Blandness and the digital sublime in Takashi Murakami's designs for Louis Vuitton

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New media and cyberculture have become watchwords for the new millennium and the visual arts as field is undergoing revision and redefinition. Design history may in some instances be marginalized in the history of art, however it seems that such distinctions are no longer valid. With digital technology comes not only changes in visual media and changes in the manner we receive visual culture. Different cultures of viewing and receiving visual information also develop. In the collaborative designs of Takashi Murakami and Marc Jacobs for Louis Vuitton, "high art" blends with consumer culture and design through the popular mass imagery of *anime* and *manga* (Brehm 2002: 34-40). This paper argues that the effect of Japanese popular culture on mass culture may be likened to the dialectical way that digital media is often interpreted in the West. Technological progress has been seen either as an ultimate goal of civilization, as the downfall of civilization. This dualistic manner of interpreting the effects of technological progress on society and visual culture as either good or evil is inadequate. The significance of digital culture has yet to be liberated from this debate. Insight into the proliferation of Japanese popular culture may be a significant contributing force into redirecting the interpretation of digital culture and furthering critical engagement with design as production of visual culture.
Key words: Murakami, Takashi, Louis Vuitton, *otaku* culture, *manga, anime, ukiyo-e*

Eenseligheid en die digitale sublieme in die ontwerpe van Takashi Murakami en Louis Vuiton

Die visuele kunste ondergaan tans 'n proses van hersiening en her-definieering binne die konteks van nuwe media en kuberkultuur, terme wat wagwoorde geword het in die nuwe millennium. Die geskiedenis van ontwerp mag in sekere gevalle gemarginaliseer word binne die konteks van kunsgeskiedenis, maar dit blyk dat hierdie onderskeid nie meer geld nie. Met die opkoms van digitale tegnologie kom verandering in visuele media voor. Vervolgens ontwikkel nuwe maniere van interpretasie van visuele kultuur asook nuwe kulture van kyk, en resepsie van visuele inligting. In die gesamentlike ontwerpe van Takashi Murakami en Marc Jacobs vir Louis Vuitton vermeng "fyn kuns" met verbruikerskultuur en ontwerperskuns deur middel van die populêre massa beelde van *anime* en *manga* (Brehm 2002: 34-40). Hierdie artikel stel voor dat die soms dialektiese interpretasie van digitale media in die Weste kan vergelyk word met die effek van Japanese populêre kultuur op globale massa kultuur. Hierdie dualistiese opvatting sien tegnologiese vooruitgang as die uiteindelike doel van die samelewing, of as die ondergang van die samelewing. So 'n siening is eensydig en kuberkultuur moet nog bevry word uit die greep van hierdie debat. Ondersoek na die vooruitgang van Japanese populêre kultuur mag die klemverskuiwing in die interpretasie van digitale kultuur en die kritiese omgang met ontwerp as visuele kultuur aanhelp.

Japanese popular culture has a distinguishable influence on the reception of digital media and interpretation and production of visual culture in the Western world. The purpose of this research is to investigate the possibility of discerning a digital sublime at work in the "fabric" designs Japanese pop-artist Takashi Murakami and fashion designer Marc Jacobs produced for luxury fashion house Louis Vuitton in the *Eyelove superflat monogram* range of fashion accessories (fig. 1, fig. 2) I suspect that the sublime may be discernible in digital mass culture as a digital sublime. There may be a link between what I perceive as "blandness" in Murakami's "fabric" designs and the digital sublime. This blandness may in turn relate to Murakami's engagement with mass culture and design which is somewhat unusual for an artist producing fine art. I also suspect that a particular combination of violence and cuteness which is discernible in Murakami's artwork may be at work in the blandness of his "fabric" designs.

In the *Eyelove superflat* range "high art" blends with consumer culture and exclusive design through the popular mass imagery of *manga* (graphic novels) and *anime* (animated films or television series). These genres developed within Japanese popular culture and can be related to earlier popular Japanese imaging traditions such as *ukiyo-e*, which were popular woodblock prints produced by nineteenth-century Japanese artists such as Katsushika Hokusai and Andô Hiroshige (Brehm 2002: 34-40). *Ukiyo-e* influenced the *Japonist* movement in Impressionist circles in nineteenth-century Paris to a great extent (Wichmann 1985). The relationship

between *ukiyo-e* and m*anga* and *anime* is too complex to discuss here in detail, however *ukiyo-e* does serve as historical context for *manga* and *anime*. The contemporary genres of *manga* and *anime* have considerable influence on digital mass culture globally. This is evidenced in the pervasiveness of the style of the genres, with global television audiences being exposed to popular *anime* series such as *Pokémon* and *Dragonball Z*. Takashi Murakami utilizes the spread of the *manga* phenomenon[1] as language in his work, and produces artwork that is both commercially successful and respected as pop-art in fine art circles. To my mind Murakami's manner and diverse media of production (he produces soft toys, posters, t-shirts and so forth) is comparable to the manner in which digital culture, but also Japanese popular culture, is proliferating.

Figure 1
Francesco Mosto. 2003. Bag from the *Eyelove superflat (pink)* range by Marc Jacobs and Takashi Murakami. CNN .com/entertainment (Wolf 2003).

What is interesting is that both new media discourse and much of the popular interpretation of *manga* and *anime* in the West either champions or condemns the rapid invasion of society by both digital media and or Japanese popular culture. Writers such as Baudrillard (1993) and Neil Postman (1993) paint an apocalyptic picture of a technologised future, while others such as Nicholas Mirzoeff (1998, 1999) and Donna Haraway (1991) can be construed as writers who see technological progress as utopian. This is problematic because often either or both are dismissed as affirmative in nature and of little value for academic investigation. What I propose is that Japanese *otaku* culture (which is the sub-culture consisting of dedicated followers of *manga* and *anime*) can be investigated in order to further the interpretation of and insight into the nature of digital mass culture and the possibility of a digital sublime. The reason for mentioning new media discourse and Japanese popular culture together is that there seems to be an intertwining in the sensibility of these two phenomena. Whether this lies in their popular reception, or in their distinctive natures is arguable, but will be investigated in the context of the digital sublime.

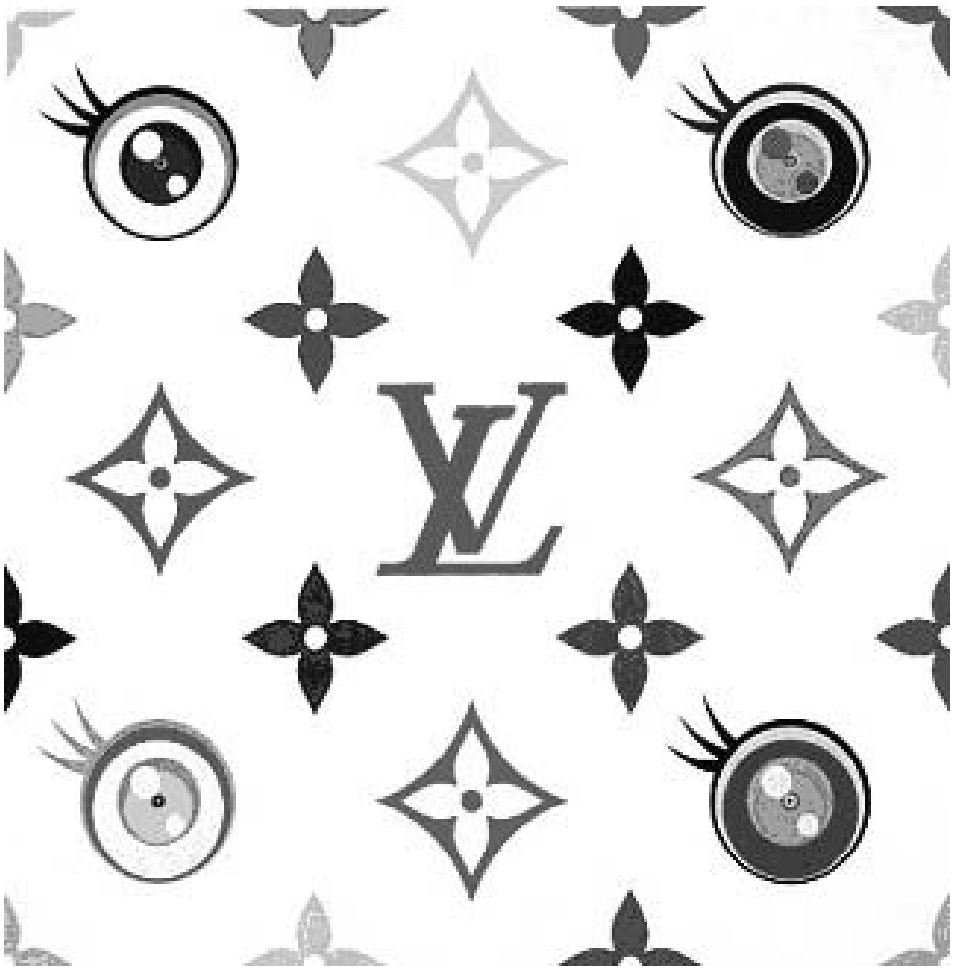

Figure 2
Takashi Murakami (1962-), *LV Superflat Pink. (*2004). 44 x 44cm. Serigraph print, edition of 50. London: Quan Contemporary (Originalprints 2006).

The digital sublime relates to the aesthetic category of the sublime in many ways. The sublime as Kant (1790-99: 5-42) defined it is essentially an experience of the forces of nature. It is an experience of terror in realizing one's human limitations in the face of the power of nature. There is also a feeling of triumph since one is able to comprehend that one cannot fathom vastness. In essence the sublime as such does not appear or present itself, it is beyond human understanding. More recently Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984: 36-43) applied the concept of the sublime to avant-garde painting and abstract expressionist art. For him the sublime can be connoted by the negation of representational art and the importance of the sublime "now" as contingent experience of art. Lyotard is of the opinion that all avant-garde art is sublime because it subverts popular aesthetic expectations. It is thus clear that the sublime as aesthetic category conceived of by Kant and Lyotard, cannot be arrived at through popular media. This is the fundamental paradox I aim to investigate with regard to Murakami's *Eyelove superflat* prints. Can the sublime appear in popular culture? I suspect that the concepts of "epiphany" or "presence" as Bohrer (1994: 198-226) and Gumbrecht (2004: 93-133) have discussed it may be effective in elucidating the dynamics of a digital sublime in popular culture.

Blandness as I mentioned above, is what I perceive to be the interpretation of much of global popular culture in relation to fine art. Popular culture as Adorno (1975) understood it is deceptive in that it appears attractive, is not substantial and offers no critical engagement with the viewer. Contemporary Japanese popular culture is often seen as bland and affirmative in the West, and this denies the fascination that it holds for many Western viewers. What is the fascination, and is it merely the attraction of its affirmative appearance? I suspect that behind

the blandness in much of Japanese popular visual culture such as *manga* there is the presence of the digital sublime. The blandness I refer to is related to the concept of "odourlessness" as Koichi Iwabuchi (Hjorth 2005: 46) defines it, "unembeddedness" of cultural specificity. Western fascination with *manga* may lie somewhere between the genre's affirmative blandness, its presentation of what is Japanese and the underlying presence of the digital sublime.

For the purpose of this study I discuss the *Eyelove Superflat Monogram* range (also sometimes referred to as *LV Superflat* or *Eyelove superflat*) of "fabric" designs that Takashi Murakami produced for design house Louis Vuitton, known for their luxury luggage and other accessories (fig. 1, fig. 2). The designs, which came in black and white, were produced as handbags, purses and other accessories in 2003. In order to interpret Murakami's fabric designs it may be useful to investigate and compare other work from his oeuvre, which I undertake below. This will facilitate situating the thematic and contextual significance of his work and consequently his designs for Vuitton.

Otaku culture

Rather than discuss the handbags in their finished form as fashion accessories (fig. 1), I refer to the "fabric" print which Murakami also produced as a series of lithographs (fig. 2). As a pop-artist Murakami often produces work in this manner, simultaneously producing marketable products and fine art from the same material. The *Eyelove superflat (pink)* print (identical to the lithographs I discussed above) is predominantly white in colour (fig. 2). The Louis Vuitton monogram "LV" appears on the print in pink, and other motifs in yellow, red, green and blue appear interspersed around the monogram. All the motifs that constitute this print are established as belonging to the Louis Vuitton brand, and the motifs are recognizable by followers of the brand. Murakami altered the existing brand language in the *Eyelove superflat (pink)* print by changing the colours from the signature browns and beiges to a white background with multi-coloured motifs. What is also visible is an eyeball motif that appears in varying colours interspersed with the Vuitton logo. The title of the print, *Eyelove superflat*, is most probably a play on the presence of these little eyes in the print. These eyes are also recognizable from some of Murakami's own artworks such as *Flowers* (fig. 6) and *Kaikaikiki News* (fig. 7). In these artworks, which are discussed in detail further on, the eyes refer to the stylized eyes that are a distinctive characteristic of figures in *manga* and *anime*. Murakami admits that his work draws almost exclusively on the visual language of these genres (Brehm 2002 :36).

As mentioned above *manga* and *anime* relate stylistically to u*kiyo-e*, wood block prints manufactured in nineteenth-century Japan (fig. 3). The wood block prints display very specific visual characteristics such as dark outlining and flat colour planes which are comparable to the appearance of contemporary Japanese *manga* and *anime* (fig. 4, fig. 5). The word *ukiyo* is a Buddhist term meaning the "floating world" that connoted the world of earthly pleasure and decadence, and in the nineteenth century came to be associated with the nightlife and entertainment industry in cities such as Edo and Nagasaki (Screech 2002: 22). *Ukiyo-e* prints were popular visual culture in nineteenth century Japan. *Manga* and *anime* constitutes the contemporary popular culture in Japan, but it is rapidly becoming very popular in the rest of the world. These genres inspire devoted following in Japanese viewers, and these followers are known as *otaku*. *Otaku* see themselves as able to become more immersed in the fantasy world of *manga* than most people. Such devotion, surrounding themselves with paraphernalia from the genres, may lend them the ability to have a more profound experience of it than other people (Steinberg 2004: 449-471). Whether *otaku* experience *manga* as sublime merits further investigation in the light of the digital sublime, however.

Figure 3
Ando Hiroshige (1797-1858) *Plum Estate, Kameido* from "One Hundred Famous Views of Edo" (1857). Woodblock print, 13 1/4 x 8 5/8 in. New York: The Brooklyn Museum (Pioch 2002).

Figure 4
Screen shot from the series *Panyo panyo di gi charat*, directed by Masato Takayangi (2002).

Brehm (2002: 16-17) interprets the sub-culture as a striving towards "being a child", *otaku* prefer to live within the fantasy world of representation rather than within the strict social codes of modern Japanese society. As such followers of the sub-culture are often shunned by Japanese society. Murakami aims to elevate the status of *otaku* culture as one that now represents Japan

Figure 5
Unknown author. 2004. Wallpaper composited from the television series *Pokémon* created by Satoshi Tajiri and Shigeru Myamoto, 1998. Wallpaperbase.

to the world, however this raises certain questions regarding the strategies of *manga* and *anime* in representing Japanese identity. *Otaku* originated as a sub-culture in the 1980's, but it is becoming a global mass culture with the rapid spread of *manga* and *anime* outside Japan (Looser 2002: 299). This is rather paradoxical since *otaku* can no longer regard themselves as an exclusive group of devoted fans. It is also arguable that other sub-cultures have similar conceptions of themselves as an exclusive group. On the other hand this belief in the significance of the experience of *manga* is what may lie at the heart of the global growth of *otaku*.

Murakami's eye motif

Murakami's eye motif can be seen as a metaphor for *otaku* culture itself, since it is propagated through viewers. In the *Eyelove superflat (pink)* (fig. 2) design, the eyes are disembodied and bland in non-seeing repetition. Even though they are eyes, they do not seem alive, or connoting of naturalistic eyes, they seem formalized and non-living. What one struggles to do is understand the image as a whole, the eyes seem to indicate what the viewer cannot do – which is to look, to penetrate, and interpret the print in terms of a coherent image. There is only the flat white ground which presents no answers and seemingly no questions. The print resists interpretation because it is framed as decorative in the context of an accessory such as a handbag, it may seem pointless to analyse this ostensibly nonsensical pattern. It also depicts the Louis Vuitton logo, which represents commercial value, but is there anything underneath the flat "nothingness" of the white ground? What is it, if anything? Are Murakami and Vuitton simply appropriating the language of Japanese popular culture for its visual appeal? These are difficult questions for a non-Japanese viewer to address, since the Western perspective of Japanese culture is necessarily constructed from a specific point of view outside of Japan.

On the other hand the eyes may seem a little monstrous and post-human. These eyes are not only stylized, they are characteristic of the way in which looking functions when one engages with a computer or television screen. One divides one's focus evenly over the screen, and one can even partition different viewing planes into "windows". One does not look at a computer screen like one does at a painting utilizing perspectival illusionary devices. There is no stable focal point because one is always aware of that which is not displayed. In fact one can surmise that the focal point may lie beyond what is displayed on the screen, and in the vir-

tual depth "behind" it. The screen displays part of a document, certain frames of an animated sequence or one website in cyberspace. Perhaps one can understand the *Eyelove superflat* print in terms of this process of looking and interacting which does not deliver one continuous visual output but rather a scattered composited whole. Such a composited image may appear to exude this "nothingness" the viewer may discern in the print. Instead of disregarding it as "nothing" one should perhaps understand it as "nothingness" which implies that it can be composited and manipulated. It is not specific and therefore is not threatened by interference from the viewer.

The affirmative appearance of *kawaii*

Contemporary *manga* is often interpreted as affirmative and bland in the West. It may be seen in this sense as part of the often banal imagery that proliferates in mass culture. This blandness is described by Koichi Iwabuchi (Hjorth 2005: 46) as "odourless[ness]". It is the result of Japanese products such as *manga* which become universally appealing because they have lost what makes them Japanese. This in turn becomes their "Japaneseness" or essence of what appears Japanese, and may be why *anime* such as *Pokémon* have been so successfully domesticated into Western television schedules. While viewers think they are watching something Japanese it is in fact a very un-Japanese representation which itself becomes mistaken for what defines the series as Japanese. Similarly the eyes in Murakami's *Eyelove superflat (pink)* print displays such an "odourless" identity. They do not appear Asian and yet one can discern the characteristic blandness of *manga*. The Vuitton/Murakami ranges perpetuate some of this in the use of Murakami's rendition of Japanese imagery. This odourless element is also reflected in the vacuous expression or lack of expression in the eyes on the print. It is comparable to the expressions found in *manga* and *anime*, characters display soulless dumb smiles (Darling 2001: 80-81).

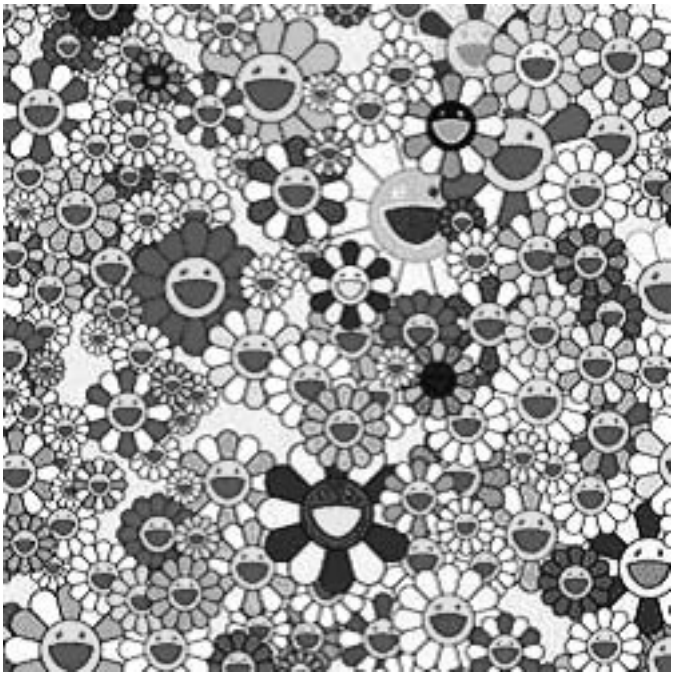

Figure 6
Takashi Murakami(1962-). *Flowers* (2003). Lithograph, 69 x 69 cm. edition of 200. London: Artificial Gallery (Originalprints 2006).

Murakami's painting *Flowers* (fig. 6) is affirmative in appearance, the painting seems familiar and easy to understand. It is a colourful field of stylized flowers that have been turned into cute smiling faces. One does not necessarily feel an urge to question that there is anything more to the painting. It might as well be the decorative print on a tissue box. It is tempting to

believe that there is no critical intent in *Flowers* (Heartney 2005: 61). The flowers are similar and non-specific in appearance. What does emerge is the abundance of these flowers in the image, they seem to want to burst from the image, but at the same time they keep their distance from the viewer because they are flat and outlined. It is like they are pressed against the inside of a screen. One can become immersed in such a "field" of "flowers", however it is a detached immersion. This immersion is comparable to the immersion one experiences when interacting with a computer or television screen. One projects one's focus into the screen and separates from one's physical environment. One does not focus on the screen as outside, but rather as a lens through which to perceive something such as particular sites within cyberspace. The immersion within the virtual depth of the screen is a merging of the user and the screen. This is not possible in viewing Murakami's print, however. The print does not offer the viewer any virtual depth, instead it is barrier-like. *Flowers* may make one aware of the sucking in and bursting out of the screen's immersive effect, since it is not fully immersive. The viewer may find himself colliding with the surface of the "screen" of flowers (Grau 2003: 339-340).

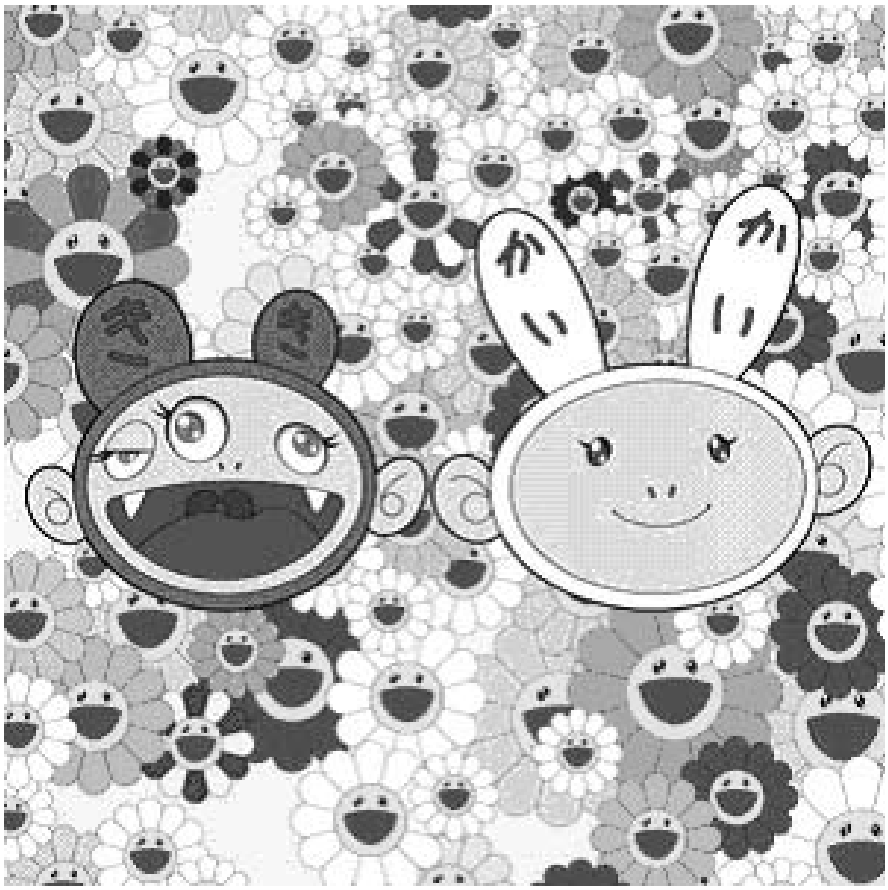

Figure 7
Takashi Murakami (1962-) *Kaikaikiki News* (2003). Lithograph, 50 x 50 cm. London: Quan contemporary (Originalprints 2006).

The dialectic of cuteness and violence

Murakami's *Kaikaikiki News* (fig. 7) was produced around the same time as the Louis Vuitton ranges. The print is brimming with flowers that all have stylized open-mouthed smiles and glittering eyes. The two characters in the foreground, "Kaikai" and "Kiki" are also smiling broadly, which tempts one to think this is simply a "pretty" picture. It does not appear to be much different from the *Eyelove Superflat* print and the *Flowers* print. However, the insistence on colourful, affirmative imagery presents fissures in the immersive spell that lead one to suspect that

this cannot be the sum total of what is depicted here. The three eyes on "Kaikai", along with the two sharp fangs in his (her?) mouth and the double sets of ears on both characters reveal the possibility that all is not as ecstatic as it appears, and even suggests monstrosity. These small humanoid creatures are simultaneously depicted as cute and potentially violent. The tension between cute (*kawaii*) and violent imagery is a dynamic that is found in much of *manga*, but it also betrays the presence of something in digital mass culture that is concealed by this dynamic.

Behind the field of flowers is a resistant plane of flat pastel yellow. Is there something beyond this flat opaque plane? It is my opinion that the "bland" language of *manga* conceals a negatory intent in the subculture. This resistance to interpretation is intertwined with Western projections of a "Techno-Orientalist Japan" (Hjorth 2005: 47). Just as one cannot look beyond the flat surface of *Eyelove Superflat* the non-Japanese viewer cannot look beyond the constructed image of Japan as at once caught in primitive cultural roots and technologically advanced cyberculture (Sato 2004: 335). This view of Japan is due to what Iwabuchi (Hjorth 2005: 46) terms *mukokuseki* which is an "unembedded expression of race, ethnicity and culture". In other words, the Western view of Japan is a construction which actually is Japan's own projection of its global identity.

Figure 8
Takashi Murakami (1962-). *Eyelove superflat (blue)*. 2003. 44 x 44cm. Serigraph print, edition of 50. (@Gallery Tagboat).

Superflat "nothingness"

The *Eyelove superflat* print comes in either white or black (fig. 8). I interpret these ground colours as resisting the viewer's gaze. It may be argued that the ground is simply white or black because it functions like printed fabric or wallpaper (fig. 9). The print can be endlessly duplicated to deliver unlimited amounts of "fabric" for Vuitton products, and can in theory produce an endless field of the *Eyelove superflat (pink)*. This potential to be endlessly reproduced and linked can be understood as more than just incidental in the context of Murakami's oeuvre. If one applies the metaphor of the little eyes as representing *otaku* culture it implies a potentially unstoppable proliferation of the sub-culture. Such a field of *Eyelove superflat (pink)* prints would also be impenetrably flat. The solid white or black ground is pictorially representative

of nothing in particular. Is it space or is it surface, is it deep or is it flat, is it insignificant or is it significant? It is exactly in this "nothingness" that a clue may lurk.

Figure 9
The *Eyelove superflat (pink)* print duplicated and placed in a field format.

The flatness of Murakami's work is the result of smooth and hard-edged painting and printing techniques and recalls the hard outlines of *ukiyo-e*. He refers to this flatness as "superflat" (Brehm 2002: 36-40) and it is not just a visual device. "Superflatness" reflects the Japanese appropriation and furthering of American popular culture such as Disney animation (Darling 2001: 80). The question of "superflatness" also relates to the manner in which Murakami works. Digital compositing is a major part of his technique and his factory even has a database of images that are ready to be inserted into an artwork or design (Frederick 2003). "Superflatness" is reflected in the *mukokuseki* in *manga* and *anime*, where objects become conceptually flat and non-specific. I suspect that the flatness in the *Eyelove superflat (pink)* is intentionally rigid and betrays the presence of something hidden behind the layer of affirmative decorative imagery. The question is what is this something that appears to be nothing *(mukokuseki*)? This may be interpreted with reference to Gumbrecht's (2004: 93-132) theory of "presence". He describes the aesthetic experience as one of "epiphany". The experience reveals itself in a moment of "intensity" (Gumbrecht 2004: 97). It may be surmised that Murakami's technique of compositing results in a quietly building intensity which may culminate in or oscillate between moments of revelatory "presence" and "nothingness".

What appears is not meaning as much as "presence", and according to Gumbrecht (2004: 105-111) the two are in tension. In terms of *Eyelove superflat (pink),* the potential appearance of "presence" seems negated by the ambiguous blandness of the ground which I interpret as an indication of the Japanese *mukokuseki* (blandness). It seems that "nothingness" precludes any possible "presence" in this case, however it is exactly this insistence on blandness and "nothingness" which betrays that there may be something concealed. Appearance out of nothing can be understood with reference to Lyotard's (1984: 36-43) sublime. The sublime is in essence a negatory experience; one that does not present itself (Lyotard 1984: 36-43). This is loosely a tendency echoed by Western artworks in the mystic tradition and a theory that revolves around what cannot be understood, what cannot be presented and what cannot be experienced, grounded in the concept of *kenosis* (Kant 1790-99: 25). It would thus be contrary to the affirmative nature of imagery in mass culture and much of design. However, if one understands this in the context of the *mukokuseki* or the "odourlessness" of Japanese popular culture, it follows that

the Japanese identity is also something which does not present itself. What I am suggesting is not that the digital sublime can simply be seen as a continuation or instance of Lyotard's *avant-garde* notion of the sublime, but rather that the composited[2] nature of digital "presence" is comparable to theories of the aesthetic experience of sublimity. In essence digital "presence" is an aesthetic experience which oscillates between immersion and "nothingness". Or rather, immersion within "nothingness" may in moments reveal itself as the "presence" of the digital sublime.

What I am proposing is that a contemporary "unpresentable" may lurk beneath the bland pleasantness of Murakami's work and the *Eyelove superflat (pink)* design. This becomes evident in the dialectical nature of images such as *Kaikaikiki News* (fig. 7). The cute and slightly ominous little eyes on the Murakami-Vuitton bags betray their own appearance and could be read as indicative of the "digital sublime", a contemporary sublime which oscillates between the layers of overly sweet and bland but still "odourless" images in *otaku* culture. The digital sublime occurs in a composited fashion, not as one graspable experience, but rather, through Murakami's strategy of smoothly compositing seemingly paradoxical imagery it reveals itself in sudden flashes. Although the compositing is seamless and not readily visible it is this seamlessness which like the perfectly affirmative appearance of many of the images such as *Flowers* and *Kaikaikiki News* is too polished to be credible.

Figure 10
Chiho Aoshima (1974) *Magma Spirit Explodes* (2004). Digital wall mural, Los Angeles: Carnegie (Carnegie online 2004).

Cuteness and violence rupture

When one looks at work from the exhibition titled *Little boy* fig. 10, fig. 11), where Murakami performed the role of curator, this conceptual dialectic surfaces (Heartney 2005: 57-61). One particular work, by Chiho Aoshima (fig. 10) displays at once "cuteness" (*kawaii*) and apocalyptic "violence". The contradictory mixture is indicative of the deeper threads of affirmative and seemingly negatory imagery which run in contemporary visual culture, but specifically Japanese *manga*. It is also evident in Murakami's work such as in *Kaikaikiki News* (fig. 7) and *Time Bokan – Pink – Black (fig. 11)*. In the former the cute figures of "Kaiki" and "Kiki" display disturbing characteristics such as sharp fangs and double sets of ears. In *Time Bokan – Pink – Black* the indeterminate shape of a human skull is contradicted by a saturated pink ground.

Figure 11
Takashi Murakami (1962-) *Time Bokan – Pink – Black.* (2001). 180 x 180 cm. Acrylic on canvas, mounted on wood. New York: Marriane Boesky Gallery (Artthrob 2005).

Otaku culture is regarded as a somewhat reactionary sub-culture in that followers often see themselves as rebelling against the "lull" (*mukokuseki*?) of normality in Japanese society. This is echoed in the themes that recur in *anime* and *manga*, such as apocalyptic disasters and massacre. Things happen on large scale, when violence is depicted, it is excessive. When *kawaii* is pictured, it is cloying and soft. In *Magma Spirit Explodes* (fig. 10) by Chiho Aoshima these strands co-exist strangely in the portrait of the boy (or girl?). Lavish eyelashes are combined with hair that seems to be melting down the canvas and strange protuberances from the boy's nostrils. In *Flowers* (fig. 6) and *Kaikaikiki News* (fig. 7) there is an over-abundance of flowers and bright colours, which seems merely banally happy, but when illusionary depth is abandoned objects become flat to the point of being disturbing. Things are depicted in excess, echoing the technique of bombarding the viewer which is popular in advertising and mass culture. This technique echoes the potentially unending field of the *Eyelove superflat (pink)*, and conceals the fundamental rigidity of the images. The viewer encounters inability to penetrate the images beyond the excessive depictions. This is the result of the blandness of the images. The combination of cuteness and violence has a mutually neutralizing effect, resulting in blandness and overall ness. It leaves the viewer feeling numb and tempted to think that there is no meaning to be found in the images. This could indicate that the images are to be encountered in a manner which does not pre-suppose that meaning will be forthcoming (Lyotard 1984). While images of disaster seem to indicate a more negatory strand of meaning such insipid disasters can only point to that which is unpresentable and negatory in the sense that it does not manifest itself, and cannot be presented. It is this which may be the digital sublime.

When one applies the idea of "presence" the notion of critical intent becomes reframed in the possibility of a digital sublime that may manifest in the viewer's experience of a visual design such as the *Eyelove superflat (pink)*. It is not for the artist or designer to contrive this "presence". It has little to do with the designer and everything to do with the viewer and the medium. How the work is received will thus determine whether there is any "presence" or sublimity to speak of. Whether an image appears pleasant or apocalyptic is merely the *mukokuseki*, the "odourlessness" of its affirmative appearance. In other words, while the *Eyelove superflat (pink)* print seems endlessly bland in its "prettiness" it may reveal something of a digital sub-

lime in a moment of "presence". But it also may not. The question occurs, who can experience this possible aesthetic appearance in the *Eyelove superflat* print? This is not something that the viewer can control, however it is rather related to focused "openness" as Gumbrecht (2004: 103-104) discusses it. The discerning viewer may foresee the possibility of aesthetic experience. It is reasonable to assume that most viewers will not foresee such an occurrence as it was for Kant (1970-99: 24-41). This creates an interesting echo of the exclusivity of the luxury brand of Vuitton, although the aesthetic exclusivity of the experience of "presence" does not rely on economic factors or the issue of "taste" as Kant defined it.

"Openness": the digital sublime

Pop-artists have produced work that is commercially viable since the 1960's. What makes this collaboration unique is that it fuses the fine art sensibility of Murakami's work with the design range of Vuitton. It also echoes the reception of *otaku* culture in the West. A Western appropriation of *otaku* culture is developing with *anime* appearing frequently on Western children's television, and with these series being downloaded off the internet in the West as soon as they appear in Japan. *Otaku* culture is a trend. What makes it so irresistible is its peculiar blend of dialectical strands of meaning but also the appearance of it having no meaning – being open to the viewer's interpretation. It is this in turn which may open the possibility for the experience of the digital sublime.

This "openness" stems from the *mukokuseki* effect in Japanese culture, and is related to *kawaii* since it subjects the idea of what is Japanese to the viewer's desires. Sianne Ngai (2005: 811-847) discusses cuteness (*kawaii*) as being related to smallness and malleability, in objects that can easily be formed and deformed. The *Eyelove superflat (pink)* print displays such a nondescript cuteness in the violated little eyes that are placed on the monogram ground. The eyes seem abandoned and trapped in the potentially limitless field of the print. The whole print creates an image of blandness or nothingness. This is a canvas ready to be manipulated into a Vuitton product. In *Magma Spirit Explodes* elements like the eyelashes on the boy's eyes and an overly small mouth make the figure appear cute and vulnerable. His mouth is open and his hair is melting while he is surrounded by flames, displaying the paradoxical relationship between violence and vulnerability which often underpins *kawaii* imagery.

Murakami assimilates the language of *manga* and this is carried through to the Vuitton range. The violence and cuteness which becomes the bland imagery of *manga* really relates to how *otaku* culture presents itself to the West. By presenting itself as "odourless" *otaku* culture is perhaps itself displaying some of the *kawaii* (cuteness) that is also present in *anime* and *manga*. What now remains is the question of whether one regards it as just another "commodified" exotic rarity outside Japan. Is it possible for the non-Japanese viewer to interpret *otaku* culture as something beyond the *mukokuseki* (blandness)? Murakami's collaboration with design giant Louis Vuitton perhaps places *otaku* culture in a different light. *Otaku* culture is seen as made up of co-existing strands that undermine each other such as cuteness and violence, and blandness and the digital sublime. It also places exclusive design in a new light which momentarily reverses and employs the "odourlessness" of Japan's commercial image.

Notes

1 What I refer to as a *manga* phenomenon is also termed *otaku*-culture and is a rapidly growing sub-culture consisting of avid followers of *anime* and *manga*, along with products such as collectible figurines, soft toys and computer games that stem from the former genres. *Otaku* culture is the subject of Magrit. Brehm's (2002) book entitled *The Japanese Experience Inevitable*, which is referred to throughout this article.

2 This term is found in Lev Manovich's *The language of new media* (2001), and refers to the manner in which digital imagery can be manipulated. This is similar to collage and photo-montage, but implies that fragments of imagery can be seamlessly combined.

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