ASOBI IN ACTION

Contesting the cultural meanings and cultural boundaries of play in Tokyo from the 1970s to the present

In the past 30 years, play (asobi) has become the subject of a heated ideological debate in urban Japan, reflecting processes of cultural transformation. During these years, a late consumer culture characterized by an incessant pursuit of playlike hedonistic pleasures has reached its apotheosis within a conservative social context that maintains high levels of conformity and prioritizes production. It is against the background of these sociocultural dynamics that the cultural conceptualization and appreciation of play have been negotiated between play as a subsidiary activity complementary to work life, confined within boundaries, and play as a phenomenon of greatest personal significance, hardly constrained by time or space. These dialectics have influenced collective imaginaries, transforming play into a symbolic activity through which people can experience and reproduce cultural rhetoric about social distinctions, values and priorities.

Keywords play; Japan; late consumer culture; youth popular culture; institutional culture; everyday hedonism

Play is more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It goes beyond the confines of purely physical or purely biological activity. It is a significant function — that is to say, there is some sense to it.

(Johan Huizinga 1938/1950)

In modern Japanese, asobi (play) means, in addition to games and sports, also pastimes, merrymaking, diversions, pleasures, fun, leisure activities, hanging out with friends, hosting or being hosted, gambling and doing nothing. The term asobi circumscribes the concept of play in a particularly broad way by
referring to the activities a person does in his or her leisure time, as well as to leisure time itself. From a linguistic point of view, then, contemporary social life in Japan is organized between working and life-preserving activities (shigoto, yoji) and play or leisure time (asobi).

This linguistic division between play and non-play in Japanese is a system of representations not necessarily equivalent to subjective experiences of play that are more ambiguous (Cox 2002, p. 181). However, it accurately reflects a cultural conceptualization rooted in the modern Japanese ideology of work ethic that poses a binary opposition between work and asobi that did not exist in Japan until the development of an industrial society in the later half of the nineteenth century. It was only then that the working class began to enjoy a regulated working day with a day off once a week. The concept of leisure was popularized at that time (Bando 1992, p. 27), and it assumed the meaning of non-work. During the twentieth century, this conceptualized binary opposition was the source of ideological dialectics among conflicting sociocultural vectors about the importance of work versus play, about what is socially and personally meaningful play and about the cultural boundaries of play, suggesting that whereas play might seem to be a simple and natural activity, ‘What is play?’ and ‘To what end do people play?’ are questions determined to a large extent by cultural context.

Ideological dialectics over the meaning of play express competing interpretations of larger social realities and aspirations concerning these realities. In the complexity of cultural heterogeneity there is always a multiplicity of ideological formations – the production of dominant classes’ ideologies as well as ideologies of the dominated, ideologies of resistance, of exclusion, of deviation and so forth (Hall 1985). However, when a social group succeeds in convincing others of the validity of its own worldview, the consent so permeates society that to many it seems commonsensical, natural and at times invisible (Gluck 1985, p. 3). Different, unconnected public and private institutions and cultural agents reproduce this consent through their activities and cultural practices, thereby reinforcing its universal acceptance and pushing competing worldviews into cultural marginality. In the post-war years, a sociocultural construction of Japan as a ‘new middle class’ society gained a broad, orienting ideological force (Kelly 1986, p. 603). In an imagined post-war Japanese social ecosystem, the idealized life-organizing model was composed of nuclear family units of the ricewinner husband, homemaker wife and two samurai students; large corporations providing secure, lifetime employment; and a meritocratic and highly demanding education system. As pointed out by Kelly (1986, pp. 604–605), so powerful was this model that even for those who rejected it, it became the target of resistance. It is in this production-oriented climate that the meaning of asobi was contested. The ideological positioning of work and play – whether institutionally imposed or otherwise – became an inseparable component of
the collective Japanese identity. Like all ideological constructs, this one did not necessarily reflect accurately everyday praxis. However, for many this positioning had come to represent sets of aspirations that orient behavior and critical judgment. It had a crucial influence on collective imaginaries, transforming different contexts of play into performance stages for ideological controversies and resonating with other social issues, the most prominent ones being social marginality, cultural resistance and cultural affirmation.

The following is a reconstruction of the dialectical contest over the cultural meaning and boundaries of *asobi* in the public culture of Tokyo from the 1970s to the present. I start with the dominant discourses on play from the 1970s until the early 1990s and the ways these discourses echoed an ongoing production of social hierarchies. I then describe how the sociocultural transformations after the burst of the bubble economy in the early 1990s and the consequent recession promoted a new appreciation of play and triggered a redefinition of the boundaries of play. From this reconstruction two sets of issues will emerge. The first is an analysis of the changes in the cultural concept of *asobi* as a symptom and reflection of larger sociocultural transformations: from *asobi* as a subsidiary activity confined within boundaries to *asobi* as a phenomenon of great personal, social and heuristic importance hardly constrained by time or space. The second is the theorizing of the relation between culture and play in an effort to capture the dynamic aspects of that relationship and its significance to the organization of daily life.

Arguably, I have a particularly thought-provoking study case at hand. Not so long ago the Japanese described themselves as bad players (Tada 1974/1975, p. 42) and as lacking a play culture (Bando 1992). However, at the dawn of the twenty-first century the urban leisure culture of Tokyo and the wealth of play activities it offers have become a symbol and a dominant image of contemporary Japan, suggesting a recent, swift transformation in the cultural positioning of play. Furthermore, Tokyo – the locus of my study – is a cultural center whence trends often start and sometimes spread to other areas of Japan. During the past 30 years, Tokyo has become the apotheosis of the Japanese late consumer culture with its pursuit of playlike pleasures (Clammer 1997, p. 69). It has done so in the context of a society in which conformity is still highly valued, creating a very intense cultural environment charged with competing symbolic meanings.

The contest over play from the 1970s until the early 1990s

*Between institutional regulation and a liberation of desires in an emerging late consumer culture*

Beginning in the late 1960s, more available money and time in urban Japan, as well as the re-emergence of a consumer culture, produced the infrastructure
for what was soon to be known as the ‘leisure boom’ (rejā būmu) – ‘leisure’ being the newly introduced loanword replacing the indigenous word asobi, which was considered old-fashioned (Linhart 1988, p. 293). For three consecutive decades, from the 1960s to the 1980s, Japan’s annual economic growth was spectacular. During the 1980s the successful Japanese management system became a globally studied model of ‘flexible systems of production,’ referred to as post-Fordism (see Wood 1993). Japan came to be known as ‘Japan Inc.,’ wherein the economy, culture, society and politics appeared to be so closely enmeshed that they looked entirely governed by economic or politico-cultural forces (Yoda 2006a, p. 29). The state, increasingly interested in the production of a leisure culture in Japan for economic, diplomatic and sociopolitical reasons (see Moriya 1984, Linhart 1988, Leheny 2003), promoted a view of leisure and leisure activities that did not tamper with the post-war work ideology and ethics that had become part of the national imagery. In this work-oriented climate, leisure and leisure pursuits were articulated in dominant public discourses as the complementary and supportive dimension of work life. The leisure boom did not produce more liberal norms of postponing duties at work, home or school in favor of play or leisure. As was wittily formulated by the president of a Japanese trade company who welcomed me to Japan in the early 1990s, ‘in order to live like a Japanese you have to work hard and play hard’ (yoku hataraku, yoku asobu). In the corporate environment, after-work dinner and drinks with work associates was encouraged as allowing unwinding from work-related stresses (kinchō wo toku) and promoting open and honest communication with colleagues (uchitokeru) (Allison 1994, p. 149). Certain play and leisure activities, such as fine dining with customers, visiting hostess clubs and playing golf at company expense, even became accepted as social status requirements and as a prerequisite for further professional promotion (see Ben-Ari 1998).

The involvement of institutions in the production of public modes of leisure reached far beyond the corporate environment (see Leheny 2003, pp. 79–86). Leisure centers such as local ‘culture centers’ (karuchā sentā), which are large-scale enterprises for self-cultivation that offer educational classes on indigenous and imported cultural pursuits and hobbies that grew from the 1970s to the 1980s into a prominent phenomenon (Cox 2002, p. 180), and university clubs and circles, in which students practice after-school sports and cultural activities, imposed the constraints of an ideological discourse on leisure practices. Leisure activities were promoted as means for personal growth and socialization. In perfect conformity with the dominant ‘key cultural concepts’ of the time (see Moeran 1984), leisure was engaged as a structured activity involving a serious attitude (majime) and requiring overcoming hardships (gambaru), great effort (doryoku), endurance (gaman) and a group-oriented behavior characterized by cooperation (kyōryoku) and administered by a senior-junior (sempai-kōhai) hierarchy.
Concurrent with the successful institutional efforts to shape the free time of the masses, however, an alternative worldview that attributes hedonistic leisure a growing importance was promoted within a dynamic and vigorous consumer culture. The emergence of a sophisticated consumer culture gave more than background and infrastructure to the consumption of play activities. Consumption is arguably a ludic pursuit; it is a response to desires, and it fulfills a variety of satisfactions. ‘It is asobi – play – as much as it is utilitarian’ (Clammer 1997, p. 7). In Japan, perhaps more than in other consumer cultures, ‘consumer use value’ needs to be expanded to include ‘play value,’ since many commodities are experimental in nature (Clammer 1997, p. 107). A vigorous consumer culture is not only an aesthetic experience; it becomes an inspiration for strategies of behavior. ‘Consumer culture uses images, signs and symbolic goods which summon up dreams, desires and fantasies which suggest romantic authenticity and emotional fulfillment in narcissistically pleasing oneself, instead of others’ (Featherstone 1991, p. 27). As culture seemingly becomes more than ever a heterogeneous field of possibilities for choice, negotiation and transfer it takes on the features of play (Minnema 1998, p. 21). As noted by Ivy (1988, p. 442), media modes and commodity forms of late capitalism play with liberated desires and push in the direction of decoding and deconstructing hegemonic modernism. In no other post-industrial nation, she continues, has there been more of a polarity between the ordering structures of capital and education and the accelerated flows of energy and innovation in consumerism, than in late 1980s Japan.

This polarity expressed the contemporaneous ongoing construction of power structures within Japanese society. Although Japanese urban men proved to be enthusiastic consumers and even more importantly main producers of the Japanese consumer culture, their primary spaces of self-definition and identity construction remained their work and their professional achievements (Kelsky 1994, p. 6).³ The invigorated consumption culture had an increasing influence on the production of selfhoods among women (Skov & Moeran 1995, pp. 27–37), and even more pronouncedly among youths – teenagers and young men and women who have not yet committed to culturally defined ‘adult roles,’ namely, entering the workforce for young men and becoming a wife for young women. Pushed away from the visible and invisible influential social centers (i.e. work and home), it is the liminality of youths that allowed them to explore countercultural alternatives. Already by the late 1970s, the tendency among urban youths to adopt a playful spirit in their everyday life so that life seemed to be an ongoing game had become so noticeable that it was drawing the attention of the media, cultural critics and scholars (Inoue 1983). A flourishing popular culture of music, anime (Japanese animation), manga (Japanese comics), toys and collectibles, video game parlors, fun ‘childish’ consumer goods and youth-oriented asobi-ba (entertainment zones) catered to youths with playful pursuits and images of play and fantasy. People on the verge of adulthood but not yet

‘adults,’ including university students and unmarried young women, enjoyed an experiential and often extravagant leisure- and play-oriented lifestyle of true connoisseurs. By exploring new modes of consumption, leisure and play, Japanese youths have become pioneers in the construction of a new consumer-culture environment and the acquisition of non-orthodox playful lifestyles (Fujioka 1986).

The ‘homo ludens’ under the hegemony of the homo laborans

Since the 1970s, intellectuals and the media have been harshly criticizing Japan’s urban youths, who have been seen as unwilling to grow out of their childish, playful lives, labeling them derogatively as ‘moratorium people’ (Okonogi 1978, 1981) or describing them as having a pathological emotional dependence (amae) that prevents them from maturing (Doi 1973, p. 163). Similarly, certain aspects of women’s culture in Japan, especially those related to consumerism and media, have been criticized severely. These sorts of criticism shared an ‘apocalyptic anxiety that the supposedly “pure” and “masculine” culture of Japan has been vulgarized, feminized and infantilized to the point it becomes baby talk beyond the comprehension of well educated critics’ (Skov & Moeran 1995, p. 70). Conservative social critic Nishibe Susumu (1986, p. 41) argued that in Japanese society, those traditionally known as homo laborans (working man) have suddenly been transformed into homo ludens (playing man). Nevertheless, continued Nishibe, contemporary Japanese are not involved in mature and creative play but in a puerile play characterized by a ‘single minded pursuit of whatever is perceived to be amusing.’

There were, however, those cultural critics who maintained that although Japanese youths are seen critically from an adult society’s perspective as looking for a mode of life based on play, most still had a conformist and sane nature, and constituted in their reformist tendencies were seriousness and moderation (Inoue 1983, p. 99). Others were fascinated by the younger generation, arguing that the growing generation gap between ‘antlike adults’ and ‘grasshopperlike youths’ reflected a rapid maturation of society and the timely dissolution of post-war values that bound and silently controlled Japanese society in favor of new values that encouraged intuition and creative expressiveness (Fujioka 1986). It has even been argued that this young generation will lead Japan from the grip of the war generation of workaholics to a better future, one that of homo ludens that is more befitting Japan’s economic achievements (Bandō 1992, p. 32).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the idealization of play among youths as a liberating space that allows doing whatever one wants to do and being whomever one chooses to be became stronger than ever before (Kinsella 1995). Nevertheless, it was usually kept within the limits of calculated action,
or a ‘controlled de-control of emotions’ (see Featherstone 1991, p. 81), which keeps play in its own territories while allowing ‘real life’ to take its designated course in due time. I am actually pointing to cultural processes that promote the ability of certain groups to adopt a spirit of ‘calculated hedonism’ and enter through play into emotional and aesthetic self-investigation, which do not climax in an altogether rejection of external control but could even be defined as calculated action that takes into account and is therefore considerate of the possible consequences of rejecting social control (see Featherstone 1991, p. 59).

The shifting cultural meaning and topology of play in post-bubble Japan

The renegotiation of the sociocultural hierarchy and the production of new meanings of play

In September 1990 the Tokyo Stock Exchange dropped 48 percent in four days, marking the beginning of the end of bubble-era prosperity. In 1993 a general agreement that Japan was entering recession times signaled the end of the long one-party rule by the Liberal Democratic Party (Aoki, M. 2002). A few years’ perspective showed how the aggravation in the economic condition harmed the hegemony of Japanese post-war institutional values (Ivy 2000, p. 820), giving stimulus and unprecedented cultural presence to cultural forms and life strategies that had been so far regarded as countercultural. Consumer culture did not lose its stronghold in Tokyo’s urban culture but rather changed into a friendlier, lighter and more amusing version embedded with a playful imagery. During unsettled times, such as Japan’s post-bubble recession, competing ways of organizing life are often fleshed out, and different cultural practices become highly charged with symbolic meanings, making explicit assertions in different contested cultural arenas (see Swidler 1986, p. 279). This has been particularly evident in the action-packed public culture of Tokyo. There are many ways to describe the influences of the recession on the experienced ‘everyday life’ in Tokyo (Yoda 2006a). Most relevant for this paper, however, is how sociocultural hierarchies have been renegotiated in the last decade in view of these cultural changes and how this renegotiation has been affecting the production of the cultural meanings of play.

Standing on the front line and experiencing firsthand the downfall of the ‘phallocentric nationalistic euphoria of the “victorious mid 1980s” bubble economy’ (Kelsky 2001, p. 7) are Japanese men. The shattered images of the Japanese economy and of the security of the Japanese labor-style management have also damaged the attractiveness of the patriarchic ‘Japanese new middle class’ imagery and its designated life-cycle. Whether because of free choice or the lack of opportunities, instead of seeking full-time employment, many high
school dropouts, high school graduates and university graduates who have come to be known as furita (an amalgamation of the English word ‘free’ and the German word ‘arbeiter’ which means worker) make a living as part-time workers in temporary, low-paid jobs. Some Japanese youths are even rejecting altogether the accepted social model of adulthood and are not seeking any kind of employment or further academic or professional training. The latter have come to be known as NEET (not in education, employment, training). In interviews conducted between 1999 and 2003 among university students, when asked about their future career plans many confessed to having trouble trusting the formerly uncontested track to a successful life and career that started with passing the entrance exams to a high-ranking university. But more dramatic is the way the ongoing recession has also changed the worldviews of men who have been on the job market for years. In contrast to the crazy rhythm of the bubble economy, during the 1990s up until quite recently, the Japanese media continuously reported uneasiness about the paralysis of politics and the economy. The threat of being laid off has become a growing worry for workers who once felt secure that their companies would take care of them for the rest of their lives (Yamamoto 1993). Workaholic and estranged fathers were reported to be trying to find their way back ‘home’ (Yoda 2006b, p. 240).

In the late 1990s, the recession-stricken publishing industries in Japan came up with several new marketing tactics, among them the creation of a new niche of magazines for middle-aged men devoted specifically to leisure, fashion and couplehood (Shuppan shihyō nenpō 2001). These new magazines, including Rapita (Shōgakukan, 1995), Ikkojin (Individual; KK Bestsellers, 2000), Jiyūjin (Free people or Playing people; Karratt, 2001), Obura (Kodansha, 2001) and Otoko no kagure (Men’s Haven; Idea Life Company, 2001), have since been generating a male-oriented worldview that cherishes individualism, freedom, play and the search for a new masculine identity. Although for many men work is still the primary construction space of the self, at the turn of the century some cultural critics suggested that it is possible that after many years devoted to work life, a growing number of men realize that enjoying private life is equally important (see Sakai 2002, p. 4).

Also during the late 1990s, self-congratulatory descriptions of Japanese women and their successful adaptation to the chaotic conditions in Japan became popular among feminists and in the media. As early as 1993, sociologist Sumiko Iwao called the significant transformations experienced by Japanese women that are, according to her, irrevocably affecting cultural conceptions and lifestyles of Japanese society ‘the quiet revolution’ (Iwao 1993, p. 265). In 1998 Nihon keizai shinbusha (Japan’s leading economic newspaper) published a book titled Women’s Quiet Revolution: The Dawn of the ‘Individualist’ Era. The authors’ main argument is that Japanese women have preceded men in their embrace of individualism in the chaotic conditions of the
post-bubble period. Furthermore, women’s individualism has the potential to radically change Japanese society into a new, flexible one (Kelsky 2001, p. 90). These views have both been influenced by, as well as have influenced, the way many women in Tokyo see themselves as a newly powerful, socially distinct group and are thus celebrating their emerging cultural image as leaders in how to enjoy life. The crisis in the male-centered corporate world has reinforced a media discourse about the dominance of the maternal principle both inside and outside homes in Japan; this discourse is used by conservative critics in reference to a corrupting excess in the maternal society that is superseding the more virtuous paternal society (Yoda 2006b, p. 239).

At the turn of the century, market studies indicated the tendency of mothers and daughters to form ‘pan-womanhood’ bonds, which have become a major characteristic of the lifestyle of many urban mothers in their fifties and sixties and their single daughters in their twenties and thirties, who spend much leisure time together (Sendenkaigi 2002, pp. 30–31). And as for single women, their already established image as enjoying ‘an exotic and longed-for world of individual fulfillment, decadence, consumption and play’ (Kinsella 1995, p. 244) is noted to sustain their desire to remain uncommitted and prolong their youth as long as possible, resulting in an all-time record number of single women in Tokyo (Sendenkaigi 2002, p. 16). But as was pointed out to me by marketing consultant Yasuko Nakamura, whereas the 1980s saw the emergence of a strong and daring new cohort of young single women, during the 1990s this cohort was eclipsed by high school girls (kōgyaru) as the most dominant, assertive and influential sector in Japan’s urban culture. These shōjo (young girls) became the ‘master trope for all social forms of consumption’ (Whittier Treat 1996, p. 281). The cultural liminality, imagined budding sexuality and relative affluence of high school girls positioned them in the media and public imagination as exceedingly materialistic and without social or moral constraints. Pending the cultural critique, Japanese high school girls were now portrayed either as an unpleasant alien racial substance within Japan (see Kinsella 2005, p. 151) or as independent, assertive and lively (Nakamura 2004). Either way, in the local and international media, the Japanese schoolgirl became a marked feature of Japan’s urban culture.

The Japanese high school girl phenomenon can be interpreted as part of what is perhaps the most bewildering change in the renegotiation of cultural organization in post-bubble Tokyo culture. Youth popular culture forms are celebrated and reproduced to the point that they have become one of the most powerful Japanese symbols of our era both inside and outside Japan. This transformation is particularly complex because it happened during a decade in which the ‘wild child’ and the ‘collapse of classrooms’ also became an intensified nexus of social concern (Arai 2006, p. 216). As noted by Arai (2006), during the 1990s the national and media discourse of the fear for/of the child was nurtured by a growing number of cases of severe violence among
youths and should be interpreted as part of a larger discourse of social crisis and collapse that made the child its nexus. I would like to add that it can also be explained as a bewildered reaction to a growing autonomy and countercultural rebelliousness in youths that have not only made them the source for adult concern but also posited them as a core element of Japanese consumer culture’s ‘cool’ and unorthodox phantasmagoria.

There are numerous other reasons for this celebration of youth culture. First, during Japan’s economic low tide, youths became one of the most affluent social sectors in urban Japan. According to Nakamura, Japanese youths who were said until recently to have ‘six pockets,’ or six sources of financial support including their two parents and four grandparents, now have ‘eight pockets’ as they are indulged also by their unmarried aunts and uncles. Since the burst of the bubble, many youths have also started to work in part-time jobs in order to meet all their material needs. Enjoying an increasingly financial autonomy, these youths are free to spend as much money as they come by like no other cohort. Innovative marketing agencies in Japan are using youths, high school girls in particular, as informants in market research on new products and trends and as propellers of new trends (Nakamura 2004). Many young adults in Tokyo are also ready and excited to enjoy the youth hedonistic culture; it is of course a way to reclaim their lost youth. Moreover, unlike previous generations, today’s young adults have memories from their own youth spent during the height of the bubble era that provide them with prerequisite aesthetic sensitivities and nostalgic disposition to contemporary playful popular culture forms.

More generally speaking, the popularity of youthful playful merchandise in Japan has also been interpreted as deriving from its inherent social and psychological merits of relieving loneliness and stress during times of economic and cultural anxieties (Allison 2003, p. 391), and of re-enchanting capitalism (Allison 2006, p. 13). Last but not least, as other industries grew sluggish with the deepening of the recession youth popular culture products such as anime, manga, video games and their paraphernalia have become the new favored exports of Japan (Machiyama 2004, p. 15). Youth-centric products and images have turned Japan into a global cultural center, in ways that Japan as an economic superpower was never able to achieve, positioning them at the core of Japan’s contemporary imagery.

The migration of youth playful images beyond youth popular culture

The reigning playful, hedonistic and fantastic allure of youth popular culture is ubiquitously commodified and consumed in a variety of ways that are not limited to or even targeted at youth but often migrate to other social sectors and spheres of life that are considered generally more conservative. Some cases in point for such unusual combinations, fusions and juxtapositions are a
miniature plastic dinosaur pendant for mobile handsets, distributed in the late 1990s with disposable razors as a promotion of the Hollywood hit *Jurassic Park III*, and the merchandising fad *tare panda* — a droopy-eyed, slack-bodied panda cartoon character who was all the rage among sarariman (white collar workers in large firms) at the turn of the century. Collecting ‘once upon a time’ (*mukashi no*) toys became an early twenty-first-century trend (*Sendenkaigi* 2002, p. 19). Hooked by the last trend, a growing number of adults of both sexes and of different ages and marital statuses enjoy buying and collecting vintage toys, such as 1940s US toy cars, miniature plastic models enclosed in plastic capsules (*gachapon*), miniature assemblages of characters from manga and anime series, vintage collectibles from fun marketing campaigns and more. In this ‘*omocha* [toys] fever’ (*Shibuya PPP* 2001), toys are bought for aesthetic and emotional purposes rather than for the play that was initially intended by the manufacturers.

Allison (2006, pp. 11–14) describes the development in post-war Japan of a ‘popular play aesthetic’ that has come in recent years to characterize Japan’s consumer capitalism. She refers to a tendency to animate commodified apparatuses (goods and machines) and endow them with a fantastic quality that provides access to imaginary worlds but also addresses the desire to find meaning, connection and particularly intimacy and familiarity in everyday life. By investing consumer goods with an imagery of fantasy and otherness, they become sites of sensations and emotions. Allison (2006) and others (e.g., Murakami 2005) contextualize the evolution of this aesthetic proclivity in a post-war historical frame as well as in native folklore and religious traditions. I would like to argue, however, that whereas this ‘play aesthetic’ is not a new phenomenon, it has been expanding in presence and forms since the mid-1990s to the point that it needs an additional, more contemporaneous reframing. The emerging sociocultural conditions that I am describing, as well as technology and media developments, have increased the dissemination of playful fantasy imagery across new borders in ways that can arguably be termed a cultural shift. I am not only referring to an upscaled version of what Baudrillard (1983, p. 148) referred to as an overproduction of simulations in a post-modern ecology that blurs the differences between reality and imagination, and in which the ‘unreal reality’ becomes an aesthetic experience, but also to the ways in which youths have become the avant-garde of urban lifestyles and the cultural campus of new, progressive forms of media and technology.

The social reception of mobile communication and Internet by Japan’s youth, for example, has shaped this industry. A process of social construction and negotiation of mobile technologies among carriers, handset manufacturers, content providers and young people (see Bijker 1990, p. 18) has transformed the cellular phone from a technological product into a playful medium. The industry has adopted play as a favorite interface for the convergence of widely circulating youth cultural forms, cutting-edge technologies and consumerism
The mobile phone technoculture in Japan is framed by cultures of gadget fetishism, technofashion and technofuturism (Ito 2005, p. 9). Mobile communication, perhaps the most important consumer trend in Japan in the past decade, is designed as a ludic experiential commodity and as a vehicle for experimenting with social strategies for communication (Daliot-Bul 2007, p. 966).

As mobile phones in Japan became a personalized medium in the mid-1990s an extravagant range of fun accessories for all ages and tastes, such as the earlier mentioned Jurassic Park dinosaur or a *tare panda* illuminating antennas, filled entire stores. With the development of new and exciting technologies, mobile phones became toy boxes (Kohiyama 2005). In 2001, for example, the Sega Dreamcast video game *Seaman* was adapted for the mobile phones of young *sarariman*. *Seaman* is a virtual fish with a man’s face; it is a macabre-looking creature with a snappy disposition and a cynical tongue. After it hatches from an egg, its owner has to feed and nurture it. *Seaman* swims in the black screen and organizes its owner’s schedule with sarcastic reminders and comments. In a 2002 advertisement for the cellular version of *Seaman*, the half-fish half-man says: ‘Good morning, you have a meeting at 09:00. Still at home? What’s wrong? Suffering from a hangover after last night?’ He reacts to the registration of a new female contact by saying, ‘What about the last one? Are you not moving on too fast?’ The development of the mobile phone as an adult-oriented toy was openly configured in 2005, when toy shops in Tokyo were offering Takara-made miniature and rather expensive cars called *puchika* (petite car) that can be remote-controlled by cellular phones and played with as desktop toys.

This universalization of youth playful popular culture has become a form of blurring childhood and adulthood that puts into question the cultural construction of adulthood representations as much as it does, and perhaps even more than it does, that of childhood’s and adolescence’s representations. The blurring of childhood and adulthood is no longer a phenomenon characterizing the so-called moratorium youths who resist accepting their assigned adult roles, but one that characterizes adults performing their culturally inscribed social roles and obligations as full-fledged society members while still indulging in the sensual and emotional pleasures of collecting, appreciating, playing with and expressing themselves through youth-oriented playful goods and services. With more youth cultural forms migrating up the age scale, Japan’s urban public culture is celebrating sensitivity, communication and collective emotions. A strong and irrepresible ‘everyday hedonism’ (Maffesoli 1991) that is expressed through sensual pleasures, play and the introduction of the futile into life becomes a central social value that organizes daily social life (see Clammer 1997, p. 162). The contemporary everyday hedonism in Japan is a mode of relating to the social environment that
integrates parameters that are often considered secondary, such as the frivolous, emotions, desires and appearances (see Maffesoli 1990, p. 13).

**Redefining the cultural boundaries of play**

With more cultural forms previously defined as youth-only becoming mainstream cultural products, ‘youth’ is redefined between the media, consumer industries and youths themselves with more extreme subcultures and practices that are often engaged and performed as play. Locating the boundaries of play in these practices becomes ever more difficult as they address simultaneously reality, fantasy and imagination, and they involve a seriously committed pursuit of aesthetic and sensual pleasures.

In the summer of 2001, the new Sony Playstation video game *Final Fantasy X* was aggressively promoted throughout the city of Tokyo. One subway advertisement showed a picture of the game’s hero and heroine looking beautiful and brave, the futuristic and exotic costumes they wear wavering in the warm wind. Throwing the onlooker into an emotional mood, the picture was accompanied by the following text:

> The purity we have forgotten...
> The characters in the game can now show with their eyes and expressions that which people cannot express.
> We have forgotten—
> Pure feelings, love.
> The purity that makes us cry.

Hinting at the love story unfolded throughout this role-playing video game in which the heroine falls in love with a boy who turns out to be — to her and his devastation — a fantasy, the text clearly suggests a blurring of distinctions between real people and imaginary, virtual characters. The advertising text and to some extent the story itself assert a moral and emotional preference of ‘play realities’ over ‘real reality,’ knowing that the youth-targeted markets will positively approve of this nostalgia for a better world found only in play.

It is Japanese *otaku* — hardcore fans of anime, manga, amateur manga (*dojinshi*), computers and video games (Takarajima 1989) — who are the most enthusiastic consumers of video games such as *Final Fantasy X*. During the 1990s another *otaku* activity, *kosupure* (an amalgamation of ‘costume’ and ‘play’ transcribed as ‘cosplay’ by English speakers), that is, a role-playing game involving dressing up as a favorite manga or anime character, grew rapidly, reaching in recent years record-high popularity and public exposure. A cosplay star describes the pleasure of cosplaying as follows: ‘cosplayers just want to express their devotion. They feel like a physical part of the world they love when they dress up as a character. The more time and money you spend on your costume, the more people will admire you at events and cons. You might
even begin to think you have become the character at last’ (Kurotani 2004, p. 111). The main performing activity of cosplayers involves posing for photographs that are taken mostly by fellow cosplayers and amateur photographers known as kameko [an amalgamation of ‘camera’ and kozo (boy)]. The quality of a cosplayer’s performance goes beyond the meticulous rendition of her/his costume; it depends on how well she/he embodies the character by assimilating its body language and expressions in staged temporary poses she/he assumes for the cameras.

Most cosplayers are between their late teens and their mid-twenties, although there are exceptions to this rule. Many are high school and university students, and some are on the job market. During interviews conducted between 2000 and 2003 among cosplayers, it became obvious that for many of them cosplaying is the most meaningful and important activity in which they are involved. The appeal of cosplaying lies in the personal transformation it allows. ‘Becoming the character I love,’ ‘becoming someone else’ and ‘changing my mood’ were among the most common replies to ‘Why do you cosplay?’

Cross-dressing while cosplaying is common and has come to be known as ‘crossplaying.’ An adoration of or fascination with a certain anime/manga/video game character precedes in importance gender correlation. Crossplaying can be performed as a parody of the character in the way of ‘games of reversal,’ often interpreted as including a protest against the established order while intending eventually to preserve and strengthen it (see Babcock 1978, p. 22. It can also be performed in earnest seriousness that reflects a strong wish to embody the character, that can be interpreted as an attempt at actively renegotiating and contesting perceived gender classifications and stereotypes (see Zemon-Davis 1978, p. 154).

An exploration of the boundaries of reality and of gender conventions is taken farther with the much more esoteric anime characters kigurumi cosplayers. These players cover their face with a mask and their hands and feet with specially devised skin-colored gloves and tights, showing no actual skin, and cross the boundary from fantasy to real life by becoming full, three-dimensional living characters. Intriguingly, kigurumi cosplayers are typically males who dress up as a female character. According to the kigurumi code of behavior, during costume-play conventions, performing kigurumi do not take off their masks in public and keep silent when posing for photo opportunities in order not to disclose their true gender. A kigurumi cosplayer explains the kind of cross-dressing in which he is involved by referring to the aesthetic conventions of the kigurumi mask that requires that it look sweet, embellished with huge, wet anime-style eyes, making it unfit for depicting male characters.9 Kigurumi cosplayers, so he explains, are ‘gender independent’ and would like to be perceived as such. The way kigurumi see it and explain it,
they sublimate themselves inside the costume, inhabiting physically and psychologically the character of their choice (Tack 2004, p. 115).

Play involves senses, emotions and desires (Raveri 2002, p. 4). And just as for otakus involved in cosplaying, for many other youths the body is at the core of play. Eccentric fashion is thereby another expression of the blurring of the cultural boundaries of play. In Japan, engagement in eccentric fashion is often referred to as ‘fun’ or plainly as asobi. Hanging around in ‘human herds’ (mururu) in designated urban locations by way of performing these styles becomes a favorite multiplayer ‘simulation game’ (see Caillouis 1958/1961, p. 44). However, unlike other ‘simulation games,’ during which a player temporarily plays a character of her/his choice, by adopting eccentric fashion styles a person plays himself or herself while constructing his or her personal and social identity.

In recent years, Tokyo youths have become internationally acclaimed as producers of avant-garde fashions and styles (e.g., Slowey 2002). In youth fashions, and in particular in eccentric fashions, clothing and accessories can easily become imbued with intentional rhetoric, developing into a means to reflexively express ideas and social attributions (Goffman 1976). Fashions become meaningful collections of signs around which Japanese youths bind to form emotional communities, which they often call ‘tribes’ (zoku). Although many of the fashions and styles do not evolve from prior sociopolitical stances, they can be interpreted as forms of refusal, since they go ‘against nature’ by interrupting the process of ‘normalization,’ challenging the principle of unity and cohesion and contradicting the myth of consensus (see Hebdige 1979, p. 18).

Some fashion trends of high school girls, such as the ‘Gothic Lolita,’ which takes its dark gothic aesthetics from visual J-Rock bands (Gothic and Lolita Bible 2002, p. 8), or the eclectic mix-and-match post-modernist fashion labeled ‘Fruit’ after the magazine published since 1994 that has been capturing and promoting it (Aoki, S. 2001), are very reminiscent of cosplay as they become an engaging pursuit for those involved in them, dictating priorities and organizing life, and yet are performed in specific urban settings during specific times. It is in fact not rare to see in cosplay events cosplayers dressed as their favorite visual J-Rock stars or as Gothic Lolita. The growing symbiosis between street cosplaying and indoors otaku cosplaying is also attested by the ways the Gothic Lolita aesthetics are inspiring manga and anime shows – for example, the anime series Chobits (Asaka Morio, 2002) that is based on Clamp’s manga series by the same name (2001–2002).

Other avant-garde fashions, however, such as the notorious late-1990s ganguro (dark faces) female style characterized aesthetically by long bleached hair, beauty salon-tanned skin, ornamented nails, heavy and bright makeup, miniskirts and platform shoes and the sequential yamanba (mountain witch) style, which took these characteristics to further extremes with conspicuously
outrageous physical remodeling that cannot be easily removed (Klippenstein & Kennedy-Brown 2000), are not exploring temporary transformation. Such fashions blast away the very concept of ‘controlled de-control of emotions.’ Becoming an end-of-the-century ganguro or yamanba inevitably entailed confrontations in school and at home (Asian Week 2000, Kinsella 2005). Interestingly, despite the social and media phobia created by the ganguro fad, it has dramatically influenced mainstream fashion and styles in Tokyo. By the end of the 1990s, magazine editors, designers and advertising agents used typical ganguro elements in order to create new fashions and ganguro models to promote several consumer products including mobile phones and instant soups (Talarowska-Kacprzak 2001).

Since the 1980s the dominance of young Japanese women in the creation of youth fashions that grow into fads has attracted a lot of notice. Typically, young men first play a more passive role as audience members and only later join in. However, according to Nakamura, in recent years young men are increasingly adopting girl-like behaviors (onnanoko ka suru). Beyond participating in youth subcultures, Japanese men in their early twenties often engage in hair coloring, growing long hair, getting permanent makeup and plucking their eyebrows. Common also are tattoos and piercings in spite of the rooted social taboos against such bodily ornamentations. This means that for these young men, too, fostering appropriate, standard semiotic dress codes (called ‘standard semiotic equipment’ by Goffman 1976, pp. 93–94) in accord with changing social circumstances is no longer possible. Young people who engage in the sensual and aesthetic pleasures of remodeling their bodies are thus also accepting the risk of becoming the source of social controversy. This is no longer a ‘calculated hedonism’ but a much more extreme version that ignores the possible consequences of the rejection of social control.

According to Bateson (1976, p. 72), the tension that is inherent in any kind of play between ‘serious reality’ and ‘play reality’ is solved by meta-communicative messages suggesting that ‘this is play’ or ‘this is not play.’ These messages are the mechanism through which play becomes a framed event separated from reality. However, when from the behavior of certain individuals or groups as those described earlier stems a paradoxical message ‘this is both play and non-play,’ their play is based not on the assumption that ‘this is play’ but on the question ‘Is this play?’ (Bateson 1976, p. 70). Such paradoxical ambiguity is a thought-provoking reflexive manipulation of the cognitive abilities of the onlookers and the participants. It emphasizes that reality is a relativistic dimension and that play offers the possibility of restructuring it, constantly modifying its perspectives and aims (Droogers 1996, Raveri 2002, p. 1).
Institutional endorsement and the appropriation of cool playfulness

The commodification of play and fantasy in Japan, in the form of toys and of play aesthetics embedded in goods and cultural practices, has become in recent years a national resource and cultural capital for Japan (Allison 2006, p. 5). Since the early 1990s, committed fans around the world and transnational corporations have been performing a crucial role in promoting the image of Japan as a leading producer of fun in the global marketplace. It was only quite recently, however, in 2002, that the government of Japan led by Prime Minister Koizumi developed an official strategy to support the export of such products and the imagery they entice with an ‘intellectual property policy’ (chitekizaisan seisaku). The newly established Intellectual Property Policy Council adopted the term ‘intellectual property’ in a broad sense, including within it technology, design, brands and content products such as music, movies, game software, animation and the like (Chitekizaisan suishin keikaku 2004, pp. 2–4). The new approach was supported by reference to recent publications arguing that a nation’s strength in the international society will be determined in the near future by the attractiveness of its intellectual property: how cool, enjoyable and enriching it is (Digital Content Association of Japan 2004, p. 4).

When the first Intellectual Property Strategic Program was published in 2004, one of its stated goals was to create and reinforce a new and attractive ‘Japan brand’ – one that resonates with the emerging global image of ‘Cool Japan’ (kakkoii nihon in Chitekizaisan suishin keikaku 2005, p. 1) promoted by the international success of Japanese media content such as movies, animated cartoons and game software. The sequential yearly Intellectual Property Strategic Programs (2004–2007), although they constantly refer to it, avoid a clear definition of ‘Cool Japan.’ Cool Japan is arguably a cachet for a quality that is multi-faceted and is exhibited in polymorphous expressions. Trendy Cool Japan is led by youths and youth-centric industries and has spread to become an atmosphere, an ambience du temps (see Maffesoli 1990, p. 13). It is a hedonistic, playful, stylish, cutting-edge, often fantastic or futuristic and always unorthodox style. Appropriated by the state, Cool Japan is not only celebrated, it is seen as a tool of cultural diplomacy for enhancing Japan’s presence and influence in a globalizing environment and not least importantly for restoring the pride of Japanese people in their own culture (Chitekizaisan suishin keikaku 2005, p. 105). Instead of the long-standing ‘Japan Inc.’ image of a work-oriented culture, ‘an enterprise society’ (kigyo shakai, in Yoda 2006a, p. 31), the youth-led Cool Japan as a notion embodying a slick playfulness that stimulates the lived life and challenges all grinding routines is being experimented with as a key cultural concept.
By way of conclusion: play as a symbolic behavior

During the past 30 years in Tokyo, not only has the cultural attitude toward play changed dramatically, but also the cultural conventions delimiting the boundaries of play and the cultural meanings of play have changed to the point of redefining the nature of play. Asobi has come to represent a means for enhancing interpersonal communication, an expression of individualism, wellbeing and progressiveness and an assertive tactic for reprivatizing time and refamiliarizing space after they have been almost entirely colonized by a production-oriented sociopolitical system.

This transformation reveals something fundamental about play as a culturally learned behavior. Many twentieth-century scholars have sought to understand the ways in which play—apparently totally unrelated to any useful aim and so free from ordinary life—has such a crucial influence on it (Raveri 2002, p. 1). In investigating, the timeless and universal recurrence of play was often mistaken for a resolution and a continuation of cultural meaning that was in fact embedded in contemporaneous terms. As eloquently demonstrated by Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne (1984/1986), much of what was accepted in the last century as the science of play, including the quest to understand the cultural meanings of play and its influence on social life, should be read as a reflection of the idealization of play in the modern industrial climate. Play has come to be idealized in practice and consequently in theory as the negation of the obligatory, omnipresent, clock-controlled work system. Play has therefore been described as the privileged realm of otherness where cultural possibilities are created, tested and contested (e.g., Huizinga 1938/1950, Caillois 1958/1961, Winnicot 1971, Sutton-Smith 1980, Turner 1982).

With the spread of late consumer culture values and the emphasis on the pursuit of playlike states of pleasure, play has come to be theoretically debated as a form of everyday life in post-modernity and the consumer civilization. A ‘free play of forms void of any ulterior purpose’ (Featherstone 1995, p. 85) that is entailed by the fragmentation, decentralization and loss of hierarchies of societies and cultures has come to represent post-modernism and the post-modernizing process (Jameson 1984). In this emerging cultural climate, play has been enthusiastically debated as eliciting the requisite mental disposition to a successful integration into social and work life that should therefore be strategically duplicated in non-play circumstances to make life more pleasurable, creative and productive (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, Lieberman 1977, March & Olsen 1979, Weissman 1990). Intoxicated by this idealization of play in practice and in theory, as well as by the overuse of play as a heuristic metaphor (Raveri 2002, p. 2, Minnema 1998, p. 22), it is easy to forget that the boundaries of play, its cultural meanings and its influence on social life are produced by and within specific cultural contexts and practical life. Play is as meaningful as the sociocultural context allows it to be.
In order to understand the relationship between play and culture, one has to start by exploring how culture shapes the way people think about play, practice play and define play and its boundaries, and thus how culture attributes play its meaning. Such an inquiry requires shifting the focus of attention from play as a genetically conditioned behavior to the potential of play as a significant symbolic behavior that is culturally learned, through which people may experience and express shared meanings and worldviews. As a symbolic behavior, playing reflects context-depending ways of organizing lines of actions that might allow members of a society to reach several different life goals (Swidler 1986). Playing becomes more than drinking sake with one’s colleagues or participating in a cosplay event; it is participating – often without awareness – in the reproduction of cultural rhetoric about social distinctions, values and priorities (Bordieu 1984).

Whereas we are now aware of the contemporaneous idealization of play in Japan – an idealization that reflects social ideologies rather than the inherent natural qualities of play – when considering the overwhelming role of play in Japan’s cultural life, it seems that we are witnessing an evolutionary process from which there is no way back. Play is at the core of the way Japanese youths fashion their bodies and selfhoods, it is in the center of Japan’s late consumer culture and it has come to be a strategy and tactic for the production, introduction and consumption of new technologies, including communication and information technologies. And yet, as has been shown by Maffesoli (1990, p. 13), social life and ‘ways of being’ (*manière d’être*) in every society are mutable. A strong and irrepressible ‘everyday hedonism’ that favors ludic forms of expressions (Maffesoli 1990, p. 19) might become the organizing pivot of social life during certain periods, whereas during others a politico-economic logic and a strict morality marginalize it to a subordinate position (Maffesoli 1990, p. 13).

The modernist-imposed dichotomy between reason and imagination, suggested to Turner (1982, pp. 32–33) that play in industrialized societies is a liminal space in which players can experiment with sociocultural repertoires – a storeroom of sociocultural alternatives. Adopting a post-modernist approach, Allison (2006, pp. 12–13) points to the investment of play aesthetics in material objects and consumer items – in my words, to the migration of play to new territories – as a semiotic tool to ‘re-enchant’ the lived capitalist world. However, for contemporary Japanese youths who adopt play as their preferred ‘way of being,’ thereby redefining the boundaries of play, play is neither a liminal secured zone for testing sociocultural possibilities nor a semiotic tool to re-enchant their lives. Play is their favored reality among multiple realities, a reality in which they have control and in which they are at the center. Compared to this reality all others fade.
Notes

1 Following Robertson (2007, p. 370), I use ‘state’ as shorthand for the several dominant agents and agencies — the government, the corporate sector, the military-industrial establishment, the major media and the education system — that, although not seamlessly, collectively produce and reproduce the status quo. In this article I will use ‘institutional’ as interchangeable with the ‘state,’ and ‘institutional culture’ in reference to this status quo.

2 The contemporaneous cultural constructs of Japan’s national identity and cultural images that reflected the dominant work-oriented ideology were intensely debated in the literary genre of nihonjinron (discourses on Japanese) that reached a height of popularity during the 1970s and 1980s (Dale 1986).

3 This echoes interestingly Huyssen’s argument (1986, p. 47) that since the nineteenth century mass culture in the West has come to be associated with women while ‘real authentic culture’ remains the privileged realm of men. Huyssen argues that the genderizing of mass culture as feminine in political, psychological and aesthetic discourses is the result of a cultural conception that laments the decline of a male-dominated hegemonic culture and civilization.

4 The term NEET is not indigenous to Japan. It was first coined by the British Department for Education and Skills in 2000 (Department for Education and Skills 2000). In Japan, however, it was popularized and ‘brandized’ by the media, quickly becoming part of the vernacular.

5 The name of the magazine, Jiyūjin, meaning “Free people,” should be written 自由人. The editors, however, have interchanged the second character with its homophone character 遊, which means ‘play.’ The pun suggests that play is a form of freedom and vice versa.

6 In 2002 the number of bachelors in Tokyo had reached an unprecedented record after doubling during the past two decades. In 1980 the rates of single men and women aged 30 to 34 in Tokyo were 21.5 percent and 9.1 percent, respectively. In 2002 the proportions rose to 54 percent and 38 percent (Sendenkaigi 2002, p. 16). Realizing womanhood through work and other pursuits available in Japan mostly to single and childless women rather than through homemaking has become the target of intense social criticism and concern (e.g., Sakai 2004).

7 Yasuko Nakamura is the founder and general manager of Boom Planning, an innovative marketing and promotion company that has been employing high school girls as informants since 1986. I interviewed Nakamura in Tokyo in July 2005.

8 See note 7.


10 See note 7.
The development of more liberal attitudes in regard to hair colors is attested by several television commercials for men’s hair color. In spring 1999 the script of an amusing advertisement for men’s hair color by the Shiseido company started by following a young university graduate (played by Masahiro Nakai, a member of the J-Rock band Smap and a TV star known for frequently changing his hair color) on his first day at work with a large Japanese corporation. Upon entering an assembly hall with his new sararīman colleagues in anticipation of the chairman’s speech, he notices that everyone is staring at him since he is the only one with black hair. Apparently all the company workers have dyed their hair blond following the chairman’s own example. In summer 2001, the script of a commercial for men’s hair color by Gatsby started by showing several severe-looking samurai kneeling in front of a gorgeous Western woman. All the samurai have their hair tightly done in a traditional chonmage bun dyed in a different flamboyant color. They keep a grave disposition while their chonmage becomes erect in an obvious phallic movement. There is one last samurai, however, whose chonmage does not quite manage the task, embarrassing its owner until it finally becomes erect too. In spring 2002, another commercial for men’s hair color by Gatsby featuring several young Japanese men with rainbow-colored mohawks won the title of the most amusing and interesting commercial among several thousand competing commercials in a survey conducted by CM Data Bank.

Following Susan Napier, Allison (2000, p. 84) uses the term ‘committed fans’ in reference to a new kind of spectatorship developed among anime aficionados that transcends issues of national boundaries. I am using the term in reference to an inclination among hardcore fans of Japanese popular culture, especially of anime, manga and related goods and practices, to become agents in the further distribution of this culture through the Internet, fans-organized for-fans conventions and the opening of small scale businesses importing and selling Japanese popular culture goods.

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