

Abstract

The main purpose of this thesis is the analysis of fictional characters, their role in Japanese visual culture and society in general. For a better understanding of the argumentation that follows in chapters 2 to 4, I first introduce the reader to the world of postwar Japanese visual culture, its most iconic works and characters. In the following chapter I observe fictional characters from a psychological and sociological standpoint, and highlight their significance for contemporary society. Chapters 3 and 4 are dedicated to some of the most significant subcultures in postwar Japan – the *shojo* and *otaku*. In each of these chapters I first offer a synopsis of their respective histories and proceed to analyze some of the main trends associated with these subcultures; trends that have subsequently led to a major shift in consumer culture and a significant popularization of characters, the character business and its products. I argue that the most significant phenomenon associated with *shojo* culture is *kawaii*, the aesthetic of cuteness. *Kawaii* is arguably one of the defining aesthetic categories of contemporary Japan and is closely linked to postwar visual culture and the character goods industry. In the case of *otaku*, passionate consumers and fans of visual culture and modern media, I have focused on trends directly associated with the adoration and fetishization of fictional characters. For a deeper understanding of these issues I decided to offer the reader a close examination of a “debate” between Ōtsuka Eiji and Azuma Hiroki – two leading experts on Japanese popular culture. I have also included numerous images in the appendices section to allow the reader to better visualize many of the discussed works and characters therein.