Eroticism, Grotesqueness and Non-Sense: Twenty-first Century Cultural Imagery of Japan in the Israeli Media and Popular Culture

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The formation of cultural imageries amidst the current transnational dynamics is presently a highly debated issue. In this paper I explore a significant contemporary discourse about Japan in the Israeli media and in different forms of Israeli popular culture that objectifies and differentiates Japan as a futuristic and often decadent Other, exhibiting the conventions of an Orientalist style of thought. Although Israelis are actively involved in the production of this discourse, it relies heavily on imagery derived from globally circulating images of Japan. Beyond its popularity in Israel as an entertaining diversion that reverberates the contemporary fascination with Japan, it serves to familiarise Israelis with the Japanese Other while keeping its alienness, and also to assert the Western identity of Israeli culture. As this study shows, globalisation is about re-territorialisation as much as it is about de-territorialisation.

Keywords: Orientalism; Self-Orientalism; Cultural imageries; Globalisation; Media; Popular culture; Japan; Israel

In 2004 the Israeli liberal and popular weekly entertainment-and-leisure magazine TimeOut Tel Aviv presented a special project on Japan titled “Land of the freaking crazy sun” (Eretz hashemesh hasruta). The subtitle read: “The Japanese culture continues to cross borders. Madness, violence, sex and branding. Delirious signs of
life are dripping all the way to here”. The project presented contemporary Japan through the most bizarre products of the Japanese urban culture. The insinuation that Israelis are able to experience only the very tip of the iceberg of such futuristic decadence transformed these peeps at extreme Japanese culture into an even more stimulating experience.

The timing of this project should be understood within the context of the increasing popularity of Japanese culture in a rapidly globalising world (Befu). In Israel too, since the 1970s globalisation has become a powerful economic and cultural force that has further intensified during the 1990s (Ram). The popular interest in the Japanese culture in Israel has been growing since the late 1980s to the point that it has been recently referred to as the “Japan Craze” (Goldstein-Gidoni “Producers of

Figure 1 ‘Land of the freaking crazy sun’ (TimeOut Tel Aviv – June 2004)
Two decades ago, Japan, then at the height of the bubble economy, became more accessible and a favourite destination for Israelis for business, travel and learning the local traditional arts. In the early 1990s, a mixture of curiosity, reserved admiration and, for many, Japan-oriented business ambitions, gained unprecedented popularity for Japanese Studies at universities and for public seminars on Japanese culture. A few years later, when most industries in Japan grew sluggish and those who focused on Japan looking for financial opportunities veered elsewhere, new transnational business alliances between Japanese producers and global distributors turned Japanese media industries and their paraphernalia into prominent global players (Iwabuchi *Recentering Globalization* 37–38). In urban Israel, like in other urban centres around the world, the hype of Japanese popular culture and its aesthetics is currently inducing a mini-wave of Japonism. Unlike the nineteenth century European Japonism movement, however, the contemporary Japonism vogue is more eclectic. It does not look passionately to a lost romantic past but rather to an exciting postmodern, multi-referential and futuristic present.

Since the mid-1990s, following the change in the cultural position of Japan in the global market, a shift in the globally circulating popular images of Japan has been noticeable. The image of Japan as an economic superpower is still dominant (Iwabuchi “Marketing ‘Japan’” 165); however, it is now evident that the Japanese economic-imperialism threat over the world has greatly weakened and with it much of the anxiety that was still associated with Japan a decade ago (Morley and Robins). Echoing this shift, in Israel too, instead of Japanese economic exploits, the abundance of consumable Japanese popular-culture icons, coupled with Western fiction, and cinematic iconography about Japan, has turned contemporary Japanese culture and urban lifestyles into recurring thematic references in the media and popular culture. And yet, the seemingly growing intimacy with Japan has not transformed the “Japanese Culture” into a transparent and more familiar culture.

In the following, I explore a significant contemporary discourse about Japan in the Israeli media and in other forms of Israeli mass consumer culture that presents Japan as the land of eroticism, grotesqueness and non-sense. Within this discourse Japan is portrayed, as an exotic Other that is weird, highly stylised, in some respects extremely “cool” – but above all else is so entertaining. As I will show, although Israelis are actively involved in the production of this discourse, it relies heavily on representations of Japan from the American media and popular culture, as well as from the Japanese popular culture. This discourse describes contemporary cultural products using Orientalist conventions that objectify and simultaneously differentiate “Japan” as a contrasting mirror image of the “West” (Said).

Much has been written on the Orientalist discourse on Japan and its products in their original West/Japan power structure. Nowadays, however, the complex trajectories of cultural flows among multiple global centres and their peripheries are creating a new world order in which the sphere of influence and the terms of Orientalism as a discourse on global cultural hierarchies need to be reviewed and expanded. In this paper I attempt to start filling this gap by offering an interpretation
to the deep cultural meanings of the domestication and, more importantly, the reproduction of Oriental images of Japan in Israel, a cultural context that does not fit in neatly within the Japan/West dichotomies of the past.

This paper offers an opportunity to further explore the production of cultural imageries in the context of intensive global circulation of media information and images, a theme that has been drawing much academic interest (see Appadurai; Friedman; Yoshimoto). Such processes of global cultural flows cut across national boundaries, making the world in reality and in experience more interconnected (McGrew), facilitating myths of global coherence and unity (Ferguson). Nevertheless, as has been observed, besides the creation through consumption of “shared identities” around the globe, globalisation is also associated with dynamics of re-localisation (Robins). In Israel, such contradicting processes of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation are at work within the explosive contexts of an ongoing colonialisational-national conflict and of an economically and culturally heterogeneous society (Herzog; Ram). The tensions between capitalism, the global logic of similarities and the local logic of differences (Featherstone “Localism, Globalism and Cultural Identity”) is also well exhibited in Israel through the contemporary fascination with differences and the marketing of ethnicity and “Otherness” (see Hall). As this study shows, although global capitalism and transnationalism are said to have transcended national borders and the East/West dichotomy allowing for free movement across national boundaries (Kellner), the conventions of the Orientalist discourse that crystallises this divide continue to thrive and have great implications on the way multi-cultural flows of information and images are organised and cultural borders established (Allison “Cyborg Violence” 241).

Reconstruction of a Popular Discourse of Knowledge: Methodological Considerations

This paper is based on a wide variety of written, audiovisual and material texts that have been imported to Israel or locally produced and have become part of the experienced urban information culture of Israel. I discuss contemporary media texts separately from other popular-culture texts only to allow a more convenient presentation. In the present urbanity, saturated with short, quick “sound bytes” of signs and images, media texts and popular-culture texts should be viewed as components of a greater ensemble of consumable information. Consumers of this overload of information are continuously involved in an attempt to arrange it into classificatory schemes that possess a “practical coherence” (Featherstone Consumer Culture and Postmodernism 127).

I present the accumulative impact and meaning of the images projected by these texts using three complementary perspectives: the variety of their forms, the thematic choices they exhibit and textual analysis. The written articles that I quote are from popular magazines, such as the previously mentioned TimeOut Tel Aviv, and Masa Aher, a monthly devoted to the exploration of nature and culture, or from
well-established newspapers and their regular supplements: including Haaretz, Yediot-Aharonot and Maariv, the three leading daily newspapers in Israel, and Globs, the leading business newspaper in Israel. The electronic reportages that I mention have been aired on television and radio channels that boast high ratings. Other cultural texts that I use have made a noticeable impact through their successful distribution and visible presence on television, in movie theatres or in shopping malls.

“Japan” in the Contemporary Israeli Media

Published since 2002, TimeOut Tel Aviv is a high-quality independent guide for urban culture, leisure and entertainment. As such, it targets an urban middle class that lives in Tel Aviv and its suburbs and is characterised by its interest in urban modes of life. It is not only on entertainment, it is meant to be entertaining in itself. The decision to have a special project on Japan in this magazine is therefore quite revealing. First, it suggests that “Japan” represents some special interest vis-à-vis contemporary Israeli urban popular culture. Second, it suggests that the editors of TimeOut Tel Aviv see a project on Japan as entertaining and as having the potential to sell. Beyond the decision to produce a special project on Japan, the terms of the project are also quite intriguing. These are clearly suggested inside the magazine as follows: “the release of Zatooichi, the new Takeshi Kitano movie, offers a wonderful opportunity to see what is going on with the richest, most bored and most delirious culture in the world”. The same sensationalist narrative is used consistently throughout the articles in visuals and in vocabulary.

The TimeOut Tel Aviv special project on Japan certainly offers a particularly concentrated dose of an emerging image of a cool yet very weird Japan; however, it reflects a specific interest of the Israeli media in Japan, which has grown in volume and impact in recent years. Contemporary Japanese culture is repeatedly portrayed as a futuristic culture that produces odd lifestyles and is obsessed with a consumer fetish of gadgets, technofuturist products and fashion. Out of the 50 media items that I have collected for this research (all of which were published between 1999 and 2004), 15 were bought from international media distributors and were originally written or produced for The New York Times, TimeOut New York and foreign television channels, suggesting that the emerging image of Japan in Israel echoes a globally circulating imagery. These media items bear more than a kernel of truth. And yet, “a truth in the details does not add up to an accurate whole picture” (Allison “Memoirs of the Orient” 388). It is not my intention to try to look for the possible truthful correspondence between these accounts and the Japanese reality. Rather, I propose to look into the internal consistency of the descriptive narratives in these accounts and the ideas they express about Japan.

One shared characteristic of many articles on contemporary Japan is the language of spectacle they adopt by either dramatising or burlesquing the object of inquiry. Thus, for example, in descriptions of Japan’s avant-garde technoculture the Japanese
are often described as having a weak spot for original products that are unordinary and not necessarily useful. In an article from 1999 on the Japanese technological innovativeness the author explains that “a peep into the Japanese electronic market is like opening a small window to the future” and that “only a few of these products ever get out of Japan, even fewer get to become international hits like the well-known and friendly tamagotchi” (Ben Gedalyahu). Put differently, most of the Japanese-invented futuristic oddities could have been invented for Japanese consumers only. The author dramatically sets Japan apart from the rest of the world while also expressing a great admiration for the Japanese technological genius.

A different approach is adopted in another article translated from The New York Times, on the war between manufacturers of technologically devised toilet seats in Japan (“Milhemet batei hashimush”). The article describes how the Japanese fascination with gadgetry has produced a market offering fragrant toilet seats that also provide soundtracks, air conditioning, massage and even check and register the user’s health condition, unlike the simple Western-style toilet seat. According to the reporter, this Japanese hedonistic obsession with toilet seats has caused some in Japan to fear that “young Japanese who sit on air-conditioned and accessorised toilet seats will become spoiled and will not be able to confront, if the need occurs, the tougher Chinese industrial workers or the North Korean soldiers who are still using old-fashioned toilets”. The reporter continues by quoting 90-year-old Hideki Nishiyoka, a former professor who is allegedly the head of the “Japanese toilets association”, who strongly argues that at least two old-fashioned toilet seats be installed in each new school to avoid spoiling future generations. The exaggerated seriousness in the article creates a satirical effect, and thereby the Japanese fascination with multi-functional toilet seats and the ensuing Japanese cultural debate around it are overtly mocked.

Besides admiring or ridiculing Japanese technological gadgetry, many media items on Japanese technofuturism express a moral agenda. An article on the proliferation of virtual pop idols in Japan, for example, discusses how the popularity of virtual idols disturbingly brings up questions about humanness, identity and reality (Foyer). Another article, on made-in-Japan therapeutic robot pets that are meant to replace living pets, insinuates that although this techno-novelty has its own benefits, it leaves one wondering about the future of the warm human experience of life (Ben-Basat). Japanese technofuturism is a representation of the future in the present of Israeli culture: while still disturbing, like the technofuturism strongly associated with Japan a decade ago (Morley and Robins), it is now more a strange and foreign representation of a future that is so remote from the Israeli (Western) lifestyle that its alienness is treated primarily as a fascinating aesthetic fact.

The Israeli media is also introducing, sometimes even on front pages and prime-time television magazines, descriptions of bizarre Japanese urban lifestyle. Reportages on a competition of animal-growl imitations held in Japan and on the promotion of space tourism in Japan (Zelicha “Tayar hasar mishkal”) attract giggling audiences and readership. The same amused tone is obvious in an article translated from The New York Times on the popularity of a museum of parasitology among young couples in
Tokyo ("Tolaei meaim behanut mazkarot"). The article includes an interview with the museum manager and descriptions of the most repelling exhibits of human-intestine parasites that are on display in the exhibition. In his writing the author produces a comical image of the young Japanese couples who visit this exhibition and who seem to be willingly playing, as he suggests, "the role of the lovers from the dark comedy The Addams Family". Similarly, an article on a new service designed to help Japanese undo their marriages by sending field agents who will seduce or blackmail their partners provides an informed description of the several Japanese agencies that specialise in "couple-busting" and of their ruthless working methods ("Mekashei hazugot lesherutcha"). Interviews with managers as well as with field agents reinforce the grotesque image of contemporary human relations in Japan.

Not unrelated to Japanese technofuturism and odd lifestyles, Japanese consumer culture is also a favourite media item. It is described as almost ridiculously affluent, with somewhat distorted priorities, and exhibiting fantastically well pre-engineered marketing strategies. An article published in 2002 describes how the Japan's sophisticated and precise engineering of new consumer trends does not limit itself to the Japanese market (Samoha). Maintaining the Us-Them differentiation, the reporter argues that while Western kids' trends such as Spiderman or Harry Potter are more coincidental and build gradually, Japan's border-crossing consumer hit products such as Yu-Gi-Ω are pre-engineered by psychologists and marketing specialists who identify the ways in which children can be successfully manipulated. These teams build a product that is actually composed of a whole line of complementary products. With these products, planned to be irresistible, Japanese toy companies conquer the world, market by market. "Japanese Yu-Gi-Ω trading cards are brainwashing the American kids", concludes the article, "No reason why it shouldn't happen here".

The use of military terms such as "attack" and "conquer" is of course quite common when speaking about marketing strategies. In this case, however, they also echo the familiar tone of the Euro-American media discourses about the irrepressible imperialistic urges of the Japanese culture that are re-emerging. The twentieth century witnessed the Japanese trying to conquer the world and then the world's economies, and they are now aiming at the world's cultures. In an often-quoted article written in 2002, Douglas McGray argues that "Japan looks more like a cultural superpower today than it did in the 1980s, when it was an economic one". McGray suggests that "Japan's growing cultural presence has created a mighty engine of national cool". By now, referring to Japan in the Euro-American media as the "empire of cool" (see Faiola) has become an accepted epithet of Japan that expresses simultaneously admiration and contempt. It is a specific form of speech that describes the huge global success of contemporary Japanese popular culture products in the rather derogative terminology of a cultural take-over.

The Israeli media usually does not go as far as to suggest a Japanese cultural imperialistic expansionism in Israel. When addressing the issue of local designs that are influenced by Japanese aesthetics, for example, one article wonders admiringly
that Japan is “already here” (Sivan-Cohen). Occasionally, this wondering admiration is transformed into a sceptical manifesto concerning the (in)ability of Israelis to adopt the more advanced – though rather strange – Japanese contemporary modes of being and behaviour. An article from 2003 on Japanese street fashion and its influence on Israeli contemporary fashion, titled “How shall we become Japanese?” (Or), argues the following: “Japanese street fashion is a unique phenomenon. Tokyo youth and their fanatic wardrobe are starting to affect Israel too, but where are they and where are we . . .” The article continues to say that “for years youth in Japan have defined themselves with their clothing, and like everything else in Japan they do it with such extreme and perfection that they leave the rest of the world speechless”. Japanese youths are buying brand names like “maniacs”, are “obsessed” with fashion and will do whatever a fashion house dictates them to do “till death”. “This is no exaggeration”, argues the reporter, “a couple of years ago five young girls wearing 20 cm – high platform shoes paid with their lives either falling off their shoes or failing to stop the cars they were driving”. According to the reporter, the Japanese youth dress exaggeratedly, tastefully, daringly, creatively and humorously – Israelis don’t stand a chance.

The niche occupied by these reportages is well defined. Israeli media exhibits the cultural logic of postmodernity (Featherstone Consumer Culture and Postmodernism 42) and adopt futurism and carnivalesque spectacle as favourite themes. Combined with the contemporary cultural fascination with Japan, the media’s voyeuristic peeps at extreme aspects of the Japanese popular culture have thus become a mode of entertainment.

Domestication and (Re)Production of “Japanese” Images in the Israeli Popular Culture

The correlation between the media narratives that I am describing and consumer trends of popular culture in Israel emphasises even more the positioning of Japan as a commodity that is entertaining in many ways. From the roaring popularity of Japanese restaurants, sushi bars and restaurants offering a fusion of Japanese and other ethnic cuisines in postmodern settings to Japanese-inspired street fashion with manga prints, geta-like shoes and home goods designed with a Japanese flair or at least decorated with Japanese script, Japanese-inspired style (even after it has been fully domesticated, re-invented and re-imagined) is stylish fun.

Tel Aviv, capital of the Israeli cultural avant-garde, offers Japanese spas and hair and beauty salons. Recently there has even been an attempt to introduce “Body Sushi” (a feast of sushi served on the body of a naked young woman), allegedly imported directly from Japan. When interviewed on Israeli radio, the introducer of this culinary novelty – himself the owner of a restaurant – having being criticised for using the female body as an object, retorted that he had spent many years in Japan and that Body Sushi has a long tradition in Japan and should be understood in its
original cultural context. He continued to say that it could very well be that such a cultural experience was too early for the (more conservative) Israeli culture.  

As suggested by the marketing of beautification and physical-health enhancement products as Japanese, as well as by the interview above, a significant portion of the consumable material and symbolic “Japanese Experience” in the Israeli popular culture is sensual, sensuous, erotic or futuristically decadent. This is a classic reproduction of Orientalist imagery. Exotification is never far removed from sensualist and erotic fantasies. Using distant places as metaphors for the displacement of sexuality outlawed or repressed at home has always been a dominant subtext of the Orientalist discourse (Allison “Memoirs of the Orient”).

The recent translation of the popular fiction book by English writer Peter Tasker, *Samurai Boogie* (2001), for example, unfolds the erotic adventures of Kazuo Mori, a semi-unemployed private detective who investigates the murder of a high official in the Japanese Ministry of Health. During one of the scenes the detective steals into the house of the deceased and is trapped into a scene he was not supposed to witness. The widow, a high-class woman, returns home with her ikebana teacher. When the teacher sends her off to take a hot bath in preparation for the class, Mori does not understand what kind of ikebana lesson requires such preparation. He picks the right moment and then peeps into the room:

He is surprised. Here are the reasons, in ascending order of impact. First: the woman is naked. Second: she is inside the room’s alcove, the place where you expect to see a ceramic bowl or a painted screen. Third: she is upside down, back against the wall, legs folded over her head. Fourth: there is something between her scissoring thighs, something that the sensei is leaning forward to adjust.

Satisfied, he moves away, giving Mori an open view. What he sees: Leaves, twigs, grasses, two tulips bobbing gently on their long stems. (51)

This passage could have been disregarded as pulp fiction had the author not been marketed as having intimate knowledge of the Japanese culture resulting from his long sojourn in Japan. Since the author is actively marketed in this way, readers are more prone to accept what he writes as an accurate picture of end-of-the-century Japan. The marketed persona of Peter Tasker authenticates the text, transforming it from simple entertainment to a more reliable account of contemporary Japan.

Writing about the erotic fantasy that she deems essential to the popularity of Arthur Golden’s *Memoirs of a Geisha* – a much more successful best seller than *Samurai Boogie* both in the United States and Israel – Allison argues that the ethnographic credibility of the book creates a feeling of convergence between entertainment and learning about the Japanese culture (Allison “Memoirs of the Orient” 396–397). It gives the readers the liberating legitimisation to participate in engaging sexual fantasies otherwise hard to excuse. In a way, the previously mentioned restaurant owner who was having trouble excusing his endeavour to introduce Body Sushi to Israel, tried to adopt a similar strategy. Body Sushi, anchored in a long tradition attested by his own Japan-experienced persona, should be
accepted, according to him, as an authentic cultural experience and not simply as erotic fun.

Export of the Japanese Popular Culture to Israel

Not everything in the Israeli popular consumption of Japanese culture is Israeli- or American-made. Japan has been known for decades as a producer and exporter of high-quality consumer technology. More relevant for this paper, however, is the export to Israel of Japanese products that are more culturally specific, such as television shows, animation and fashion. These products are often marketed or interpreted by the Israeli media as reflecting a distinctive Japanese way of life, reinforcing the image of Japan as an entertaining and exotic place.

During the second half of the 1990s, Japanese animation (anime) and its by-products became an established genre in the global market, making Japan a leader in the marketplace of entertainment goods for children (Iwabuchi “Marketing ‘Japan’” 177). Interestingly, when comparing the more recent Japanese anime hits in Israel – such as Pokemon, Digimon, Yu-Gi-Ö and Sakura – with the older generations’ – such as 3000 Leagues in Search of Mother (Nippon Animation 1976) and Nils Holgerson (Animation Production Pierrot 1980) – contemporary plots and characters are original and more suggestive than ever before of a location somewhere in East Asia. More importantly, at least from the time Pokemon was released in the Israeli market (1999), Japanese anime for children are actively marketed in Israel as “made in Japan”.

A much more esoteric animation genre in Israel is Japanese pornographic animation labelled inside (and outside) of Japan hentai (lecherous). Nevertheless, the editors of Globs, the leading Israeli business newspaper, thought an article on the subject might interest their readership. In it, Japanese pornographic animation is described as follows:

The closest experience to surfing the Internet is the Japanese kabuki theatre. Time stretches endlessly, the plot jumps incoherently from here to there, and during the whole performance one hears strident growls and sounds similar to those of a modem. Since the average kabuki performance lasts about nine hours (more or less a surfing day on the Internet), the Japanese culture preferred displaying as its technological avant-garde a more rhythmic artistic genre: hentai, the art of graphic animation [...] As a matter of fact it [hentai] is not real porn but rather something reminiscent of “The Hobbit: a naked version”. The combination of eroticism, sadism and faces that seem to have been taken from kids’ animation expresses to the point the spirit of the genre – some would argue the spirit of the Japanese culture. Even the wildest imagination is painted accurately to the last detail. Cruelty has optimistic, glowing colours, and pornography is more about colour and rhythmic exercises. (Cohen)
Just like more “traditional” forms of the Japanese culture in the classical Orientalist discourse about Japan (Moeran), such as the sumo wrestler, the geisha or, in this case, the kabuki theatre, Japanese pornographic animation is presented as if it embodies the spirit of Japan’s unique culture. Japanese culture is objectified and exotified as a highly sophisticated and futuristic culture concerned with form, rhythm and colour rather than with warm and more familiar human emotions.

It is only recently (2003) that the Israeli cable-television channel Arutz Hahaim Hatovim bought one of the most popular Japanese television shows outside of Japan, Iron Chef. Iron Chef is the first Japanese television show that targets adults to be released in Israel. The show was launched in Japan in 1993, and its international version was aired on the US cable-television channel Food Network beginning in 1999. The host of the show plays an eccentric gourmet who lives in a castle with his three “Iron Chefs”, each of whom represents the finest of a specific cuisine – Chinese, Japanese or French. A guest, usually a well-established chef, challenges one Iron Chef and thus a competition between the two unfolds. The show is edited with replays of amazing culinary tricks using extraordinary camera angles. The dramatic though humorous beauty of the studio, together with the performers’ seriousness, turns it into an extreme experience of television entertainment. As described by an Israeli television critic: “The extravagant set, the cooking arena called ‘the kitchen stadium’, produces a comic effect, almost grotesque, that casts a non-real atmosphere. Such a cooking show was never seen before. The huge differences between this show and British cooking shows [that are fairly common on Israeli television] and Israeli ones are fascinating” (Alfer). By comparing Iron Chef with British and Israeli cooking shows, the writer is clearly positioning Iron Chef as a category of its own. The author highly recommends Iron Chef as great fun to watch and further posits that “a television program like Iron Chef could have been produced only in Japan”. Finally, rather than concluding that this show is television entertainment at its best, the writer ignores the self-referential humour of the show, which he had pointed to earlier, and reproduces one of the better-known stereotypes of a traditional ritualistic and over-serious Japan by concluding that “[food in Iron Chef is transformed into] the most difficult ritual assignment”.

Marketing Contemporary Japanese “Cultural Fragrance” to Israel

Iwabuchi describes how for many years the exporting strategy for Japanese audiovisual cultural products has been effacing their Japanese origins (Iwabuchi “Marketing ‘Japan’” 167–68; Recentering Globalization 24–35). The major audiovisual products Japan exports overseas – consumer technologies, comics, cartoons, and computer and video games – may be characterised as “culturally odourless” (a creative translation of the Japanese term mukokuseki, literally meaning “no citizenship”). These cultural products present an imagery in which the bodily and ethnic characteristics of the Japanese are erased or softened – hence their international success. Iwabuchi further argues that this is particularly evident in
Japanese animation where the characters, for the most part, do not look Japanese. For many years, Japanese animation industries adopted the assumption that the non-Japanese-ness of characters works to their advantage when aiming at the global market.

However, since the time *Pokemon* was released to the international market, there has been a noticeable shift from the post-war policy of culturally neutralising exported anime to assure their marketability (Allison “Portable Monsters” 383). The recent Japanese anime hits are not only “fragrantly Japanese” (to follow Iwabuchi’s terminology) they are also actively marketed as Japanese. Even if the characters do not look Japanese, kids are taught to recognise them and adore them as Japanese. The same global marketing strategy that emphasises the Japanese identity of cultural products is applied beyond anime and children’s culture. The Japanese producers of the international version of *Iron Chef*, for example, obviously did not care about obscuring the Japanese origin of the show. On the contrary, the show is dubbed in an English that keeps as much proximity as possible to the Japanese version. The English-speaking actors imitate quite successfully much of the original Japanese intonation and meta-linguistic sounds. Occasionally, the original Japanese sound track is even retained while the foreign audience is provided with subtitles only.

The variety of Japanese popular culture products in Israel is limited. Contemporary Japanese pop idols and television dramas, for example, are totally non-existent in Israel. The Japanese popular cultural products that are exported to Israel are those that are “fragrantly Japanese”, in other words, fragrantly different. These are enjoyable, entertaining cultural products that are cool in an unorthodox way. From *Hello Kitty* to *tamagotchi*, *Pokemon*, *hentai manga*, anime, sushi bars, *Iron Chef* and Japanese street and high fashion, Japanese cool is extremely well designed, sometimes whimsical and always challenges the banality of everyday life in a non-aggressive, imaginative and fun way.

The Japanese popular-culture products available in Israel reflect patterns of selection and marketing strategies of global distributors and local importers that capitalise on the emerging image of Japanese cool. Japanese cool evokes the image of an urban postmodern hedonism. In Japan this hedonistic cool reflects an *esprit du temps* of a popular culture that is deeply concerned with elegance, eroticism, emotions and the body; it is expressed through play with forms and the intrusion of an objectified “futile”, non-utilitarian, into daily life (Clammer 162). In Israel the appeal of this hedonistic cool is in its entertaining quality as well as its association with the new label of the exotic “Japanese postmodern play aesthetics” (Allison “Portable Monsters” 383). The growing demand in the global market for “cool Japan” products stimulates the production of more supply.

Cool Japan is actively produced and promoted in Japan not only through products embodying it that are devised by invisible producers of Japanese popular culture, but also by the public figures of more visible Japanese producers of popular culture. Not surprisingly, after being embraced by global distributors, some of these producers become international promoters and interpreters of the weird yet very cool Japanese
contemporary culture. “We don’t have any religion”, tells pop artist Murakami Takashi to the Japanese art magazine BT, “we just need the big power of entertainment” (cited in McGray). For most Japanese people in their everyday life and struggles this is of course an over-exaggeration and a manipulative description of an urban cultural space in which playful popular culture and its artefacts are but one aspect. Yet, Murakami critically fleshes out that same esprit du temps that is becoming synonymous with contemporary Japanese urban culture. What really sets Murakami apart from other contemporary Japanese artists active on the global arena is his (by now) established position as an interpreter and cultural critic of post-war Japanese culture. Since 2001, Murakami has curated three high profile international instalments known as the “Superflat Trilogy”, in Los Angeles (2001), Paris (2002) and New York (2005). In the first two instalments Murakami explored the relations between Japanese avant-garde art, manga, anime and their historical predecessor Ukiyo-e woodblocks prints. In the last instalment, Murakami, moved to considering the post-war socio-cultural and political contexts that shaped Japan’s popular culture forms and contemporary Japanese art (Murakami viii). These instalments have given considerable global exposure to contemporary ultra-cool Japanese high and popular visual arts.

Murakami’s pop art itself, recognised by his anime-like characters, can similarly be read as a reflexive critique on the Japanese post-war culture. But Murakami, who is also highly involved in the production of marketable consumer goods, fuels these same cultural tendencies that are the subject of his criticism. Murakami’s “consumer art” blurs the cultural boundaries between fine art, popular art, and consumer culture and profits from the domestic and global appeal of Japan’s contemporary popular culture forms. Arguably, Murakami – an artist with explicit and declared commercial aspirations and whose products are very much for export (Porter) – actively participates, for commercial ends, in the local and global dissemination and reproduction of “cool Japan”.

While Murakami is known mostly among art aficionados in Israel, a true contemporary icon of the Japanese popular culture in Israel is movie director, actor and Japanese television star Kitano Takeshi. Kitano is the best-known export of the contemporary Japanese film industry. Debuting his international career as a supporting actor in Nagisa Oshima’s Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence (1983), until 1997 Takeshi Kitano was hardly known in Israel. That year, the movie Fire Works (Hanabi), which Kitano wrote, directed and in which he plays the leading role, won a Golden Lion award at the Venice Film Festival and made him an acclaimed artist whose movies are sure candidates for global distribution. As a scriptwriter and director, he has since been producing amazing and even extravagant visuals of contemporary and traditional Japan (e.g. Kikujiro 1999; Zatoichi 2003). Kitano has also been creating cinematic experiences that constantly investigate the boundaries between reality and imagination (e.g. Kikujiro 1999) and past and present (e.g. Dolls 2002), using, uninhibitedly, manga-inspired stylisation (e.g. Brother 2000). As an actor he participated in highly visual and frantic, myth-abolishing cruel tales of
feudal Japan (e.g. Nagisa Oshima, *Gohatto* 1999) and futuristic Japan (e.g. Kinji Fukasaku, *Battle Royale* 2000). Kitano has become, in the Israeli imagination, a personification of the puzzling postmodern Japanese popular culture that challenges the cultural limits of past, present, reality, virtual reality and imagination through constant self-reference and simulacra, and is totally uninhibited and sweepingly entertaining. Israeli critics love to love his films and his persona for exactly that (see Shuv).

Such self-exotifying messages conveyed by Japanese brokers of the Japanese popular culture have a huge impact on the cultural imagery of Japan. It has been argued before that the almost obsessive processes of self-presentation and self-definition in Japan are producing self-Orientalising and self-exotifying discourses (Creighton 53; Goldstein-Gidoni “Yapan ze kan” 206; Ivy; Martinez; Miller 209–211). Until recently these discourses emphasised “traditional” cultural elements that were resurrected (Moeran 95), (re)invented (Goldstein-Gidoni *Packaged Japaneseness*) and harnessed to create compelling interpretations of a unique and modern Japanese culture. I would like to point to a new self-Orientalising narrative formulated within the Japanese contemporary popular culture that emphasises postmodern futuristic Japanese experiences in which traditional elements are stylistic points of reference at most. While Miller uses the term “reverse-Orientalism” to describe an internal form of Orientalisation – conducted by Japanese on themselves (209–211), Moeran suggests the term “counter-Orientalism” to describe the way Japanese use a self-mythologising narrative to explain themselves to others and reverse the hierarchical world order promoted by Western hegemony (95). The contemporary self-Orientalising discourse that I have described is projected both inside and outside of Japan. It diligently maintains the irreducible Otherness of Japan found in other self-Orientalising discourses on Japan; it lacks, however, the insuppressible paranoid urge of proving Japan’s superiority over the West. This is not to say that the producers of this discourse are indifferent to its resonance. On the contrary, it is more than anything else a discourse that is meant to be provocatively luring. Producers of the Japanese popular culture formulate it not for nationalistic political purposes but for producing business opportunities in Japan and in order to protect and enhance their interests in the global economy (Thomas 145).

Israel and the Cultural Borders of the Orientalist Discourse

The Orientalist imagery of Japan is more than a set of racial stereotypes. It is a discourse on cultural domination that echoes the political, economic and cultural power relations between the West and Japan. The Western media and popular-culture industries have been major proponents of this imagery, since they force information into standardised moulds and thus reinforce the conventions by which the Orient is viewed (Moeran 108; Said 26). In the post-war period, with the rise of US hegemony, the global dissemination of American popular-culture and media products has entailed a distribution of Orientalist images of Japan to cultures that are peripheral or
even irrelevant to the shared history of the “West” and “Japan”. Israel is a good example of such transference of knowledge since it has been for many years a consumer of imported representations of Japan from US global distributors of media content. It is thus that the changes in the images of Japan in the Israeli media have generally followed trends in the Euro-American popular Orientalist imagery of Japan.10 The rise of Japan’s global symbolic power in the past decade has so far served to reinforce the current production of a new chapter in the history of Oriental images of Japan.

The import and reproduction of this imagery in Israel can be interpreted as confirming the “imperialistic thesis” of transnational flows that suggests a simplistic transference of messages and ideologies from a dominant centre to its peripheries, where they are passively absorbed (Iwabuchi Recentering Globalization 39). Nevertheless, rather than being consumed simply as a collection of second-hand stereotypes, the domestication of these images in Israel has been imbued with a commonsensical consent on a world division in which Israel belongs with the rational, democratic, virtuous and humane “West”.11 This consent is very visible in the contemporary Israeli-made media portrayal of Japanese culture. In these texts “Japan” and the “West” are often boldly juxtaposed along with frequent by-the-way references to the Western identity of Israel. One example should suffice to illustrate my point. In the TimeOut Tel Aviv special project on Japan, one of the articles examines the contemporary Japanese film industry and its global influence (Handelman Ben-Knaan and Fishler). The authors start by arguing that the Japanese influence on the Hollywood movie industry (from The Matrix trilogy to samurai movies and anime-inspired styles) is evident to the point that “It seems that the West is becoming more Japanese than Japan”. “However”, the authors continue a few lines later, “there are those issues in which the ocean separating the US and Japan is still huge”. The article argues that an extreme combination of astonishing violence, sadistic and perverted sexuality, a provocative dialogue between animation and live movies, and stylistic and cold photography make the Japanese movie industry unique and enigmatic. In their conclusion, the authors praise film director Quentin Tarantino, who has understood the essence of the contemporary Japanese movie industry, and in his recent film Kill Bill Vol. 1 (2003) “has sent us, ignorant Gaijins [“foreigners” in Japanese] of the West, to look towards Japan and understand what the hell is going on there” [my italics]. The distance between Japan and the West is portrayed visually in the metaphor of the ocean, and the authors’ equation of the West with the United States and Israel could not have been clearer.

The consent over the Western-ness of Israel has by now permeated Israeli society to the point that its assertion is natural and often invisible. Although Israel is located in the heart of the Middle East and boasts a Mediterranean culture influenced by Middle Eastern food, music and more, the Euro-American origin of many of the Jewish immigrants who settled in Israel before and after it became an independent political entity in 1948, its status as the sole non-Muslim country in the region and especially its ongoing political conflict with the surrounding Arab countries as well as the
colonialist conflict with the Palestinians have isolated it socially and politically in its geographic environment. The pro-Israeli rhetoric on the regional political dispute often adheres to a configuration that, to quote Said (26–27), differentiates between the “freedom-loving” and “democratic” Israel and its surrounding “totalitarian” and “terrorising” Oriental Arab countries. The “Western-ness” of Israel has come to signify its modernity, its political and economic superiority over the Arab world and its cultural affinity with its Western military and political allies – the United States being the predominant one.12

The ultimate context of the domestication and reproduction of Orientalist images of Japan in Israel therefore goes beyond the indigenisation of racial hierarchies and cultural differences. It is the local production of a global geo-cultural division in which the geographic borders of the Euro-American West are assertively re-mapped to include Israel.

Conclusion: Globalisation and the Production of Cultural Imageries

Japan is today an independent globalisation centre with its own peripheries among a multiplicity of globalisation centres (Befu). As centres multiply, move and overlap with one other, producing ever more complex and disjunctive economic, cultural and political intercultural flows (Appadurai), the different logic of global cultural influence between different globalisation centres and their different peripheries becomes apparent. Mathews describes a global environment in which cultures – defined as “information and identities available from the global cultural super-market” – are relatively easy to access (4). Goldstein-Gidoni argues that the so-called open global environment is in fact rather restricted because information and identities are subject to manipulation and complex cultural production processes, as is very evident in the processes of cultural appropriation she describes (“Producers of ‘Japan’ in Israel”). I have suggested another perspective that reinforces the latter view, pointing to the ways cultural imageries in the globalising environment are produced and structured in pre-formulated moulds, in this case a dislocated Orientalistic discourse that maintains the established world order.

According to Smith, “images [of cultures in the globalising environment] do not derive from or descend upon mute and passive populations on whose tabula rasa they inscribe themselves. Instead, they invariably express [local collective] identities which historical circumstances have formed” (179). He further writes that these are not collective identities in the sense of similar repetitive patterns of life and activity, but rather are a denominator of “those feelings and values in respect of a sense of continuity, shared memories and a sense of common destiny of a given unit of population which has had common experiences and cultural attributes”. This study shows how through the domestication and reproduction of Oriental images of Japan in Israel, a “sense of continuity” is reproduced, serving as a stabilizer and consolidator to an Israeli collective identity that continuously seeks to define itself
as part of the larger cultural and political heritage and prospects of the Euro-American “West”.

Accelerated globalisation processes in the past decade have brought about the shrinking of global distances and the rise of Japan’s symbolic cultural power but not the de-exotification of the Oriental Japan, and it does not seem as if this de-exotification is about to happen. The well-established configuration of the dramatic difference between “Japan” and the “West” has transcended the Japan-Euro-American power structure a long time ago. Orientalism as a discourse of knowledge is by now a globally accepted reference point in defining cross-cultural similarities and differences, and a high-selling marketing strategy that stimulates transnational cultural flows and produces business opportunities.

Notes

[1] The title of this paper is a metaphoric reproduction of the slogan used by Japanese to describe the 1920s in Japan as the era of “eroticism, grotesqueness and nonsense” (ero, guro, nonsensu). In using this slogan as the title of this paper I do not mean to suggest that history repeats itself, but that cultural imageries can sometimes become marked features of a society and powerful symbols of an era.

[2] All translations from Hebrew in this paper are the author’s.

[3] The tamagotchi is a take-along digital pet.

[4] Seen on the May 2002 broadcast of Roim Olam Magazine, a weekly survey of current events around the world produced by First Channel, Israeli public TV.

[5] Yu-Gi-Ô is the protagonist of a hit anime series produced by Asahi TV (starting in 1998). The series has become the inspiration for a large range of collectibles, card games, video games, etc.

[6] This article was the subject of a TIME Asia cover story and a profile in the “Year in Ideas” issue of The New York Times Magazine, and it was reprinted in a number of international publications, including the Guardian (UK) and Chô Kôron (Japan), suggesting the huge impact it had on public opinion both inside and outside of Japan.


[8] On the enhancement of an everyday hedonism in postmodernity, see Maffesoli.

[9] On the concept of the esprit du temps in Maffesoli’s thought, see also Shields (4).

[10] For an account of the changes in the images of Japan in the US popular imagery during the twentieth century, see Raz and Raz 1996.


[12] Naoki Sakai (476–77) reminds us that onto the geography of the “East” and “West” are mapped the distinctions between “pre-modern” and “modern” and between the superiority of the “West” and the relative inferiority of the “Orient”.

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