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Japanese Pop Culture, Identification, and Socialization: The Case of an Italian Web-Community

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Abstract

Japanese pop culture has influenced Italy over the last thirty years. In the '70s anime started to fill the airtime of emerging private TV channels, marking the childhood of those Italians who grew up in those years and until the early '90s, when manga finally appeared in the Italian market. Globalization and the Internet have made other aspects of Japanese pop culture available to Italians and the rest of the world alike. It has resulted in a very active Italian fandom spanning different generations, and in a strong fascination with Japan.

This paper aims to provide insights into the way Italian fans perceive Japanese pop culture and Japan; on the kind of bonds with Japan they develop, and how they socialize. It does so by considering the biggest Italian web-community, AnimeClick.it, *as a microcosm of the Italian fandom's interactions and emotions. Privileging a qualitative method, it focuses on the people who give life to the website. Their images of Japanese pop culture reveal the recognition of a specific cultural odour perceived as pleasant, which translates into an interest in Japan. Those fans associate Japan with images of fantasy and charming mystery that nevertheless co-exist with perceptions of extreme difference, echoing the notion of Japanese uniqueness, so that Orientalist processes are re-enacted. There are intergenerational differences in the way fans have developed an emotional bond, and look at Japanese pop culture. However, these are mediated and transcended through their socialization and collaboration in the web-community, opening up new perspectives for the future evolution of Japanese pop culture's influence in Italy.*

Keywords: Italy, Japan, Anime, Manga, Pop Culture, Web-Community, TV, Orientalism, Exoticism, Postmodern.

Monet's house, a mansion hidden in the small village of Giverny in Normandy, is famous for housing a wide collection of Japanese prints[i]. Going from room to room during our visit in 2013, we marvelled at the presence of "Japan" in what used to be the intimate spaces of the painter.

They powerfully recalled the moment when Europe started to learn about Japanese aesthetics and sensibility through the art of *ukiyo-e*, challenging the long history of diffidence developed during the Edo period; this art particularly influenced Impressionism, generating the phenomenon known as *japonisme*[ii]. In that moment, we joked over Monet's house looking like the precursor to those private houses in some parts of Europe, like France and Italy, whose bookshelves display a collection of *manga* and *anime,* and over *japonisme* having been "revived" by phenomena like fanfiction (stories inspired by *manga/anime* characters written by fans) and cosplay (the practice of dressing up like a *manga/anime* character). Our somewhat irreverent comment was influenced by our own experiences as Italians growing up in the '70s-'80s – when *anime* were a common feature of our country's television broadcasting – and "converted" into *manga* readers during the '90s, when the Japanese comics appeared in our local market (see Pellitteri 1999, 2008, 2015).

Paralleling *manga* with *ukiyo-e*, we did not mean to identify the former as the evolution of earlier Japanese arts. As Jacqueline Berndt (2008, 305-306) argued, this perception developed when Japanese scholars tried to tie *manga* to historical Japanese traditions and downplay the influence of aesthetics and narratives coming from outside. This process can be framed within the spirit of *nihonjinron* — post-World War II theories about the notion of "Japaneseness" conceived in opposition to other countries, especially Western ones, upon which some Japanese scholars have constructed the idea of Japanese "uniqueness" (Nakane 1970; Doi 1973). These claims have been largely criticized[iii]. In this regard, it is meaningful that, at the time

of our visit to Giverny, the Museum of Impressionism, situated on the opposite side of the road from Monet's house, was hosting an exhibition on Hiramatsu Reiji, whose paintings, depicting water lilies as a reinterpretation of Monet's *Les Nymphéas*, reminded us of the mutual aesthetic influence (and desire) between Japan and Europe[iv]. In fact, concerning *manga* and its derivations, Bouissou pointed out how Tezuka, for instance, was influenced by Disney, which he "loved and dreamt to emulate" (2000, 4; see also Pellitteri 2008, 89).

By comparing *ukiyo-e* and *manga*, rather than endorsing an artistic continuity between them, we were referring to the enduring force of the exotic perception of Japan in Europe, which is partly connected to that idea of Japanese uniqueness; and to Japan's persistent ability to introduce new ideas and influence the European peripheral/urban culture in terms of cultural appropriation and consumption (see Vanzella 2005, 45), a process implying the insurgence of some kind of "*neo-japonisme*" in Europe. Those reflections were part of our own approach to Japan. For a long time, we had considered ourselves "detached" and "intellectually critical" enthusiasts of this country's pop culture, and of the country itself. Throughout the years, we had opened up to *manga* and *anime* destined to a more mature public; we had started to explore past and contemporary Japanese literature and cinema, their food and their customs, and tried to get a taste of their pop music and serialized dramas; we had visited Japan, and developed Japanese friendships. That was just a small facet of our lives, a shared interest — something that we enjoyed discussing in cultural anthropological, historical and philosophical terms, due to our own involvement in those disciplines.

Then, nearly two years before our visit to Giverny, one of us had become actively involved in the world of fandom, joining *AnimeClick.it*, the largest Italian online platform of Japanese pop culture, as an editor and news writer[v]. Without him realizing it, the collaboration started to become for him more and more intense, as well as socially significant. During our own meeting in France in September 2013, one of the topics of conversation was actually the realization of his cosplay for the annual Lucca Comics & Games convention (hereinafter referred to as "Lucca Comics"), which is usually held between the last week of October and the first week of November, where *AnimeClick.it* hosted a stand. Doing cosplay was something conceived as a mixture of sociocultural experiment, fun with the rest of the staff, and familiarization with an increasingly visible aspect of Japanese pop culture fandom. At that point, we wondered how detached we both were from Japanese pop culture.

That trip to Giverny called for some self-reflexivity, and generated some questions[vi]. What does the mediation of Japanese culture enacted by *AnimeClick.it* say about the ways Italians perceive Japanese pop culture products and Japan in the era of globalization? In a process where Japanese pop culture products become part of Italian practices and thus a tool to read Italian contemporary society (Pellitteri 1999, 2008), which is the meaning of the different Italian generations' usage, mediation and negotiation of Japanese culture within the largest and fast-growing local platform? What do these practices mean to them? This article stems from that momentum, and it builds upon the analysis of the practices and opinions of some of the people involved in *AnimeClick.it*, and of the interactions in-between staff and between staff and users within the *AnimeClick.it* website as well as at the Lucca Comics

convention, where *AnimeClick.it* participates, playing an active role in the dissemination of Japanese pop culture, and the mediation of images between Japan and Italy. We interviewed fifteen people — twelve staff members, including the founder, and three active users — aged between 18 and 44; and observed the 2013 and 2014 Lucca Comics conventions. Focusing on *AnimeClick.it*, this article explores two parallel but interplaying themes: the perception of Japanese products and "Japan" by Italian fans; and the appropriation of Japanese cultural products as a way for the Italian fans to "talk" about themselves.

Japanese Pop Culture and the European Market: the Italian experience

In the late '70s, Japanese animated productions started to fill the airtime of emerging local and national private TV networks in Italy. As illustrated by Pellitteri (2008, 2015), those networks needed cheap products: Japanese animation could offer plenty of them. The initial absence of TV content regulation favoured the acquisition of different genres broadcasted in their original version (Pellitteri 2008, 312-315). The first wave included many *mecha anime* (robot *anime*), starting with *UFO Robot Grendizer*, broadcasted on Italian public television from 1978 to 1980 as *Atlas UFO Robot* (the Italian audience shortly identified this *anime* as "Goldrake", from the name of its main robot character). Other series drew on European and North American children's literature, mostly belonging to the Nippon Animation's *Meisaku* project, like *Akage no Anne*, *Kazoku Robinson Hyōryūki* or *Shōkōjo Sēra* (respectively based on *Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy Maud Montgomery, *Der Schweizerische Robinson* by Johann David Wyss and *A Little Princess* by Frances

Hodgson Burnett); animated versions of *shōjo manga*, like *Versailles no Bara*, widely known in Italy as *Lady Oscar*, or *Kyandi Kyandi* (*Candy Candy*). During the '80s, Italians also became accustomed to the *majokko* ("magical girls") genre (*Mahō no Tenshi Creamy Mami*, *Mahō no Star Magical Emi*) and the *spokon* (sports *anime*) genre, such as *Attack no. 1* and *Captain Tsubasa* (respectively known by the Italian general public as *Mimì e la nazionale di pallavolo* and *Holly & Benji*). Broadcasting of Japanese animation in Italy started to stabilize and then diminish in the '90s. In a time where television acted like a "nanny", generations of Italian children were massively exposed to, and influenced by Japanese animation: they became the "Goldrake-generation" (Pellitteri 1999; Teti 2011). In contrast, many adults criticized the content of its products and opposed their presence on the TV programming, blaming them for instilling violence and a distorted understanding of reality in Italian children, and their criticisms partly contributed to decreasing the number of *anime* broadcasted on national TV channels in Italy (Pellitteri 1999; Vanzella 2005).

Pellitteri (2008, 5-7) framed the incorporation of *anime* and *manga,* and later other Japanese pop culture products*,* into the Italian taste and cultural practices within the increasing presence of the Japanese cultural industry in the European market. Having identified two phases, he called the period going from 1975 to 1995 the "phase of the Dragon". *UFO Robot Grendizer*, the first *anime* to achieve a large popularity on European television in 1978 (6), epitomized this phase, where Europeans "discovered" Japanese products other than electronics and motorbikes. The turning point between the two phases is marked by the appearance of the videogame and *anime Pokémon*, in 1996-1997 (the

anime was broadcasted in Italy for the first time in 2000). Pellitteri defines the following period as the phase of the "Dazzle", which is ongoing. During this time, *anime* and *manga* have appeared in the local market; merchandising featuring the most popular characters and series has come to support those products; videogames, that had started to become popular in the late '80s, have grown stronger[vii]; and through the development of Internet and globalization, Italians, other Europeans and other non-Japanese audiences have started to be exposed to further expressions of Japanese pop culture (J-Pop, dramas, cinema, live actions, TV shows) and contemporary Japanese culture as a whole[viii]. Appealed by the competitive prices, the narrative quality, and the distinct aesthetics of the Japanese products[ix], European markets and audiences have played a pivotal role in the international diffusion of contemporary Japanese cultural forms.

Many of the Italians who grew up during the phase of the Dragon have developed an emotional attachment to Japanese *anime* as markers of their childhood and early teen-hood, and as a generational experience, whose nostalgia has been instrumental in the second phase of the Japanese cultural conquest of European markets (Pellitteri 1999). Some of these nostalgic Italian grown-ups started the companies specialized in Japanese video products like Yamato (established in 1991) and Dynamic Italia (1995); several others evolved into *manga* readers and discovered new *anime* (or re-discovered the old ones) continuing their relation with Japanese pop culture, and constructing specific images of Japan (see Pellitteri 2011, 244-246). The founder of *AnimeClick.it*, Tacchan[x], a man from Verona, Northern Italy, now aged 40, is one of these "nostalgic" committed Italians, who eventually opened up to

different aspects of Japanese pop culture. *AnimeClick.it* first appeared in 1998, as a page focusing on Japanese animation and *manga*. As its creator noticed, "for quite a while it was just me, myself and I"[xi]. It was the period when *manga* was timidly making its way into the Italian market. As another interviewee noticed, "back then, the comic-shop was like a mysterious object". Similarly, the first Lucca Comics conventions (or even the Comiket festival in Japan) were small reunions of early acolytes[xii].

We ourselves witnessed and participated in such economic and cultural process. In our own memories, when *manga* made their appearance in the Italian market, we were approaching a black and white, paper version of the kind of stories that we used to watch on TV as kids and early teenagers. *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, one of our first *manga*, emerged as the contemporary vision of the robot world from our childhood days. While there was the sense of reconnection to our past, we also felt a form of complaisance and excitement in approaching a distinct world, which remained unknown to most. *Manga* needed to be read backwards, from the last to the first page, and from the right to the left of the page. They told stories whose underlying distinct codes and practices we were starting to fully perceive and to consciously associate with a certain idea of Japan. Parallel to the emergence of the *manga*, we rediscovered the animated version of such stories, which could no longer be simply described as "Japanese cartoons". The label "*anime*" encompassed the idea of an animated world of its own and enhanced its status, making it accessible when the age for cartoons was officially past and gone.

However, *manga* and *anime* slowly gained in visibility and popularity, and within one decade the solo initiative of the page evolved into a website managed by a trio of fans, Tacchan and two friends of his same generation and area. Today the trio has been replaced by a team of about 40 people, situated in different parts of Italy, and an average of 30,000 users visit the website daily. *AnimeClick.it* has largely expanded, encompassing other aspects of Japanese popular culture — such as videogames, dramas, cinema, J-pop music and cosplay — and Japanese culture as a whole. It has a significant database hosting an encyclopaedia for *anime* and *manga*, which is updated daily, making it a precious resource not only for fans but also for professionals and researchers[xiii]. It also organises the "Neko Awards" for *anime* through surveys amongst the users. *AnimeClick.it* is equally the only Italian website of its kind to have its own stand at the Lucca festival, and it is increasingly having presence at live events all over Italy. At Lucca and other Italian comic conventions, it organises conferences hosting experts and professionals, in order to disseminate Japanese pop culture and an understanding of Japan. Finally, the website organises seasonal *AnimeClick.it* trips to Japan. This website, which has progressively expanded its presence to platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, brings together different generations of Japanese pop culture fans — the generation that witnessed the arrival of *anime,* the one that grew up at the turn of the two phases, and the new one, for whom Internet plays a primary role to familiarise with or access Japanese pop culture.

AnimeClick.it is not unique in its genre, for similar websites exist in other countries, like *Animexx.de* in Germany. [xiv] It is, however, particularly relevant to the understanding of the Italian scenario. Its

history and the frictions amongst the generations that gravitate around the website mirror the different trajectories that define the Japanese pop culture reception in Italy. At the same time, this website provides distinct Italian generations with opportunities for socialisation, and becomes a space for the concerted mediation and use of Japanese culture, and production of images about Japan. In this sense, Japanese pop culture is mediated by the collaboration of different generations, while mediating through the generations themselves. Both these processes and the website size make *AnimeClick.it* a space, the observation of which can provide interesting insights into Italian youth's personal and social identifications as mediated by Japanese culture, and into a part of contemporary Italian social experiences and desires.

The people we interviewed included the founder and eleven of the main collaborators. Most of them can be said to emotionally belong to the Goldrake-generation (which, in turn, encompasses different age generations and trajectories): the founder, Tacchan; the event organiser Alessandro from Rome (aged 42, and being the current webmaster); the illustrator and factotum Roberto from Bari (45); Hachi from Perugia (42), who is in charge of news about Japan; Stefano from Naples (34), one of the website programmers; Federico from Rome (33), who is in charge of the videogames section; the accountant Lara from Vicenza (31), in charge of news about J-pop, dramas and live-action movies; Rossella from Messina (32), responsible for the *anime* database files; and Dany87 from Imola (29), collaborating on the *manga* database files. Eretria from Naples (26), editor of the *anime* database, as well as Rossella S. from Turin (22), website moderator and in charge of the

calendar summarizing the *anime* legally streamed in Italy, and Ruuby[xv], in charge of the *anime* database files' maintenance, belong to another "era". We also interviewed three *AnimeClick.it* users, playing an active role in the web community: Athena from Varese (25), as well as Miriam from Turin (18) and Giada from the island of Elba (19), who represent the younger generation. There is a striking difference in terms of gender between the different generations, with the older one, which also leads the website, being mostly male[xvi], and the younger ones — its most active fringe — being represented by females. Sociologists have actually pinpointed the predominance of women amongst the youngest fans in Italy and France alike, and, in several European countries, the more active role of women as *manga* readers, cosplayers, and, more in general, consumers of Japanese pop culture (Pellitteri 2011a, 233)[xvii].

The older ones are all employed: Tacchan as a programmer, Alessandro as sales and marketing agent, Roberto as an artisan, Hachi as a pharmacist, Stefano as a programmer, and Federico as a lawyer. They all have a degree, except Roberto who has a postgraduate diploma as an artisan. Lara is an accountant, Rossella has higher education and is currently working in a kindergarten, and Dany87 is employed in the private sector. Athena has a degree in engineering and is now working. Four are students: Ruuby is studying agriculture; Eretria is a postgraduate student in publishing; Rossella S. is an undergraduate student in Asian languages and literatures; and Miriam is studying international relations and marketing at high-school. Only Giada is currently unemployed and not studying. All of them have various hobbies. These profiles are diverse, but overall they mirror sociological surveys pointing to a mostly medium-highly educated fandom, whose

education "leads them to be interested in 'faraway' themes like Asia or Japan" (Pellitteri 2011a, 234), which challenges old prejudices about *manga* or *anime* entertaining a lower social class or people trying to escape a depressing or disadvantaged life (235). Thus, this paper examines the terms in which these consumers perceive Japanese pop culture, and the "faraway" Japanese world. It then explores what these images add to their daily lives, leading them to spend a good amount of money on Japanese cultural products, a considerable amount of time consuming them, and a lot of energy disseminating them in ways that make the website look like a professional product, and what these practices of consumption and mediation reveal about distinct Italian generations of fandom.

Italy, the Cool Flagrance of Japanese Pop Culture, and the Mysteries of Japan

In his essay *Recentering Globalization* (2002), Iwabuchi explored the international rise of Japanese cultural power (from motorbikes to technology and pop culture) in the era of globalization, and connected it to products lacking a "cultural odour"— a term whereby he referred to "the way in which cultural features of a country of origin and images or ideas of its national, in most cases stereotyped, way of life are associated *positively* with a particular product in the consumption process" (27). The images that constitute the cultural odour are often associated to exoticism, like the geisha and the samurai — he added — and to specific racial and bodily images (27-28). The cultural odour of cultural commodities can evolve into what he calls a "fragrance — a socially and culturally acceptable smell", developing when "the image of the

contemporary lifestyle of the country of origin is strongly an affirmatively called to mind as the very appeal of the product" (28). We understand that being made in Japan — and recognised as such — is not enough to produce a Japanese fragrance: we also need a cultural odour. Japanese producers and creators of animation and videogames have, however, aimed at producing something that would not be defined by the "Japaneseness" celebrated by *nihonjinron*, but would rather be an expression of non-Japaneseness (28-29). Iwabuchi noticed that Japanese animation seems to believe that the absence of Japaneseness in their products is crucial to access a global market, and even though it might not consciously aim to export, Japanese animation always has a global market in mind (98). This non-Japaneseness is encapsulated in the notion of "*mukokuseki",* literally meaning 'someone or something lacking a nationality', but also implying the erasure of racial or ethnic characteristics or a context, which does not imprint a particular culture or country with these features" (28). Accordingly, Iwabuchi noticed that the characters of Japanese animation or comics do not have Japanese features, and the context is often non-Japanese (ibidem).

Pellitteri questioned this theory when applied to Japanese pop culture, using the metaphor of the "odour [that] always exudes, at least a little bit; especially if it is smelled by people outside the original context of the product, which is supposed to be aseptic" (2008, 69). While acknowledging the Japanese attempts to de-localize their pop culture products, he identifies elements that can be ascribed to a Japanese style. In this sense, he provides the example of Hello Kitty, the popular cat-like character, which in the creator's mind is supposed to be from London, and yet its design incorporates the *kawaii* (cute) style peculiar to *manga*

and *anime* (ibidem). Pellitteri emphasizes how Italy and other countries that have been long exposed to the style of *anime* and *manga* can definitely recognise the aesthetics, the registers, and the dynamicity of the products as Japanese, even when the creators maximise the camouflage of the product's Japanese origins (70). He also stressed that the very understanding of *anime* and *manga* as Japanese has played a paramount role in their successful reception in Italy, for their origins were associated with a cultural world, a sensibility, and aesthetics foreign to the Italian ones. Focusing on Japanese pop culture in Northeast and Southeast Asia, Otmazgin (2012) instead used the notion of "faceless" products versus products with a "flavour". He mentioned the animated character of Hello Kitty too, together with Doraemon, and Pokémon. In his opinion, these characters "do not look Japanese in any objective way. However, they are identified as Japanese because they represent a specific genre of animated products associated with Japan" (13). The "Japanese flavour" is then detected in the genre, and it is "the appreciation shown to Japanese cultural products, due to their quality and high artistic level, [that] creates a recognizable genre of products associated with Japan" (13).

The people who gravitate around *AnimeClick.it* do perceive a cultural odour in the Japanese pop culture products. Similarly to the interviewees of Otmazgin's survey (2012), the people we discussed with explicitly identified a genre that they associated to Japan, whose features (graphic style, narrative and characters) they perceived as distinct and charming. To the Italian noses, this odour has evolved into a fragrance, which has been leading them to explore most of the manifestations of Japanese pop culture (*anime*, *manga*, dramas, cinema,

music, games, cosplay, street fashion, food, etc.). At the same time, some have tried to live their passion creatively. For instance, some have been writing fanfictions inspired on characters and works they appreciate. Roberto and Stefano have instead been working on local reinterpretations of some specific forms of Japanese pop culture: the first has developed a local *manga*, made by an Italian *mangaka* and targeting an Italian public, whereas the second, in collaboration with other staff members, was aiming to develop a visual novel taking place at Lucca Comics. The focus of Roberto and Stefano's projects is more on the product rather than on the characters or the themes, and on the concept of local re-interpretation. In this sense, they re-act the cycle of cultural appropriation of the "Other", which has characterized Japan-Europe cultural relations. All of this suggests a form of "Japanization of European youth" to cite Kinsella (1998b), but in this case the Japanization stretches to include adults.

When we paused on the elements that the interviewees recognized as typical of Japanese comics and animation (including videogames), the graphic style was overall appreciated as "captivating" and "colourful". Most of the female interviewees paused on the *kawaii* aesthetics. For instance, Rossella believed that the "sweetness of the faces, their 'kawaiiness', the ethereal beauty of the characters" could, in some cases, compensate for a low-quality story. Hachi described *kawaii*, as a Japanese cult, and she appreciated it for "its ability to incorporate the puerile side of life into adulthood and serious matters". Based on our interviewees' perceptions of *kawaii*, the definitions provided by fans we met at Lucca Comics, our conversations with Japanese friends and acquaintances, and Pellitteri's (2008, 192) definitions, *kawaii* could be

translated as "cute", and associated to something inspiring tenderness. This sense of cuteness moves from the *manga* pages into the real world. As we noticed during our visits to Japan, it pervades its cities, with billboards and announcements being represented as comic scenes that adopt the *kawaii* style's forms and colours, and the *kawaii* mascots adopted by Japanese railways companies, local authorities, or even the Japanese Communist Party and Japan's Self-Defense Forces[xviii].

Pellitteri (2008, 192-204) identified *kawaii* as an emotional attachment to roundish and small objects, but also a three-faceted (psychological, sociological and aesthetic) concept[xix]. Psychologically, *kawaii* can be linked to a psychosocial *moratorium*, defined by Erikson (1950) as a time when a person takes a break from "real life" to actively search for their identity, which is affecting contemporary Japanese youth and infantilizing it. Sociologically, it can be interpreted as a "non-ideological confrontation with the values of Japanese society" (Pellitteri 2008, 195). Aesthetically, it refers to the notion of *iki* as developed by the philosopher Shūzō Kuki (1992), a threefold concept implying seduction, spiritual energy and resignation (53-64). In Western philosophy, *iki* was also considered by Martin Heidegger (1999) as a form of "grace" (116).

Through a "pop" influence, Shūzō Kuki's *iki* transforms into *kawaii*, preserving *iki*'s sweetness (*amami*) while making it flashy (*hade*). The semantic halo of *iki* thus manifests in its "pop evolution", namely the "kawaiism". In this sense, *kawaii* is not a subcultural phenomenon, since its roots are embedded in Japanese culture and make it an integrated part of this system (Pellitteri 2008, 198). Nevertheless, the childish style of *kawaii* cannot be separated by a complex range of sociological issues,

concerning the juvenile tendency to refuse growth and adulthood (202), or the feminization of a certain youthful culture (208; Kinsella 1998a), which is strongly connected to the popularity of *shōjo manga* (Masuda 2015).

The *AnimeClick.it* members we talked to, hence, sensed this "kawaiism" and recognized it as a Japanese trait. Interestingly, they appreciated "kawaiiness" for its ability to produce a fantastic world, but also because they did not see it as being disconnected from the gritty realities life is made of, or from any teaching. Hachi elaborated on that, arguing that Japanese pop culture "plays with fantasy, and still, it can relate to reality, with much more brutal stories than the sugar coated Disney world". In this sense, Japanese animation and comics were lauded for providing hard content through soft looks. Rossella admitted having been inspired by the stories of *manga* and *anime* in different episodes of her life, notably she was influenced by what she perceived as "celebration of team work, collective effort, and happy collective problem-solving [smiles]". An appreciation of the "Japanese genre" also emerged when the respondents talked about the narratives, and the characters associated to this style. The interviewees equally emphasized the "diversification" of *manga* and *anime*, in terms of stories and themes. Federico loved the Japanese videogame, because "the narrative part gets even more attention than the game per se". Concerning the characters, Alessandro praised the "heroes who are violent but fair". So did other interviewees. Alessandro also emphasised appreciating that the Japanese stories rarely portray solitary heroes. In his opinion, the values and the models entrenched in many Japanese products were reflected in the website, its strong cohesion and multiple

interactions. An expert of the *yaoi* ("boys love" *manga*) genre, Dany87, argued that *manga* could also help young people become aware of sexuality and gender issues.

This perception of Japanese pop culture strikingly differs from the one of their "predecessors", namely those who were adults between the '70s and the '90s. During those decades, many parents associations regularly intervened, backed by mainstream mass media, and people revolving around the school and the intellectual world, to protest against what they perceived as a corrosive influence on the Italian children (Pellitteri 1999, 148-156; Vanzella 2005, 37-40). These voices associated the *anime* stories with violence, death, immorality, and sexual ambiguity. They depicted the *anime* as low-quality products. They also perceived their presence as an invasion due to the large numbers of "Japanese cartoons" on Italian TV. This caused the increasing "de-Japanization" of the products: Italian names and credits replaced the Japanese ones, too explicit references to Japan were cut, and the *anime* disappeared from the national TV channels, while being more and more subjected to selectiveness on the private networks. As Vanzella stressed, these criticisms echoed the general hostility to television peculiar to that time, and were reinforced by the products' "exotic origin — which stirred some secret xenophobia — and a latent wariness of technology" (2005, 38). The Italian voices that diminished Japanese animation powerfully re-enacted the negative connotations of Orientalist perceptions.

Said (1978) identified Orientalism as the phenomenon whereby Europe and America have constructed an image of the Middle East and Asia as exotic but inferior. The Japanese influences on European art only

reveal the particularly strong fascination and desire that Japan has exerted on Europe. However, missionaries and early observers have actually represented Japan as being both exotic and inferior: they portrayed the Japanese as indolent and undisciplined, and since the Japanese traditions that charmed them (like the *samurai* or *geisha* worlds) were vanishing, they believed that becoming "modern" like Europe was the only direction the Japanese could take (Minear 1980). World War II led to the construction of images of Japan associated with violence and lack of emotional control, particularly in the U.S. (Dower 1987). After the war, the famous work *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* by the anthropologist Benedict (1946) crystallised the American representations of Japan as totally dissimilar to the West, while *nihonjinron* theories such as the ones by Nakane and Doi validated such dissimilarity as uniqueness. Iwabuchi (1994) argued that all of this significantly reinforced both Japan's exoticism, and the European wariness towards Japan[xx]. As Japan advanced technologically, and progressed to the extent of becoming an exporter of technology in the "West", it has become the object of "techno-Orientalism" (Morley and Robinson 1992; Roh 2015). However, Iwabuchi (1994) noticed that media, literary and cinematic representations emphasizing the technological advancement of Asia were counterbalanced by the stereotype of intellectual primitiveness. The historical Western construction of "Japan" is actually quite complex — Iwabuchi continued — for its perception of Japan is constantly shifting, and influenced by the Japanese Self-Orientalism enacted through the *nihonjinron* theories, whose defining traits are, in turn, an appropriation of the features that Western forces had initially attributed to Japan (what Manabe and Befu

(1992) labelled as the "samuraization" of Japan). However, in this context we only want to stress how amongst many Italian adults Japanese pop culture contemporaneously roused the fear towards technology as well as the latent European wariness towards the exotic dimension of Japan, and the force that Iwabuchi (1994) identified as the "subversiveness of 'Japan' against the 'West'".

The following generations — those who actually grew up with *anime* and those who were familiarized with Japanese pop culture as teenagers — have modified these perceptions, "re-humanizing" Japan, and "elevating" the status of *manga* and *anime.* This is the time when Japanese pop culture translates into "Cool Japan". Several scholars have discussed the phenomenon in relation to the notion of "soft power" (Iwabuchi 2002; Groot 2006; Kelts 2006; Allison 2008; Otmazgin 2007, 2012; Norris 2010; Bouissou 2012) [xxi], particularly with respect to America, which dominated Japan culturally, politically and economically in the immediate post-World War II, and Asia, where Japan has been an imperialist force, and even after the collapse of its colonial empire at the end of the World War II, it has maintained a rhetoric asserting the superiority of Japan over the other Asian countries (see Iwabuchi 1994, 2002). Focusing on Asia, Otmazgin (2012) did not see the popularity of Japanese pop culture translating into an extension of Japanese economic/political power. Its power rested in its ability to generate positive images of Japan amongst the new Asian generations, which challenged enduring political tensions, and historical diffidence. Similarly, any form of Japanese "power" in Italy needs to be identified in the de-demonization of the Japanese products (and, as we will see, in the overall positive perception of Japan itself). To a certain extent, this

translates into soft power in economic terms, insofar as it has resulted into a solid market, and brought tourism to Japan (Lam 2007; Norris 2010; Kaneko 2013).

Four collaborators — Roberto, Rossella, Stefano and Federico — joked over the fact that now they act as ambassadors of Japanese popular culture, to the extent that they are hardly reading *manga* or watching *anime.* At the same time, as we hinted to, we witness a phenomenon of appropriation of Japanese pop culture, which gets transformed in the way it mixes with local themes, stories and aesthetics. To this regard, *AnimeClick.it* also organises the IICA (Italian Indie Comics Awards) to award self-produced Italian comics, mostly in the *manga*-style. This phenomenon of cultural appropriation is not unique to Italy. Throughout Europe, America, and Asia, we witness the circulation of an increasing number of comics labelled as "*manga*" that are actually conceived and created locally or in foreign countries other than Japan, to the extent that we might wonder whether we might have "Japanese comics" without Japan (Brienza 2015). Paradoxically, the "Japanization" of new European (in this case Italian) generations through Japanese pop culture also manifests in the way they appropriate the domestication of foreign cultural forms which has characterized Japan.

Japanization also manifests in the fans going beyond Japanese pop culture to embrace (their idea of) Japan. Except for Stefano, whose relation to Japan remained circumscribed to its pop forms, the others have tried to access other aspects of Japanese culture, such as food, literature, mythology, cinema, and history. Two of the youngest ones were studying Far Eastern languages. A few of them had interacted with Japanese people through *AnimeClick.it* live events. Tacchan, Alessandro

and Hachi had been to Japan with *AnimeClick.it*, and the rest dreamt of travelling there one day. All of them had developed a specific idea of Japan. The terms in which they interpreted and imagined Japan become meaningful if framed within the dynamics of "complicit exoticism" identified by Iwabuchi (1994) that have marked the construction of Japaneseness. In fact, some interviewees challenged the idea of Japanese extreme difference, arguing that the gradual familiarization with Japan had enabled them to detect similarities with Italy. For instance, Alessandro identified them in political instability. "Both of them constantly change their government" he noticed, contemporaneously defying stereotypes of a hyper-functional Japan. To Roberto, Japan was, "after all, not so different from Italy, whether it is for the American influence we are imbued in or… and then it [Japan] has the same shape as Italy, I do not know how to explain this, but at the atmospheric level they are similar". Yet, he noticed how exoticism triumphs over these similarities, with "Japan's distance, its millenary culture, the samurai, and the myths, and all of these legends that are totally irresistible". After describing Japanese culture as "*totally* [own emphasis] different from our way of life", Rossella S. included the charm of the Buddhist and Shinto religions, "which are much more interesting and *mysterious* than the Christian one". This striking difference translates into strong fascination, she argued. She also added how she had come to perceive Japan as a "nearly *utopian* world, where the criminality rate is very low and people are very devout to their religion and their emperor".

Ultimately, our informants talked about an exoticism that equated with inaccessibility. In their words, Japan emerged as unreachable. Geographical insularity was coupled with a cultural insularity that they

ascribed to the Tokugawa period (or we should say, what they knew about it). Federico compellingly illustrated this feeling arguing that in a time where travelling is much easier and moving within Europe is particularly easy, travelling to a place like Japan remains a limited phenomenon. In this sense — he argued — Japan can remain mysterious and maintain the charm of difference. Within this scenario, pop culture acts as a bridge. However, this bridge is, in turn, an expression of Japan's exoticism. According to Athena, many Italians and Europeans alike are attracted by Japanese pop culture, because "it is seen with a halo of mystery, something to be unveiled". All of this echoes the latest dynamics of Orientalism towards Japan: the European acknowledgement of Japanese distinctiveness contributes to maintaining the ideas upheld by *nihonjinron*; at the same time, it delegitimizes Japan's technological superiority and charm by emphasizing its "immeasurable difference".

Similar to the surveys done amongst fans in different European countries (Pellitteri 2011a, 251-255), the features that our interviewees attributed to Japan evoked the ones that have come to be associated to Japaneseness, and resulted in an ambivalent image of Japan. Our interviewees perceived (and appreciated) Japan as efficient and organized, and as the country where ancient traditions and technological progress harmoniously coexisted. All those interviewed from *AnimeClick.it* paused on the working culture in Japan, which they perceived as being dramatically different from the Italian one. On the one hand, they appreciated the emphasis on collaboration and teamwork that they pinpointed in many *manga/anime*. On the other hand, they perceived lack of flexibility and excessive work. In a similar

way, they viewed Japanese social relations as extremely different and expressed ambivalent reactions towards it. Miriam emphasised this aspect, first lauding the culture of "respect, which in Japan, is tangible everywhere: in the family, at school, at work, amongst peers, colleagues, parents and their children…", then expressing scepticism towards their "totally different ways of approaching one another". "Come on! Do they address one another by their surname even if they are friends? Finally, it is a society of very reserved and closed people", she concluded. Excessive distance in interpersonal relations and extremely strict rules were the aspects our informants perceived and did not appreciate. Some also perceived Japanese people as struggling to express their emotions and feelings — the opposite of the earlier representations of Japan where Japanese were portrayed (and looked down) as emotional (Iwabuchi 1994). Rossella S. was one of them, describing "the social repression of feelings and emotions" as the other side of her utopian image of Japan. In this case, Japan emerged as a dystopia. When difference became too different, it was negatively connoted, and there was no space left for negotiating identification.

Above all, Japan was a place associated with imagination and the fictional. Napier (2015) highlighted how Japanese pop culture has marked a shift in the Western representation of Japan, moving from Orientalism to fantasy. As a matter of fact, surveys about *manga* readers highlighted that many of the fans wanting to learn more about Japan do not feel the need to meet Japanese people (Pellitteri 2011a, 251). This fantasy was epitomized by Alessandro defining the Japan he had visited as an "an amazing amusement park". Alessandro had spent two weeks in Japan, joining one of the *AnimeClick.it* trips. His expectations were not

disappointed; inasmuch as he found the Japan he was looking for. The Japan his mind had imagined based on *manga* and *anime* was there: *sakura* (cherry blossoms)*,* the *hanami* (cherry blossoms viewing in Japan during springtime), the houses, the atmosphere, the technology. To him, "it was as if *anime* had turned into reality". Thus, Japan emerged as a place where to have fun, where to "live" the fantasy. But he definitely believed it would have not been possible for him as an Italian to live there — at least not at his age. The trips organized by *AnimeClick.it* represent a specific kind of tourism: travellers search "for the settings of their favourite characters' adventures (if they were set in a real place), and for the places which are considered cool, such as Tōkyō and its many souls, from the hyper-technological ones to those connected to traditions" (Pellitteri 2011a, 252).

Alessandro contradicted himself, for he simultaneously blamed those Italians whose appreciation of *manga* and *anime* resulted in an idealistic and naïve exaltation of Japan's difference. He equally stressed how *AnimeClick.it* strived to provide an all-encompassing and critical perception of Japan, mentioning Hachi's article on Japanese culture. These do not limit to aspects such as food, traditions and any extravagancies, but also consider social and political issues. Overall, the *AnimeClick.it* people we interviewed revealed forms of self-reflexivity, for they constantly stressed that the Japan they were talking about was just what they imagined. Miriam was the youngest fan we talked to and yet she was very careful as to the way she would talk about the Japanese country (starting from her bracketing "Japan"). Ruuby instead took some distance from that phenomenon:

> Like many people, I initially admired Japan. Then, little by little, this has transformed into mere interest in a country that I indirectly learnt to know through many articles [hosted on AnimeClick.it].

The ambivalence generated by the alternation of self-reflexive moments and exotic and fantastic images of Japan seems to dissolve in the fact that fans are content with their imagined Japan. Japan is there to fulfil the role of fantasy. Here, it might be noted that amongst our informants the enthusiasm towards live-action movies and TV series based on *anime* and *manga* was quite mitigated – a couple really liked them, while the others were not really interested or did not watch them at all. Two of these ascribed it to the Japanese actors' acting. Maybe, the presence of real Japanese incarnating the *manga/anime* characters disrupts the fantasy dimension. Indeed, talking about the appeal of *anime/manga,* Ruuby had consciously connected it to its ability to tell stories that could not be told by "actors in flesh and blood". However, Alessandro emphasised that this Italian interest in Japan was a niche phenomenon. In his opinion, it was a marker of people who loved reading and were quite educated, suggesting that the imagined Japan remained the object of an elitist subculture.

Emotions and Socialization: the "*Otaku*" Experience in Italy

The identifications with Japanese pop culture and the perception of Japan as a fantasy that we have so far illustrated translates into forms of engagement with Japanese pop culture products. These tell us about various experiences and emotions of segments of the Italian generations from the '70s until today. The sociologist Otmzagin claimed that the narratives of fans interested in Japanese popular culture point to an

emotional bond with Japan (2013, 92). As we have illustrated, the consumption of the different genres of Japanese pop culture elicited emotional responses. There are also emotions that are related to the impact such consumption has had on the consumers' lives. The Goldrake-generation directly or indirectly claimed that their emotional connection, being made of nuances such as nostalgia and familiarity, strongly differed from the attachment of the new generations. Talking about their first memory of Japanese popular culture, their voices and smiles revealed a form of warmth and mythization, evoking the "Mazinga nostalgia" (Pellitteri 1999). Their first memories of Japanese pop culture were all situated in their childhood and related to the *anime* broadcasted on Italian channels. Several recalled the "*robottoni*" (Italian familiar word for "big robots"). Tacchan particularly appreciated the sports *anime*, which he deemed something unique to Japanese animated works. Rossella mentioned the "girls' stories", which she remembered watching with her mother. Roberto also evoked the "superbly-made *Meisaku* stories". At some point in their adolescence, the oldest members of that generation experienced a more or less long "period of oblivion", or "hole", or "disconnection", where they were "distracted" by other aspects of life, until they identified a moment that was at the same time one of re-discovery and initiation, coinciding with the second phase of the transnational diffusion of Japanese popular culture goods — the Dazzle. For instance, Hachi explained:

> Thanks to the mythic MTV *anime* night[xxii], I rediscovered a world and I did not abandon it anymore. What attracted me the most was the graphic boost of Japanese animation. I recovered things that were buried in my memory and I started wanting to know more about Japan and its culture. And I discovered a whole world.

For younger members of the "nostalgic group" like Lara, the transition from the first to the second phase did not properly include a moment of rupture, having directly shifted during their adolescence from the unaware exposition to Japanese pop culture on Italian TV to the discovery of *manga* and *anime* in the comic shops:

> Probably *anime* [is my first memory of Japanese pop culture]. I can't really remember, I just have the feeling I have watched Japanese *anime* on television since I was a little child. Maybe Heidi or Creamy… I feel like I have been constantly tied to Japan, one way or another. I used to watch many *anime*, then reading a lot of *manga*, then watching dramas and following the entertainment industry as a "journalist" for *AnimeClick.it*. I have always been particularly interested in Japanese culture and habits, even those not linked to the *anime/manga* industry at all.

As Lara spontaneously pointed out, many Italians are so interested in Japanese pop culture, because "it's probably like getting more in touch with some fond childhood memories". Having grown up with Japanese *anime* also translates into an acute sense of familiarity. Further, there is the sense of belonging to a specific era in Italian society: the time when up to six-eight hours of *anime* would be broadcasted daily on private networks, one episode a day for each series (in Japan and the U.S.A. the series were broadcasted weekly), and children would then be fed *anime* for breakfast, lunch, afternoon snack and dinner. Hence, we have to situate such bonds within the larger frame of the historical and socioeconomic phenomenon that fostered the massive presence of Japanese animation on Italian TV (see p. 3; Pellitteri 2008). Based on the interviewees' stories and personal experiences, these memories can today become the object of nostalgic conversations, vividly evoking the peculiar images they are made of as much as the emotions attached to

them, and sometimes ending with everyone singing the theme songs of the most popular *anime*. In this regard, Stefano joked over the fact that an intimate connection was unavoidable in the circumstances where he grew up:

> Go and watch Captain Tsubasa, 45 million times, always the same season, the same episodes (laughs). It is obvious that sooner or later you develop feeling for it!

As Pellitteri highlighted (2015, 36), this phenomenon created an extraordinarily intense process of loyalization amongst the young Italian TV viewers, which acted as the solid rock upon which *anime* and *manga* could later build their success in the Italian context. For those who approached *manga* and further learnt about (or rediscovered) *anime* when these first started to appear on the shelves of the comic shops, the notion of Japanese pop culture also calls forth the excitement of those days as well as a form of pride for their role as pioneers. Describing her initiation to *manga* during the late adolescence, Dany87 recalled that "everything was new and unknown, and at that stage my involvement was at its utmost". Stefano argued that all of this made the emotional bond of the Goldrake-generation particularly strong:

> Our generation is more attached to the *anime*. We underwent the invasion, then the novelty. They [the new generation] grow up in it, now the relation is different. Nowadays they can find whatever they want. We depended on the TV channel… We had to look for what we wanted. We experienced the innovation. I remember I could not wait for the day after to watch an episode of *I Cavalieri dello Zodiaco* (*Saint Seiya*)… The *manga* was a revolutionary product too. […] Although I personally lived this phenomenon in a much more superficial way than others, our relationship was definitely much more profound than it is now.

Finally, having witnessed all of the phases of the international expansion of Japanese pop culture in Italy, the Goldrake-generation has acquired a historical memory of the phenomenon. In this sense, the serious engagement of older generations in a project like *AnimeClick.it* reveals a sense of responsibility (and privilege) in transmitting the history of Japanese pop culture as well as the history of the Italian relation with such cultural forms, and per extension, with Japan.

The Goldrake-generation highlighted other intergenerational differences. For instance, Rossella could not help noticing the generational gap between the staff and the majority of the website users in the way they approached Japanese pop culture:

> There are things… I do not think they are negative per se, but they just do not intrigue me that much. Idols, cosplay, the survey of this, the survey of that… I don't know… finding two hundred news about J-pop. I think that it is, however, fair to cover as many interests as possible. But it is also true that young people have a different approach and a different philosophy. They tend to like things that, when we were 15, we didn't have or we did not find interesting, whereas they grow up with those things.

The narratives of the youngest people we talked to were more diverse. Athena's memories did not actually differ from those of the older generations — "cartoons" as a child and a bit later the "*anime*" broadcasted on MTV. Eretria identified the singer Nika Makashima, who played the character Nana in the live action movie *Nana*, as her first memory of Japanese pop culture. Rossella S. recalled "the *anime* broadcasted on MTV that included references to Japanese culture, like monsters, gods, and mythological figures". Miriam, who confessed to have been initially "skeptical" towards Japanese pop culture, related her first memories to a biographical episode, which also corroborated the

fact that today's youth increasingly approaches Japanese pop culture thanks to their friends or siblings (see Pellitteri 2011a, 247-248):

> An old friend of mine told me I looked like a character I ignored. I got curious […] and found out that the cartoons I watched as a child belonged to Japanese culture. Since that episode, I started to watch them more and more often. As for the videogames, I can't remember my "first time", but I remember me playing as a small child with my brothers to any kind of new game.

Finally, Giada's first memories of Japanese pop culture were related to *manga* rather than *anime,* pointing to new trajectories in an Italian scenario that has been characterized by the *anime* preceding and channeling towards *manga* (see Pellitteri 2011a, 246).

Contrary to the others, the younger *AnimeClick.it* participants did not make comparisons in terms of attachment, except for Miriam, who wanted to minimize intergenerational differences, for "a passion is a passion. If you like a cartoon, you watch it, you talk about it, you play the characters, and that's what the fans in the '70s and the '80s used to do, in my opinion". In terms of consumption practices, Miriam only noticed that nowadays fans could be more "obsessive" and more "easily influenced" and that "today we can find very young fans". Athena, Rossella S. and Ruuby actually portrayed their own generation as privileged, arguing that back in the day fans had limited options, could not really choose what and when to consume because they depended on TV programming, and could hardly find news about the products they liked. Athena also noticed that given the huge variety of genres, today there is space for everyone.

These distinct stories and attitudes do not imply a minor attachment/emotional response to Japanese pop culture. There

certainly must be a special relation with it and Japan in general, given their impact on their daily habits and their life choices. Eretria's "discovery" of Nana was transformative, insofar as it inspired her to open to other Asian cultures like Chinese and Korean cultures, and resulted in her intense involvement in fansubbing — activity that has certainly been instrumental to the expansion of Japanese pop culture (Rush 2009; Lee 2011). Rossella S.'s memories of the traditions and creatures seen in *anime* evolved into her current involvement in Far East Studies. Miriam became so curious about Japan that she wanted to submit a project on Japanese culture for the high-school final exam. 90% of the music Giada currently listens to is Japanese. The emotional and biographical element is ubiquitous. Emotions play out in different ways, but in both generations they point to a bond with Japan. Further, if older generations have been pioneers and are active in maintaining the history of *manga/anime*, the younger generations are actually more active in other dimensions that play a paramount role in the dissemination of Japanese culture in contemporary society, such as fansubbing, scanlations (the practice of unauthorized translation of graphic narratives; see Fabbretti 2016), and, above all, cosplay. The *AnimeClick.it* staff/users who did cosplay enjoyed embodying their favorite characters and viewed cosplay as a different way to have fun with their friends and socialize.

In fact, Alessandro, who did claim a stronger emotional bond, later lamented what he saw as an increasing form of snobbery towards the new generations' expressions of Japanese pop culture:

> […] like, some forms of fandom, which have certainly their flaws, as, for instance, cosplay, but cannot simply be labelled as *otaku* or stupid… It is

> another way to express fandom. OK, I have seen cosplayers who just show off, but I have also seen a group like the one at Naples, who organized all alone the event at the Asian Village. They are guys in their 20s, who, instead of getting drugs or becoming morons in front of videogames, transform cosplay into a moment of fun and a form of socialization, they are all friend, and they also express their love for a form of art. Because it is a form of art… some of them are so talented, they sew their clothes themselves. One must admit that some of them are really good people and deserve visibility.

Despite generational differences, and the divergences and ambivalences revealed by the older generations, the "spirit" seems to be the same for younger and older fans: orienting their efforts towards a conscious and informed consumption of Japanese pop culture and an understanding of Japan as a country. Intergenerational differences do not prevent younger and older fans to collaborate. Further, the shared practice of consuming and (re)producing Japanese pop culture enables Italians spanning through different generations to socialize. Indeed, the initial motivation for participating in an initiative like *AnimeClick.it* is not necessarily the interest in Japanese pop culture consumption. Most of our interviewees told us they had been "dragged in" by friends, and eventually got "trapped" in the initiative. Socialization seems to be the ultimate factor that "trapped" them. Rossella argued that the social dimension of the website contributed to the solidity of the working group. Eretria emphasized that "a lot of people who used to superficially participate in the website started to dedicate much more time and energy to this reality once they met the web friends in real life". Similarly, Federico revealed that the socialization opportunities offered by *AnimeClick.it* motivated him to collaborate again after a two-year break, and to stay despite the increasing commitment it demanded. He argued that the element of socialization was a relatively recent phenomenon,

favoured by the website's participation in Lucca Comics, the growing number of Japanese pop culture related events as opportunities for staff and users to meet, and Alessandro's role as an event organizer, who emphasized and advanced the live dimension of the website.

We could also say that collaboration and socialization around Japanese pop culture brings together different generations that, in their own way, experience forms of marginality: the older ones are marginal in their nostalgia for a time gone, whereas the younger are marginal for they are not part of a generational phenomenon. Apart from these distinctions, they are all marginal for Japanese pop culture represents a specific niche within the wider cultural scenario, whether it be for the sophistication of its products and their consumption, or for its opposition to those adults who look down on *anime* as products for children or view Japanese pop culture products as trivial or carriers of dangerous influences, or imagine their fans as loners alienated from reality.

Escapism can also be a factor transversal to generations. The emotions that our interlocutors associated with "kawaiism" as well as their perception of Japan as a fantasy suggested escapist desires. Further, attempting to trace the average profile of the *AnimeClick.it* collaborator, Tacchan ironically identified it as a person with "problems". Federico laughed at Tacchan's considerations, but he then agreed with him:

> Well, you must actually have some problem. What I mean is... Nobody who is mentally sane would stay in it! In a situation where you work yourself out just for the sake of it... We are so strange that we enjoy it...

The surveys of the comparative research on *manga* in Europe actually revealed that most readers aimed to distract themselves from daily life, although this was just one of the reasons why they consumed *manga* (Pellitteri 2011a, 239) However, none of our interlocutors consciously identified the desire of escaping into an alternative reality as the element motivating their consumption of Japanese pop culture or their collaboration to *AnimeClick.it*.

Finally, we could argue that all differences are transcended in the staff/users becoming part of the *otaku* sociological phenomenon, as identified by the philosopher Azuma Hiroki (2010). The "emotional bond" we have so far considered is not certainly unique to the *manga* and *anime* fans. Nevertheless, the *otaku* phenomenon assigns a key-role to the Japanese pop culture products, and the kind of experience they are associated to, where feelings like nostalgia, sentimentality and escapism prevail. According to Azuma, both Japanese pop culture and the cultural practices related to its products are quintessentially postmodern (82), since they all point to a fictional statute of reality and knowledge: in other words, it is a cultural consumption that does not care about the statute of reality of the consumed narratives (92-97), considering that for the consumers there is no more a distinction between an original work and its copies[xxiii]. Following the theoretical framework of postmodernism found in Baudrillard (1979; 1985) and the French philosopher's theory of simulacra, Azuma (2010) assumes that Japanese pop culture fandom reduces narrative works to a database of simulacra, where there is no longer any difference between the copies (of a copy) and the model, the authentic and the inauthentic (118); more

specifically, the database is the deep structure behind the circulation of simulacra as copies of a copy (119).

In his phenomenology of "otakuism", Azuma also draws on the philosopher Alexandre Kojève and his *Introduction to the reading of Hegel* (1996). Kojève identifies "snobbery", conceived as pure form detached from any specific content, as a fundamentally Japanese trait (543n). In Azuma's analysis, the *otaku* attitude becomes a postmodern and someway distorted expression of Japanese snobbery (Azuma 2010, 127). Actually, *otaku* realize a "snobbish" consumption of forms (e.g. erotic images or characters data) regardless of their contents, but their snobbery cannot be compared to Japanese *seppuku* (ritual suicide), as in Kojève's example. Rather, the "snobbish" trait of the *otaku* can be interpreted in terms of a "return to animality" (127) or animalization, where the consumers, or "database animals" (77), are peacefully adapted to "nature", understood as a fictitious and cynical consumerism (134).

Nevertheless, in the *otaku* experience Japanese pop culture products become tools to understand — rather than embellish — reality, and to connect with emotions (135-139); thus, in the *otaku* subculture we can detect a spreading interest in the "dramatic elements" of a story (135). This leads us to another aspect of Azuma's analysis of postmodernism, that is the statute of narratives. According to Lyotard (1979), due to the advancement of technology and the skepticism towards ideologies or master ideas, postmodern is permeated by "small narratives", short local narrative practices suitable for segments of the society and useful to define subcultural meaning. "Small narratives" are to be understood as a replacement for the "grand narratives", mirroring a world where

ideologies and grand stories seem to be waning. Born in a post-war Japan, deprived of its Father-State, the *otaku* phenomenon has become transnational, evolving into a postmodern experience; according to Azuma, *otaku* are not interested in "grand narratives", rather they seem to focus on "grand non-narratives", i.e. the deep inner layer of the database, while letting themselves be deeply touched by "small narratives", the surface layer of simulacra (146-147). In postmodernity, these two levels are no longer connected, leading to a sense of "dissociation" between database consumption and emotional consumption, a "desire for small narratives" juxtaposed to a "desire for grand non-narratives" (147-148), which, rather surprisingly, does not seem to bother the *otaku* at the level of life meaning.

During and after the Years of Lead (*Anni di piombo*)[xxiv], Italy "nurtured" a generation which Pellitteri (2012) called "children of a lesser nostalgia", whose first "cultural imprinting" consisted of the small narratives conveyed by Japanese *anime* massively broadcasted by local and national television. The Italian fans gravitating around *AnimeClick.it* are, then, a facet of the transnational *otaku* phenomenon, where Japanese pop culture and its cultural consumption become independent from the sources and the ideas that first generated them. The result is an imagined Japan, combining the past with the present.

Paradoxically, one element that distinguished the Italian fans we talked to (and brought together the different generations) was the refusal or a certain malaise at being labelled as "*otaku*". To a certain extent, they confirmed the emotional factor of the *otaku* experience as described by Azuma (2010), but denied their identification as "database animals", i.e. fans particularly interested in a database consumption

disconnected from the narrative consumption (indeed, Azuma has in mind Japanese *otaku* in his philosophical approach to the phenomenon). Some informants actually viewed contemporary Japanese creativity as being more and more oriented towards stories devoid of values and rich in clichés that they ascribed to Japanese society, where they felt excluded. Others made sarcastic comments over the Japanese pop culture merchandising machine, particularly Eretria, whose image of Japan as a country of contradictions came from the co-existence of "fantastic, extremely charming traditions" with "a lot of useless merchandising", and Lara, who portrayed the Japanese pop culture industry as a system which "aims to generate in people a severe addiction to its products, so that fans will buy tons of material or appealing merchandising to prevent that world from vanishing too soon". The term *otaku* was then associated with dependence, obsession and alienation: the kind of attitude that Miriam more frequently detected amongst new Italian fans, and that everyone viewed as a Japanese sociological phenomenon. They had internalized the negative connotations that have come to be associated with the term *otaku*, whose practices — first and foremost reading *manga* — are perceived as "solitary — nearly masturbatory", the action of people "shut in their own bedroom to run away into a fantasy world" (Pellitteri 2011a, 238). Hence, they distanced themselves from it, identifying it as Japanese, the uncharmed child of its extreme difference.

Future Trajectories

Focusing on a group of people involved in the largest Japanese pop culture website in Italy, we have explored the terms in which Italian fans

recognise the cultural odour of Japanese pop culture and develop a specific image of this country – one that is influenced by the fictional statute of Japanese pop culture's worlds and their own identifications with what they perceive as Japanese, and reproduces the complicit exoticism that has characterized Japan since post-World War II. Under the umbrella of Japanese pop culture, different generations of Italians come together to socialize, each bringing diverse emotions, different relations with Japanese pop culture and practices, and each representing a piece of the history of the Italian relationship with Japanese pop culture. The multiple platforms and the several narrative genres Japanese pop culture is made of favours the encounters of these people, and their dialogue over the consumption and mediation of Japanese pop culture. Cosplay[xxv] is the new frontier, making Japanese pop culture and its practices more and more visible, but could also bridge distances between these generations, being quintessentially a form of socialization. As Vanzella (2005, 61) pointed out, "cosplay is a practice: to be a cosplayer means to do cosplay and thus participate in the comic events and the competitions" and "it focuses on the body: to enjoy a cosplay event, whether alive or through pictures, means to (recognize) meet some people".

During the interviews, we discussed the future of the consumption of Japanese pop culture, and most of our interviewees trusted that the phenomenon would remain strong. Some older members had, nevertheless, the impression that new fans would be less oriented towards *manga*, because Italians read less and less. Other older members revealed they sometimes struggled to recognize themselves in the new productions. Despite the huge numbers of *manga/anime* now

available in the market, these interviewees could not always find a title really worth reading/watching, or a character they could identify with, for they believed that the latest production contained clichés targeting an audience with specific obsessions, typical of Japanese society — they argued — rather than addressing a large audience. Hence, they complained about what they perceived as Japan's lack of interest in European audiences, which they attributed to Japan cultural insularity. We find again the intergenerational differences, which Stefano dismissed as a "*girella* effect"[xxvi], adding that fans of his generation appreciate old *manga/anime* because "they reflect the values I had ten years ago, to which I am still attached. But they cannot be objectively more beautiful". We equally detect once more the negative perception of *otaku* as well as the topos of Japan's self-referential mind-set. Yet, we know from Iwabuchi (2002) that the Japanese pop culture industry does take into account the European market. Indeed, similar comments are also forgetful of their own cultural marginality. Apart from Studio Ghibli's world-renowned animated productions (and the works of a few other directors), *anime* and *manga* series *per se* are not targeting "all audiences".

At the same time, we notice that Italian fans have started to transcend Japanese pop culture and Japan to open up to other forms of pop culture in Asia. Amongst our informants, Eretria and Stefano had developed an interest in Korean pop culture, particularly Korean dramas and K-pop. Above all, observing the website and the virtual interactions, we detected a veering towards an "Asian pop culture" community, for it now gives space to Korean, Chinese, and Taiwanese pop culture, and to Far Eastern pop cultures in a wider sense. In this sense, the website is

now also interested in festival focusing on Asian culture and cinema, such as the Far East Film Festival in Udine (FEFF), where *AnimeClick.it* was web partner for the 2016 edition.

Finally, the Italian creative appropriation of the Japanese pop culture, more specifically *manga*, might open new routes, which might better reflect Italian values. And yet, Japan provides the "fantasy". Rossella S. concluded that "as long as there will be good titles able to passionately capture both youth and adults, Japanese culture will continue to influence Europe with its traditions and cosplay for a very long time". But this might also mean that an image of Japan as hyper-modern and yet "the last of the exotic" countries or a "real fantasy" may continue to live through the engagement of Europeans with Japanese pop culture.

Finally, socialization and the terms on which people socialize around the consumption of Japanese pop culture will play a paramount role in the evolution of practices of consumption and mediation. At the 2014 Lucca Comics convention, Roberto offered each collaborator a car shaped magnet with their website nickname on it. He then showed them a stop motion short movie whose characters were the cars he had just given to them:

> The first car was the one of Tacchan, the founder, then other cars joined him, becoming more and more numerous, until they created a total chaos [laughs]. Then everything resolved into a little martial march – Tacchan at the top – with all the cars pulling the *AnimeClick.it* logo. Cars would hit one another, but then, we could say they found an agreement, and collaborated. It is a metaphor of *AnimeClick.it*.

We might wonder if today's younger generation might be the nostalgic of tomorrow leading the cars, and how they will change the awareness of Japan.

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[i] Our article draws on our own biography, referring both to our life trajectories and to a specific episode like our trip to Giverny. We have considered Poirier, Clapier-Valladon and Raybaut (1983) and their notion of ethnobiography to contextualize discourses and analyses in relation to the narrators and their socio-cultural contexts.

[ii] For a critical understanding of the relationships between European tradition and Japanese art, see, for instance, McNeal Lavender (1983), Wichmann (1999), Little (1996), Lambourne (2005), and the website of Professor Brigitte Koyama-Richard (URL: <http://brigittekoyama.web.fc2.com/index.html>). To get a wider sense of this phenomenon, see also the catalogue of the exhibition on Japanese arts hosted by the Musée Guimet en 1988; and the catalogue of the exhibition on Monet and Japan hosted by the National Gallery of Australia and the Art Gallery of Western Australia (2001).

[iii] For a critical understanding of *nihonjinron,* see Kawamura 1980; Dale 1986, 1994; Mouer and Sugimoto 1986; Manabe and Befu 1992; Payne 2003.

[iv] On Hiramatsu Reiji and Claude Monet, see Koyama-Richard (2013).

[v] See Cantarelli (2009, 107). Other Italian websites include: *Mangaforever.it* – significantly large, it is more commercial rather than amateur and does not have an active web-community; *Jikogu.it* – once active in terms of community and online streaming, it was closed down and then re-appeared as *Tamachan.moe*, a smaller website; *Nanoda.com* – it has important partnerships with *manga* publishers, but its size has significantly decreased throughout the years.

[vi] We are aware of the limits (and value) of a local perspective over *manga* and *anime* (Berndt 2008), since we are basing our research on the Italian context and we are not using references written in Japanese. On this topic, see Pellitteri (2009, 9-26).

[vii] For a brief history of videogames and videogaming, see Pellitteri and Salvador (2014).

[viii] See, for instance, Iwabuchi (2002) to understand the Japanese cultural presence in Asia; Pellitteri (2011), Bouissou (2012) and Otmazgin (2013) for Europe; Napier (2007) for North America; Otmazgin (2013) for Middle East.

[ix] Pellitteri identified three kinds of aesthetics/archetypes, linked to distinct cultural models (2008, 8-9) — the robot, representing the technological progress; the infant, epitomized by the notion of "*kawaii*" (cute); and the mutation (the metamorphosis symbolized by *Pokémon* characters).

[x] Some of the interviewees decided to be identified by their nickname on *AnimeClick.it*.

[xi] All interviews were conducted in Italian, and the quotations are our own translations.

[xii] For a chronicle of the first editions of Lucca Comics, see Traini (2007). About the Comiket, see Inokai (2000).

xiii See Pellitteri (2011b, 314-315n14).

xiv For an understanding of the German experience, see Malone (2010).

xv Ruuby did not want to disclose her exact age and town. She was a university student and seemed to be in her early twenties.

xvi The remaining older staff was also prevalently male (we also count within them one of the authors of this article).

xvii All the quotations from Italian references are our own translations.

xviii See, for instance: Japan Local Government Centre (2012); Alt (2015); Warnock and Martin (2013).

xix For a recent contribution to the conceptualization of *kawaii*, see Pellitteri (2016). Forthcoming.

xx Retrieved at http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/readingroom/8.2/Iwabuchi.html. It lacks page numbers.

xxi They refer to soft-power as in Nye (1990).

xxii In the early 2000s Japanese animation nearly disappeared from the programming of Italian channels, except for a few older ones broadcasted over and over again on one of the Italian private channels (Italia 1). MTV revived such tradition, identifying Japanese animation for the first time as *anime.* As a result, MTV became the new platform to access *anime.*

xxiii For an aesthetic analysis of the relationship between postmodernism, simulacra and Japanese fine arts and pop culture, see Palumbo (2016).

xxiv The Years of Lead (*Anni di piombo*) indicates a period of social and political turmoil in Italy, including political terrorism and killings committed by right-wing and left-wing activists, lasting from the late 1960s (Piazza Fontana bombing on 12 December 1969) to the early 1980s.

xxv For an understanding of cosplay, see, for instance, Valzella (2005) and Manning and Gershon (2013).

xxvi *Girella* is an Italian sweet snack produced by Motta, which was very famous during the '70s-'80s. The older generations of Italian fans of Japanese pop culture use it to identify a relationship with Japanese animation that is stuck in the past and is not open to contemporary *manga/anime*.