Israeli Fans of Japanese Popular Culture and "Japan"[1]

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In the past twenty years, the global success of contemporary Japanese media-centered youth popular culture has earned for Japan the epithet of "Cool Japan" (Daliot-Bul 2009). Starting with consumer products such as anime (Japanese animation), manga (Japanese comics), computer and video games, collectibles, pop music, TV dramas, and street fashion, and moving on to complex and sophisticated fandom practices such as *dōjinshi* (fan-drawn self-published manga), *cosplay* (an amalgamation of "costume play," a performance of fans as their favorite characters), subbing (fan-produced subtitles for anime and TV dramas) and scanlation (fan-translated manga), Japanese popular culture has generated around the world many local communities of "committed fans" (Allison 2000:84). These hardcore fans consume, appropriate and embody enthusiastically Japanese popular culture and become agents in the further distribution of this culture through the Internet, in fan-organized for-fans conventions and through small-scale businesses that import and sell Japanese popular culture goods.

In Israel, the emergence of a community of fans could be observed since the beginning of the new millennium. Early fans who operated as individuals, were usually young people in their early and mid teens. Starting from a personal interest in one of the typical Japanese popular culture forms, often anime, these people later formed groups centered on Internet forums. Israeli fans see themselves as performing on a par with other communities around

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the world; their main groups of reference are located in the United States and Japan. Japanese popular culture has been deterritorialized. Nevertheless, for Israeli fans, this popular culture remains resolutely "Japanese."

How can we analyze and interpret the relations between the complex and multidirectional trajectories of cultural flows of Japanese popular (trans)culture and the local Israeli fan culture? What is so "Japanese" about Japanese popular (trans)culture, with its many different mediums, genres and styles? These are the questions that we explore in this paper.

Japanese Fans as Neocosmopolitans

Owing to its wide global exposure, it is anime which turned Japanese popular culture into a part of kids' culture in many countries around the world, including Israel. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, series such as *Pokemon* (since 1999) and *Digimon* (since 2000), which were bought from U.S. distributors after being heavily edited, were marketed for the first time in Israel as "Japanese." These hit series started a merchandizing boom of anime-related goods, such as toys, cards, books, VHS tapes and later DVDs, and computer and video games. Since the beginning of the new millennium, kids' channels and even a short-lived Anime Channel (2004–2008) broadcast a growing number of anime series for kids, teens and aficionados, which are often bought directly from Japan. In time, many of these anime series were broadcast unedited in their original Japanese versions and often with their original Japanese soundtrack (e.g., *Sakura*, *Inuyasha*, *Fruits basket*, *Hikaru no go*). Today, anime director Hayao Miyazaki's feature-length movies are broadcast regularly on Israeli television in Japanese or in Hebrew. The cable television video-on-demand service also provides several lesser known anime titles for the refined viewer.

Notwithstanding, Japanese popular culture products could have never reached its high level of popularity in Israel had it not taken place in an environment referred to by Jenkins (2006) as an environment of media convergence. In this environment, information and communication technologies shape nearly every aspect of contemporary life, including how people create, consume, learn and communicate with one another. Traditional means of distribution of Japanese popular culture products have expanded and they are even challenged by newer means. Broadband connectivity and not national borders, customs or copy rights determine today's cultural flows.

The Cool Japan Wave was characterized by a high involvement of local brokers in the reproduction and promotion of Japanese culture. The high accessibility and the technological and interactive nature of these popular culture products have been enhanced by global transformations that Thomas Friedman (2005) has termed "Globalization 3.0" as a pun on the futuristic resonance of "Web 3.0." Whereas Web 2.0 was coined in reference to the revolutionary interactive and social Web that facilitates collaboration between people, Web 3.0 is a term used to hypothesize about a future wave of Internet innovation.

According to Friedman's periodization of the globalization process, Globalization 3.0 began in the year 2000 and is characterized by groundbreaking developments in software and the installment of a worldwide fiber-optic network. Rather than by states or companies, as in Globalization 1.0 (1492–1800) and Globalization 2.0 (1800–2000), today's Globalization 3.0 is to a large extent driven by private players. The result for Israeli fans of Japanese popular culture, like for their counterparts in other parts of the world, is an inviting open-to-all playing field.

In 1990 Hannertz coined the neologism "cosmopolitans" in reference to those who spend several years abroad and upon returning home become self-proclaimed intermediaries, conveyers and interpreters of the foreign culture they studied. Hannertz' cosmopolitans were "citizens of the world" who embody an orientation, a willingness to engage with the other….they were characterized by an intellectual and aesthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences. And they presented themselves as owing an exclusive knowledge inaccessible to others without their intermediacy. However, while early "cosmopolitans" had to physically leave their homes to discover new lands and cultures, such is not the case with the "Globalization 3.0" generation. These "neocosmopolitans," we suggest, can become cosmopolitans from their computer desks and TV sofas.

Jenkins (2006a: 156) has coined the term "pop cosmopolitanism" to refer to "the ways that the transcultural flows of public culture inspire new forms of global consciousness and cultural competency." As neocosmopolitans, Israeli fans embrace "Japanese popular culture" as their own, without inhibitions or reservations. This sophisticated kind of cosmopolitanism highlights the possible fluidity of individual identity, or "people's remarkable capacity to forge new identities using materials from diverse cultural sources, and to flourish while so doing" (Held 2002: 12–13; also see Scheffler 1999: 257).

A Transnational Virtual Community

Discovering Japanese popular culture initially through TV anime, the small group of mainly early and mid teenaged Israeli fans, who were also early adopters of the Internet and well versed in using their home computers, started to watch and download anime even before the turn of the twenty-first century, when search engines were in their pioneering stages, using the very early prototypes of chat clients and file-sharing programs. Early Israeli fans often refer to those "hard times" when they had to use "devious paths" and "clandestine connections," meeting strangers on street corners and exchanging floppy discs, in order to get copies of anime series. In doing so, they joined a growing virtual transnational community of *otaku*, i.e. hardcore fans of anime, manga, *dōjinshi*, video games and paraphernalia, who are often criticized in Japan as being nonsocial geeks (Ishii 1990(1989)). However, in the Euro-American region and by extension also in Israel, the term *otaku* has been adopted by local fans of contemporary Japanese popular culture as a rather cool denotation. Moreover, as we have been told by several of our interviewees, many of the Israeli fans do not deem themselves knowledgeable enough to be praised as *otaku*.

Early "reaching out" experiences are often described in cosmopolitan terms as fans nostalgically recall chatting with strangers from all over the world, who soon became their internet "friends." Meanwhile, the first Israeli Hebrew-speaking anime forums on the Internet, such as Pokemon, Tapuz Anime and Manga forum, *anime.co.il* and Hydepark, became attractive alternatives to international chat rooms and forums, which could be joined only by those with a good command of English. As Japanese forums are naturally out of the way because of language barriers, the command of English seems to have always been a practical means to gain significant cultural capital. Israeli *otaku* attest that the ability to juggle between Hebrew-speaking Israeli forums and English-speaking international forums provides a way to differentiate and position oneself "snobbishly" within the "upper class" of the Israeli anime and manga fan community. In other words, the seemingly borderless world of global online fan communication is in fact restricted by language barriers. Thus, while the American "global cultural hegemony" or "cultural imperialism" is being contested, the global lingua franca is still English, and it is English that provides a linguistic infrastructure that parallels

the technological infrastructures of our era (see Held 2002: 2). It seems that global hierarchies die hard after all.

At the first stages of the formation of what has later become the community of Israeli anime fans, it was a local "virtual imagined community" built of smaller subgroups with a strong affiliation to a larger transnational "virtual imagined community". Similarly to the way innovative print technology has laid the basis for national consciousness by creating a unified field of exchange and communication among the masses overcoming class and education differences as described by Anderson (1991: 44), the innovative technologies of the 2000s have created a unified field of exchange and communication among global masses overcoming national differences creating a transnational culture.

Israeli fans are involved in a kind of cultural cosmopolitanism that thrives in innovative ways through cutting-edge technological means of communication and cooperation *underneath quarreling nation-states and governments.* In fact, fans of Japanese popular culture in Israel are often proud of having "virtual friends" around the world, even in Muslim countries with no, or limited, political liaisons with Israel, such as Morocco and Indonesia.

From a Transnational Virtual Community to a Local Physical Community

At the turn of the century, members of different Israeli forums started to meet regularly, in intimate social gatherings in outdoor parks or private homes. Japanese popular culture–centered virtual communities, similarly to other virtual communities, provide their members with social network capital, knowledge capital and communion. Internet forums are a haven for many lonely souls, no doubt also because the potential for constructing alternative identities (Baker 2001). The disembodiment of participants in virtual communities is essential to the construction of alternative online identities. Extension of virtual communities into real life, as in the case of fan communities, goes against the concept of Internet anonymity and is undermining the construction of alternative identities. However, fans (or at least most of them) do not seem to care. To the contrary, the virtually invented identities of fans flow seamlessly into real life. An obvious example of this flow is how virtual pseudonyms are often kept in real life interactions.

While there was always a competitive edge among fans as well as acknowledged social hierarchy at play within the subcommunities and within

the larger community, the larger community as a whole is arguably very inclusive. Anyone who shows an interest is welcome to join, as put by one of the early members:

> Since most members meet for the first time online, physical appearances don't matter, it is only the "head" that counts. When you meet the person face-to-face a few months later, and you are already friends, you don't mind so much if they don't look too good, or even if they are physically challenged.

In merging virtual reality and media images with their daily reality, participating in virtual realities is no longer a liminal leisure pursuit for fans. Boundaries between realities blur. Fans' virtual identity becomes one facet of their identity, and fans' communion with other members of the community, which is based on a shared fascination with fictional worlds, becomes their favorite reality among multiple realities. The fan community becomes the most significant sociocultural affiliation for many of the fans—their preferred way of being.

Between Japan and the USA

At the early stage of the formation of the Israeli fan community, American fandom was the primary mimetic prototype. Fans used to look at the American Anime Expo as a "holy grail." As veteran fans recall, "people were fantasizing about saving one day enough money to attend it [the American Anime Expo], and about future days in which they will have their own Anime Expo in Israel." According to Alex, even today "the Israeli community of fans should be compared and paralleled to the American one." In reality, practices appropriated by and within the Israeli fan scene exhibit the expected processes of cultural domestication. For example, the first cosplay events in Israel were planned for Purim, a Jewish holy day during which it is customary for kids to wear costumes. However, from the point of view of many fans, Israeli anime conventions that started in 2005 and grew to attract an estimated one thousand patrons, center on cosplay and anime-screening events like their American model, and the highlight of Israeli cosplay events are masquerade and cast performances like in the United States.

And yet, although all eyes are set to the USA, anime and related merchandizing have always been consumed as *Japanese* products. Viewing anime in Japanese with subtitles and later even without subtitles became another avant-gardist practice among Israeli fans of anime and of other forms of Japanese popular culture. Cosplaying, drawing *dōjinshi*, wearing Lolita-style street fashion, and fancying Visual-Kei pop music and idols are often learned by emulating American practices and by gathering information from English-speaking Web sites, but they are appropriated and performed as *Japanese* practices. This is another expression of the contemporaneous complexities of cultural flows, and of the position Israeli culture holds as a cultural periphery to more than one global cultural center. This may also be an expression of the deterritorialization of Japanese popular culture. Fans all over the world appropriate and thereby participate in the consumption and reproduction of Japanese popular culture. Japanese popular culture has become a *transnational culture*. The identification process with Japanese popular culture is supranational; it is not in between, but above (see Friedman 1995:78). Nevertheless, somehow this popular culture remains "Japanese".

So, What is so Japanese about Japanese Popular Culture?

Jenkins (1992: 208) has shown how fans can be consumers who also produce, readers who also write and spectators who also perform. And Fiske (1989, 1992a) has described the semiotic productivity of fans, whereby new meanings, knowledge, texts and identities are produced, accumulated and circulated as cultural capital. As early as the 1970s, fans of anime and manga in Japan have been engaged in inventing interactive fan practices, which are often "derivative works" based on intertextual play. In time fans expended their references beyond anime, manga, computer and video games to include also idols, J-pop, street fashion and more. We suggest that fandom of Japanese popular culture is distinguished by the high degree of interconnectedness between genres. This tendency is closely related to the marketing/production style of "media mix" as developed by the relevant cultural industries in Japan since the 1970s, namely the reproduction of successful titles in a diverse range of media (Steinberg 2012). Israeli fans typically specialize in specific genres, products and/or practices. However, they often attest to being fans of something much more general, like "Japanese contemporary entertainments." This inclination for being a "total consumer" has been described by one of our interviewees as follows:

It is impossible to separate between bands, anime, manga, computer games and the rest. If, for example, you like a certain actor for the way he did the dubbing of an anime—and I personally am a huge fan of certain voice actors—you soon realize that he is also doing video games, movies, OVAs (Original Video Animation made for release in home-video format), and that he is also in a band…and then you realize that the other band members are also into voice acting or that they are singing a major anime theme song which has become a hit….So you really *cannot stay* in just one area.

The highly active process of consuming Japanese popular culture can be interpreted as a theatrical play with identities, a process in which fans are choosing, making and remaking their identities (see Kellner 1992). By constructing themeselves as "total consumers" of popular Japanese cultural products and moreover by higligting the "Japaneseness," of these intertwined products, Israeli fans do not only mark themselves as belonging to a (youth) subculture, they also differentiate themselves from other groups and from the mainstream society.Outside of Japan, through the agency of non Japanese fans who perform their subcultural identity as styles, and thus reproduce social meanings (see Hebdige 1979), Japanese popular culture has come to represent a genre and even a life-style, much like rock or punk music.

Conclusion:

We have shown how the particular economic and cultural structure of Japanese popular culture—that is, the ways different products are closely interwoven and the culture's enhanced participatory and interactive fandom—together with innovative global technologies of communication and cooperation have turned Japanese popular culture into a highly inclusive transculture. This culture offers Israeli fans cultural capital, knowledge capital and communion. As it merges with real life, it offers new means to construct a differentiated personal and collective identity, vis-à-vis the mainstream culture. Japanese popular transculture has become for Israeli fans a youth subculture affiliation performed as a meaningful style.

Kellner and others (see Bauman 1996) have pointed to the propensity of the postmodern identity for play. Israeli fans of Japanese popular culture manifest high tendency for theatrical play with identity by challenging and incorporating forms of Otherness, including fictional others. Fans as

neocosmopolitans are not only discovering more formulations of Otherness, they are also appropriating and performing them as multiple and temporary styles in an era that promotes a sense of unstable, multiple and diffuse "subject constitutions" (Fiske 1992b: 288).

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