Japan's pop culture are supported by the masses and by young adults because the receivers [consumers] find, sometimes unconsciously, their own problems in the [projected] meanings of these texts. A critical understanding of the globalized products of Japan's pop culture would bring to the fore at least some of the problems shared universally around the world.

I conducted this experiment [of critical textual analysis] within "Galapagos Japan," and having left my Galapagos islands, I presented its results to you today.