Review: Review
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# Reviews

***Teaching Japanese Popular Culture***, edited by Deborah Shamoon and Chris McMorran

Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies, Inc., 2016. 308 pp.,
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*Teaching Japanese Popular Culture* is a multiauthor publication edited by Deborah Shamoon and Chris McMorran. The impetus for this project was generated by an international conference of the same name, organized by the book's editors, and assisted by Kim Thiam Huat. The conference was hosted by the Department of Japanese Studies at the National University of Singapore, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, November 11–12, 2012. It was supported by the Japan Foundation and coincided with the Anime Festival Asia, one of the largest conventions of its type to be held in Southeast Asia. This event was a drawcard for scholars in the field who were brought together to review their interests in strengthening pedagogical methods for teaching popular culture from Japan. The aim was also to share strategies for incorporating subject matter from Japanese popular culture, such as film, manga, anime, TV drama, fashion, art, design, and music, into curricula for teaching other disciplines. This book reflects some of the outcomes.

In the introduction to this volume, the editors recognize the ever-expanding significance of Japanese popular culture and the "critical mass of scholars" who take this research area seriously.[1] They write, however, that

> despite . . . convergence[s] of increased student and institutional demand, growing research expertise, and improved access to primary and secondary texts . . ., there has been a lack of serious discussion on

teaching about, and with, Japanese popular culture. It is time for such critical reflection. This book aims to fill this gap.[2]

Susan J. Napier, professor of Japanese studies at Tufts University, affirms that *Teaching Japanese Popular Culture* does much to compensate for this lack of discussion. In her endorsement on the back cover, she states that this book could just as likely be titled *Taking Japanese Popular Culture Seriously*. Indeed, one of the emphases of this venture was, and is, to create improved methods for critical engagement with popular culture and to encourage the analysis of subject matter in context with political issues.

Regarding theoretical approaches to the teaching of Japanese popular culture, Shamoon and McMorran cite Henry A. Giroux's argument that all popular culture studies require political contextualization and the ability to perceive "patterns of authority and power," especially when it comes to objects of mass media.[3] They also discuss William S. Armour's opinions on the importance of critically evaluating these patterns in popular culture texts, including Japanese manga, film, and anime, especially in consideration of gender and class constructions, and the ability to "perpetuate soft power."[4] As Armour claims, students are not always aware of the underlying messages embedded in language and visual material. As the editors explain, instructors must be mindful of the possibility of "unreflectively replicating stereotypes and prejudices contained in pop culture texts but also of uncritically promoting consumerism to students in a classroom setting."

These concerns are no less pertinent for the study of fashion. Since toward the end of the twentieth century, fashion studies, alongside popular culture studies and, more specifically, fashion theory, has gained momentum as a field of rigorous inquiry. In her chapter, "Teaching Fashion as Japanese Popular Culture," Jan Bardsley, professor of Asian studies at the University of North Carolina, maintains that "taking fashion seriously ha[s] never been more critical."[5] As she indicates, fashion highlights important sociopolitical issues associated with age, race, class, and gender. Bardsley's chapter, which is based on her teaching program, discusses ways to investigate Japanese popular culture through the analysis of key moments in Japan's fashion history. Fashion is interrogated regarding statements it makes about authenticity, the notion of invented traditions, cultural appropriation, orientalism, and the concept of "cool Japan."

One of the threads that run through this publication is the contentious aspect of orientalism, particularly in its relationship with cool Japan. Sally McLaren and Alwyn Spies, in their chapter, "Risk and Potential: Establishing Critical Pedagogy in Japanese Popular Culture Courses," identify tensions established by the promotion of this ideology:

> Cool Japan . . . has a propensity to ignore historical, gender, and labor issues and precludes discussions of diversity and dissent inside Japan. Persistent problems with Orientalism, self-Orientalization . . . and the othering of "exotic" Japan continue to haunt Japanese Popular Culture programs.[6]

In her chapter, "Confessions of an Anime and Manga Ignoramus: Approaches to Japanese Contemporary Popular Culture for the K–12 Classroom," Melanie King also discusses orientalism and the pitfalls of exoticizing—and fetishizing—Japan through an idolization of Japanese popular culture. She cites the Internet as a source of unchecked education, whereby consumption of popular Japanese visual material exacerbates the bastardization of Japan as imaginary "other."[7] She talks about the dichotomy of wanting to support her students' passions but simultaneously wanting to discourage their tendencies toward the perception of Japan as an exoticized "Orient." She writes:

> I have a responsibility to provide my students with the tools to appreciate the cultures we study but also to give them an understanding of the history of colonialism, cultural exchange, and Orientalism. . . . In the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Orientalism* (2003), Edward W. Said reminded us that "history is made . . . just as it can be unmade and rewritten. . . ." [W]e appear to have lost sight of the lessons left by Said . . .; thus, we are tasked with creating a more meaningful and authentic discussion of Japan while challenging our cultural unconscious in an effort to educate more civically minded global citizens.[8]

Therefore, Deborah Shamoon and Chris McMorran, the editors of *Teaching Japanese Popular Culture*, call for the "establishment of critical pedagogy in Japanese Popular Culture."[9]

*Teaching Japanese Popular Culture* contains three sections: "Part I: The Big Picture on Curriculum Design," "Part II: In the Media Studies Classroom: Teaching about Popular Culture," and "Part III: Using Popular Culture in Teaching," altogether divided into ten essay chapters, an introduction by the book's editors, and a conclusion by Chris McMorran. Ranging from suggested pedagogical methodologies for instructing kindergarten to high school classes to proposed courses for undergraduate students and leading toward postgraduate studies, the goal of this volume is not to stipulate a single formulaic method but to encourage critical reflection and evaluation as main approaches to the teaching and learning of, and *with*, Japanese popular culture.

## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

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## NOTES

1. Deborah Shamoon and Chris McMorran, eds., *Teaching Japanese Popular Culture* (Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies, Inc., 2016), 2.

2. Ibid.

3. Henry A. Giroux, *Disturbing Pleasures: Learning Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 121.

4. William Spencer Armour, "Learning Japanese by Reading 'Manga': The Rise of 'Soft Power Pedagogy,'" *RELC Journal* 42, no. 2 (2011): 130.

5. Jan Bardsley, "Teaching Fashion as Japanese Popular Culture," in Shamoon and McMorran, *Teaching Japanese Popular Culture*, 101.

6. Sally McLaren and Alwyn Spies, "Risk and Potential: Establishing Critical Pedagogy in Japanese Popular Culture Courses," in Shamoon and McMorran, *Teaching Japanese Popular Culture*, 19.

7. Melanie King, "Confessions of an Anime and Manga Ignoramus: Approaches to Japanese Contemporary Popular Culture for the K–12 Classroom," in Shamoon and McMorran, *Teaching Japanese Popular Culture*, 138–39.

8. Ibid., 139.

9. Shamoon and McMorran, *Teaching Japanese Popular Culture*, 21.