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# Character Street Signs (*hyōshiki*): "Mangaesque" Aesthetics as Intermedial Reference and Virtual Mediation

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*Introduction*

Since around the turn of the century, a "manga-ization" of Japanese daily life has been observed. Television commercials, cooking books, PR brochures, even leaflets by government agencies, and especially street signs (*hyōshiki*); they all seem to apply a certain "manga-pictoriality" to convey messages or information. Mangaesque *hyōshiki* are encountered within specific situational contexts, just as well as regular pictograms or street signs. They are installed at stations and intersections, in parks, or in public buildings. Their function is to communicate something or to draw attention to something that the accompanying textual information partly explicates. Sometimes, this "message" is left deliberately vague or open to interpretation. Often, we can read only "*chūi*" (Attention!) or "*kimari o mamorimashō* " (let's stick to the rules!); which rules these should be must be inferred from the pictorial content.

Recipients will usually be immersed in their daily routines as they encounter these communicative artifacts. They are about to enter a train station, to take a ticket, or to get on a train. In doing so, they have to share the available public space with other individuals, coordinate their movements on the streets or in queues, or ask themselves whether a specific mode of behavior (such as eating food, smoking, etc.) would be considered appropriate (and more precisely: when, where, how, in what circumstances). Many of these movements, actions, and modes of behavior are strongly habitualized. The collective coordination of movement in public spaces, in particular, is highly dependent on implicit or tacit

knowledge that may not even be accessible to the individuals themselves (see Collins, 2010, 119–138; Kress, 2010, 159). *Hyōshiki* thus *enter into* situational contexts, seeking to *influence* or *modulate* them in some respect.

**Figure 1:** Manya-kun, the 'working character protagonist' of a series of instructive JR-graphics in Japanese train stations (photographs by the author, 2015 – L.W.)

On the one hand, confusing these signs with "manga" on the basis of some formal similarities would be a huge neglect of other medial aspects, such as publication format, genre, institutional framework, cultural value, readership participation, and so on. On the other hand, the mangaesque aesthetics of many *hyōshiki* in contemporary Japanese public spaces — formal elements and representational conventions such as speech bubbles (*fukidashi*), speed lines (*dōsen*) and energy lines (*dōkōsen*), sound words (*on'yu*), or specific pictograms (*keiyu)* — cannot be denied. This can easily be demonstrated with recourse to a series of information graphics by Japanese Railway (JR), in which a cat conductor named Manya-kun is exposed to a spectacle of mishaps, embarrassments, and hazards (sometimes accompanied by a much less "officious" female companion named Manyami-chan, see figure 1). Within the depicted settings, numerous passengers put themselves in dangerous situations by their carelessness.

Pitiful Manya-kun encourages passers-by (or, rather, the actual recipients) to act with more mindfulness. The pictorial scene thus integrates countless interdependencies between (appropriate or inappropriate) forms of behavior and their consequences within a single spatial setting. All of this could perhaps be communicated verbally (or textually) as well, but only by the most tedious lists of enumerations.

The following discussion indicates ways to conceptualize the relationship between manga as a medium, on the one hand, and signage in everyday contexts that is decisively *not* manga. The question I am interested in can be formulated as follows: is the difference between a regular pictogram and a mangaesque one just a matter of popularization or "cutificati -on"? Or is there a notion to which 'the mangaesque' might even be central to the communicative interaction? I would like to point at tentative answers from the perspective of mediation theory, building on insights I developed in my PhD thesis (Wilde, 2018) from the perspective of picture theory and semiotics. I am especially interested in how government agencies and institutions employ specific semiotic and aesthetic resources — clearly associated with manga — in order to influence, to modulate, or to "reframe" the very material conditions and affordances within actual interactions in public spaces. I'd thus like to elaborate on a conceptual relation between *communication as framing* on the one hand; and a certain interpretational framework, on the other, which can be activated and modified by communicative artifacts posing as *distinct types or formats of media* — in this case, as manga. If certain habits of interpretation and comprehension are connected to this moving "medial frame," then the mangaesque would be more than a mere decoration of communication. We could see it rather as a sophisticated form of *mediation* between (actual as well as virtual) social actors.

In the following, I am going to triangulate the question of "manga-mediation" with recourse to the concepts of 1) *mediality*, 2) *narrativity*, and 3) *kyara*, finally focusing on some aspects of 4) *performativity* that are less prominent within the proliferating *kyara*-discourse.

*Mediality*

Mediation theory initially developed out of the Canadian School, by thinkers such as Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, who dedicated considerable efforts to account for the historical shifts in media development and its impact on the experience of culture and society, as well as on behavior, knowledge, and power (see Crowley, 2013, for an overview). While early approaches were mostly interested in *technological* evolu-

tions and their respective historical dynamics, the term media has increasingly come to refer to a complex multi-dimensional concept.

To begin with, the notion of isolated mono-media has proven to be extremely problematic, not only for our increasingly digitalized age of "media convergence" (see Jensen, 2013) or "media mix" (see Galbraith and Karlin, 2016). As communication theorist David Crowley (2013, 310) put it, mediation theories now "take fuller account of the inscriptive context itself, at the assemblages of codes, conventions, and practices around these inscriptive devices; and at how they emerge in the first place, why they do or do not persist and with what consequences".

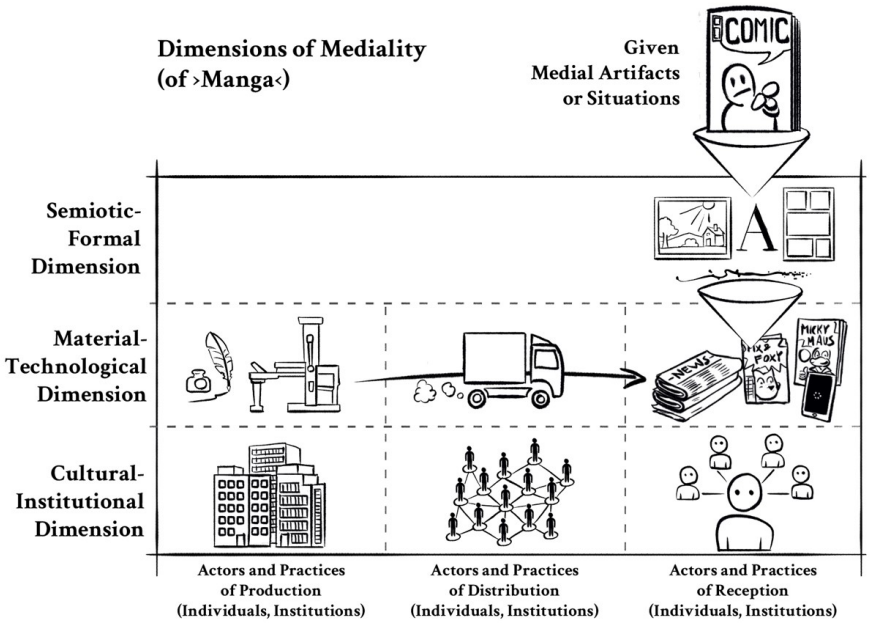


**Figure 2:** A model of the different dimensions of mediality (illustration by Kilian Wilde, www.wildegrafik.com)

In other words, if the concept of mediality at least facilitates the distinction between a semiotic-formal, a material-technological, and a cultural-institutional dimension of media (or rather, their respective mediality, see Thon, 2014; Wilde, 2015, figure 2), then media scholar Henry Jenkins' assertion seems not too controversial that "[d]elivery systems are simply and only technologies; media are also cultural systems" (Jenkins, 2006, 14). Within manga studies, Japanologist Jaqueline Berndt has urged to dis-

tinguish with William J.T. Mitchell and Mark Hansen, authors of *Critical Terms for Media Studies* (2010), between a narrower, technological notion of medium or mediums (as mainly technical systems or material support) and the collective singular media, the latter used "for the conventionalized practices and institutional frameworks, which, once established, predetermine how individual mediums are being used" (Berndt, forthcoming). Special attention must be given to the conventional-institutional dimension of mediality because it also includes what new media scholar Richard Grusin coined "the media everyday" (2010, 90): conventionalized patterns of everyday application. More generally, media historian Lisa Gitelman conceptualized these aspects as the "supporting protocols" of media (see Gitelman, 2008, 5): "Norms about how and where one uses [a certain type of media]" (ibid.).

A "medium conventionally perceived as distinct" (Rajewsky, 2010, 61) – such as manga – could then best be understood as an interpretational *framework* that appears largely stable, or almost naturalized in a given historical and cultural context. By now, media theoretical adaptions of frame theory have been proposed in many fields, ranging from communication studies to genre and gender theory. These frames can be identified — and activated — only with recourse to certain "qualifying aspects" (Elleström, 2010, 26), which are connected to default conditions of interpretation and comprehension and are thus epistemic (structuring cognition) as well as normative (guiding behavior). We could then see the "cultural work" of contemporary media as a sophisticated form of *mediation* between social *actors*, shaped and facilitated by specific notions of mediality (which are sometimes highly contested, but more often than not invisible or transparent to the actors involved). "As a theory of media, the focus is on control mechanisms as *structured agency*, or, if that is too hard-edged, then *directed interaction*" (Crowley, 2013, 311; original emphases).

If we shift our attention accordingly from the classification of artifacts and medial situations to the description of the respective interactions themselves, we follow a trajectory from mediality to mediation. The relationship between individual or institutional actors is mediated by semiotic systems and inscriptions (writing, images, gestures etc.), by material and technological affordances, as well as by institutional frameworks and the conventionalized "protocols" and habits associated with them. Although all these dimensions of mediation usually coexist, they are not all equally relevant to activate the respective medial frame. Interestingly, manga (and comics in general) is mostly identified formal-

semiotically by sequential images, often accompanied by words, and further by speech bubbles, speedlines, or manga-specific *keiyu*. The same would not be possible for the medial frame of theater, for instance, as the semiotic resources of a stage performance are mostly the same as those of a university lecture or a church sermon. We can distinguish — and identify — respective frames only with recourse to their institutional dimension. Communication with emoji, to take up another example, cannot be identified without account of the technological dimension (the Unicode standardization): hand-drawn emoji would just be considered "pictures." I argue that we should understand mangaesque *hyōshiki* in similar terms. The integration of speech bubbles, speed lines, sound words and so on is a way of formally imitating manga to activate certain supporting protocols — schemata of comprehension and interpretation, derived from and associated with prototypical manga.

What could it mean to pattern, to shape, to structure, or to direct agency in everyday situations by invoking the mangaesque in *hyōshiki* - signage? A provisionary first answer could be provided with an observation by media scholar Stephan Packard: "[T]here is a current cultural disposition to read *whatever formally resembles comics* as likely narrative, likely fictional, and as less likely than serious" (2017, 22; emphasis mine – L.W.). In other words: It would be legitimate to speak of a manga-ization of Japanese everyday life in the sense that the material artifacts in question are indeed *intended* and *staged* forms of semiotic imitations. Since manga are usually classified as *narrative* types of media, recipients will be inclined to apply the same conventionalized protocols of comprehension and interpretation. In order to understand the hypothetical communicative intentions behind a given *hyōshiki*, it is in fact necessary to infer structures of relations between actors, props, and (correct, inappropriate, embarrassing, or comical) actions according to narrative probabilities. In many cases, these also include temporal progressions, changes of state, and narrative events which the pictorial depictions merely imply. What is communicated most saliently is often *not* shown at all — like an impeding collision in traffic that should be avoided (see figure 3).

**Figure 3:** The relevant information can be inferred by the application of narrative schemata: an accident about to happen — or not! Retrieved from https://funnyjapanesestreetsigns.wordpress.com/2014/10/11/tobidashi-these-signs-really-jump-out-at-you, 11.10.2014 (accessed October 1 2018).

*Narrativity*

There are many more ways in which the mangaesque might significantly interact with pictorial comprehension in general. Prototypical pictures can be said to provide "surrogate stimuli" of perception (Eco, 2000, 353–382). Recipients are usually able to recognize depicted objects, persons, and scenes without the need for an explicitly learned code. Superficially, many contemporary *hyōshiki* appear to be a semiotic hybrid of pictograms and emoji (see Giannoulis and Wilde, 2019). However, one would hardly speak of depicted individuals or characters in this regard. Although the iconic categorization, the constitution of "picture objects" (see Wilde, 2019), may be as unproblematic as in prototypical images, we do not take pictograms or emoji to represent snippets of storyworlds. Does the emergency exit sign invented by graphic designer Ōta Yukio in 1979 represent a *diegesis* in which a character makes a run for a door? The usual answer would be: no, emergency exit signs just communicate where the next

emer-gency exit is located. Little to no make-believe is involved, just as "[t]he picture of a man on a restroom sign does not refer to any parti-cular man but to all men". In contrast, cognitive narratologist David Herman (2009, 196) attributes certain "world-creating properties" to *narrative* representations, as they are indeed able to generate possible worlds — or, more modestly in our case, possible situations. They evoke lifeworld experiences. Manga critic Ōtsuka Eiji, too, emphasized that "to make readers feel that an imaginary 'world' is real, it is indispensable to have a character whose way of seeing things and acting is deeply entrenched within this world" (Ōtsuka, 2003, 223; translation Steinberg 2012, 199).

In other words, characters act as gateways or nodal points into narrative meaning-making. Characters on street signs enable recipients to frame their real-world environments differently by imagining the perspective of others, or by imagining themselves from the perspective of others. Characters, however, are not brought into existence by the pictorial representation of bodies and faces alone — we can see those on a variety of pictograms and emoji without assuming a domain where they "exist" prior to their representation (the comical premise of actor Tony Leondis' The Emoji Movie, 2017, rests precisely on the reversion of the unmarked case).

The notion that there is a contemporary "*character*-ization" of Japan (Aihara, 2007) has become a truism within Japanese studies by now. As a heuristic typology for anthropomorphic beings on street signs, we could distinguish at least between:

a) characters proper (in a narrower sense: *kyarakutā*) whose origin is derived from narrative media such as manga, anime, videogames, or light novels;

*b) iyashi-kei kyara*, produced by companies such as Sanrio or San-X for the distribution of and on *kyara guzzu* (character goods); they do not derive from any narrative contexts and assume the role of emotional connectors within consumer communities;

c) mascot-characters, *gotōchi kyara or yuru-kyara*, designed by institutions, companies, agencies, or prefectures for representational purposes;

d) "pure" working characters, *hataraku kyara*, often nameless, which can be found exclusively on signs in public places and other infographics. According to graphic designers Matthew Alt and Hiroko Yoda, the latter may include five sub-categories (official characters,

instructional characters, warning characters, advertising characters, and food characters, Alt and Yoda, 2007, 8).

Obviously, there is a significant permeability between these classes, so that all four types of characters can be found on street signs and other *hyōshiki*. This is evinced by Tobidashi-kun (or Tobidashi-bōya, figure 4): initially a purely pictogrammatic street sign to warn children of traffic (used throughout Japan since the 1970s). Tobidashi-kun has gained fame as a regional mascot since the turn of the millennium, even appearing on TV shows and inspiring merchandising products.

**Figure 4:** A collage of Tobidashi-kun *hyōshiki*, assembled from Seki Show 2016 and https://funnyjapanesestreetsigns.wordpress.com/2014/10/11/tobidashi-these-signs-really-jump-out-at-you (accessed October 1, 2018).

To account for all these phenomena, Japan-based critics offer the helpful conceptual distinction between *kyarakutā* (character)—a fictitious being represented to exist within a diegetic domain (storyworld)—and *kyara*:

"[a] highly stylized or simplified visual figuration that can be easily reproduced and consumed outside of its original context" (Galbraith, 2009, 125).

*Kyara*

*Kyara* seem to share the common trait of existing in denial of any "mandated" narratives, official stories, or fictional worlds. In this perspective, one might consider "virtual idols" or "fictional celebrities" like Hatsune Miku; corporate icons like LINE's Cony or Brown the Bear; mascots and "communicational characters" such as Pipo-kun from the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Force. Further examples are fictitious beings which are invented for nothing but toys and material objects, such as Takara's Licca-chan; and, finally, pure product placement figures such as Sanrio's Hello Kitty which circulate on clothes, coffee mugs, and office supplies (sometimes called *iyashi-kei kyara*). Their "pre-narrative" state is not so much based on a lack of narrative information, but rather on the (over) abundance of competing and incoherent information. An instructive example is the tourism poster of Kitty "as" Mount Fuji found in the restaurant area of the Mt. Fuji bus station (figure 5). Linguist Toratani Kiyoko (2013, 45) uses such examples to observe a "spectrum of pretense" between "Kitty as agent" and "Kitty as object." At the object-end of the scale, however — when Kitty is depicted as a tiny grain of rice or, indeed, as a mountain — there can no longer be any kind of coherence between the semantic information provided: "Gotōchi-Kitty denotes a small figure which happens to have the features of Hello Kitty, distinct from Hello Kitty" (ibid., 56).

**Figure 5:** Kitty 'as' Mount Fuji—'narrative incoherence' taken to the extreme; only one of the innumerable 'masks' Sanrio's iconic *kyara* uses throughout its countless representations! (Photograph by the author, 2015 – L.W.)

*Kyara* are often described as "mediated performers" (Maynard, 2015, 377), fictitious actors that can take on any fictional *role* attributed to them. These roles, in turn, are highly contradictory, so that no coherent story-world could be constructed. Often, these attributions take place within collaborative networks and participatory cultures, in fan fiction, artworks, or cosplay. *Kyara* can be *enacted* and *performed*. If characters without stories (*kyara*) could thus be considered "pre- or proto-narrative," as manga critic Itō Gō (2005) has coined it, they essentially function as hubs, interfaces, or intersections for diverging "games of make-believe" (see Kacsuk, 2016). These games are often forms of a narrative, aesthetic, medial, or social *recontextualization*. As such, *kyara* seem to possess an uncanny agency, since they develop a life of their own that could not have been part of any single author's (or any intellectual property right holder's) intentions. The argument that *kyara*-artifacts "detach from all tasks of representation" (Peil and Schwab, 2013, 336; translation L.W.), or in cultural philosopher Azuma Hiroki's influential terminology, that they generate a "grand non-narrative" (*ōkina hi-monogatari*, Azuma, 2001, 54), is attractive only if one approaches the objects in question from the perspective of narratology or *intersubjective* meaning-making. But seen as props for the imagination, *kyara* products function especially as (meta-) narrative user interfaces.

As anthropologist Itō Mizuko has pointed out, it is precisely this "mobilizing the imagination in everyday play" (2008, 397) which makes up the peculiarity of Japanese media mix franchises. *Kyara* products are "explicitly designed to allow for user-level reshuffling and re-enactment" (ibid., 404). Anthropologist Nozawa Shunsuke expanded on this idea, specifically for *kyara*-communication in public contexts: "Characters' life is maintained through processes of 'decontextualization' and 'recontextualization'" (Nozawa, 2013, n.pag.). Consequently, every *kyara* could also be addressed as a transfictional "meta-narrative nodal point" (Azuma, 2007, 125; translation L.W.). They can easily be placed back into heterogeneous contexts (as a contingent *kyarakutā*). Hence, while the media artifacts they are circulating on/in might not be described as narrative, they are nevertheless not accurately addressed *out* any account of imaginative make-believe.

The term *gokko asobi* (make-believe games) can be used for all kinds of *kyara*-enactments not tied to compulsory storyworlds (*monogatari sekai*) (see Galbraith, 2009, 90). Some less-noticed passages from philosopher Kendall L. Walton's *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1991 [1993]) might provide a suitable connection between the *kyara*-conceptions of Itō,

Azuma, or Ōtsuka and the realm of public communication that Nozawa is interested in. According to Walton, any conceivable artifact could be examined as a "prop in a make-believe game" (1991 [1993], 35). For our understanding of *kyara*-communication, this is helpful in two regards: first, Walton offers a basic theoretical framework for imaginative games in which no (represented) storyworlds are involved: "Not all props have their own fictional worlds, apart from the worlds of games played with them" (ibid., 61). Second, and more importantly, he also indicates some roads for inquiry about *performative props*, which encourage recipients to conceive *themselves* as part of their own narrative imagination.

*Performativity*

An ordinary toy doll cannot only be used to imagine a baby. Usually, we imagine the doll itself *as a baby* (ibid., 117). The doll enables narrative imaginations about itself, or more precisely, about its localized representational material: "If the doll is in Decatur, Georgia, fictionally the baby is there. If Chris cuddles the doll, then fictionally Chris cuddles the baby" (ibid., 118). However, and this is vital for the argument, recipients interacting with the doll can just as well turn *themselves* into reflexive props: "Children are almost invariably characters in their games of make-believe; the imaginings they engage in are partly about themselves" (ibid., 209). Enacted *kyara*-performances (featuring actors in *kigurumi*-full body suits, or Hatsune Miku shows on stage) are perhaps best described in similar terms. When Kumamon, the fictitious representative of Kumamoto Prefecture, met the Japanese Emperor and Empress on October 28, 2013 (Maynard, 2015, 372), they all participated in staging a "game world," in which Kumamon actually exists. The participants of such a performative situation are at the same time the authors, props (representational material), and objects (represented entities) of their narrative imaginations (see Walton 1993, 212).

**Figure 6:** *Kyara*-representations on a 'blank' sign's space—without any represented context, directly gazing at the recipient (photograph by the author, 2015 – L.W.)

*Kyara-hyōshiki*, especially those in which *kyara* are depicted on a sign without any specific context, could likewise be considered specific performative props for the imagination. Like pictorial dummies for construction workers, they are intended to trigger narrative imaginations about

themselves, about their localized representational material. The contexts in which the depicted beings are supposed to exist are *precisely* the situational contexts of the communicative interactions. These *kyara* often look directly at the recipient, who is meant to be a part of the "virtual encounter" (see figure 6). For this reason, Nozawa considers working characters as semiotic interfaces between human and non-human actors of public spaces:

> They [characters] constitute an interface of objects and spaces that relays signs between other semiotic actants — between pedestrians and a construction site, between smokers and the city, between commuters and the subway station. (Nozawa, 2013, n. pag.)

Since there are little or no official storyworlds, recipients are quite free to develop their own (markedly private) game worlds, thus *appropriating* the *kyara* as their personal character. This is all the more relevant as the manga-pictoriality — a "simple line design" (Inuyama and Sugimoto, 2012, 12; translation L.W.) or "iconic symbols based on simple *senga* [line drawings]" (Itō, 2005, 145; translation L.W.) — effectively functions to "mask" most identifying criteria.

Nonetheless, not all rules of the imagination are left to the recipient. As for Kumamon, the prefecture has made it very clear that "he" is not intended to represent an actual bear, as anthropologist Debra Occhi has stressed: "Kumamon is not a bear, although he resembles one. When I sought permission from Kumamoto Prefecture to use his image in my chapter, I was told that any statements to that effect were not factual and should be removed" (2018, 15; my emphasis – L.W.). Kumamon is to be imagined as a human-like agent. He is not a represented bear, but just represented as a bear. Another aspect where the prefecture tries to establish and uphold rules of what is to be imagined concerns the question of whether or not there is one Kumamon or many. Due to the mascot's popularity, actors with "his" kigurumi costume can often be found in several places at the same time. The prefecture, however, claims: "Actually, there is only one Kumamon, but Kumamon lives in a warped universe, and only Kumamon can transfer himself across warped spaces and worlds" (quoted in Maynard, 2015, 380). Maynard comments on this by observing that "[c]learly, Kumamon is meant to be understood as a fictious [sic] entity existing only in an imaginative frame of play. Lacking real human identity, Kumamon as a character can simultaneously exist across space and time" (ibid.).

While these playful cases may not seem overly relevant, there are many more in which *kyara*-imaginations are not arbitrary at all. Occhi, for instance, noted that there are certain moral-ethical norms framing most *kyara*-messages:

> Spectators are already accustomed to seeing moral messages delivered by *kyara* — the TV characters of Anpanman frame the moral imperati-ves of kindness, cleanliness, and cooperation in their narrative. *Yuru kyara* exploit that imperative power further into the realms of consumption and other acts beneficial to society. (Occhi, 2012, 127; original emphasis) …

It is precisely this communicative framing that media scholars Lisbeth Klastrup and Susanna Tosca describe as the ethos of transmedial story-worlds:

> "How does the good and the bad behave, and what behaviour can be accepted as 'in character' or rejected as 'out of character' in that world. Thus ethos is the form of knowledge required in order to *know how to behave* in the world" (Klastrup and Tosca, 2004, n. pag.; original emphasis).

But a decontextualized ethos, which is no longer bound to any one story-world, but nevertheless conveys a generic *kyara*-world-view — quite literally, a *sekaikan* (Ōtsuka, 2003, 219) — is not easily accounted for with approaches from transmedial narratology. Especially within gender theory, however, connections of generic framing mechanisms to the assumed agency of actors are of utmost importance. Generically predefined schemes provide probabilities and patterns of how actors in (ethnic, social, or gender-specific) coded environments can behave successfully, what has to be considered as a violation of norms, and more generally: which distribution of agency is to be expected.

The *kyara*-aesthetics of *kawaii* imagery may be understood as one such generic cue, activating communicative expectations that are familiar and internalized (see again Occhi, 2012, 127). Conflicts, dissent, or "sensitive" subjects have as little place within these frames as any criticism of social power relations. *Hataraku kyara*, working characters, can defuse problematic issues by relying on recipients' pre-expectations which kind of behavior is to be regarded as correct and acceptable: "Hello Kitty resonates powerfully with a tendency to aesthetically 'soften' controversial, sensitive, or troublesome issues (as well as warnings, street signs, and corporate images)" (McVeigh, 2000a, 242). Anthropologist Brian

McVeigh has aptly described the manipulative flipside of this as "authority cuteness" (2000b, 150), a transformation of social power relations into internalized control: "[T]he lines of power are reinforced since they become emotionally charged with positive feelings of loyalty and commitment" (ibid., 144). The "authoritarian cuteness" of *kyara* has even been employed for campaigns of Japan's Self-Defense Forces (see Frühstück, 2007, 128–138).

*Summary*

Working characters might best be described as *virtual actors*: They are neither actual (materially present) nor, exactly, fictional. *Kyara* on street signs are somehow real, since their presence has actual, physical effects. In this context, virtuality is not opposed to reality. Recipients willing to play along turn themselves into reflexive props of their own narrative imaginations. These imaginations necessarily include the material objects and the bystanders within the actual situational contexts. Other recipients, too, can be expected to know what forms of "correct" behavior *kyara* such as Manya-kun call for and what generic forms of "appropriate" interactions they themselves would exhibit (if they were, in fact, present). Although these imaginations are highly private, they are by no means purely subjective. On the contrary, the assumption that generic rules of imagination maintain intersubjective and normative qualities is central for the functioning of this mode of communication. *Kyara-hyōshiki* therefore exercise regulative powers, since most recipients can be sure that other recipients, too, comprehend the way these communicative offers are to be understood: as a prompt to imagine how Manya-kun, Kitty, or Kumamon would behave if they were (physically) present.

The mangaesque would then be more than a decoration or a "cutification" of communication. We could see it as a sophisticated redistribution of agency, a form of mediation between (actual and virtual) social actors and their surrounding materialities. While my discussion has focused mainly on Japan, it is noteworthy that the same kind of "manga-pictoriality" can increasingly be found in many other Asian countries. Future research will show whether the theoretical insights gained from Japanese *kyara*-discourse are useful for the analysis of communicative interactions in other media environments as well.

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