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Never-Ending Gender/Sexual Cannibalism? Transformation of Female Idolisation in Japan

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Inspired by an innovative class named "The (underground) Idol as a Transcendent Existence," this paper concentrates on the psychological and economic relationship between young female human idols, the aidoru, and their devoted male fans, the idol otaku. The first section of the paper uncovers the exploitation of female human idols by their male fans. While the concept of "idol as image" imposed by idol producers fosters the fetishisation and objectification of female human bodies, the consuming act exhibited by the male gaze indicates a metaphorical form of gender/sexual cannibalism. The second part of the paper focuses on the impact of the birth of digital female idols on the issue of female exploitation. With the development of computer and artificial intelligence technologies, female virtual idols have been replacing female human idols, as they offer more space and freedom of manipulation. With computer technologies, each idol otaku can construct a more intimate relationship than is possible with female human idols through designing feminine characteristics of female virtual idols according to his personal needs and fantasies. However, from a feminist perspective, this transformation of female idolisation or more specifically, the digitalisation of female human bodies, could ultimately lead toward a world of feminist dystopia due to the further manipulation of female selves and bodies by their male producers and consumers.

Introduction

On 21, 22 January and 5 February of 2017, I took part in a self-designed class called 'The (underground) Idol as a Transcendent Existence,' which was set up by the Cross-Boundary Innovation Program, Osaka University. During the first day of the class, Mr. Hamano Satoshi, one of the organisers of the class, explained the culture of idol *otaku* (オタク, 'people with obsessive interests in young female idols') through introducing his affection toward 'AKB48' (pronounced 'A. K. B. Forty-Eight', see fig. 1.1.)[1], one of the most famous and highest-earning female idol groups in Japan today. In addition, Mr. Watanabe Jyunnosuke, the CEO of an idol company named 'WACK', also the producer of a female idol group called 'BiSH' (ビッシュ, see fig. 1.2.)[2], shared with the audience his experience of how he runs his idol company and his personal experience regarding the meaning of female idols in Japanese society. On the second day, Mr. Take Taichi, the producer of an underground female idol group called 'You'll Melt More!' (ゆるめるモ, pronounced 'yurumerumo', see fig. 1.3.)[3], explained his main purpose for starting his idol business and his future vision towards the idol industry. The last day introduced to the audience the concept of a half-virtual underground female idol group called '. . . . .' ('Dots', see fig. 1.4.) founded in Tokyo[4].

[Fig. 1.1. Cover of 'AKB48''s so far bestselling single 'Manatsu no Sounds Good!' ('真夏のSounds good!', '*Midsummer 'Sounds good!'*'); *AKB48 Official Website*, akb48.co.jp/about/discography/detail_cd/?media_id=18]

[Fig. 1.2. Cover of 'BiSH''s album 'TO THE END'; *BiSH Official Website*, www.bish.tokyo/discography/]
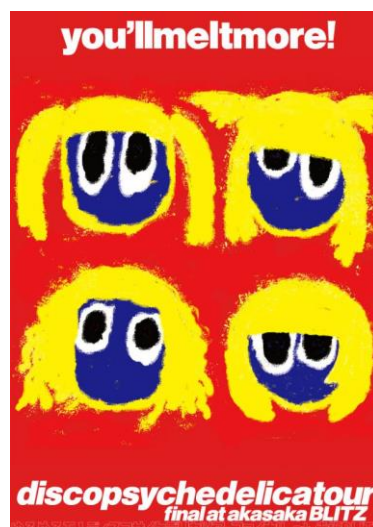
[Fig. 1.3. Cover of 'You'll Melt More!''s live show DVD, 'Disco Psyche Delica Tour Final at Akasaka BLITZ'; *YouMeltMore! Official Site*, ylmlm.net/?cat=9&paged=1]

[Fig. 1.4. Japanese female idol group '. . . . .' ('Dots'); *Dots Tokyo Official Website*, dots.tokyo/about/]

Drawing on the information and knowledge gained from the lectures, I realise that the word *aidoru* (アイドル, 'idol') has become a general term for female teenage entertainers in Japan who are promoted on the basis of being *kawaii* (カワイイ): a type of cuteness that involves a sense of innocence, purity and selfless obedience. In *Islands of Eight Million Smiles: Idol Performance and Symbolic Production in Contemporary Japan*, Hiroshi Aoyagi identifies idols with *kawaii* and a sense of being imperfect: 'Japanese idols…typically depict images that are fairly standard: appearance, ability, and charm that are above average, but not so much as to alienate or offend the audience' (67). Similarly, Daniel Black in 'The Virtual Idol: Producing and Consuming Digital Femininity' suggests that a female idol is the one who 'evokes youthful innocence, vulnerability and meekness, and a lack of remoteness or self-sufficiency' (219). As for the idol agency, young female idols are expected to be role models with perfect characters: they must be obedient to their producer and their agency in order to gain more jobs; at the same time, they must work their best to increase the number of fans while trying to keep their old fans. Following this, through the lens of feminism, I attempt to explore the power relationship between the young (late adolescence to early 20s) female human idols and their extremely devoted working-class male fans (*idoru-otaku*) in terms of the psychological and economic aspects. By doing this, I foreground a metaphorical, parallel structure between idolisation and the cannibalisation of the female human bodies. Furthermore, I argue that through the development of computer technologies, the creation of the female virtual idol serves as a transcendent phenomenon to destabilise the direct exploitation of the female human idols in Japanese society. Nevertheless, the digitalisation/objectification of female human bodies and selves remains unsolved, urging one to question whether this transformation will ultimately lead to a feminist utopia or dystopian future.

The Death of Female Human Idols

In Japan, it is expected that the young female human idols have zero talent. This element of '[n]on-ability,' as P. W. Galbraith suggests, 'is a particularly capitalist fantasy, in that it is opposed to

the constant struggle to perfect one's self and skills and succeed in the neoliberal market' (202). In other words, for the working-class male consumers the young female idols function as a release from the repressed capitalist society in Japan, whereby individuals are forced to be perfect and successful in their social duties and jobs. It is this perfectionist mentality embedded in the Japanese working environment that converts the *non-ability* of the female human idols into a state of *kawaii*, whereby its presence is a '"show of enjoyment" that is "not directed towards mastery"' (qtd. in Galbraith 202). This explains why talentless female human idols are in huge demand and are even a driving force for working-class men to survive in society.

From the male consumers' perspective, this lack of talent of the idol encourages them to take part in the growth and mental development of the young idols that they support. As Hiroshi Ogawa and Go Sasakibara also claim, the need for the young female idols to become an 'absolute existence' outside the everyday is to provide a source of security and unwavering support for their male fans (qtd. in Galbraith 186). In this respect, the female human idols are important as they stabilise both the mental and physical condition of the oppressed working men through de-intelligentising themselves. In addition, this *non-ability* of the idols is deeply associated with the *full-ability* of the idol producers. Tsunku, the producer of the idol group 'Morning Musume' ('モーニング娘。', 'Morning Girls', see fig. 2.1.)[5], claims that the ideal idol candidates must be 'obedient' (53). Tsunku continues to note, '[i]n sum, take the value system of someone outside yourself into yourself' (51-52). To put Tsunku's words another way, the female human idols must have no sense of 'self' so that their producers can take control of them entirely, making them the perfect *kawaii* idols for men. Metaphorically, this demand for *non-ability* and selflessness among the young female human idols can be viewed as a dehumanising—or more specifically, mind-cannibalising—act. Moreover, the fact that young female idols are used by the male producers as 'a node in the network of the capitalist system of commodities' that links themselves to the male consumers leads to the argument that the industry itself is a gender-cannibalising process (Galbraith and Karlin 8).

[Fig. 2.1. An official photo of 'Morning Musume'; *Morningmusume Official Website*, helloproject.com/morningmusume/profile/]
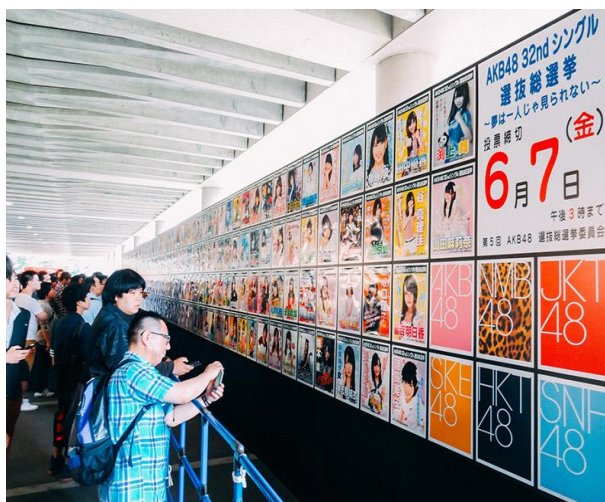
[Fig. 2.2. *Otaku*s taking photo of female idols' images; 'AKB48 Handshake Event at Makuhari Messe: 32 Senbatsu Election Posters'; D. Thomas Johnson; Flickr, June 2, 2013, flickr.com/photos/31029865@N06/15481882251/]

One of the instances that support my argument above is that the female human idols produce images and yet they are also promoted as images (see fig. 2.2.). Constantly present and exposed, the female human idols become *real* only through the production of their images. As John Fiske suggests, '[i]mages are made and read in relation to other images and the real is read as an image' (qtd. in Galbraith 186); images lead to more images, not to a *real* person. In Japan, exhibitions on idols, portraits of anime and video game characters are often displayed alongside portraits of idols, emphasising the female human idols as images (Amano 2007). This parallel position between human idols and fictional characters frequently attracts a lot of attention from the male *otaku*. Saito Tamaki also defines *otaku* as 'those with an affinity for "fictional contexts"' (qtd. in Galbraith 187). Agreeing with Saito, Otsuka Eiji claims that the similarity between these two lies in the act of reconstructing the idol/product 'narrative' by the male *otaku*/consumer. For instance, the human idols are constantly introduced and interviewed on the mass media, which allows their fans to collect information about them piece by piece (Otsuka calls this 'small narratives') for the purpose of gaining the whole picture (what Otsuka calls the 'grand narrative' (107-108)).

Apparently, this act of narrativising the object of desire/idol provides a certain pleasure to the male *otaku* since the idols exist as a '"symptom of man" created for his ontological consistency' (qtd. in Galbraith 194). In other words, the female human idols do *not* exist; they serve as a desired object, a lack, for the male otaku to reconstruct their selves. Galbraith refers this to the Lacanian's formation of the Ego in the mirror stage, in which the formation of one's self is achieved through the objectification of the female human idols. 'Humans are constituted by a lack and produce images of themselves as autonomous and whole by latching onto objects. This is related to the structure of male desire' (194). On top of this, John Whittier Treat suggests that what the female idols' 'lack' is what makes her a substitutable product that associates with the 'signifying process of Japanese consumer capitalism' (qtd. in Galbraith and Karlin 2). Following these aspects, the objectification of female selves and the fragmentation of female body parts—which ironically are also enforced by the idols themselves via the

mass media—are derived from the male-oriented consumer-capitalist society. Through the act of consuming, collecting and pursuing, the female human idols are then cannibalised, piece by piece, by the male gaze as a way to feed their Ego.

Anne Allison defines the male gaze as 'a process of looking that is sexualized as is scopophilia and based in a relationship of dominance and inequality if not necessarily sadism as clinically defined by Freud' (9). Indeed, there is a sense of sexual cannibalism and a dominating tendency embedded in the perverted erotic gaze of the male *otaku* toward the young female idols. As for them, the young female idols symbolise 'a world of sex without actual women' (qtd. in Galbraith 187). More specifically, they are associated with the 'unproductive' or 'consumptive pleasure suspended from (re)productive functions' (Otsuka 18). In this sense, the male fans transform their idols into some sort of hyper-sexualised objects that do not even exist in the actual world. Furthermore, in order to sustain the purity of their fantasised idols, the male *otaku* tend to shift their erotic gazes toward other women when they masturbate. This ability to disassociate the images or fantasies of the same idol from one another is encouraged by the presentation of idols in the media, in which young female idols in swimming suits are placed beside more mature women in less clothing, perhaps even nude (Galbraith 196).

Another instance of the *idol-otaku* perversion can be found in their voyeuristic gaze toward the non-nude erotica or soft-porn image videos presented by the female human idols through the camera. During this process, the male viewers see the idol from a first-person perspective, as the camera becomes their own eyes (Galbraith 195). The female human idol is then being watched in different locations with different clothing in order to make the viewing erotic though at the same time she retains her purity and innocence. Here, Roland Barthes's analysis followed by Bradford K. Mudge's explanation could be helpful to understand the psychology of the male *otaku*'s voyeuristic gazes:

> ...it is the *intermittence*, as psychoanalysis as rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: *the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance* (Barthes 10; emphasis in original).

And also:

> The moment of seduction occurs in a 'flash,' a brief glimpse of skin between articles of clothing, along the edges that frame the visible. *Seeing here is knowing*, and the glimpse is of the body beneath, the truth below, exciting with the possibility that revelation and pleasure follow (Mudge 13; emphasis in original).

The scenes of a late adolescent female idol in a swimsuit at a pool, followed by her wearing pyjamas in bed, then her donning a maid's costume in a restaurant—all these separated scenes accompanied with different clothing offer a great deal of excitement and perverted space for the male *otaku* to gaze and fantasise freely. Furthermore, through the process of gazing into/knowing about her body, the male viewers gain a kind of perverted dominating power over the idol's body. Here, the lack of any genital exhibition enforces a decentered eroticism that not only maintains the purity of the idol but also exhibits an urge to visualise, 'a cinematographic perversion' (Galbraith 196). Ultimately, this perverted, erotic

and dominating gaze leads to the consumerism of more photographs or videos that are associated with the images of the female human idols. '[S]exuality reaches its goal much better and much more promptly to the extent that it…addresses itself directly to Images' (Deleuze 313; qtd. in Galbraith 202). Overall, the concept of idol-as-image fosters an endless fetishisation and objectification of the idol's human body, which leads to an assumption that the process of idolisation, metaphorically, is itself a perverted gender/sexual related cannibalising practice.

The Birth of Female Digital Idols

On 13 June 2011, Eiguchi Aimi, a member of AKB48, appeared on the cover of *Weekly Playboy*. What surprised the readers was that Eiguchi Aimi was not even a human being but an artificial cut-and-paste pop star based on a hybrid of the AKB48 members: 'with eyes taken from Atsuko Maeda and a button nose from Tomomi Itano while her long, lush hair hails from Yuko Oshima and her sensual mouth belongs to Mariko Shinoda' (Demetriou). It was promised that soon, through accessing the Glico website, the fans would be allowed to create their own version of 'Eiguchi Aimi' from taking parts—skin, hair, eyebrows, body shape and so on—of their favourite AKB48 idols with the tool 'AKB48 Oshimen Maker' ('CG Idol 101'). The producer Aikimoto Yasushi in *Weekly Playboy* claimed that Eiguchi Aimi was the 'ultimate idol'—an idol beyond any other idol (Galbraith 194).

Since Yamaha Corporation's creation of a singing voice synthesis technology and the software Vocaloid[6], the artificial production of sound and musical performance has become possible, in which humans can sound like machines while machines can sound like humans (Galbraith 222). This development of technology thus fosters the replacement of the human idols with the digital idols. An excellent example is the Japanese pop idol 'Hatsune Miku' (初音ミク, see fig. 3.1.), who is nothing more than a technological creation, a computer animation. Hatsune Miku is pictured as a 16-year-old school-uniform girl with blue eyes and two long blue ponytails down to her knees. Her name means 'first sound of the future' (Vocaloidaddict). It is suggested that the creation of virtual idols promotes a new kind of relationship between the idol and its fans. Unlike the human idols, the connection between the *otaku* and the virtual idol mainly relies on a high level of fantasy and desire (Rojek 24-26). While the traditional relationship between the human idols and the fans is through the consumption of images, the mode of interaction with the virtual idol is quite different, as the fans take on the role of producing, modifying or personalising the virtual idol. As Black suggests, the fans have become 'prosumers,' a combination of consumers and producers (216). Another difference between the traditional idol and the virtual idol is that the latter provides a wider creative space for the construction of femininity according to the fans' needs. 'While the living idol's commodification and circulation crucially depend upon her translation into digital data (digital audio, video games, etc.), the virtual idol exists as nothing but digital data' (Black 217). Just as Hatsune Miku is called the 'first sound of the future,' female digital idols are regarded as the idols of the future.

[Fig. 3.1. The figure of 'Hatsune Miku'; *Crypton Future Media, Inc.*, ec.crypton.co.jp/pages/prod/vocaloid/cv01_us]

The *otaku* culture is deeply related to the commodification of femininity. However, the kind of femininity desired by the *otaku* is unlikely to be embodied in any living human being, as what the *otaku* requires for an idol is an infantilised cuteness coupled at the same time with a kind of sexualised femininity (Black 219). This kind of unachievable femininity can only be achieved through the manipulation of digital texts. An idol that exists as digital data provides the *otaku* a chance to manipulate its femininity and also 'holds the promise of a more intimate relationship than is possible with a living idol' (Black 220). As in the instances of Eiguchi Aimi and Hatsune Miku, the virtual idols can meet the male otaku's desires in ways that the human idols cannot; through the manipulation of technologies, the virtual idol can become each otaku's *private* idol. In this respect, the digital idol transcends the limited relationship that exists between the female human idols and the male fans and furthermore, it transcends the biological reality of women through forming a new kind of cyber femininity that is outside traditional femininity. On a positive note, this might reduce the direct exploitation towards female human bodies by male producers and devoted fans. However, the exploitation of female bodies remains unresolved even if they are transformed into diverse, virtual forms. In fact, from a feminist perspective, this might lead to a worrying form of intense patriarchy since the male consumers can control the biology of women.

Conclusion

In Japan, the female human idols are often required to be *kawaii*: a form of beauty that involves characteristics such as immaturity, innocence, imperfection and obedience. These required elements are promoted for the purpose of maintaining the physical and mental stability of single working-class men trapped in an extremely repressed society, whereby they are required to be perfect in fulfilling their social role. Under this condition, one of the best ways to release themselves is through idolising the adolescent female human idols who seem to be totally isolated from their actual lives. Additionally, by taking part in the growth and development of the idols, the male fans actually feel as if they are the care-takers of these young female idols, providing them with a high sense of satisfaction that they cannot gain from working.

In order to fulfil this demand, the idol producers tend to search for girls who are selfless and thus obedient and easily controlled. However, from the lens of a feminist, this specific need for immature, obedient and talentless female human idols can be viewed as oppression toward women. This aspect is exhibited through the fictionalisation, fragmentation, and objectification of the female human idols by their devoted male fans, the *otaku*. More specifically, the female human idols' bodies and knowledge of self are being separated into pieces in order to feed the *otaku*'s fetishism that contributes to stimulating the capitalist neo-liberal market in Japanese society. During this process, the male otaku further performs a symbolic form of sexual cannibalism through gazing into the faces and bodies of the female human idol via the camera. Meanwhile, in order to maintain the innocence of the idol, the *otaku* tend to dissociate the reproductive function of the idol and connect that with another mature woman. This linking of an unproductive function with the idol embodies a kind of female castration. Metaphorically, this behaviour can also be seen as genital cannibalism. After all, the perverted erotic desire displayed by the male *otaku* encourages the consumerism of more images and goods that are associated with the female idols, which accelerates the sexual exploitation towards young women. In short, what is underlying in the process of female idolisation is patriarchal cannibalism.

Recently, with the development of computer technologies, the replacement of female human idols with digital idols has become a new trend. This shift promotes a new kind of relationship between the female virtual idols and the male *otaku*, in which the latter take the entire responsibility from production to personalisation of the former. By doing this the male fans become capable of creating the kind of femininity that fit their own needs and desires. This then enables a more intimate relationship between the digital idols and the *otaku* in the sense that every otaku can *own* his personal idol. As a result, the male creators not only transcend the limitations of female biology but also enforce a kind of digital femininity that is outside traditional femininity, for instance, hypersexualised or infantalised and sexualised cyber-femininity. From a feminist viewpoint, this shifting towards the digital idol through the assistance of technologies might somehow reduce the direct exploitation of the female human bodies by the male producers and consumers. However, there is an opposite result which is of real concern, namely the increased manipulation of female selves and bodies, which could ultimately lead toward a world of feminist dystopia.

Notes

[1] 'AKB48' was founded upon the idea of 'idols you can meet,' whereby the female idols (aging from early teen to mid-20s) would perform regularly in their own theatre located in Akihabara, Tokyo (Kiuchi 30).

[2] 'BiSH' was founded as a 'non-instrumental female idol punk band' by WACK company in 2015. The group mainly performs in the Tokyo area.

[3] Founded by You'll Record Co. Ltd. in 2012, 'You Melt More!' employs the catchphrase of 'We came to loosen everyone's heart! We are, You'll Melt, More!' ('みんなのハートをゆるめにきました！私たち、ゆるめる、モ〜！') There is a word play between the group's name ('ゆるめるモ') and the verb '緩める' (ゆるめる) in Japanese, which means 'to loosen'. ('You'll Melt More,' *J-Pop Idols*).

⁴ 'Dots' was founded by Japan Connection Co., Ltd. Tokyo in 2016. Based on concepts such as 'idols of the post-Pokemon Go era' and 'ghost of the city,' all Dots' members are anonymous, and they always wear patches to hide their eyes from fans ('About,' *Dots Tokyo Official Website*). The characteristic of this group is its heavy dependence on technologies as a way to interact with fans.

⁵ 'Morning Musume' is a female idol group formed in 1997 by Tsunku, who was a rock singer-songwriter before becoming a record producer. The group functions according to the school system, whereby old members 'graduate' and leave the group, and new members are recruited into the group through nation-wide elections.

⁶ Vocaloid generates realistic human vocals through its 'singer libraries' and 'synthesis engine.' The 'singer libraries' store databases of recorded voices from singers, while the 'synthesis engine' synthesizes voice information from a 'singer library.' With these sources, the users are able to make a whole package of their music's vocal parts by simply inputting data into their personal computers without having to hire a real vocalist ('Vocaloid').

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