

The International
JOURNAL
of the HUMANITIES

Volume 6, Number 5

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Aesthetics

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THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE HUMANITIES
<http://www.Humanities-Journal.com>

First published in 2008 in Melbourne, Australia by Common Ground Publishing Pty Ltd
www.CommonGroundPublishing.com.

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ISSN: 1447-9508
Publisher Site: <http://www.Humanities-Journal.com>

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE HUMANITIES is a peer refereed journal. Full papers submitted for publication are refereed by Associate Editors through anonymous referee processes.

Typeset in Common Ground Markup Language using CGCreator multichannel typesetting system
<http://www.CommonGroundSoftware.com>.

The Glimpse and Fan Service: New Media, New Aesthetics

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*Abstract: New media forms often open up new understandings of aesthetics. Japanese comics (Manga), and animations (Anime) arose in a time of limited social constraint. This allowed them to explore unmentioned topics and develop new aesthetics that involve Fan Service and the Glimpse. Fanservice is the random and gratuitous display of a series of anticipated gestures common in Manga and Anime. These gestures include such things as panty shots, leg spreads and glimpses of breast. In their valorization they indicate a deep philosophical concern with the status of personal experience. These vagrant moments of libidinous possibility underwrite the anticipation of sensual fulfillment; they indicate the genuine access of the personal to a realm and/or moment of reality in which the physical and the imaginative are co-extensive. The connection between the eye and desire is re-established in defiance of the general requirement in society to deny the Glimpse. The Glimpse, in its mediated form as Fanservice, confirms the imagination as the dimension of the interpersonal: someone else also already understands the glimpse. This is perhaps the "darker" freedom because it offers to forgive the otherwise unique nature of vantage (I alone could see from where I stood). What I see you could also see; how I see you might also see. The Glimpse affords a new aesthetic understanding of being within the transitional world of the adolescent. Gibson, J.J. (1979). *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin. Marcuse, Herbert (1979). *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*. Erica Sherover, trans. London: Macmillan. Mulvey, Laura ([1975] 1992): "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". *Screen* 16 (3): 6-18. Schodt, Frederik L. (1996). *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga*. Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press. Winnicott, D. W. (1971). *Playing and Reality*, London: Tavistock Publications.*

Keywords: New Media, Glimpse, Fanservice, Manga, Anime, Japanese Youth Culture, Affordance, Gaze, Moe

NO TWO CULTURES are the same. The freedoms and constraints of each, along with the material possibilities, lead to a multiplicity and variety of expressive forms that come to typify each, in their own way. In Japan, the rise of new media has often followed Western models. However, in the case of Japanese comics (Manga) and animations (Anime), it is Japan that has explored new kinds of expression and new understandings of aesthetics. Comics and animations have long been a part of Western popular culture but the development of these forms, within Japanese youth culture, in particular, has been significantly different. If we look at another transposed Western media form, we can gain some insight into the dynamics at play in Japan. The extraordinary success of 2channel, a simple on line bulletin board, created by Hiroyuki Nishimura, is an excellent example of what happens when West goes East.

What was innovative about 2channel was its openness. Nishimura read the air and realized that what Japan needed was an outlet for unfettered expression. On 2channel, anyone can start a thread and anyone can post — there's no need to register or log in and no Web handles. There are no censors, no filters, no age verification, no voting systems that boost one thread

or comment over another. (Katayama, 2008, URL)

According to Katayama, this "ugly, lo-res site gets about 500 million pageviews a month, and Nishimura runs it with the help of nearly 300 volunteer administrators." The need for such primary, if not primitive expression, arises from Japanese traditional formal social constraints. Given the opportunity to express themselves, and given the material means, users of 2channel have created their own peculiar on-line society.

The people of Japan who pass wordlessly on the way to work each day suddenly realised they had a lot to talk about. They could argue, berate, complain, insult, opine, free-associate, joke around, and revel in their ability to entertain one another as a completely anonymous collective. (Katayama, 2008, URL)

While the demographics of 2channel are not readily available, the features of this new media format are typical of youth culture. Even if the users are not all adolescents, the activities and expressions mostly are those of adolescence.

The snarkiness, the sophomoric humor, the questionable taste — 2channel posts often have



the sort of tone you'd find on a site like Something Awful. There's also a prankish streak: When fast-food chain Lotteria held an online poll asking customers to vote for a new flavor of milk shake, 2channelers stuffed the ballot box in favor of kimchi — fermented cabbage. (Lotteria dutifully offered the vile concoction for sale.) (Katayama, 2008, URL)

When given the opportunities for expression, youth cultures worldwide seem to show similar characteristics.

Young people are culturally-oriented, express themselves to an unusual degree in texts, pictures, music, styles and are considered by others as publicly culturally significant. Young people are also to a degree transient or flighty and associated with what is modern and with the future. Modernity has also entailed an aestheticizing of the everyday or commonplace and politics. (Fornas & Bolin, 1995, 5)

The everyday and commonplace, along with “questionable taste” and “fermented cabbage” are everywhere evident in Manga and Anime, and while this youthful modernity is typically adolescent, it is not these youthful features of Japanese new media that are interestingly new. That is, the content of Anime and Manga are very contemporary, very popular culture and very much Japanese, but the key features of newness are to be found more in the formally structured aesthetic dimensions of these media forms than in the peculiar tropes and unusual themes. (See tvtropes.org for an extensive, if not exhaustive account, of Manga and Anime tropes.) It is within the aesthetic structure of the glimpse that we can begin to understand how Japanese culture has achieved something new and has added to our universal understanding of the personal and social uses of mediation.

New media forms often open up new understandings of aesthetics. Cinema, for example, has managed to combine aspects of all three traditional genres: the epic (novel), drama and the lyric. In combining aspects of these three, it has extended the audience experience through the precise material possibilities of the medium. The point of view associated with the camera, allows for closer inspection of directorial intention, while photographic realism allows for thrills and sensations typical only to films and hence, we often refer to events in the real world as being cinematic. Cinema, as a new media form, has allowed for a re-mediation of the everyday through its distinctive combination of aesthetic forms and its range of extended visual opportunities.

Of special interest here are the forms of viewing and seeing that cinema and, by extension television, have allowed. Camera shots, such as the close-up,

permit us to do more than merely look and see. We can openly stare and gaze, as we never could before.

Some theorists make a distinction between the gaze and the look: suggesting that the look is a perceptual mode open to all whilst the gaze is a mode of viewing reflecting a gendered code of desire (Evans & Gamman 1995, 16). John Ellis and others relate the “gaze” to cinema and the “glance” to television - associations which then seem to lead to these media being linked with stereotypical connotations of “active” (and “male”) for film and “passive” (and “female”) for television (Ellis 1982, 50; Jenks 1995, 22). (Chandler, 2008, URL)

Without agreeing to, or arguing about, the stereotypical aspects of glancing and gazing, we can appreciate that significantly different forms of seeing and viewing have become part of the aesthetics of cinema and television productions and audience experiences. Each of these new media forms has presented us with additional insights into aspects of our motivated perceptions. While we have experiences of glancing and gazing in our everyday lives, prior to cinema and television, we did not experience glancing and gazing in the structured and differently constrained ways made possible by art objects. Through the formality of art we are able to explore and inspect, in reflective ways, the motivations of our perceptions, in a kind of aesthetic suspension.

In the case of Manga and Anime, we can gaze and look and glance and also, importantly, we can glimpse. This glimpsing, in its exploration and elaboration through Fanservice, is a radical feature not found, as an aesthetic structure, in any other existing media form. Instances of Fanservice can be noted in other forms, but the precise aesthetic structure of glimpsing is distinctive. While Fanservice glimpsing is radical, it can also be critiqued as part of what Mitchell describes as the “pictorial turn”:

Whatever the pictorial turn is, then, it should be clear that it is not a return to naïve mimesis, copy or correspondence theories of representation, or a renewed metaphysics of pictorial “presence”: it is rather a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality. It is the realization that spectatorship (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that visual experience or “visual literacy” might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality. (Mitchell, 1994, 16)

The complexity of the interplay “between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality”, described by Mitchell, helps us isolate the significance of freedom in the arising of both 2channel, as an expressive outlet in a culture of constraint, and the development of Manga and Anime. Manga, in particular, arose in a time of limited social constraint on the art form and at a time of major cultural and material change. Kids were just doing kids’ stuff. This freedom allowed writers and artists to explore unmentioned topics and develop new aesthetics that involved Fan Service and the Glimpse.

Horribly well-behaved Japanese children are reading stories with scenes that make adult visitors from other, more “liberal,” cultures blanch. While the elimination of taboos in Japanese children’s comics has given rise to many stories of questionable artistic value, it has also been a vital factor in the growth of the whole medium. Freedom from regulation allowed what was originally material exclusively for children to appeal to adults. It made it possible for artists to explore the potential of comics as other artists have explored the potential of novels and films. (Schodt, 1986, 125-126)

Fanservice is the random and gratuitous display of a series of anticipated gestures common in Manga and Anime. These gestures include such things as panty shots, leg spreads (spread legs) and glimpses of breasts. As an indication of the possible innocence of Fanservice and the panty shot (Panchira) we need to look at the history:

. . . the convention is believed to have started with Tezuka Osamu, whose character designs for Uran (“Astro Girl” in English, from the Astro Boy comic strip (Japanese: Tetsuwan Atom)) incorporated an improbably brief hemline”. “Panchira . . . means upskirt in Japan. The word is a portmanteau of “panty” . . . and “chira”, the Japanese sound symbolism representing a glance or glimpse. (“Panchira”, Wikipedia)

To establish the value of such a glimpse we need to look at what is being glimpsed and how the glimpsing functions as part of a transitional aesthetic. The glimpse is part of everyday life. Blouses buckle as women move. Random moments of glimpsing are everywhere that we are. Glimpsing is part of our possible visual experiencing of being in the world. What we incidentally and accidentally see, tends to be left out of art and not even mentioned in our accounts of the everyday. We tend to disown our moments of everyday glimpsing. In 1934 Cole Porter

wrote the song “Anything Goes”: “Days of yore a glimpse of stocking was looked on as something shocking . . .”

This afternoon, back in San Francisco, I had an interesting sighting driving down Clement Street - it was raining out, and I saw a young woman crossing the street, left hand holding up her umbrella ... and as she crossed, her above-the-knee-length grey skirt rode up a bit, revealing a black stocking top and some bare thigh. However, it looks like she was wearing over-the-knee socks and not necessarily thigh highs or stockings, as the “stocking tops” could be plainly seen, and her calves were covered with black opaque colored cotton (I think! Remember, I was in a car!) and not nylon ... still, it was the closest thing to a stocking sighting that I have seen in the streets of San Francisco in years! Literally years! (Stockings HQ, 2008)

These vagrant moments of libidinous possibility underwrite the anticipation of sensual fulfillment; they indicate the genuine access of the personal to a realm and/or moment of reality in which the physical and the imaginative are co-extensive. The connection between the eye and desire is re-established in defiance of the general requirement in society to deny the Glimpse. Here personal experience takes on a value, in relation to the everyday world, that elevates the possibilities of the personal from the merely mundane to the potentially transcendent.

In looking at the glimpse in this way we would seem to be in danger of granting it a higher status than it deserves. Afterall, we see much more than we talk about, or bother to reflect on, all the time. Our five senses involve us in a vast and rich world of sensuous experience. Indeed, the superfluity of the sensuous always attends all information: there is more than enough; indeed, there is too much. The too much of the sensuous becomes the sensual. This implies that the sensuous is always inherently sensual: even the innocent details of a flower provide visual pleasure that belongs to the viewer and not the flower. In the case of the libidinous glimpse, the glimpse of the curve of the partly exposed breast, the apprehension is immediately sensual and there is no question of there being a surplus: the breast is the breast.

This lack of surplus is not the case in terms of the partly exposed breast when the exposing is done for someone, as happens within the gaze of cinema and fine art. Such ways of seeing and being seen, as are found in cinema and fine art, are also to be found in Manga and Anime. Characters, within the plot, often gaze on the same objects that the readers/viewers glimpse. Indeed, Fanservice is as much a part of the experience of the characters in Anime and Manga

as it is part of the audience experience. Characters and viewers celebrate the freedom of the glimpse, while both also experience the function of the gaze.

Clearly there are parallels to be drawn between the model of the glimpse being explored here and the model of the gaze as announced by Laura Mulvey in her seminal article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). Scopophilia, the pure pleasure that we all may take in just seeing, is the basis of object desire whether that desire is contested, as in the gaze, or allowed to remain free, as in the glimpse. We must see what we gaze on, as we must see what we glimpse. The precise positioning of the audience in each kind of seeing is less relevant here than the assumed nature of the object being viewed. In the case of the gaze, the object of desire is located within a dramatic tension that implicates the viewer in the appropriation of the viewed. In the case of the glimpse, no such appropriation is implied. The drama, in the glimpse is given as a moment of free seeing. Such are the benefits of Fanservice.

Which is not to say that the Fanservice glimpse is not also a kind of fetishistic looking. It definitely is, in its moment of being sustained in the imagination of the viewer. Fetishistic looking, for Mulvey, involves "the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous. This builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself. The erotic instinct is focused on the look alone" (Mulvey 1992, 29). In the case of the glimpse, it is the perceptual process itself that achieves satisfaction as a moment of liberation and empowerment. Further aspects of the connection between the gaze and the glimpse are taken up in other developments of the concept of the glimpse (see Russell, 2008).

In this current account of glimpse as looking, we can recognise key features of Fanservice. Not only is looking, itself, a source of desire and its satisfaction, but the looking authorised by Fanservice is precisely to be undertaken as a fetishistic looking, not of the breast, for example, but of looking itself, as glimpse. The Fanservice object is a reassuring object rather than a dangerous object; the gratuitous object is a confirmation of the freedom of desire to find itself structured as the structuring of objects for its own visual satisfaction. That is, the viewer of Fanservice is able to determine erotic values within the orbit of a freedom that defines the erotic object as special (and given) and therefore not dangerously real. These art forms, after all, are not photorealistic. Their lack of realism is part of the empowered and empowering nature of the Fanservice experience. The Fanservice object is a kind of libidinous ornament, or totem, that not only reassures through confirmation but also announces the freedom of the

possible that is located, in its origins, in the everyday viewing of the everyday world. There are, after all, breasts to be seen.

Indeed, the closer Fanservice comes to reality the less useful it is as Fanservice. Desire is to be located in the Fanservice object, not re-determined as an achieved object of realised gratification. That is, the mediation of desire is the purpose, not the gratification. This mediation, performed knowingly, within the interpersonal space of the Manga and Anime worlds, is the redeeming quality of Fanservice that points to the hygienic nature of the glimpse. Somewhere between desire and satisfaction there is a space in which what is experienced is just experience. Fanservice is a figuring and confirmation of this free, and uncontested, visual space.

This uncontested realm of experience is a key grounding condition of object relations in the psychology of Donald Winnicott. For Winnicott, there are special objects that arise in the development of the child's relationship with objects and the world. These objects are best thought of as subject-objects, or transitional objects. According to Winnicott:

The transitional object and the transitional phenomena start each human being off with what will always be important for them, i.e. a neutral area of experience which will not be challenged. *Of the transitional object it can be said that it is a matter of agreement between us and the baby that we will never ask the question: "Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?" The important point is that no decision on this point is expected. The question is not to be formulated [Italics in original].* (Winnicott, 1997, 12)

Just as the child is allowed to hold on to its special teddy bear in the transition from infancy to latency, so the adolescent is allowed a special kind of freedom in the transition to adulthood. Fanservice and the glimpse offer defining and boundary experiences that typify the adolescent transitional.

We may see this transitional glimpsing as indicative of a healthy transitional relationship with the world. The mediation, through an aesthetic engagement, is culturally experienced and hence it is authorized even if it is constrained by forms of censorship. Manga and Anime are publicly available and they are everywhere. There is no secret in the freedom. Everyone knows what is going on, even if, in Winnicott's terms, "we will never ask the question: 'Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?'" The glimpsing may be treated as a trivial feature, by adults, but that is a key element of the function of the glimpse. For the object of the glimpse to be able to take on its value to the glimpser, it must remain uncontested.

The precise theoretical status of the object of desire, in the case of the glimpse, is not immediately important to this current argument, but it needs to be pointed out that within a Lacanian psychology, the Fanservice object would be deemed a fantasy object rather than a subject-object as in Winnicott. The status of this object is highly contested, for Lacan. The reading, offered by Dino Felluga, can ease our way forward, through this puzzle, towards the usefulness of these special objects to adolescents. According to Felluga:

Our desires therefore necessarily rely on lack, since fantasy, by definition, does not correspond to anything in the real. Our object of desire (what Lacan terms the “objet petit a”) is a way for us to establish coordinates for our own desire. At the heart of desire is a misrecognition of fullness where there is really nothing but a screen for our own narcissistic projections. It is that lack at the heart of desire that ensures we continue to desire. To come too close to our object of desire threatens to uncover the lack that is, in fact, necessary for our desire to persist, so that, ultimately, desire is most interested not in fully attaining the object of desire but in keeping our distance, thus allowing desire to persist. Because desire is articulated through fantasy, it is driven to some extent by its own impossibility. (Felluga, 2008)

Additionally to the personally liberating and sustaining aspects of the glimpse, the glimpse, in its mediated form as Fanservice, confirms the imagination as the dimension of the interpersonal: someone else also already understands the glimpse. The objects being glimpsed have been given precisely for glimpsing. Their value is only found in glimpsing. This free status frees up the personal glimpsing such that the stocking man’s account of his experience in San Francisco, given above, is one of open pleasure. He is not ashamed in that he did not seek the glimpse; the glimpse was given, by the world. This aspect of the glimpse is perhaps the “darker” freedom because it offers to forgive the otherwise unique nature of vantage (I alone could see from where I stood). What I see you could also see; how I see you might also see. There is nothing inherently perverse about this way of seeing.

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The glimpse affords a new aesthetic understanding of being within the transitional world of the adolescent. While the original innocence of Astro Girl’s short skirt glimpse of panty has been perverted over the years, by adult incursions into Manga and Anime, the fans of these forms maintain a critical resistance to excess. Fans complain about too much Fanservice. Still, the freedom that allowed for the uncontested development of Manga and Anime has been lost. Ten years after his first excited foray into the world of a free Manga, Schodt, reported on the collapse of liberalism brought about by one horrific crime committed by a crazed fan of Manga and Anime.

Tsutomu Miyazaki was a disturbed twenty-seven-year-old man who kidnapped and killed three girls of preschool age in 1988 and 1989, delivering the remains of one of his victims to her family using the pseudonym “Yuko Imada,” reportedly the name of a favorite female comic book or anime character. When Miyazaki was finally apprehended, his apartment was found to contain nearly 6,000 videos, including “splatter” and “horror” films and many animation videos of the rorikon [lolicon] porno ilk, as well as similar fanzines and manga. He was the manifestation of the manga and animation industries’ worst nightmare: a fan incapable of distinguishing between fantasy and reality, obsessed with the darkest and most degenerate genre of material - kiddie porn. Even more horrifying for the dojinshi market, Miyazaki had also reportedly sold manga of his own creation ... (Schodt, 1996, 45)

This history is typical of the US comic industry where moral outrage led to the constraining of the content and drawing styles of comics. It is also of broader academic interest in the field of media effects (Catharsis Theory) and studies of cultural repression. However, in terms of freedoms, the ways of experiencing the glimpse in Manga and Anime persist. It is the precise features of the glimpse that sustain this freedom. It is only under conditions of transition that the glimpse functions and hence it is not lost in the general loss of freedoms of the youth-culture forms. We are still free to glimpse that which is freely given because glimpsing is part of our visual being.

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Keith Russell is a Design and Communication philosopher, a poet and a new media artist. His doctoral work, *Kenosis, Katharis, Kairosis*, presents a theory of literary affects. Currently he is working on a theory of the Glimpse.