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**Kim Brandt, *Kingdom of Beauty: Mingei and the Politics of Folk Art in Imperial Japan*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007. 320 pp. ISBN 978-0822340003 (paperback), \$24.95.**

*Reviewed by Susan Lee*

As its title indicates, historian Kim Brandt's *Kingdom of Beauty: Mingei and the Politics of Folk Art in Imperial Japan* is an examination of the Mingei movement and its active deployment and complicity in the political maneuverings of a colonially ambitious Japan during the interwar era. *Mingei* was a neologism coined in the mid-1920s by Yanagi Muneyoshi (1889–1961) and soon developed into a theory and institution that privileged the beauty of folk-craft made by unknown craftsmen of rural Japan as the supreme expression of an innately native aesthetic. The book springs from the research and analysis of the author's Ph.D. dissertation, "The Folk-Craft Movement in Early Showa Japan, 1925–1945" (Columbia University, 1996) and constitutes a welcome addition to critically rigorous examinations of the Mingei phenomenon that have appeared in the past two decades.<sup>1</sup>

According to the author, what distinguishes *Kingdom of Beauty* from other studies of Japanese folk-craft is her attempt to expand the discourse on Mingei by widening the focus away from Yanagi, the canonized aesthetic genius and the movement's putative "founder." Brandt effectively demonstrates that the complex of concepts and values connected to Mingei cannot be attributed to one man nor limited within the bounds of an aesthetic theory. Contrary to the arguments of the standard narrative, not only were many more individuals, as well as institutions, involved in the

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<sup>1</sup> Prominent publications in the English language are Brian Moeran's *Folk Art Potters of Japan: Beyond an Anthropology of Aesthetics* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), itself a reworking of an earlier publication, *Lost Innocence: Folk Craft Potters of Onta, Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), and Yuko Kikuchi's *Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2004). Scholars writing in Japanese have included Takenaka Hitoshi, *Yanagi Sōetsu, mingei, shakai riron: karuchraru sutadizu no kokoromi* (Tokyo: Akashi shoten, 1999) and Hamada Takuji, *Mingei undō to chiiki bunka: mintō sanchi no bunka chirigaku* (Tokyo: Shibunkaku, 2006).

far-reaching movement, the concept of Mingei wielded influence in state policy within and without the national boundaries and mobilized reforms to daily life patterns and habits of the Japanese and “East Asian” peoples. Furthermore, Mingei served as an effective tool for Japan in her colonialist projects.

Brandt focuses on the time span between 1920 and 1945 as she identifies distinct phases in which the concept of Mingei and the scope of its meanings shifted in dramatic ways. Chronologically organized, Chapter 1 examines the activities of Korean pottery enthusiasts Yanagi, Asakawa Noritaka (1884–1964), and Akaboshi Gorō (1897–?) in the mid-1910s to mid-1920s. These men’s appraisals of Koryo (935–1392) and Choson (1392–1910) dynasty ceramics earned them positions of authority in the world of ceramics connoisseurship; their analyses and ruminations also served as the building blocks of a new theory of folk-craft. Chapter 2 describes the “process” (p. 38) of the “defining and redefining of Mingei” that occurred over the span from the late 1920s to the early 1930s.

As the author argues, in contradiction to the conventional canonization of the “Mingei triumvirate” of Yanagi, Hamada Shōji (1894–1978), and Kawai Kanjirō (1890–1966) as the master aesthetes who “discovered” the true value of Japanese folk-craft in the mid-1920s, the concept of Mingei was constituted over many years and “within a larger social and cultural context” (p. 39). In fact, it wasn’t merely the domestic environment, but broader fields in which many different voices in various places of the world were concerned with the role of art in rapidly changing modes of life. The discovery of folk art issued from the “nineteenth-century impulse to idealize the national past” and constituted an “antimodernist reaction against urban industrialization” (p. 1); William Morris (1834–1896), John Ruskin (1819–1900), and the British Arts and Crafts movement are just a few examples of the world-wide phenomenon. However, in the Japanese case, activists such as Yanagi saw in valorization of the “folk” a means not only to overcome the perceived ills of modernity but also an effective instrument in the effort to stem domination by imperialist Western powers.

In Chapter 3, Brandt discusses recognizably sharp changes in the ways Mingei was further redefined (evident in the newly coined term “new Mingei” or *shin Mingei*). Changes were effected in production and consumption of Mingei as it began to be marketed to a wider group of middle-class consumers. With Chapters 4 and 5, the author focuses on the relationship between Mingei activism and institutions complicit in the

state's colonialist projects. The first of these final chapters looks at domestic efforts to cultivate what was perceived as a truly native way of life (*seikatsu bunka* or "daily life culture"), a step in the fascist effort to cultivate a sense of ethno-national unity. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the state didn't just recognize "the potential for an updated national aesthetic" (p. 5), but they saw in Mingei a means to reform everyday behavior. The "idealized vision of rural productivity" (p. 136) and the "social harmony of premodern communal forms" (p. 126) imagined and celebrated in the theory of Mingei was actively promoted by the state as the style of living (*seikatsu bunka*) to be adopted by all Japanese. The latter chapter takes the reader to Korea, north China, Manchukuo, and Okinawa as Mingei activists became involved in the construction of a "Greater East Asian culture" (*Dai tōa bunka no kensetsu*) (p. 196); the imagined community of "East Asians" fit the rationale for Japanese domination.

*Kingdom of Beauty* makes a valuable contribution to the critical examination of folk cultural discourses in Japan in the interwar era. While discovery of the folk and its deployment in modernist and antimodernist projects is evidenced in many parts of the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the import of the discourse in Japan and its long life and breadth of influence is noteworthy. Brandt does an excellent job of highlighting significant events within the twenty-five-year span that is the focus of her study. The narrowed boundaries of her examination allows her to conduct a historically grounded analysis of the movement; the reach of Mingei ideas and its associations with other movements with shared conceptual and political foundations can easily allow the material to become unwieldy.

However, at certain points in her discussion, widening the context of her analyses may have yielded intriguing insights. For example, a brief discussion on how the movement compared to and intersected with similar projects (such as the proletarian arts movements of the 1920s and 1930s) would have been welcome. The flow of ideas, objects, and people across national boundaries marked both phenomena. Many non-Japanese activists saw in Mingei and proletarian literature and art a means to resist Japanese colonialism. How were the concepts underlying the theory so malleable to serve such varying ends? Furthermore, *Kingdom of Beauty* could have further explored the many fascinating areas of ambivalence both in the theorization and practice of Mingei production and promotion. What of the conflicts between its fundamental tenet of privileging the unknown craftsman and the vital role of celebrity "artist" potters like Hamada Shōji?

The author could also have done a better job of recognizing the contributions of scholars such as Moeran, Kikuchi, Takenaka, and Hamada to the recent field of literature on Mingei, thereby engaging with salient issues within this body of scholarship. In sum, however, Brandt's *Kingdom of Beauty* is a well-written and thoughtful addition to the important phenomenon of the global concern with the "folk" and the significant political and cultural uses the concept yielded (in case of Japan, continues to yield) to various agents in recent history.

**J. Charles Schencking, *Making Waves: Politics, Propaganda, and the Emergence of the Japanese Navy 1868–1922*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005. 283 pp. ISBN: 978-0804749770 (hardcover), \$60.00.**

Reviewed by Daniel A. Métraux

Any visitor to Tokyo at the beginning of the Meiji Period (1868–1912) would have stared in disbelief if told that Japan would become one of the world's great naval powers in less than half a century. Early Meiji Japan was a poor agricultural state with a small weak army and no navy to speak of. The effort by the Satsuma and Choshu domains and their allies to overthrow the Tokugawa shogunate in the late 1860s was accomplished by army units with only marginal naval support. Strategic concerns of the new Meiji governments in its early years revolved around consolidating control and suppressing potential armed rebellions at home rather than trying to project Japan's power overseas. As author J. Charles Schencking, a professor of Japanese history at the University of Melbourne, notes that due to the seclusionist policies of the Edo period (1600–1868) “the Meiji government...inherited neither a spirited naval tradition nor state-of-the-art equipment to serve as the foundation for future naval development” (2).

Despite this rather inauspicious beginning, by the time of the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), Japan had developed a powerful enough navy to demolish the Russian navy. By the early 1920s, Japan possessed the third largest naval fleet in the world which its military successes in the Sino-Japanese (1894–1895), Russo-Japanese Wars, and World War I commanded respect both in Japan and abroad. Naval expansion accelerated in the 1920s and 1930s despite warnings from some quarters that in a naval race Japan could never effectively compete with the vast resources of the United States and that southward expansion might precipitate a conflict with the Americans, the British or other Western powers. By 1938, Japanese military spending reached an astounding 70 percent of Japan's total overall expenditures.

Professor Schencking's goal is to analyze the growth of Japan's navy into a major world force. This expansion required not only access to the most modern naval technology, but also the know-how and large amount of money needed to sustain this growth. Acquiring funding required that naval leaders develop strong political skills and useful political alliances. Schencking writes:

Though often overlooked by military historians interested in battles or military hardware, navies required vast amounts of annual funding to purchase, construct and maintain warships, land-based infrastructure, naval institutions, and personnel. To fund such programs, admirals in navies around the globe, but particularly those in countries with newly emerging navies that possessed no naval tradition to build upon, found it necessary to implement imaginative and persuasive means to persuade politicians and the public to support the expensive cause of naval development. In doing so, navies significantly altered politics, empire and society in pursuit of their narrower and more parochial concerns, namely larger budgets. Nowhere was this more evident than in Japan. Moreover, owing to Japan's constitution, nowhere did a military service exhibit a greater ability to shape national policies, society and empire than in Japan. (5)

Japan's military expansion came a century ago when other major powers were also building up their armies and navies. Political power in Japan in the early twentieth century began to shift away from the narrow oligarchy that had guided Japan through the earlier years of the Meiji era and into Japanese politicians and parties in the Diet. Having to work with Japan's elected politicians necessitated the formation of political alliances, and fortunately for naval leaders, they found beneficial allies in the Seiyūkai political party, the chief parliamentary force in late Meiji and early Taishō (1912–1926) periods:

The Seiyūkai, under the cabinets of Yamamoto, Hara and Saionji, supported naval expansion primarily because of the political stability that working with the navy brought to politics and also because party leaders quickly realized the need to accommodate and work constructively with non-party elites in order to gain further access to positions of power and influence, above all the prime ministership. With political stability and an important nonparty elite ally, the Seiyūkai obtained greater power, and once in a position of elite-level influence, implemented policies their leaders desired and programs they coveted geared toward further

increasing party power....It was a party of pragmatic opportunists, a trait the Seiyūkai shared with the navy. (225)

Naval leaders worked hard to cultivate public support for its major expansion programs. Voters who are impressed with the navy and imbued with a sense of nationalism might be inclined to vote for politicians and a party that supported a growing naval program. The navy became very adept at producing pro-navy propaganda and vast displays of pageantry including flotillas of ships on Tokyo Harbor. Mastering the art of winning political and popular support opened the way for the necessary funding for a bigger and more modern navy.

Professor Schencking's *Making Waves* is an impressive scholarly achievement. This work is especially important because there have been very few published works in the West on the building of Japan's modern navy. The author's key contribution here is his study of the political process involved that made this expansion possible. In this sense, it is truly a piece of groundbreaking scholarship. Although Schencking has an occasional penchant for meandering sentences that seem to go on forever, his writing is generally lucid and reader-friendly. His research is based on an impressive body of research materials. In short, *Making Waves* is a masterpiece that belongs on the shelves of every major university library.



**Walter A. Skya, *Japan's Holy War: The Ideology of Radical Shinto Ultrationalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009. 385 pp. ISBN 978-0822344230 (paperback), \$26.95.**

*Reviewed by Daniel A. Métraux*

Even though I have studied, researched, and taught modern Japanese history for over four decades, one of the great mysteries I have encountered is the true essence of the fanatical nationalism that appeared in Japan in the late years of the Meiji era and became a major force from the late 1920s to the end of World War II. Numerous scholars have written about various aspects of this nationalism, but it is very difficult to find a coherent study that attempts a very in-depth comprehensive view of this phenomenon. Perhaps the closest more popular study is George Wilson's seminal work, *Radical Nationalist in Japan: Kita Ikki 1883–1937*, but this book concentrates almost entirely on the life and thought of just one man. The great benefit of Walter Skya's *Japan's Holy War: The Ideology of Radical Shinto Ultrationalism* is that while there is a very excellent chapter on Ikki that updates Wilson's now-outdated book, Skya looks at the whole panorama of Japanese fascism.

Many Western scholars often carelessly lump Japanese "fascism" with that of Germany or Italy, but even a superficial study of Japanese nationalism before World War II reveals vast differences. Walter A. Skya, a Visiting Assistant Professor of History at Colby College, asserts that this nationalism evolved from a fundamentalist Shinto movement promoted by a group of writers in the late 1800s and early 1900s. This ultrationalism focused on the unique qualities of Japan and suggested the Emperor of Japan was sacred and that Japan possessed a divine oneness that made it superior to other states.

Skya finds many parallels between this Shinto-based ultrationalism and contemporary radical Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. The strong reaction of some Japanese nationalists to their nation's adoption of many Western ideas, such as liberal democracy and socialism, is somewhat similar to the ideology of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the subsequent growth of radical Islam. Skya notes that this "transformation of the ideology of State Shinto in contestation with liberal democracy and socialism strongly suggests that creeping democracy and the secularization of the political order in Japan in the early twentieth century were the principal factors responsible for breeding terrorism and radicalism,

a political trajectory from secularism to religious fundamentalism similar...[to Iran]...and in the broader radicalization of much of the Islamic world” (p. 10).

Skya’s main thesis is that there was a major shift in the thinking and direction of State Shinto in the Taishō and early Showa eras. He explains that “while the fundamental structures of the Meiji state remained largely intact, a hidden revolution in the realm of religious thought and state ideology had taken place...By the end of the 1930s, extreme nationalists had taken over the state by employing radical religious fundamentalist ideas to sublimate the advocates of all competing ideologies” (p. 12). There were, of course, many Japanese with competing ideologies who tried to contest the moves of the ultranationalists, but by the end of the 1930s, these extremists had succeeded in their mission to take over the state and to crush the advocates of competing ideologies.

Part of the blame, Skya contends, for this development was in fact the Meiji constitution itself. Its framers refused to put in any balance of power institutions that are found in many Western constitutions. All power was put in the hands of the Emperor, so whichever group dominated the core of the government in effect could dispose of any opposition. The constitution made the office of Prime Minister fairly weak and the military an independent branch subject only to the control of the Emperor. Thus, no government could be formed without the consent of the military, which in turn could embark on military adventures without any checks imposed by the Prime Minister or any other branch of government.

Another of Skya’s key themes pertains to the worldview of Shinto ultra-nationalists. Their goal was the establishment of a new world order based on the concept of Japanese imperial rule that was to replace the Wilsonian-inspired world order of “democratic internationalism” that had been institutionalized through the League of Nations after World War I. Again, it was this so-called “divine oneness” of the Japanese nation that was an attribute not shared by any other people. China, for example, was not such a nation, but rather a congregation of people who occupied a territory of no sacred significance. Therefore, the rule of the Japanese emperor should have encompassed the globe since no other people could stand on an equal level with the pure Japanese in their sacred land. Thus, the worldview of these proponents of Shinto ultranationalism was that the war that they waged in the Pacific was a civilizational and religious conflict between a divinely governed theocratic Japanese empire and a secular global order created and controlled by the imperialist nations of the West.

Here we see also a dose of pure racism where the Japanese saw themselves as being superior not only to other Asians, especially Chinese, but also to the Europeans and Americans. Clearly, the phrase, “Asia for the Asians,” meant an Asia dominated by the Japanese. Interestingly, my own research on the Asian writings of American author Jack London (1876–1916) indicates that he was one of the first Western writers in the very early 1900s who perceived this disturbing trend in the thinking of some Japanese that he met.

Skya adds that this attitude of the superiority and uniqueness of the Japanese nation made it impossible for Japan to have any true Asian allies during the war. How could they, when Japan at the time clearly saw itself as being superior to any of the nations that it was invading, and believed that Japan should be the leader of a new world order which other Asian nations should follow for their own good? “Asia for the Asians” was clearly Asia for the Japanese.

This work is an in-depth study of the ideology of State Shinto from the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution in February 1889 to the publication of the *Kokutai no hongī* [Fundamentals of Our National Polity] and Japan’s intensified invasion of China in 1937. Skya notes that “one of the significant discoveries of this study is that a transformation of the internal structure of the ideology of State Shinto did occur from a theory of constitutional monarchy inspired by Imperial Germany, established by Ito Hirobumi and his colleagues, to a theory of absolute monarchy in the political thought of Hozumi Yatsuka in the late 1890s, and then to mass-based totalitarian ideologies in the constitutional theories of Uesugi Shinkichi and Kakehi Katsuhiko in the Taisho period” (p. 10).

Skya interestingly contends that the transformation of the ideology of State Shinto came, as noted above, in a rather dramatic contestation with the proponents of liberal democracy and socialism, and that the apparent trends towards democracy and the secularization of the nation’s political order early in the last century were the main factors responsible for breeding the terrorism and radicalism of the early Showa period. This transformation saw the movement from a quasi-religious or quasi-secular state constructed by the Meiji oligarchs to Hozumi Yatsuka’s traditional conservative theocratic state of the 1890s and later to the more radicalized and militant forms of extreme religious nationalisms in the state theories of Uesugi Shinkichi and Kakehi Katsuhiko in the 1920s. Skya sees a clear parallel between these developments and the political trajectory from

secularism to fundamentalism in the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and in the broader radicalization of much of the Islamic world since the 1980s.

Skya clearly demonstrates that, despite the uniformity of its main goals, Shinto ultranationalism was a very diverse movement with many thinkers and no clear leader. The main sections of the book consist of very detailed chapters on some of the various ideas of the movement's main architects including Hozumi Yatsuka, Kita Ikki, Uesugi Shinkichi and Kakehi Katsuhiko. The chapters are especially illuminating because none of these writers and thinkers has received much publicity in the West with the possible exception of Kita Ikki – the same might be said of Japan. I have had many Japanese students in my classes here in the United States and at Doshisha Women's College in Kyoto. I have always asked these students if they are familiar with the life and writings of Kita Ikki, and I have never had one student say that she is familiar with him. It is as if he never existed.

The careful reader will come away with a very detailed overview of prewar Japanese fascism. The book is very detailed, very well written, and carefully researched. *Japan's Holy War* is a classic work that should be on the reading list of any scholar of Japanese history who wishes to gain some deeper insights into the direction of Japanese politics from the late 1920s through World War II. A Japanese translation of this book should be made as soon as possible. Skya is to be commended for this major academic achievement.

**Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. 144 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8166-5352-2 (paperback), \$17.95.**

*Reviewed by Yuki Watanabe*

Jonathan Abel and Shion Kono's translation of *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* provides intellectually rich insights into Japan's postmodern pop culture context, written in a style that is accessible to interested readers outside the academic cultural studies profession. The book's author, Hiroki Azuma, is a leading cultural and literary critic in Japan who has published extensively on Japan-specific pop culture phenomena as well as more general or abstract issues in cultural criticism and social communication theory. According to Azuma (as translated by Abel and Kono), *otaku* is "a general term referring to those who indulge in forms of subculture strongly linked to anime, video games, computers, science fiction, special-effects films, anime figures, and so on" (p. 3). This definition, however, gives far too limited sense of the implied stigma and explicitly pathological connotation Japanese speakers have in mind when they use the term today. Perhaps this missing connotation in Abel and Kono's translation of *otaku* can be explained by its rapid evolution.

*Otaku* was originally published in 2001 as an inexpensive paperback in Japan and found a wide audience despite its academic content and tone. Since there was no other book that had examined this nascent global subcultural phenomenon with such critical and theoretical perspective, *Otaku* provided a long awaited introduction to this specific area of Japanese popular culture criticism.

Azuma begins his discussion by examining *otaku* as consumers (and producers) of cultural products. He points out the similarity between current postmodern social structure and essence of *otaku* culture. Two aspects of postmodern society occupy Azuma's main focus: dysfunctional grand narratives and the omnipresence of simulacrum. He states that, with the end of modernity, grand narrative, or the cohesion of the social entirety, quickly weakens. At the same time, the distinction between originals (which includes commodities, works of art, etc.) and their copies weakens correspondingly. This gives rise to the dominance of an interim form called simulacrum. In the case of *otaku* culture, Azuma observes these trends, where the "original" takes the form of narratives by the main author (i.e., grand narrative) and copies or derivative works are played out in the

consumer culture. According to Azuma, grand narratives are boiled down to the level of the dysfunctional among the otaku consumers and replaced by what he calls grand non-narrative.

In Azuma's formulation, grand non-narrative is a collection of characters and settings, or simply a database, which provides users with a space to create their own meaning in the form of derivative works and other small narratives (i.e., simulacra). Once otaku take interest in an object, they endlessly re-arrange and play with derivative works, often circulated in the form of consumer products. For Azuma, the grand non-narrative manifests in otaku culture as database consumption. Rather than being guided by a linear narrative, otaku consumption is defined by a strategic stripping away of narrative or well-defined order, to make room for *otaku* consumers to play, replay; form, unform; create relational meaning, and then let it melt away. To illustrate this, Azuma refers to variety of anime works, which include visual novels, videogames, and popular television series. Azuma cites *Mobile Suit Gundam* as an example of grand narrative and contrasts it with *Neon Genesis Evangelion* as an example of grand non-narrative. Azuma proposes "the double layer structure" of otaku consumption, which consists of consumption in the form of derivative works and other forms of simulacra on the surface level and database consumption (i.e., grand non-narrative) on the deeper level.

Azuma's work (in Abel and Kono's rendering) ruminates extensively on the concept of "animalized" consumers in postmodern society. The term is based on an idea that Alexander Kojève, a Russian-French philosopher, uses in *Interpretation to the Reading of Hegel* (Kojève, 1969) to describe the state of American consumers in the post-WWII. Kojève interprets Hegel as positing that humans define their humanity by negating their environment, and refers to American consumer society as "animalistic" as opposed to humanistic, based on his observation that postmodern consumers readily accept the commodified environment and their role in its cycle of feeding and constructing wants, needs and desires. Azuma points out that Kojève had written admiringly of Japanese consumers, contrasting their "snobbery" (in post-WWII Japan) with "animalistic" consumers in the U.S. This observation of Kojève was possibly attributable to the reminiscence of samurai codes of ethics encouraging virtuous persons to risk their lives for the sake of honor.

Azuma, however, claims that otaku consumers in Japan are also "animalized" just like postmodern humanity in general. Here, Azuma's account is as follows. In postmodernity, where grand narrative is

dysfunctional, the “grand empathy” of the modern world, where authentic emotional experience has more outlets, becomes ambiguous, as the ratio of uncommodified to commodified space in the lives of most consumers shrinks. Consequently, well-established domains of emotional experience, such as consumption of drama (or other forms of relatively small or linear narrative) rarely find analogs in the social worlds in which consumers reside. Instead, people’s thirst for “meaning” is satisfied in solitude, reducing it to “animalistic needs.”

Indeed, otaku’s obsessive pursuit of “*moe*-elements,” such as maid costumes and images of young girls with cat ears or other anime pop culture markers, seem, by multiple criteria, more “animalistic” than humanistic. Yet, according to Azuma, a pop culture enthusiast himself, this “animalistic” behavior is rational, neither higher nor lower than modernist cultural expression. Azuma contends that animalism, in the sense of consumers actively mixing in the environment of cultural production rather than seeking lines of demarcation on which to separate themselves from it, offer opportunities for constructing new social values and standards, at least in the fictional world. In turn, Azuma argues that this active construction in fictional space can, at least in theory, spill over to effectively deal with real social problems and build ties between people in a postmodern world where social values and standards are dysfunctional. In this sense, the animalistic behavior of otaku is a rational means to adapt to the postmodern social world that “drifts about materially, without giving meaning to lives” (p. 94). Azuma goes as far as claiming that the functions of *moe*-elements are “not so different from those of Prozac or psychotropic drugs” (p. 94).

Azuma insightfully describes a chronic problem of postmodern capitalism, brilliantly delineating it from those of the modernist cultural milieu. As the grand narrative weakens, ideals, values, and senses of tradition are lost. To fill this void, people turn to animalized consumerism, through which consumers take a newly active (if uncritical) role in continuously inventing and fulfilling needs. Animalized consumers such as otaku are inevitably vulnerable to increasingly sophisticated mechanisms of social control. In Azuma’s stark but oddly optimistic view, consumers live to satisfy their needs without questioning or regretting their behavior, specifically, the economic process that animalized them in the first place. Consumers’ lives may not be any better because of animalized consumption, but at least it will be stable and safe. This, in any case, is the viewpoint one hears written in Abel and Kono’s translation of Azuma.

Azuma's book has been cited on numerous occasions by newspapers and literary commentators as an attempt to explain otaku consumers using the concepts of postmodern theory. Azuma, however, counters that his book is less an investigation of otaku using postmodern theory than an investigation of postmodern theory using the cultural text (i.e., data) provided by the otaku phenomenon. Azuma sees consumer culture transitioning from its past forms in modernity to otaku culture writ large, virtually everywhere that postmodernity has reached. Regardless of whether anime and its icons are the elements of the database, the Azuma's message is database consumption, to which he wants the insights and his label of otaku culture to apply widely. The book's Japanese-language title is *Dōbutsu-ka suru posutomodan: Otaku kara mita Nihon shakai* [Animalizing Postmodernity: Japanese Society as Seen Through Otaku] perhaps better conveys Azuma's stated goal.

The term "database animal" in the English title is perhaps misleading since, at the level of "database," otaku consumption still maintains "virtual, emptied-out" humanity and at the level of simulacrum and the "animality" coexists with that humanity in a dissociated manner. Azuma wants the word "database" to apply far beyond a set of characters or settings of specific anime series to a wider system consisting of collections of grand non-narratives of otaku culture more generally. In either case, otaku behavior seems to be a symbolic representation of bleak (the consequence of compression of open semiological space crowded out by dramatically more extensive commodification of social interactions) state of postmodernity. Azuma writes, "the world drifts about materially, without giving meaning to lives" (p. 95). This elegiac tone Azuma uses at the conclusion of the second chapter indicates his sincere concern for the simultaneously oppressive and creative power of our evolving culture.

Azuma's 2007 sequel to *Otaku* was titled *Gēmu teki riarizumu no tanjō: Dōbutsuka suru posutomodan 2*, [A Birth of Game-like Realism: Animalizing Postmodernity 2]. In it, Azuma examines the possibilities of changing the more dire aspects of postmodernity. One interesting issue he raises that relates directly to *Otaku*'s thesis of database consumption is what happens if one tries to create a narrative in postmodernity. He analyzes how the narratives that do appear in the postmodern non-narrative environment serve equally to weaken modernity's grand narratives, taking up the examples of light novels and "cute girl games." Azuma is an interesting figure as both cultural critic and cultural producer. He has worked in the production of light novels that are themselves elements in the

otaku culture he analyzes. Azuma's attempts to apply academic theories of postmodernity to critique and construct popular culture are not mere intellectual experiments but are rooted in his deep conscience as one of the leading intellectuals in contemporary Japan. Readers will appreciate both the acuity of Azuma's descriptive insights and his sincere intention to act for the benefit of consumers.

In the final chapter of *Otaku*, Azuma turns to the HTML language for designing websites as an interesting application of his theses. Here, he uses the concept of "hyperflatness" to draw an analogy between the computer screen and "database" consumption. Azuma deftly describes how what one sees on the computer screen when visiting a website is a combination of image files and an invisible database. Although there are attempts to guide and entice clicks, there is no linear structure. Azuma convincingly argues that the simultaneity of a website's database in parallel layers reflects the postmodern world image with astonishing congruence. The role of narrative in modernity contrasts, again and again in Azuma's view, with the absence of narrative in postmodernity. In the database world of postmodernity, small and grand narratives are no longer directly connected. Rather, many small narratives can be created from the same grand non-narrative (i.e., database), which is why its status as narrative is in question and the label non-narrative applies. Azuma's insight here seems right on the mark, with deep parallels between computer coding (i.e., the system of production in the Internet economy) and the social system it generates (and is generated by other means to support it).

*Otaku* offers a colorful integration of serious or high-brow cultural analysis juxtaposed with kitsch images from Japanese popular culture. The book pioneered in describing specifics of Japanese otaku culture and attempted to break new ground equally on the theoretical front, with the distinction between narrative and database consumption, and the philosophical implications and antecedents of animalistic consumption. Its profound content suggests numerous further applications, which will undoubtedly prove fruitful in analyzing consumer subculture in Japan and beyond. Today, various forms of otaku subculture can be found outside Japan, and postmodern capitalism spreads globally as nation states' political power weakens and their cultural terrains blend into a form recognizable and amenable for secularization. This book should be of interest, not only to scholars of Japanese Studies and cultural criticism, but also to fans of manga, anime, video games, and other Japanese pop cultural forms. For those who are interested in postmodern critical theory, *Otaku* will offer

tangible examples, specific references, and a style of writing that is likely to be well received by graduate students in a variety of humanities programs. For those who study Japanese culture and society, this book will provide source material for the cultural phenomena that is, at least partly, responsible for resurgences in enrollments (among American fans of anime) in Japan-related courses. For enthusiastic English-speaking consumers of Japanese pop culture, this book will reveal a theoretical account of the structure of pleasure from a leading voice in the analysis and production of that culture. Readers from a wide variety of perspectives will benefit from Abel and Kono's translation. They deserve praise for the precision in the translation of Azuma's language and for bringing this important work to wider audiences.