

## **ARTISTIC LANGUAGE OF MASS CULTURE AS ILLUSTRATED BY TAKASHI MURAKAMI (ON MATERIALS FROM "UNDER THE RADIATION FALLS" EXHIBIT, 2017–2018, MOSCOW)**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper I delve into the artistic language of Japanese mass culture, as represented by Japanese contemporary artist working in the field of neo pop-art, Takashi Murakami. General traits, characterizing the kawaii aesthetic, influenced in large part by the otaku subculture, are defined in the research. Main unique features of kawaii as an art style based on manga stylistic are defined; their traces in Takashi Murakami art are scrutinized. The artist's works themselves are to undergo an analysis based on the artist's personal theory of superflatness. A thesis about strong ties between the artistic language of contemporary art and mass culture, their mutual influences is proved true.

**Keywords:** artistic language, kawaii aesthetic, mass culture, Takashi Murakami

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Since late XX century, Japanese mass culture becomes more and more globally popular with every year. Vivid and unconventional imagery, peculiarity of artstyle and a wide variety of genres allowed it to include itself into the global culture. New artistic formulas had first been conceived in traditional Japanese culture, and later were reimagined in mass culture, becoming an inspiration for contemporary artists like Takashi Murakami.

### **2. METHODOLOGY**

During the analysis of kawaii aesthetics, following authors are cited as theoretical grounds: Yuko Hasegawa, Inuhiko Yomota, Soichiro Ishihara, Kazuyuki Obata, Kayoko Kanno, Gunhild Borggreen, Elena Katasonova. The art of Takashi Murakami is characterised with basis on his own works, as well as critical entries by Dick Hebdige, Midori Matsui, Paul Schimmel, Mika Yoshitake, Scott Rothkopf, Akira Mizuta Lippit, Chelsea Foxwell, Michael Dylan Foster, Michael Darling, Reuben Keehan, Aynura Yusupova, Ekaterina Inozemtseva, and materials from the "Under the Radiation Falls" 2017-2018 exhibit of the artist, displayed in MCE "Garage" in Moscow.

### **3. AESTHETICS OF KAWAII AS A TOTALITY OF CULTURE**

It is typical for different periods of Japanese culture to develop a specific aesthetic category that would govern the entire artistic tradition. Such categories were *mono-no aware* for Heian era (794-1185), *yugen*,

*wabi* and *sabi* for medieval aesthetics, *iki* for the Edo period (1600-1868). Modern mass culture followed the same path and in 80's. Of the XX century has developed its own aesthetic category — *kawaii*, something cute, infantile, free-and-easy.

Russian researcher Elena Katasonova in her monograph "Japanese in Real and Virtual Worlds" gives a history of this notion's genesis. Originally, the word *kawaii* was phrased like *kawaiise*, a word used in classic Heian literature to describe the feelings of slight sadness and mourning. During the Edo era the word appears in Japanese-Portuguese Jesuit dictionary as "cauaij" and translates to "cutesy" and "touching", now referring to positive emotions. In the beginning of the XX century the notion transforms to *kawayushi*, after 1945 — *kawayui* and only in 1970s became the modern form *kawaii* [Katasonova E.L. (2013). The Japanese in the real and virtual worlds. P. 195].

Elena Katasonova, following the dictionaries and the modern uses of the notion, defines *kawaii* as something cute and attractive, specifying that «the Japanese call "kawaii" ...literally anything and everything they find attractive, interesting, unusual and in any way deserving attention» [Katasonova E.L. (2013). The Japanese in the real and virtual worlds. P. 193]. Danish researcher Gunhild Borggreen addresses the category of *kawaii* in the context of Japanese visual art and points out that it should be understood as a cultural direction of everything adorable, be it manga, anime, teen fashion, video games, design and so on. [Borggreen Gunhild (2011). Cute and Cool in Contemporary Japanese Visual Arts. P. 41]. Japanese researcher Yuko Hasegawa, while agreeing on the pre-established understanding of *kawaii*, offers to broaden the concept of *kawaii* as something valuable: "something that we are drawn towards and which stimulates one's feeling of wanting to protect something that is pure and innocent" [Hasegawa Yuko (2002). Post-identity Kawaii: Commerce, Gender and Contemporary Japanese Art. P. 128].

Other Japanese researchers Soichiro Ishihara, Kazuyuki Obata and Kayoko Kanno also accentuate the broadening of the notion of *kawaii*. If the original meaning was associated primarily with children, in the late XX — early XXI century it became widely used by people of all ages. Authors assume that «..."*kawaii!*" — it's an easy way to show approval, it's a way to appear young and hip, and it's a way to deny we are growing older» [Ishihara Soichiro, Obata Kazuyuki, Kanno Kayoko (2007). Kawaii – How Deep Is the Meaning? P. 6]. The desire to appear younger less constrained and more comfortable forms a demand to acquire cute and adorable things, which creates a high demand for the *kawaii* aesthetics and makes it truly massive. The same outlook on *kawaii* is shared by Inuhiko Yomota [Yomota Inuhiko. (2006). Kawaii-ron (Theory of kawaii)].

Additionally, in their review of *kawaii* Soichiro Ishihara, Kazuyuki Obata and Kayoko Kanno compose a system of coordinates of *kawaii* types and levels, where different phenomena of Japanese culture can be placed. The system is coordinated by two scales: on the vertical scale are the degrees of inner proximity, with maximum being passionate worship, on the horizontal scale are the degrees of mood uplift, up to sympathy of *moe* (warm, cuddly sympathy). Most of the phenomena included in this system of coordinates are typical solely for the Japanese mass culture, however there are also foreign influences. Disneyland and Mickey Mouse, for example, are definitely non-Japanese phenomena, but they have their weight in modern Japanese mass culture, thus they fit in the frame of *kawaii* and may be considered something that provokes passionate appreciation and lightens the mood. Children and animals also raise the spirits and evoke a feeling of inner proximity, and anime character figurines evoke sympathy [Ishihara Soichiro, Obata Kazuyuki, Kanno Kayoko (2007). Kawaii – How Deep Is the Meaning? P. 8].

We can, thus, establish that *kawaii* is not just an aesthetic category, but a defining trait of modern Japanese mass culture, connected to the artistic traditions of times past. This leads us to the thesis that, if a foreign phenomenon was to fit into the Japanese mass culture, it would have to gain the attributes of *kawaii*: to cause one to smile and sympathize, to give a feeling of inner proximity and the desire for passionate worshipping.

These feelings are accentuated by imagery peculiar to the Japanese animation and manga. As Elena Katasonova points out, "today manga is fundamental, a defining matrix of almost every form and sort of contemporary art, including animation, cinema, music, video games, etc." [Katasonova E.L. (2013). The Japanese in the real and virtual worlds. P. 103]. The graphical style developed by the manga comics is recognizable by its simplicity and conventionality. Yuki Maguro analyzes an assortment of expressive tools in manga and offers consolidated tables of different planes, angles, frames, speech bubbles and backgrounds, and also compiles a visual-symbolic dictionary for manga, where assorted expressions of face, eyes, facial traits, gestures and postures that are utilized to translate certain exact emotions. For example, touching tips of index fingers indicate indecisiveness, while big eyes express naiveté and purity characteristic of juvenile age [Maguro Yuki. (2015) Manga Anatomy]. This exact conventionality, in our opinion, allows one to include one's ideas into the offered visuals and easily inscribe one's desires to experience the world of the cute and

charming into it, a defining trait of kawaii.

Following this, we'd like to point out that the aesthetics of kawaii are affected by the conventionality of manga taken to the extreme. The simplest visual forms become popular thanks to their fluent adaptability to one's emotional condition. It all leads to the gradual submission of Japanese mass culture to the principles of kawaii. Due to modern mass culture's gravitation towards depicting the diversity of cultural heritage in its entirety, kawaiization claims even phenomena not normally associated with it. Aesthetics of kawaii serve as inspiration for modern artists, who consider it to be one of the modern artistic languages.

## **4. CARDINAL TRAITS OF TAKASHI MURAKAMI'S ART**

### **4.1 The Global Nature of Takashi Murakami's Art**

The aesthetics of kawaii and otaku subculture have had a strong influence on several generations of the Japanese, who grew up on anime and manga. It's not surprising that this aesthetic and style started to exert influence on art. This trend is most notable in the works of Takashi Murakami (b.1962). The artist is a graduate of the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts, with a degree in the field of traditional Japanese painting. He was captivated by the popularity of manga and anime at the start of his artistic career in the late 80s — early 90s, and, as a result, became a propagator of Japanese comics culture in his art.

1960s Japan sees the formation of anime and development of manga industry. Milestone titles are created, such as *The Mighty Atom* (1952-1968) or *Doraemon* (1969-1996). It is at this moment that the otaku subculture is born. During the 70s, new anime genres are formed, i.e. "mecha", Famicom game console becomes a symbol of the otaku subculture. This is the time of Takashi Murakami's youth. During the 80s, when the artist was attending university, anime and manga industry reach their peak popularity. Science fiction conferences are held. During the 22nd conference the founders of Gainax demonstrate their work, a short film titled *Daicon IV* (1983), which became an aesthetic manifesto of otaku subculture, accumulating all of their favorite imagery: from giant monsters to the cute girl protagonist sporting adorable ears. In the 90s Japanese comics culture enters global market. At this time *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1994-1996) comes out, drastically changing the way anime was viewed, opening new possibilities for the depth of images and topics possible within the mass culture boundaries. All these things were exhilarating to the mind of then young Takashi Murakami, making him consider a career of an animator. But in the end, he remained an artist, who always desired to create anime. However, as he confesses in an interview with Ekaterina Inozemceva: "...working on anime and feature fiction movies has proven to be useful to keep my artistic potential high" [Takashi Murakami: *Under the Radiation Falls* (2018). Ed. by E. Inozemceva. P. 18].

In mid-90s Murakami visits USA and decides to gain a foothold in the overseas art market, so that when he returns to Japan, he may become the trend setter at the domestic art market. He starts with a humble studio in New York, and, after his major exhibit at the Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art in 2001, he opens his own art company — *Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd.* The company functions akin to Andy Warhol's *Factory*, producing and promoting art projects and memorabilia under the name of Takashi Murakami [Schimmel Paul (2017). *Making Murakami*. Murakami. Ed. by Paul Schimmel. P. 52-79].

Creative pursuits of Takashi Murakami and his penchant for theoretical re-imagining of art have led to the creation of the superflatness concept as an artistic style. Superflat is a style of portrayal that originates from Japanese artistic tradition, in particular it is characteristic of ukiyo-e woodblock prints, later lending its character traits to the manga style. However, superflatness relates to blurring of the boundaries between the mass and the elitist caused by the democratization of tastes in postwar Japan as well. Superflat is bright colors and surfaces toned with one solid color, crossing over and penetrating each other [Murakami Takashi (2000). *Super Flat*].

In his exhibits, Takashi Murakami always addresses the stylistics of manga and the aesthetics of kawaii, developing his own unique style that can best be described as neo pop art. For example, his 2007 Los Angeles exhibit [Murakami (2007). Ed. by Paul Schimmel], or a recently held 2017 Chicago exhibit [Takashi Murakami: *The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg* (2017). Ed. by Michael Darling], and, of course, his most recent Moscow exhibit [Takashi Murakami: *Under the Radiation Falls* (2018). Ed. by E. Inozemceva.], among others.

### **4.2 Takashi Murakami Moscow Exhibit**

During the time from 29th September 2017 to 4th February 2018 in "Garage" Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow, Russia, one of the most voluminous Takashi Murakami exhibits of recent years, titled "*Under The Radiation Falls*", was displayed. This marked the first time the artist's work has been displayed in Russia.

The exhibition was divided into several blocks framing various periods of the artist's work. As noted by the exhibition curator, Ekaterina Inozemtseva: «"Under The Radiation Falls" exhibit is a revision of materials of sorts, showcasing sources utilized by Murakami, structural components comprising his works, the ways with which the artist combines these components, starting from the very first experimentations of 1990s» [Takashi Murakami: Under the Radiation Falls (2018). Ed. by E. Inozemceva. P. 22].

The exhibition itself was organized into three spaces containing the author's works, each space denoting a chapter: *Geijutsu* or Learning and Technique, *The Little Boy and the Fat Man* and *Kawaii*. The "Geijutsu" chapter showcases a connection between the works of Takashi Murakami and Japanese artistic tradition. Such works as "Daruma the Great (in 6 parts)" (2007) or "Enso. I am Free" (2016), "Enso. Zen, Rain" (2015) display a close connection with Buddhist china ink paintings, while works like *Enso. Poincare Conjecture* (2015) and "Lion Peering into Death's Abyss" (2015) trace back to the conventions of Japanese woodblock prints.

Second chapter is devoted to the nuclear disaster that struck Japan at the end of the Second world war. *The Little Boy and the Fat Man* are the names of the bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The aim of this chapter is to show how it is possible to overcome this kind of terror by translating it into the world of fantastic images of Japanese animation. The comprehension of this tragedy is most apparent in otaku subculture. As Hikawa Ryūsuke points out: «More often than not, the authors and viewers of anime had not witnessed atomic bombings or nuclear tests in the Pacific, but had only indirect knowledge of such events. For that reason, the visions of each individual played such an important role in depicting the catastrophes» [Hikawa Ryūsuke (2017) Radiation and Postwar Anime and Tokusatsu Culture. P. 97]. Triumph of imagination as means of overcoming tragedy is demonstrated by Takashi Murakami in his works. In this chapter, Japanese manga like *The Mighty Atom* (1952-1968) and anime like *The Barefoot Gen* (1983) and *Akira* (1988) are juxtaposed with the artist's works. The therapeutic effect of Japanese mass culture and Takashi Murakami's art allow one to enjoy life once again.

Third chapter delves even deeper into the Japanese mass culture, the quintessence of which ever since the 80s is denoted by the aesthetics of kawaii. A utopia of happiness, love and needfulness, along with immersion into the childhood's pleasures were shown in this part of the exhibit. As noted by the exhibition curator, Ekaterina Inozemtseva: «The "Kawaii" section is shaped to resemble a continuous stream of environments, separate parts, which, when passed through, allow one to experience the totality of kawaii narratives and familiarize oneself with very peculiar representation of beauty in Japanese mass culture» [Takashi Murakami: Under the Radiation Falls (2018). Ed. by E. Inozemceva. P. 150]. Statues of Takashi Murakami's characters, Kaikai and Kiki, whose names refer to the word "kaikaikiki" (Japanese for odd, unusual), used in relation to the art of Japanese painter Kanō Eitoku (1543-1590). Here they represent the guardians of kawaii world of phantasmagorical widely smiling superflat flowers, bizarre mushroom forests and sights of Tokyo. A distinct subdivision of the section is the "Nakano Broadway" installation, filled to the brim with manga and anime figurines, which, when entered, immerses one into the world of anime and manga, the world of otaku fantasies.

Another chapter is *Sutajio*, where Takashi Murakami and his Kaikai Kiki Company team members were compiling artworks, creating the exhibition's environment, and even making artworks specifically for the exhibition. During the exhibition working hours anyone could take an insider look at the functioning of the studio. The studio resembled an industrial environment more than it did an art studio. Adding to the workshop filled with various instruments and work area were the project department, where the layout of the exhibition was assembled and worked on, and even a small office fitted with a small resting place and filled with various kinds of documents.

The last chapter is called *Asobi & Kazari*, which stands for "Entertainment and Decorations". This chapter was at the same time the least explicitly shown and the most engrossing. It manifested itself in the details of Museum's decorations. Nuclear cloud—shaped skull lighting that adorned the face of the museum, the design of the slide in children's area, the walls in the toilet hall, a specifically-created menu with Japanese cuisine and a burger decorated with the trademark flower.

Feedback of Russian visitors, according to the websites Tripadvisor and Otvovik, was mostly positive. The most prominent description of the exhibition: positive, vivid, uplifting, engaging, psychedelic.

(Tripadvisor.URL:<https://www.tripadvisor.ru/ShowUserReviews-g298484-d5600235-r534494190>

[Garage Museum of Contemporary Art-Moscow Central Russia.html](https://www.tripadvisor.ru/ShowUserReviews-g298484-d5600235-r534494190);Otvovik.URL:

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## 5. CONCLUSIONS

A thesis about strong ties between the artistic language of contemporary art and mass culture, their mutual influences is proved true. Aesthetics of kawaii have transcended the boundaries of mass culture and become the part of contemporary art's lexicon. This leads to the dissolution of lowbrow/highbrow distinction, allows art to functionally include itself in to mass culture as one of its phenomena.

## 6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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