

modern Japan on the final exam.

Sandakan No. 8 is a film that I will continue to use. It raises controversial societal and ethical issues, especially the issue of prostitution, which is a hot topic right now, given the controversy and discussion of the role of the Japanese and American governments in providing “comfort women” to their troops.

¹Mark C. Carnes, “Hollywood History,” *American Heritage*, September 1995, p. 76.

²“A Conversation Between Eric Foner and John Sayles,” *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*, edited by Mark Carnes, Henry Holt, 1995, p. 17.

³Carnes, “Hollywood,” p. 83.

⁴Leon F. Litwack, “The Birth of a Nation,” *Past Imperfect*, p. 141.

⁵Robert Brent Toplin, *History By Hollywood: the Use and Abuse of the American Past*, Univ. Of Illinois Press, 1996, see chapter 3 - “JFK—Fact, Fiction, and Supposition,” 45-78.

⁶“A Conversation”, p. 13.

⁷Carnes, “Hollywood,” p. 83.

⁸“A Conversation,” pp. 15-16.

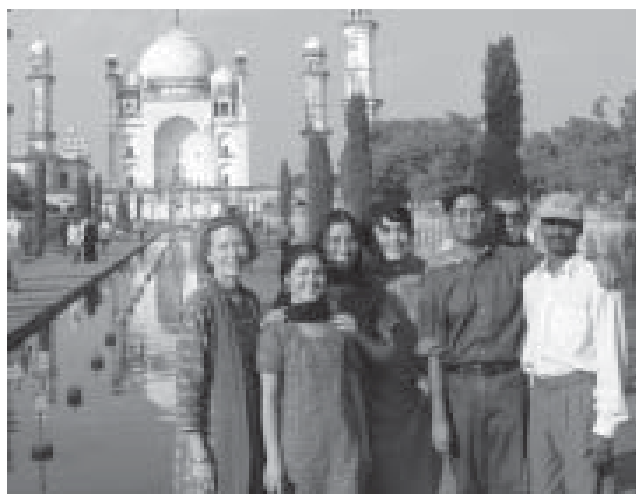
⁹Carnes, “Hollywood,” p. 83.

¹⁰Yamazaki Tomoko, *Sandakan Brothel No. 8: an Episode in the History of Lower-class Japanese Women*, translated by Karen Colligan-Taylor, M. E. Sharpe, 1999, pp. 45-66 and the film *Sandakan No. 8*.

¹¹Yamazaki, 18-45.

¹²Yamazaki, 85-96.

¹³Yamazaki, 146-61.



Cathy Benton and students in India: part of the ASIANetwork Freeman Student-Faculty program

Teaching the Postmodern Using Examples from Japanese Film and Popular Culture

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PREFACE

My first encounter with the “postmodern” as a subject of intellectual inquiry came with my reading of Miyoshi Masao and H.D. Harootunian’s *Postmodernism and Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), an edited collection of articles probing the arrival and influence of this concept in Japan. This initial interaction was prompted by the need to keep abreast of the latest trends in Japanese life and culture for a course I was teaching on contemporary Japan in historical perspective; I came away from the book with enough of an abstract understanding of the notions involved to talk about the subject within the context of my course if asked by students to deal with the principles involved but, I must confess, little more in the way of interest or concern.

Then in 1996, I taught a version of that same course at the Japan Center for Michigan Universities in Hikone (on the shores of Lake Biwa outside Kyoto) while on sabbatical leave. Soo-Kyung Chang, one of my students from Korea, brought me a video by the Japanese film director Shunji Iwai which she insisted I view as an example of the abstract concept we had touched on briefly in class the previous day. I was completely captivated by the film and thereupon began a quest for not only other works by the same director but other examples of “postmodernism” within the general arena of contemporary Japanese popular culture.

Soon enough I was awash in the recommended works by film makers, authors, musicians and various other artists brought to my attention by well-meaning friends and students. And I was hooked! In early 1997 I presented a paper on Shunji Iwai at a conference on Japanese Popular Culture held at the University of British Columbia.¹

The next issue I had to face was how best to integrate this newly-fascinating subject matter (for me, at least) more fully and completely into my undergraduate courses. I began to search for selected examples among my assembled resources that could be effectively used to introduce, define and illustrate the facets of the postmodern phenomenon within the context of contemporary Japanese popular culture. The resulting “learning package” became an integral part of two different courses: one, my ongoing exploration of contemporary Japanese culture in historical perspective; the second, a contribution to a team-taught course on “Power and Authority in Nonwestern Societies.”

In the classroom I chose to approach the subject matter from two distinct perspectives. The first built on already-developed concepts associated with the interplay between “tradition” and “modernization,” illustrating “the postmodern” as an attempt to break away from the paradigm linking the traditional to the contemporary through the process of “growth and change within a cultural tradition” (my basic definition of the modernization process). My

second point of view emphasized the notion that, however “postmodern” an aspect of contemporary Japanese culture might seem, it nonetheless was, to some extent, still imbued with characteristics and attributes associated with Japanese cultural traditions, however much the author/artist/musician and his/her audience thought those constraints had been overcome and abandoned.

What follows represents an attempt to extend these insights beyond my own classroom into the general arena of “Japanese Studies,” “East Asian Studies,” “Asian Studies” or “World History” at both the university and advanced high school level. Here’s hoping teachers everywhere might find something of value here worth transferring into the undergraduate curriculum in general or into the high school classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Emerging from the Kitayama station at the northern terminus of the subway system in Kyoto, one is plunged into a surreal world of gleaming automobiles, glitzy shops and avant-garde architecture. The atmosphere is more redolent of Rodeo Drive in Los Angeles than of anything likely to be expected in what many consider the most quintessentially traditional of Japanese cities.

Like the new Kyoto train station near the other end of the subway system, the Kitayama streetscape displays great expanses of gray concrete, glass and polished marble done up in exposed steel beams and brushed aluminum. Gradually the visitor begins to realize that no Japanese language signage is to be found anywhere along the street—even “New Tenant Wanted” is posted in English. Indeed the sought-after effect seems purposefully designed to capture something of “the exotic West” by denying the surrounding Japanese cultural and natural landscape altogether. Young, expensively-dressed Japanese women flock to Kitayama to shop at the local DKNY or to sip cappuccino at the Cordon Bleu Café, another characteristic which in turn strongly suggests the heady appeal undergirding this seemingly “postmodern” outpost in the heart of traditional Japan.

To label the Kitayama area of Kyoto “postmodern” is not an accidental assessment. The term “postmodern,” and the associated concept of “postmodernism,” came into widespread use in a number of different descriptive and analytical contexts beginning in Japan during the early 1980s; it should, therefore, come as no surprise that by now the “postmodern” is amply represented in late twentieth century Japanese popular culture.

“POSTMODERN” DEFINED

Several decades ago, the concepts of “postmodern” and “postmodernism” were initially applied to examples of architecture and art in the West which seemed to abandon the rules of convention; “postmodern” examples in both fields appeared to strike out on a course purposefully defying both tradition and historical context. Since then both “postmodern” and “postmodernism” have received particularly widespread attention in the world of academe, affecting the social

sciences and the humanities no less so than the universe of those scientists grappling with the “information revolution.”

Sherry Turkle, professor of sociology of science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to cite only a single example, claims that in this new, revolutionary information age:

...no unitary truth resides anywhere. There is only local knowledge, contingent and provisional. ... The surface is what matters, to be explored by navigation. Postmodernism celebrates this time, this place; and it celebrates adaptability, contingency, diversity, flexibility, sophistication and relationships—with the self and with the community fostering “the precedence of surface over depth, of simulation over the real, of play over seriousness”...nothing is true in or of itself; truth is only an artifact of social negotiation.²

The notion of the “postmodern,” a decidedly “Western” construct, stood assumptions about the relationship between “tradition” and the process of “modernization” on their heads. To the “postmodernist” there is no meaningful tradition, no relevant history; history and tradition bind one too closely to an expected trajectory and to the centralizing power defining that particular pathway to the future. What replaces these restrictive culturally-defined imperatives is a consumption-oriented “transnational community of taste,”³ a multi-centered, decentralized, egalitarian multiplicity of “world views.” Defined as “difference without difference,” the postmodern gives rise to that which is fragmented, fluid, differentiated, indeterminate—and thereby enabling.

The postmodern seeks, not progress, but the identification of core/periphery relationships. As such it represents the essentially timeless, rootless, free-floating present understood and appreciated without reference to a past from which one may be estranged or of which one is essentially ignorant.⁴

In fact, to secure or maintain an existing core/periphery relationship, history might well be reconstructed or reinvented to establish a needed direction, the imagined past making possible the imagined future from the vantage point of the “empty” and essentially static present. The present happiness promised by the past thus becomes, to the “postmodernist,” “the retroactive consequence of nostalgia.”⁵

The “postmodernist” seeks to create for oneself a small, safe space in an otherwise deficient, destabilized, fragile present, a safe space that meets one’s own immediate interests on a contingency, provisional basis. The role one arbitrarily assumes in such a world recognizes the incongruity of daily life rather than innate realities defined by tradition, cultural expectation and history.⁶ The core determinants, therefore, are also themselves circumstantial and temporary. It becomes the responsibility of each individual to transform “information” into “knowledge” by placing the data derived from the various sources consulted into a meaningful contextual whole depending on the defined needs of the

moment. The context provided by a value system, a given set of assumptions and beliefs, however, is provided by the auditor, the viewer, the listener; it is not inherent in the materials themselves.

Since becoming an arena of scholarly analysis, the postmodern appears to have taken hold with particular tenacity in Japan and in the study of contemporary Japanese life. At least three edited volumes and a host of scholarly articles have appeared in English over the past decade or so applying the term to the study of a vast array of disparate figures, including not only those figures we will examine this afternoon but also, for example, the “pop” writer Yoshimoto Banana.⁷

GETTING STARTED — MOVING INTO THE POSTMODERN: “ON YOUR MARK,” A MUSIC VIDEO BY MIYAZAKI HAYAO

“On Your Mark,” animated for Chage and Aska, represents Miyazaki Hayao at his most postmodern, an excellent example of the postmodern influence at work in *anime*, and a great place to begin our exploration of the place of the postmodern in Japanese popular culture.

Miyazaki Hayao, Japan’s foremost *anime* icon, was born in 1941 in Tokyo and graduated from Gakushuin University (Japan’s well-known Peers’ School) with a degree in Economics. He began his career as an animator at Toei Doga (Toei Animation Studio) in 1963. Among the feature films in his highly-regarded oeuvre are *Nausicaa* (1984), *Laputa* (1986), *Totoro* (1988), *Mononoke-Hime* (1997), and *Sen To Chihiro No Kamikakushi* (2001). Both of the last two films topped the list of highest grossing films in Japanese movie history at the time of their initial release. In fact, more than 23,140,000 people have seen the latter as of March 25, 2002! Another indication of his icon-like pop cultural status: the Studio Ghibli Museum featuring Miyazaki *anime* has become a major Tokyo area tourist attraction since its debut in October 2001.

RECOGNIZING THE POSTMODERN

Using “On Your Mark,” the music video *anime* by Miyazaki Hayao, as an example of the postmodern construct at work, let’s take the aspects of the above definition and apply them to see if the required elements are present.

•Unexpected, jarring juxtapositions of featured elements

Just as in the Academy-Award-nominated film *Moulin Rouge*, wherein twenties-style music, Beatles tunes, and Madonna hits are used to tell a story set in late nineteenth century Paris, so “On Your Mark” uses the “occasion” of a music video to play out a totally-disjointed narrative featuring Chage and Aska (the two singers performing the music) but otherwise unconnected to the music in any significant way.

•Movement beyond cultural borders, out of the arena of contextual expectations

While the futuristic urban setting of much of the video meets multiple, recognizable “cultural expectations” about the ideal city of tomorrow, the action is presented as taking place anywhere—and nowhere. The rural scenes, furthermore, feature unidentified monoliths hulking in the background—what are they all about? Certainly nothing with which we might be innately familiar in cultural terms.

•Abandonment of “the rules”/established norms of adopted format

“On Your Mark” is neither a conventional *anime* nor a representation of the usual formula encountered in an average music video but rather an unexpected hybrid in terms of both form and content.

•Ambiguous narrative, open to a multiplicity of interpretations

What are we to make of the disjointed narrative structure at the heart of the video? Seen as a backdrop to the opening of a rock concert, few in the audience necessarily would have cared, paying more attention instead to the performers they had come to see. But even a more focused audience would be hard-pressed to come up with a definitive interpretation of the storyline.

•Expected audience consciousness of media form; awareness of simulated “reality”

The listener hears the music; the visually-oriented views the narrative being played out on the screen. One is, therefore, consciously aware of one or the other in the need to “reject” the less important media format. Some have seen the disjointed narrative itself as a conscious attempt on Miyazaki’s part to make his audience aware of the creative process involved in coming to grips with a useable narrative to be visually presented in *anime* form.

•A lighthearted, fun, playful and sophisticated consumer product

However “serious” Miyazaki’s intent to play out for his audience the creative process, the medium chosen, a rock video, could hardly be more geared towards entertainment—and yet a sophisticated and aware viewer just might catch on immediately to the animator’s intention and appreciate the insights provided.

•Referent loaded linkages, obvious and otherwise

The radioactive symbol emblazoned everywhere, the eerily suited guards in white protective clothing, the military video game violence, the youthful victim’s

feathered angel wings, all alert us to familiar narrative themes invoking the age old confrontation between “good” and “evil” with a minimum of needed explication.

• *Self referential content*

Miyazaki’s *anime* style is unmistakable as are the environmentally-friendly, politically-liberal themes he seeks to explore—this may be a commissioned undertaking for a pair of pop idols but it’s unmistakably a Miyazaki production.

• *Narrative focused on surface detail and movement from peripheral to core*

Cleverly we begin with familiar video game mayhem and an immediately understandable narrative line; only then do we veer off into the incongruities and blind alleys, the disjointed results, of Miyazaki’s creative processes at work.

Applying these criteria to works suspected of harboring postmodern sensibilities, then, ought to turn up enough evidence to confirm or undercut one’s suspicions and thereby enable one to judge the work appropriately rather than simply turning away, admitting to discomfort and disorientation but unwilling to judge the merits of the work at hand.

REPRESENTATIVE EXAMPLES OF THE POSTMODERN PERSONALITY

Several well-known contemporary Japanese musicians, film directors, authors and animators enrich their popular cultural contributions with their postmodern sensibilities. Below are a few representative figures worth taking into account.

SAKAMOTO RYUICHI

The musician/actor/composer Sakamoto Ryuichi, born on January 17, 1952, in Nakano, Tokyo, graduated from the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music in 1976. He is credited with inventing technopop in the late ’70s while working with the Yellow Magic Orchestra. One of his first international successes came when he acted in and composed the soundtrack for *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (1983). In addition to his several scores for television, fashion shows and video games, he won an Academy Award for *The Last Emperor* movie score in 1987, was awarded a Golden Globe Award for Best Original Score for *The Sheltering Sky* (1991) and composed and conducted a 30-minute piece, “El Mar Mediterrani,” for the opening ceremonies of the Barcelona Olympic Games (1992).

In 1999, commissioned by Asahi newspaper on the occasion of the newspaper’s seventy-fifth anniversary, he wrote the opera *Life*, subsequently released on CD in four different versions: one recorded while being composed; a second, live in the studio; the third and fourth while on stage

in Osaka and Tokyo. All four rose to become number one hits in Japan!

Most recently Sakamoto composed the film score for Nagisa Oshima’s *Gohatto* (1999) and has issued *Anger/Grief*, a remix companion to *Discord*, his modern classical endeavor with multi-media features for CD-ROM from 1997. His two latest albums from Warner Japan, released within the last few months, are entitled *Comica* and *Elephantism*.

Sakamoto Ryuichi epitomizes the multiplicity of talents frequently found within the postmodern artistic community, both in Japan and elsewhere. He plays, composes, acts, produces, and directs. Today Sakamoto lives in New York City where he has actively collaborated with John Cage, Madonna, Cyndi Lauper and Iggy Pop. He works with other musicians and film makers as well in Japan, Brazil, France, Great Britain and Korea.

Sakamoto’s popularity and musical influences are multicultural and multidimensional. His CDs are readily available in the United States, for instance, and his European tours regularly sell out. His appeal clearly crosses national and linguistic boundaries. His musical range extends across the spectrum, too, ranging from folk music collages through a modernist classical idiom into the realm of hip-hop and jazz piano.

His music strikes familiar notes but veers off in unexpected directions; his career moves take him along unfamiliar and unconventional routes. His work defies easy categorization in terms of time and culture. He is, then, without doubt, a prime example of the postmodern sensibility at work, an artist with a great deal to say to his world-wide audience of admirers and fans.

IWAI SHUNJI

Born in 1963 in Sendai and educated at the Yokohama National University, Iwai Shunji began his career producing videoclips for cable television. He directed his first television drama (*Mishiranu wagako* [My Child, Who is a Stranger to Me?]) in 1991 and subsequently has filmed a dozen or more dramas, including the highly-praised *Swallowtail* (1996). In 1994 he received the “Best Young Director Of The Year” award from the Directors’ Guild of Japan for his film *if/Moshimo uchiagehanabi shitakara miruka? Yokokara miruka?* (If / Sky Rockets, How Do You Watch Them? From the Bottom or the Side?). He was given a Minister of Education Award for New Artists in the field of film in 1996.

His feature-length films, *Love Letter* (1995) and *Picnic* (1996), were well received in international film festivals in Montreal, Milan, Toronto, Cleveland and Berlin (where *Love Letter* was awarded the Berliner Zeitung Reader’s Jury prize). *Love Letter* also has been optioned by Fine Line Features for release in the United States with an English-language adaptation being planned (to star Meg Ryan).⁸

Most recently—in addition to new short film work—he has written and produced a film, *All About Lily Chou-Chou*, shot on digital video and based on an interactive

Internet novel by the director published on April 1, 2000. The character of Lily Chou-Chou is loosely based on Hong Kong pop star Faye Wong.

Iwai Shunji's Lily Chou-Chou offers eternal peace; she's ethereal, the rebirth of death (indeed, she was born the moment Mark David Chapman shot and killed John Lennon). She's all-powerful, a voice for a pop-cyber culture that feeds on her Bjorkness. In *All About Lily Chou-Chou*, fans of the fictional singer use her "amniotic" music to detach themselves from the violence that consumes their Japanese culture.⁹

Here again, in looking at this popular young filmmaker's work, I would claim that any assessment of Iwai Shunji's cinematic works and of his popularity among young Japanese filmgoers is rooted in his appeal to "postmodern" sensibilities commonly found in numerous arenas of contemporary Japanese popular culture. Moreover, that "postmodern" appeal is in turn dependent upon an assumption on the part of the film maker that his audience is willing to make the investment needed to assure effective communication and a realization on the part of his audience that Iwai's films represent an enduring present to which the viewer can return again and again, even in the midst of a constantly changing and unsettled world, to search out new meanings, insights and implications comforting in their validation of their own contemporary cultural values. These qualities, in turn, I believe amply illustrate the appeal of the "postmodern" in the world of contemporary Japanese popular culture.

If we apply "postmodern" criteria to the film world of Iwai Shunji, we find that his appeal among younger Japanese audiences is in large measure reflective of his ability to construct a cinematic universe that permits the "postmodern" process to move forward. Iwai Shunji films are very "presentist" in their presentation of time and place, seldom rooted in a specific locale or historical/seasonal time frame, they appear to fly in the face of the "high context" demands usually made of those engaged by Japanese film. Unlike the works of Itami Juzo, for example, which use a single well-conceived scene to establish a specific place, time frame and a host of other specificities, Iwai places his characters in a featureless environment that could be anywhere or anytime. The plots usually reflect an attempted response to a given stimulus, an adaptation to a change in circumstance reflective of the seemingly random nature of existence.

MURAKAMI HARUKI

Born in Kobe in 1949, Murakami Haruki managed a jazz bar in Tokyo from 1974 to 1981. His novel, *A Wild Sheep Chase*, was awarded the Noma Award for New Writers in 1982. His *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* won the Tanizaki prize three years later, enhancing his popularity so much so that a later novel, *Norwegian Wood*, published in 1987, sold more than 4.5 million copies.

His most famous work to date, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, appeared in English translation in 1998.

After spending several years teaching at Princeton University in the United States, Murakami returned to Japan in the aftermath of the Aum Shinrikyo gas attack on the Tokyo subway system. To regroup himself in Japanese culture, he undertook an extended investigation of those involved in this event, first interviewing and publishing the oral accounts of attack victims and then perpetrators. (These two volumes of interviews appeared in a single combined edition when translated into English as *Underground* in 2001.) His latest work, *Sputnik Sweetheart*, was published later that same year; a selection of short stories, many of them appearing first in *The New Yorker*, is scheduled to appear during the summer of 2002.

A summary of Murakami's short story "Barn Burning" from his collection entitled *The Elephant Vanishes* illustrates his postmodern predilections.

A thirty-one year old man meets a twenty-year-old advertising model at a wedding party; she informs him that she has inherited a small sum of money and plans to use it to travel to North Africa. She returns from her trip with another young Japanese male (somehow involved in trading) in tow.

One Sunday while his wife is out, the two call and invite themselves to dinner (to which they contribute all the food); after the meal the woman falls asleep, leaving the two men to carry on as best they can. In the course of their conversation, the younger man says, quite casually, "Sometimes I burn barns." This leads to an extended probing of reasons behind these barn burnings and all the other circumstances involved. The younger admits he has already picked out his next target: "A great barn. The first barn really worth burning in ages. Fact is, I went and checked it out only today."

It turns out the barn is in the immediate vicinity—or so it would seem. The host subsequently becomes obsessed with locating the target barn and begins to undertake a daily run taking him by the five candidates his research has led him to believe represent the potential "victims." The two men don't meet again for a couple of years; when they do, the older man (having recounted his efforts to keep tabs on possible candidates) asks if the intended target had indeed been torched. The younger says that it had, about ten days after their earlier encounter. Impossible, says the older man; "Must have missed it" says the other.

The younger man also indicates he is no longer seeing their mutual acquaintance; he also admits to feeling jealous of the way the woman appeared to trust the older man the most of all her (very few) "friends." This prompts the older man to seek her out again, but he proves unable to locate her—even her apartment seems abandoned, "her mailbox stuffed with fliers." He eventually gives up looking for her. He continues, however, to jog by the five "target" barns everyday—"Not one of them has yet burned down," he reports.

What happened here—and what didn't? The story begins conventionally enough, then moves on to involve a

seemingly stray encounter between two individuals resulting in one becoming obsessed by the potential behavior of the other. The story is only loosely tied to time and place, constantly shifts its narrative focus, is full of ambiguities and open to multiple interpretations; yet it contains a wealth of detailed “irrelevant” references to specific jazz CD titles, gourmet food items and other contemporary Western consumer products.

Perhaps most telling, however, is the inclusion of inescapable “traditional” literary qualities common to almost all forms of Japanese written expression—the indirection and ambiguity, the grounding references to the passing seasons, the metaphors and symbols drawn from poetic antecedents, the pervasive Buddhist melancholy, the demand for reader input into the process of composition and comprehension.

TEACHING THE POSTMODERN: ESTABLISHING INSTRUCTIONAL CONTEXT

Although the prospect of teaching an entire course on postmodernism appears a bit daunting, the material is there to do so. Drawing resources from the art world, architecture and recent fiction would result in a rich and rewarding educational adventure buttressed by side excursions into deconstructionism, post-colonial studies, and other areas of contemporary intellectual inquiry. The academic studies to support such a course are there as well, although not all are equally well-considered nor do they all approach the subject using the same analytical lens (not surprisingly so, given the nature of the beast and its avoidance of easy answers to complex issues of interpretation and meaning).

A more likely possibility incorporates a brief examination of the postmodern into an already existing subject matter area or discipline-centered field of academic inquiry. A twentieth-century literature course or one focused on contemporary art history or current architectural trends would likely already spend some energy analyzing the impact of the postmodern sensibility on the particular field being studied. Courses in history or marketing or communication easily could do so as well.

Other possibilities exist as well, however, which—like postmodernism itself—tend to cross disciplinary boundaries and accepted arenas of academic research and inquiry. Within the emerging focus on expanding world history beyond the study of the Western tradition, for example, the examination of the postmodern offers particular appeal as a thematically-oriented subject matter area. Within the general East Asian Studies or Japanese Studies curricula, the multidimensional and multicultural nature of the subject matter exerts a particular appeal as one means to gain a grasp of the contemporary scene beyond the world of politics, social problems and economics. As an illustration of an alternative vision of the world’s future, the concept also has numerous lessons to teach.

The study of world history, having abandoned its Eurocentrism, recently has begun to focus in on the thematic inquiry into the impact of shared historical phenomena such

as cross-cultural contact and migration patterns. With such figures as Frank Gehry, Don DeLillo, David Mitchell and others available as examples drawn from other cultural contexts, the Japanese artists we have considered herein—plus those drawn from South Asia, Africa and Latin America—could be used to jump-start a far-ranging and rewarding discussion on the future of “world culture.”

Another dimension to consider in the context of the study of world history is the impact of the postmodern on what Benjamin Barber describes in *Jihad Vs. McWorld* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995) as the dialectical conflict between “consumerist capitalism” and “religious and tribal fundamentalism,” a conflict which, in his estimation, endangers the very future of democracy around the world. Does the postmodern contribute to the rise of fundamentalist attempts to preserve tradition? Or does it mark a similar challenge to the forces of modernization leading us all towards a future capitalist utopia?

If, in fact, the very process of modernization itself is rooted in the traditional as the base upon which change, growth and development is premised, what are we to make of those who would discard entirely the lessons of the past and the confining traces of tradition? Are those who throw off these traces undermining our collective future? Is it possible, in fact, to do so, to discard the influences of one’s cultural heritage? Or will remnants always remain?

In Japan specifically, what accounts for the phenomenal popular success of artists such as Sakamoto Ryuichi, Iwai Shunji, Murakami Haruki and Miyazaki Hayao? Are their fans aware of the postmodern aspects of their compositions or are they reacting to some other appeal particular to the Japanese contemporary cultural context?

All these questions—and doubtless others as well—commend themselves to educators everywhere seeking stimulating areas of study and inquiry for their college or high school students. Postmodernism provides wonderful fodder, much of it generated in Japan, for just such an intellectual undertaking. I commend the subject matter to you without reservation!

CONCLUDING REMARKS

That these alternative interpretive perspectives exist, each with an independent sense of its own validity, should come as little surprise to those familiar with traditional Japanese culture. Successful communication in traditional Japan was always dependent on the assumed ability of both parties in a cultural exchange to provide and understand the implied meaning present in the poem, the metaphor imbedded in the ink painting, the allusion casually mentioned in the few actual words spoken or written between the two. Poets, writers, musicians and painters were expected to employ a rich symbolic vocabulary; and their readers, auditors and viewers were called upon as well to have mastered a wide range of allusions, metaphors and images designed to provoke, to evoke, an expected emotional response. The work of prose, poetry or art was completed in essence by the consumer, whose knowledgeable participation in the

exchange was assumed by the producer.

Under such culturally-conditioned circumstances, although the popular music, films, short stories, music videos and animated movies we have been discussing might seem initially bereft of “meaning,” even a contemporary Japanese audience would be more likely than one in the West to provide the needed interpretation. Such an interplay has long been typical and expected in both the world of the fine arts and the arena of popular culture in Japan. The distinctive new element now present is the lack of implied commonality in the sought-after audience response; neither any of these artists nor their young audiences expects a single common interpretation to be imposed or generated. Indeed the artist’s purposefully ambiguous and indirect pastiche of layered meaning, replete with shifting levels of cultural implication, provides seemingly limitless space for debate.

On the other hand, “postmodern” popular cultural artifacts in Japan today project a sense of carefully managed time and culture within comforting, even constrained, limits. The resulting sense of “control” openly helps validate a larger sense of shared values held in common with other members of Japan’s younger generation of *shinjinrui* (“new human beings”). Iwai’s young audience, for example, surely must find comfort in seeing their view of reality confirmed in such a cinematically sophisticated visual narrative—clearly this is not their parents’ world, one limited and bounded by tradition; it is instead boundlessly theirs and theirs alone. His cinematic world makes many of his viewers comfortable as a whole, then, despite its uncertainties and ambiguities.

The Japanese aesthetic postmodernist does not lace his work with clues to a solitary underlying meaning or message; in fact, if anything, the opposite occurs: the disordered juxtaposition of elements from a variety of cultures and time periods layers “postmodern” art and literature with a range of sophisticated interpretive possibilities. What are we to make of the rich use of color in Iwai Shunji’s *Undo*, the deep blues and the warm glow of sunny yellows which permeate scene after scene? Why are there portraits and statues of nude women in the background of so many scenes? Surely all those wires across the sky mean something. And what about those tortoises? Drilling holes in one’s shell and inserting metal pins so that it can be dragged about on a leash is obviously not a random act included in the film for no reason. Yet, despite all these included symbols, no one “meaning” appears to emerge from their careful consideration; rather they appear to allow each viewer to take away his or her own “reading,” dependent on the given circumstances under which the film was seen and the particular symbolic references which catch one’s attention at the time.

Not surprisingly, multiple viewings/multiple readings encourage multiple interpretations. The effect of cinematography and music and the related arts likewise intrude on the mix of implied meanings, allowing still other ways of understanding “postmodern” popular culture. “Postmodern” popular culture appears, in fact, to exist in a timeless, rootless, free-floating present, one recognizing “the

basic incongruity of daily life” and its Zen-like relationship to one’s ongoing existence.¹⁰

In a world rife with little-understood and even less-appreciated change, “postmodern” Japanese popular culture, however tense and anxiety-producing its content might appear to be, nonetheless provides an island of tranquillity amidst the resultant unease and distress of contemporary life. Watch the (unchanging) film again and again or listen to the CD cut or reread the short story or watch the *anime* yet again; change your mind about its meaning again and again; imbue the work with its own history; accept the “postmodern” value system implied by its director—and thereby create your own control over that which might otherwise seem uncontrollable, a “safe haven” in the midst of contemporary chaos.

What greater appeal can one imagine emanating from the works of any creative artist working in the arena of contemporary Japanese popular culture? And how better might one be able to explain the appeal of the “postmodern”—the ability to create “things we can fashion for ourselves and in our own interests”¹¹—among Japan’s contemporary younger generation? All these artists may in the end represent only a passing fancy in the world of Japanese popular culture, but their expanding body of work is deserving of study and appreciation if only because their current appeal is rooted in a particular time and circumstance representative of the “postmodern” at work in Japanese popular culture today.

THE POSTMODERN IN JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE: SOME RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

EVANGELION: A fourteen-part animated television series from 1996 which has recently been issued in a complete eight-disk DVD set. For more information, the place to start your Internet search is *Evangelion.com* at <http://www.evangelion.com/> or the list maintained at Google (http://directory.google.com/Top/Arts/Animation/Anime/Titles/Neon_Genesis_Evangelion/Opinions_and_Information/).

MIYAZAKI HAYAO: A music video, “On Your Mark,” animated for Chage and Aska, represents Miyazaki at his most postmodern, an excellent example of the postmodern influence at work in *anime*. The fan web site *Nausicaa.net* at <http://www.nausicaa.net/> contains lots of useful background information and current news about various Miyazaki *anime* projects.

MURAKAMI HARUKI: “Barn Burning” (found in *The Elephant Vanishes*). Murakami’s short fiction frequently is published in *The New Yorker*; most recently “Tony Takitani” appeared in the April 15, 2002, issue. The Complete Review web site at <http://www.complete-review.com/authors/murakami.htm> provides information and opinions about many of the author’s works with a list of links to other Internet sites. Murakami Links at <http://www.ne.jp/asahi/f-shi/grahamch/mura.html> collects another list of reviews and articles. *Exorcising Ghosts* is a currently maintained site with

up-to-date links at <http://www.exorcising-ghosts.co.uk/> as is the list at the dmoz open directory project (http://dmoz.org/Arts/Literature/Authors/M/Murakami,_Haruki/).

SAKAMOTO RYUICHI: The official web site for Sakamoto Ryuichi is sitesakamoto located at <http://www.sitesakamoto.com/index-main.html> (run your cursor over the page and read the headings listed at the bottom of your browser screen to access the various parts of the site).

IWAI SHUNJI: *Undo* (1994). The final sequence, open to multiple interpretations, or the entire short film (about forty-five minutes in length), is acceptable for mature audiences. *Mouboshi* (1997). This music video commissioned by the Japanese group Moon Rider incorporates an homage to the film director Ozu Yasujiro and the Japanese long distance runner who won the gold medal at the 1964 Olympic Games held in Tokyo. Yen Town Report (<http://www.swallowtail-web.com/en/>) is the official Shunji Iwai web site on the Internet and includes a current chronology of the director's various projects.

YOSHIMOTO BANANA: Three useful fan sites: Monica Hubenette's Bananamania (<http://abyss.hubbe.net/banana/>), Chris Moxey's Bananamania (<http://www.cix.co.uk/~mfaller/fuschia.htm>), Shinichi Evan's Shockingly Beautiful (<http://www.aznet.net/~shinichi/banana/>). *Kitchen* (1993) is the most accessible of this author's novels.

The discussion of postmodernism discussed above has been integrated into the two following course web sites accessible at the following URL addresses:

HIS 373, 573, Contemporary Japan in Historical Perspective<http://academic.csuohio.edu/makelaa/history/courses/his373/index.html>; **HIS 227, Power and Authority in Nonwestern Societies** <http://academic.csuohio.edu/makelaa/history/courses/his227/index.html>

¹The gathering resulted in the eventual publication of *Japan Pop! Inside The World Of Japanese Popular Culture*, Timothy J. Craig, editor; Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2000.

²Marilyn Gell Mason, "The Yin and Yang of Knowing," *Sunday Magazine, The Plain Dealer*. Cleveland, Ohio, February 2, 1997, p. 7.

³LiseSkov, "Fashion Trends, Japonisme and Postmodernism" in John Whittier Treat, *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture*. Richmond, Surrey, England: Curzon Press, 1996, p. 159.

⁴See the discussion in Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, pp. 56-58.

⁵John Whittier Treat, "Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home: The *Shojo* in Japanese Popular Culture," in John Whittier Treat, *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture*. Richmond, Surrey, England: Curzon Press, 1996, p. 298.

⁶See the discussion in John Whittier Treat, "Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home: The *Shojo* in Japanese Popular

Culture," in John Whittier Treat, *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture*. Richmond, Surrey, England: Curzon Press, 1996, pp. 284-285.

⁷See Miyoshi, Masao and H. D. Harootunian, editors, *Postmodernism and Japan*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989; and John Whittier Treat, *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture*. Richmond, Surrey, England: Curzon Press, 1996, particularly the articles in the latter volume by Aoki Taotsu "Murakami Haruki and Japan Today," John Whittier Treat "Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home: The *Shojo* in Japanese Popular Culture," and Brian Currid "Finally, I Reach to Africa: Ryuichi Sakamoto and Sounding Japan(ese)." The categorization of "Evangelion" as a postmodern *anime* is by Daisuke Onitsuka, a film critic whose reviews are frequently featured in *Kinema Jumbo*, a leading journal devoted to Japanese cinema.

⁸Leah Kohlenberg, "Letters from the Dead," *Time*. web edition of vol. 149, no. 3: January 20, 1997.

⁹*Slant Magazine* at <http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/archive/allaboutlilychouchou.html>, accessed April 16, 2002.

¹⁰John Whittier Treat, "Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home: The *Shojo* in Japanese Popular Culture," in John Whittier Treat, *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture*. Richmond, Surrey, England: Curzon Press, 1996, p. 290.

¹¹Frederic Jameson, "Nostalgia for the Present," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88 (2), p. 569 as quoted in John Whittier Treat, "Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home," in John Whittier Treat, *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture*. Richmond, Surrey, England: Curzon Press, 1996, pp. 306-307.

Asian Economic Issues: James Gillam, Chair;
Anne Hornsby; Bernice Scott: Spelman College

Impacts and Issues Associated With China's Three Gorges Dam Project

James T. Gillam, Spelman College

In the summer of 1999, I attended a two-week traveling seminar along the central and southern portion of the Yangzi River Valley. The seminar was sponsored and facilitated by the Council for International Educational Exchange in the United States and various agencies of China's national, provincial, and even county governments. The main focus of our activities was for my colleagues and me to acquaint ourselves with the issues related to the building of the world's largest dam, the Three Gorges Dam. Time and space prevent a comprehensive re-telling of my findings here, so after providing a brief historical context for the project, I will limit my observations here to six areas of concern associated with this project. They are: a summary of construction, cost and finance issues, ecological policy and problems, flaws in the government's resettlement policy, compensation and employment issues, and finally, the