

Mutual
Images

ISSUE 9

AUTUMN 2020

ARTISTS, AESTHETICS, AND ARTWORKS
FROM, AND IN CONVERSATION WITH, JAPAN
PART 2

MUTUAL IMAGES
ISSUE 9 – AUTUMN 2020

MUTUAL IMAGES

A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

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ARTISTS, AESTHETICS, AND ARTWORKS
FROM, AND IN CONVERSATION WITH, JAPAN
PART 2

EDITED BY
MARCO PELLITTERI & JOSÉ ANDRÉS SANTIAGO IGLESIAS

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MUTUAL IMAGES – ISSUE 9 – AUTUMN 2020

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A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

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Mutual Images is registered under the ISSN 2496-1868. This issue's Digital Object Identifier is: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.32926/9](https://doi.org/10.32926/9).

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Lolita fashion, new media, and cultural hegemony in contemporary Japan

SHUAI Ziwei | University College London, UK

[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.32926/2020.9.SHU.LOLIT](https://doi.org/10.32926/2020.9.SHU.LOLIT)

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to present Lolita fashion, which emerged in Japan during the 1980s, as a case study in performed, postmodern identities that are negotiated through consumerism. Opening with a broad stroke introduction to Lolita fashion, with regard to its principal characteristics and its cultural origins, the article attempts to examine the Lolita phenomenon using a variety of theoretical tools and approaches. Firstly, the article considers Lolita fashion in the light of Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony. I assert that Lolita fashion might usefully be read as a place of rupture or resistance against the orthodox hegemony of Japan's historically collectivist culture, one that provides its users with an alternate set of social values, particularly when it comes to traditional notions of femininity. Next, I lean, particularly, on Stuart Hall's ideas about modernity, and consider the question of agency, with regard to Lolita fashion, and attempt to locate the impetus for it, not in multinational fashion houses, but the participants of Lolita subculture themselves. In a third section, I go on to problematise that agency, drawing on John Storey's cultural theory work. While it is a commonplace to attribute the rise of a totalising, contemporary mass culture to the digital revolution, Storey locates a potential for new meanings to be generated, not so much within the act of buying - for that is largely determined by the market - but in what he calls the 'production in use' of those goods. The fashion adage, 'It's not what you wear, but how you wear it' seems to ring particularly true in Lolita fashion, and I explore that idea further with an in-depth, textual analysis of a select image. I conclude by considering Lolita fashion's exportation, out of Japan and into a globalised marketplace, and the signification thereof.

KEYWORDS

Lolita; Fashion; Japan; Kawaii; Globalisation.

Date of submission: 12 December 2020

Date of acceptance: 18 December 2020

Date of publication: 20 December 2020

1. Introduction

'Lolita' style emerged, as a progressive form of street fashion in Harajuku, Japan, during the 1980s, from a unique mixture of Japanese popular cultural movements and a love of the qualities of 'cuteness'. 'Whether dressed in pink, powder blue, red, white or black', Lolita fashion adherents became recognisable through 'their doll-like make-up, frilly skirts, fanciful headgear, ribbons and lace' (Victoria & Albert Museum, 2018, para. 1) (Fig. 1). In the context of the hyper-modern mediatised streetscape of Tokyo, Lolita figures cut a surreal image, dressed in clothes that, stylistically speaking, originate in the nineteenth

century, but which are, at the same time, being glamorously adorned with a knowing nod towards a representation on social media networks that is wholly contemporary.



Fig. 1. Lolita fashion on the streets of Tokyo (ca. 2018). Source: <http://tokyofashion.com/horned-harajuku-girl-gothic-lolita-angelic-pretty/>

As the image in Figure 1 makes clear, Lolita fashion is highly performative. Not only are the clothes and make-up themselves extraordinarily elaborate, but the behaviour of the wearers is also intensely inflected with artifice. Lolita fashion is also, as again the image shows, a communal activity; the two girls, one dressed in black, one dressed in white, form an ideally contrastive pair and their figural and gesticulating language is clearly rehearsed, or at least highly constructed on the basis of a pre-existing familiarity with each other's roles and predilections. When viewed in terms of the backdrop of contemporary Japanese society – one dominated in equal measure by traditional hegemonic values and normative patterns of work and leisure – Lolita fashion stands out (along with a host of other subcultural practices) as a place of rupture or resistance where alternative value systems come into play.

With all this in mind, the aim of this article is to reconfigure Lolita fashion within the context of both Japanese society and a globally widespread culture of new media maintained in images and social networks on the basis of ideas about cultural hegemony

(Gramsci, 1971, 12; Coban, 2018). The Lolita look is obviously indebted to Victorian notions of style, the *jouissance* of perversion/subversion, and the provocative eroticism of innocence in young girls expressed in the novel by Vladimir Nabokov that gave Lolita fashion its name. However, Lolita is also a fundamentally contemporary phenomenon, impossible to imagine outside of a global mediascape to which Lolita followers are attuned. Lolita fashion must also be seen in terms of its crucial relationship with non-Western, Japanese traditions of dress and social performance (the *Geisha* tradition, for example), and these factors all combine to constitute a rich media context of overlapping and convergent networks and practices that will, to the greatest extent possible, be subject to critical analysis in what follows.

By drawing on a range of theorists of popular culture and media, the article will consider the production, reproduction, and transformation of social values while considering the streets (and public spaces more broadly) as ideological battlefields in which dressing up, and performing the particularities of the dress, serve as a means to reinvent the world rather than as a merely reflexive action produced by the dominance of consumer culture, normative trends, hegemonic values, and the passive repetition of corporate advertising imagery. At crucial junctures, Lolita fashion resists complicity with hegemonic tendencies (Fraser and Rothman, 2018, 5).

Lolita fashion cannot be spoken about without reference to its implication in participatory media cultures, as fashion dress becomes inseparable from its mode of circulation through digital media-based social networks (Storey, 2018; Bartlett, Cole and Rocamora, 2018). Dress, from this perspective, includes an ensemble of media operations that 'clothe' the subject and project their identity, making it appropriate to consider Lolita fashion in relation to broader discourses on consumerism and spectacle within media studies (Lister, 2010; Debord, 2016; Baudrillard, 2014).

The structure of this article is designed to weave together the theoretical speculation on the nature of digital fashion and performance cultures with direct object analysis of media texts (in this case, the visual documentation of Lolita fashion). Rather than carrying out these tasks separately and working through the theory before approaching its implication in practice, this article will use theoretical texts as a way of reading Lolita imagery, thereby simultaneously building up a critical theoretical backdrop and a series of case studies that will help us to explore and expand on the phenomenon as a whole.

The Lolita phenomenon is distinctive in that it is highly crafted out of both the materiality of fashion and the immateriality of digital networks, and in respect of this duality, it makes sense not to separate the practices of dressing and networking on digital media. Following the same logic, it also makes sense to consider both dressing and networking as articulations of cultural and social ideologies. These three motifs conveniently map onto established methodological schemes for dealing with fashion and visual culture. Gillian Rose's identification of the three sites at which the image is transformatively constructed and disseminated provides a useful framework for negotiating the particular qualities of Lolita fashion. This framework circumscribes 'the site of production, that is, where an image is made; the site of the image itself, that is, its visual content; and the site where the image encounters its spectators or users [its audiencing]' (Rose, 2012, 19).

These analytic nodes of production, content, and audience, together with a fourth node of geographical locale that might usefully be added to Rose's model, will structure the following analysis of Lolita fashion, enabling us to tackle the complex questions of cultural hegemony that this article is fundamentally designed to engage with. In the same way that exponents of Lolita fashion carefully choose their garments, design and arrange their ensemble and go out and pose in the street or upload images on different social media networks (each of which has its own distinctive appeal), this article will also proceed through a series of critical outfits through which different aspects of the Lolita phenomenon will be explored. These outfits will be chosen to reflect, as required, elements of theory that emphasise different elements of the discourse. Together, the entire ensemble aims to both offer a level of comprehension and a corresponding measure of detailed analysis.

2. The Cultural Origins of Lolita Fashion

Lolita fashion and 'Loli' girls in Japanese fashion represent a nexus of complex cultural origins. The name 'Lolita' was derived from the 1955 novel by Vladimir Nabokov, which was made into a film in 1962 by Stanley Kubrick that featured James Mason and Sue Lyon as Lolita (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Still from *Lolita* (1962), dir. Kubrick. Source: Kubrick (2008).

The film opens with shots of James Mason's character painting Lolita's toe nails – a powerful cinematic image that demonstrates the peculiar mixture of affection, care, eroticism, and taboo that has, since the 1980s become synonymous, in Japan, with *Lolicom* or *Rorikon*, which translates as 'Lolita Complex'. Increasingly a politically sensitive subject in Japan, for self-evident reasons, 'Lolita Complex' describes an attraction for teenage girls by adult and middle-aged men. In some respects, it has become an umbrella term for a wide range of related predilections, encompassing *Ariikon*, an attraction for pre-teen girls, after Alice from *Alice in Wonderland* ('Ari-' means 'Alice'); *Heikon*, an attraction for very little girls (after Heidi of Johanna Spyri's novel *Heidi*, who is 4-5 years old); and *Shōtakon*, the love complex for small boys (after 'Shōtarō', the boy protagonist from *Tetsujin-28 go*, a famous science-fiction manga of the 1950s by Mitsuteru Yokoyama).

Both Nabokov's *Lolita* novel and Japan's 'Lolita Complex', however, obfuscate as much as they inform, and inscribe, meanings onto Lolita fashion. Lisa Blauersouth observes that Nabokov's novel is less read, and therefore has less cultural resonance, in Japan: 'In Japan, where the fashion originated, *Lolita* is less known, less of a problem', she explains, 'In the West, the book's paedophilic associations haunt our community' (Blauersouth, 2011, 314). At least one fashion commentator, meanwhile, views Lolita

fashion 'as a reaction to sexualised representations of women in Japanese culture. It displays', notes Rebecca Arnold, 'an almost confrontational femininity that prizes elegance and modesty over seduction' (Arnold, 2018, 139).

Philologically indeterminate, Lolita fashion becomes an uncanny amalgam of everything that is brought to it. The *affective* quality of Lolita, the young girl who inspires absolute devotion in an older man, the young girl who is simultaneously sexually attractive and innocent, is one aspect of the Lolita style within Japanese fashion. However, as the screenshot above shows, the novel and the film are not the source of the actual sartorial style of the subculture. As Winge (2008) pointed out, the fashion reference points for Lolita style are, in fact, located in Victorian-era girls' dress, emblematised by the figure of Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, the 1865 fantasy novel that was partly inspired by Carroll's own Lolita-esque relationship with the schoolgirl, Alice Liddell (Winge, 2008). In the illustrations to that text, the narrative is mediated by images of lace, ruffles, high necklines, and voluminous skirts on the figure of Alice, who is herself an embodiment of cuteness, albeit one with provocatively long hair, big eyes, and pouting lips. The duality that exists at the root of the cultural origins of Lolita fashion highlights the lack of any 'authentic' genealogy or essence. It is a defining feature of Lolita fashion that it is eclectic, diverse, and internally self-contradictory. It could be said that every iteration of Lolita fashion goes some way towards redefining it as a media phenomenon.

Magazine culture has been instrumental in the circulation of Lolita fashion imagery, both within Japan and internationally, through print circulation networks and digital publishing. The *Gothic and Lolita Bible* is the most widely circulated document of this type (Yoshinaga and Ishikawa, 2007). Winge (2008, 49) has noted, for example, that the 'visual style' rock bands such as Buck-Tick that emerged in the 1980s took on the trappings of the Lolita style, popularising the trend through music videos and fashion shoots. In fact, moving from the street onto screen media had important implications for the further dissemination and appropriation of Lolita style as it was introduced to an increasingly global audience. Here, Gwen Stefani became perhaps the most well-known artist to appropriate the Lolita style through her collaboration with the Harajuku girls who appeared in numerous videos and stage appearances (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Gwen Stefani and the Harajuku girls (2016). Source:

<https://www.usmagazine.com/stylish/news/gwen-stefani-explains-her-harajuku-obsession-w441999/>

An instance of cultural appropriation such as this raises significant questions that must be addressed at this stage of the article. There is no doubt about the directness of the appropriation – the name ‘Harajuku’ comes from the street district in Tokyo that is well-known as the origin of Lolita fashion and its premier fashion and media hub (Kawamura, 2013, 66). There is also clearly a direct appropriation of multiple Lolita fashion traits: lace, embroidery, and nineteenth-century ensembles being the most obvious examples. At the same time, there is something entirely different about the presentation of the Harajuku girls, that is, their flamboyant and overt adult sexual seductiveness expressed through tight, figure-hugging clothes and exposed legs and cleavage, as well as the highly-rouged lips and directly soliciting gazes. These are not traits that are native to the Lolita style as it originated and continues to be performed inside of Japan.

In view of this, Lolita fashion can be seen to inhabit a contested space within the overall socio-politics of media convergence culture (Jenkins 2004, 2006). ‘Convergence culture’ has entered the language of media and communication studies as a means of describing two principal phenomena. The first relates to the expansion within the array

of media, media outlets, and forms of media circulation, combined with the inclusion of users as active media producers, while the second relates to the challenge posed by this new media tumult for 'established forms of organisation across many domains, from political to cultural production, from corporate decision-making to marketing' (Couldry, 2011, 487-488).

3. Lolita Fashion and cultural Hegemony in Japan and Globally

Media convergence raises questions surrounding the extent to which media are able to, or in fact do, challenge established forms of organisation across multiple domains. It is clear that Lolita fashion does indeed participate in media convergence to the extent that it inhabits not only bodies on the street but text, image and video sources of various kinds and genres, all of which are rendered accessible through the internet. If these convergent media are said to challenge established forms of organisation, what, in the context of contemporary Japanese society, are these established forms of organisation? Can they be considered hegemonic? And how does Lolita fashion challenge them?

Gagné (2008, 131) argued that one of the most distinctive features of Lolita fashion is the 'counter-public discourses' of distinctive girls' speech patterns used in online forums as well as on the street. The creation of distinct linguistic sub-groupings has, in fact, a long history in Japan, while it entered the realm of counter-public discourse after the Meiji restoration when the state became a dominant source of modernisation through looking towards Western economic and industrial practices as models for its own development, thereby overturning centuries of cultural isolationism. Partly as a result of the state's dominant intervention into education, new counter-public communities (particularly girls' communities) emerged to contest, in often private but significant ways, the linguistic hegemony of the state. 'Hegemony' is here used in its Gramscian sense, common in cultural studies, as the manufacture of consent among the majority of the population as distinct from the use of physical force by propagating the apparently natural superiority of certain classes above others (Scott, 2014, s.v. 'hegemony'). Here, *Joseigo* became a hegemonic form of women's speech that governed social expectations of what women would say and how they would say it. Against this backdrop, multiple forms of counter-public speech have emerged, including *gyaru*, which entertains exuberant forms of speech, and *noripigo*, which is defined as 'childlike' or 'infantile' (Gagné, 2008, 132).

The emergence of counter-public speech communities associated with Lolita fashion indicates that, to some extent, Lolita fashion represents an alternative narrative, or a way of being that is distinct from the norm. Here, sociology has provided a set of key terms and theories for understanding and conceptualising the idea of the normative, as well as the deviation from the norm. Broadly speaking, as Goodman et al. (2012) have observed, there are two basically opposed sociological explanations of how norms and divergence work. First, norms are considered to be the product of social structures. These structures are necessarily large and collective in scale and their concept ultimately derives from Marxist thinking that considers society to be stratified into classes that are inherently antagonistic towards one another (Goodman et al., 2012, 7). The advantage of a structural explanation of normativity and deviation is that it operates at a very large scale, and therefore promises to explain the tensions within society as a whole. Lying in direct opposition to the structural model is the individual model proposed by Erving Goffman, wherein it is the individual himself/herself whose interactions effectively shape our understanding of everyday reality and social organisation (Goodman et al., 2012, 7).

Japan is frequently considered to be a collectivist society (Doak, 2014, 127). As such, it would seem that structuralist models of understanding its culture would be the most appropriate. However, Lolita fashion appears to directly subvert the expectation of collectivism; indeed, it has certainly attracted criticism for its subversion of standard expectations. Kawamura (2013) argued that what distinguishes Lolita fashion is that it represents a departure from traditional forms of the collective subversion of the norms of race, identity, class, sex, and politics.

Instead of taking a revolutionary, class-based stance, Lolita fashion can be considered a postmodern subculture in which individual agency is modelled through a unique set of consumer choices. Here, Kawamura (2013, 68) argued, with reference to Muggleton, that postmodern subcultures 'involve a combination of hybridity, diversity, and fluidity' where 'traditional points of collective identification, such as class, gender, race, and place, are gradually replaced by elective, build-your-own consumer identities'. This sentiment has led to an understanding of members of subcultures as postmodern subjects, exhibiting a fragmented and individualistic personal style. The social and political implications of such a subcultural position are that it exhibits freedom from structures and control and gives the subject more space in which to express themselves.

Looking at Lolita fashion catalogues certainly seems to correspond with Kawamura's ideas about 'build-your-own consumer identities' (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Classic Lolita style garments from the Body Line fashion catalogue (ca. 2000).

Source: Winge, 2008.

Indeed, the medium of the catalogue embodies the principle of difference within similarity. Whilst it is the advertising device of fundamentally mass-producing corporations, which demand that everything be as similar as possible in order to maximise profits, it presents the illusion that anyone can be – and should be – anything they wish or desire to be. The printed catalogue has now converged with the digital catalogue, meaning that the process of do-it-yourself consumer fashion styling is instantly linked to other media channels for sharing photographs and establishing networks of fellow avid fans. However, it should also be noted that while the catalogue promises infinite variation of self-fashioning, it also provides the possibility of closely-knit fashion communities held together by shared themes and motifs that can nonetheless sustain individual permutation.

This makes them particularly distinct from the class-based sartorial codes exemplified by the uniform (Crane, 2009).

With this, it appears possible for Lolita to be both radical and hegemonic at the same time. It is radical in so far as it permits liberal freedoms of choice and self-fashioning for Lolita consumers through the availability of different dress items, yet it is hegemonic to the extent that it serves to mirror the collective grouping that typifies collectivist societies. While it may look extravagantly different from the ordinary office culture, Lolita fashion nevertheless represents a definite social grouping of an alternative kind, a mirror image, as it were, of the traditional class structures of Japanese society, albeit one that reflects them as covered in lace, make-up, and frills. This would account for the perplexing mixture of critique and acceptance that Lolita fashion encounters within Japanese society. Nakamura et al. (2013, 174), for example, have described in detail how Lolita fashion has 'been perceived as mirroring the wearer's rejection of maturity and social conformity to the normative mode of femininity'. At the same time, Kawamura's (2013, 174) research shows how Harajuku girls find Japan the most accepting of all their behaviours in ways that would not be possible outside of Japan, especially in the West.

4. Lolita Fashion and the Question of Agency

One of the most pressing questions in current media studies is the question of agency. Whether or not people are positioned or controlled by the media, or whether in fact they have agency to resist, make their own meanings, and subvert dominant meanings, are crucial concerns that specifically relate to fashion and consumerism. There certainly exist widely diverging opinions regarding the agency that it is possible to exercise in the context of consumerism, ranging from the idea that consumerism permits minimal agency and, to a large extent, dictates consumer choice, to the idea that consumer culture allows the maximum quantity of individual imagination (Featherstone, 2014). In each case, the idea of agency is closely related to the idea of participation. Here, we must ask, to what extent do Japanese Lolita fans *participate* in the production of style and fashion, and to what extent are they merely passive adherents who consume but do not produce?

Kawamura (2006, 784-785) made the radical claim that inverts the conventional system of agency in the world of fashion media and business: 'Japanese street fashion does not come,' he wrote, 'from the famous Japanese designers, but is led by high school girls

who have become extremely influential in controlling fashion trends'. This leads to the extraordinary situation whereby Japanese fashion is effectively dictated by hyper-conscious fashion youths in a spirit of experimentation and obsession. For Kawamura, not only are fashion subcultures opportunities for liberation from established social destinies, but they are also alternative systems of fashion business that actively participate in setting trends, rather than follow existing ones meted out by corporations.

This point of view stems ultimately from a widely held understanding within media and cultural studies that fashion can serve as a means of agency and empowerment for those who are otherwise shut out of the corridors of power due to their being in some way deviant or perverse in their predilections, or simply in their refusal to conform. This has led to what Hall (2011, 596) has identified as a 'crisis of identity' in that the modern subject inhabits a fractured and fragmented self that experiences the dislocation of the central structures and processes of modern society. Media have played a crucial role in this rebalancing of agency. According to David Harvey, media have worked in both an 'extensional' mode (connecting the individual to supranational global networks of information flow) and in an 'intentional' mode (according to which the most intimate interpersonal relationships are inflected by media use) (quoted in Hall, 2011, 599).



Fig. 5. 'Sweet Lolitas' at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (2012). Source: <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/j/japanese-street-style/>

The Victoria and Albert Museum in London has been an important global institutional agent in the dissemination of academic knowledge about Lolita fashion, actively collecting Lolita garments as part of its permanent collection and hosting research and social events connected with the subculture. Documentation of Lolita events at the museum reveal the spectrum of identities that Lolita fashion is able to encompass (Fig. 5), detaching the style from any sense of attachment to Japanese cultural authenticity, and in so-doing, effecting the kind of rupture and displacement that Hall speaks about in relation to identity under the conditions of modernity. The intimate relationship between the disparate Lolita fans gathered in this image, and the function of a digital group portrait circulated online and thereby inserted into the global discourse on Lolita fashion, also demonstrates how extensional and intentional media operate within a single subculture.

However, the question of individual agency is complicated here since the individuals are brought together and documented under the auspices of a media institution and this may, in fact, be evidence for participatory agency being taken away from individuals and relocated within the institution. This predicament at the heart of contemporary media has been discussed by Langlois (2013, 91), who has spoken about the ‘paradox of participatory media’ and the emergence of a ‘new governance of communication’ that has appropriated individual agency. While Langlois acknowledges the enthusiastic claims that have been made on behalf of participatory media cultures in empowering users and raising the potential for democratic agencies to unfold, he also posits a note of caution on the basis that ‘the locus of power and focus of the governance process is not on content per se, but on the conditions within which meaning can emerge’ (2013, 103).

If Lolita fans possess agency over the content of their individual fashion ensembles, do they also possess agency over the conditions within which their identities can emerge on global social networks? The events at the Victoria and Albert Museum would suggest that in a fashion world context where there are so many stakeholders – including museums, fashion labels, pop stars (such as Gwen Stefani) and (it must be said) scholars of fashion and media – individual agency becomes diluted. In important ways, this returns us to the question of hegemony and asks us to think of Lolita fashion in terms of Hall’s (2013) concept of meaning as a social practice, and cultural production as an ‘ideological battleground’.

What is especially unique about Lolita fashion as a cultural phenomenon is that, while it has been consistently appropriated by global media networks, and while social

media, in particular, has exploded the international reach of the style, it still remains fundamentally connected to an urban epicentre in the Harajuku district of Tokyo, where streets, department stores, and print magazines continue to transmit the agency of amateur fans in a rapid, place-specific environment in which participatory agency over a global phenomenon at a local scale is common. If the process of governance on participatory media platforms is about defining meaning through cultural value, shaping cultural perceptions, and 'the setting up of a horizon of communicative possibilities and agencies', the process of governance on the streets is still dispersed among the individual agencies of Lolita fashion fans, and this is what makes it so compelling as a cultural phenomenon (Langlois, 2013, 103).

5. Ideology of Mass Culture and the Phenomenon of Lolita Fashion

The issues explored thus far have covered the cultural origins of the Lolita fashion, the relationship between Lolita fashion and cultural hegemony, and the question of agency within Lolita fashion. Having originated in the 1980s, Lolita fashion came of age during the period of postmodernism and has migrated into the digital realm, becoming inflected in the process by media convergence and the emergence of a fully networked society. In order to finally situate Lolita fashion culture within the contemporary context of media studies, it is now necessary to consider the question of ideology and mass culture and to reflect on the more general significance of Lolita fashion within the wider context of global media studies.

Speaking about the current state of global mass media culture, Storey has argued that all consumers should see themselves as cultural producers: 'selecting, rejecting, making meanings, attributing value, resisting, and, yes, being duped and manipulated' (2019, 271). The crucial recognition expressed in this statement is that we are all, to some extent, 'duped' by mass culture and that we cannot avoid this situation, nor live in hope of revolution. This subtle shift marks a move away from the uncompromisingly political readings of media and cultural studies by figures such as Baudrillard and Hall, who were writing at a time when mass culture had not yet been assimilated by global corporations to the extent that it now has. The ultimately Marxist idea that the illusions of false consciousness projected by a dominant class could be overthrown has gradually been replaced by a more compromised, but perhaps more realistic, notion that 'we must recognize the difference between different versions of reality, and to know that each can

require a different politics' (Storey, 2019, 271). While earlier theorists may have rejected consumer culture out of hand, thinkers such as Storey have called for the consumer to become reconciled to consumption. However, this acceptance of consumption still denies that popular culture 'is little more than a degraded landscape of commercial and ideological manipulation, imposed from above in order to make profit and secure social control' (Storey, 2019, 271).

Lolita fashion serves as a vivid illustration of the argument that Storey is making. It may, in fact, be the case that the Lolita fashion fan becomes the model consumer. Why should this be the case? According to Storey (2019, 272), 'it is, ultimately, in "production in use" that questions of meaning, pleasure, ideological effect, incorporation or resistance can be (contingently) decided'. By 'production in use' he means a dialogue between the processes of production and the activities of consumption that serves as a way of negotiating cultural hegemony. In 'production in use', the consumer 'always confronts a text or practice in its material existence as a result of determinate conditions of production', that is, the consumer confronts a text or practice in a way that is inflected by the economic system that has brought it into being, manufactured it, distributed it, advertised it, and made it available for purchase. However, this does not imply total passivity on the part of the consumer since just as the consumer is confronted by the commodity, so the commodity is confronted by the consumer, 'who in effect produces in use the range of possible meaning(s)' (Storey, 2019, 271). Consumer and commodity are thereby locked in a reciprocal process of mutual self-definition and this is exactly the logic that is at play in Lolita fashion culture.

A textual analysis will serve to bring these ideas into sharper focus (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. 'Sweet Lolitas' photographed in Harajuku (ca. 2010). Source: Rahman, 2011.

This group portrait of sweet Lolitas (that is, Lolita fans whose attire emphasises the 'sweet' aspects of Lolita, as opposed to the gothic) is one of many globally circulating images of Lolita fashion that testify to a strong set of shared stylistic conventions – a key characteristic of a subculture. What is particularly poignant about this image is its collective nature: seven girls arrange themselves in a tableau, compositionally balanced according to height and colour, displaying both uniformity in the commodification of the body as well as subtly differentiated interpretations of *kawaii*, or 'cuteness' (McVeigh, 2000; Winge, 2008). Dress, from this perspective, includes not only the physical commodities worn by the girls, but an ensemble of media operations that 'clothe' the subject and project their identity in the form of a group performance. This confirms a key part of this argument, which is that media users are media producers.

Another striking fact about the image is the degree to which individuation is created through the repetition of almost identical elements. The shoes are almost all pink but with different bows; the socks are knee-height but with different weaves; the skirts are identically plush but are modelled differently through each girl's individual posture, and so on, up to and including the highly coiffed big hair styles and stylised make-up. The image and its circulation testify to the appeal of the fundamental group affinities of a subculture, achieved through shared practices, rituals, and performances of commodity-based identity construction. It can therefore be concluded that circulation through global media

is vital to establishing collective subcultural identity. It is obvious that such an image could not have been produced without a highly commercialised consumer culture and this undoubtedly accounts for the sameness of the girls' accoutrements, while it is also clear that the exertion of individual agency is so extreme and dedicated in its effects that a range of possible meanings is produced within the group.

I began this article by referencing Vladimir Nabokov's seminal novel, *Lolita* (1955), as the etymological origins from which Lolita fashion's name is derived, suggesting that the word had become a shorthand for what I called 'the provocative eroticism of innocence in young girls'. On many levels, this continues to be a useful interpretative touchstone, making sense as it does, succinctly, of ideas such as the 'Lolita complex', most graphically rendered in the often controversial 'lolicom manga' work of artists such as Junko Mizuno (Pilcher, 2009, 317), with which, as we have noted, Lolita fashion is often mistakenly conflated and confused. What it obscures, however, is the fact that Nabokov's novel is a satire, a first-person narration by Humbert Humbert as he attempts to convince the 'Ladies and gentlemen of the jury' (Nabokov, 1955, 5), whom he repeatedly addresses, of, if not his outright innocence, then the mitigating circumstances of his paedophilic crimes. Unlike the Stanley Kubrick film of the same name, which adopts the viewpoint of a characterless but all-seeing narrator, Nabokov never straightforwardly serves up Lolita, to his readers, as a character in her own right: she is, instead, forever mediated through the distorting lens of Humbert Humbert's persuasive rhetoric ('You can always trust a murderer for a fancy prose style!' (Nabokov, 1955, 5)).

At the start of this article, I also invoked Antonio Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony, a post-Marxist idea that, closely paralleling Althusserian notions of ideological state apparatus, postulates a system of cultural normatives, upheld by both a network of notable non-coercive social institutions (including schools and nuclear families) and popular consensus. This 'civil society' is in direct contradistinction, of course, to his 'political society, which, like Althusser's repressive state apparatus, includes institutions, such as police and armies, that exercise control on their populations coercively. I considered whether Lolita fashion might be construed as a site of resistance to the cultural hegemony of Japan's historically collectivist state, albeit one that operated, finally, on an immovable and incontestable capitalist impulse, upon which any individualism could only be expressed through consumerist choices, that is to say, combinations of purchases from the Body Line fashion catalogue, or perhaps its digital successors.

Both of these ideas come to the fore as I consider, briefly, the impact of globalisation on Lolita fashion. With its visual exuberance of pastels, frills and archaic garment shapes, there has, since its earliest development, been a danger that Lolita fashion is only ever regarded as spectacle, exploited by a highly sexualised, male gaze, the very same ticking time-bomb sent up by Nabokov's novel. And this happens in spite of Lolita fashion's credentials as a site of broadly feminist resistance in the face of sexualised stereotypes. While Winge observes that 'Japanese Lolitas claim they are not attempting to be sexually alluring' (2011, 50), she usefully questions whether their 'hyperfeminine and hypercute characteristics' (2011, 62) might be liable to easy misinterpretation. Gagné notes he 'often saw middle-aged men (foreign and otherwise) with massive cameras ogling the girls gathered in the Harajuku [...] many people', he continues, 'don't ask permission to take photographs, and just snap away as they stroll around the area' (2008, 140). While the non-visual practice of Lolita, from its ritualised liminality as identified by Winge (2008, 25-7), to the distinctively childlike and anachronistic *noripigo* speech patterns mentioned earlier, has always been precarious, it is all but certain to be lost in translation once exported to non-Japanese speaking countries of the West.

In his seminal study of *Orientalism*, Edward Said forcefully argues that Gramsci's cultural hegemony is 'an indispensable concept for any understanding of cultural life in the industrial West. It is hegemony', he writes, 'that gives Orientalism the durability and the strength I have been speaking about [...] a collective notion identifying "us" Europeans as against all "those" non-Europeans' (Said, 2003, 7). In its exportation from Japan to the West, Lolita fashion soon becomes a silenced Other, reduced to a visual, sexualised spectacle. Writing about her experiences as a Lolita in Minnesota, Laura Blauersouth documents the surprise of fellow diners in a tea-room, 'there is a momentary pause while they silently wonder if this is some sort of sexual fetish [...] our culture', she explains, 'sees anything that grabs attention and shows off its *otherness* as a bid for sexual attention. It is also an undeniable fact that our culture objectifies little girls as sexually forbidden fruit. Combine the two, and Lolita seems designed to make people think the worst' (Blauersouth, 2011, 314). American popular culture has fared no better with the Lolita trope. For every darkly complex Darla or Drusilla character from Joss Whedon's multi-series teen-vampire drama, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), there is strewn a litany of failures cut from the same cloth. Gwen Stefani, mentioned earlier, may have been met with opprobrium by Japan's Lolita subculture, but got off lightly compared to

Avril Lavigne's 'Hello Kitty' (2014), or Alisha Attic's career-ending *Japanese Dream* (1997) that came before. None of them failed quite as spectacularly as Zack Snyder's *Sucker Punch* (2011) whose porcelain-faced, pigtailed Babydoll failed to win over audiences and was reviewed as 'Misogyny disguised as empowerment' with just a paltry 22% rating on *Rotten Tomatoes* (Rotten Tomatoes, 2011).

6. Conclusion

Yet, if America gets Lolita fashion wrong, it also holds up a mirror to its limitations. Far from home, the cracks in the apparently flawless face of Japanese Lolita subculture begin to show. Writes Blauersouth:

Lolita subculture, at its worst, is a materialistic, classist, and racist hobby. The sheer amount of money that can be spent on clothes, shoes, accessories, and other paraphernalia is astounding - and for some, a necessary component of the subculture [...] it has internalized a strict Victorian hierarchy, enforced with vicious online forums, scathing critique, exclusion, outright bullying, and racist screeds on how certain races just don't *do* Lolita. (Blauersouth, 2011, 315)

If Lolita fashion challenges the ordered, measured cultural hegemony of Japan with its exuberance and individuated consumerism, it is also challenged by its own vicious online policing. And if Lolita fashion, Orientalised and othered in the way that Edward Said describes, challenges a constant predilection, in the west, to immediately sexualise difference, it is also challenged by its own shamelessly Eurocentric and relentless fetishisation of whiteness. It is telling that, in 2014 as Lolita fashion struck a critical mass as a global phenomenon, Japanese toymakers, Sanrio, shocked by the world by reinforcing that Eurocentricity and advising that 'Hello Kitty' - by far the most internationally recognisable icon to be co-opted by Lolita fashion - was not a cat at all, but a young British girl in the third-grade, living outside London (Petri, 2016, para. 4-5).

In many ways the adoption of Lolita (predominantly Gothic Lolita) fashion in Europe sees the wheel turn full circle: Lolita fashion was an invention by Japanese girls inspired by Victorian or nineteenth-century European fashions; now European women are inspired by Lolita fashion's take on the same. That fashion has always borrowed from the historical past, or, more precisely, re-articulations of the historical past, is nothing new.

What is interesting in the case of Lolita fashion, however, is the ways in that it re-inscribes the importance of settled hierarchies of race and class. Blauersouth observes that

'many of the Japanese Lolita models are white (or are digitally altered to look like it)' (2011, 315). In the hands of 'primarily Caucasian' (Blauersouth, 2011, 315) Minnesotans, or the hands of its European scene, the whiteness of Lolita's own community becomes celebrated and fetishised, an ugly and putrid reflection of the high colonial impulses from which those same fashions derive. And, as we have seen, Lolita fashion does not come cheaply either: whether in Harajuku or Minnesota, the financial cost of mimicking the fashions of porcelain dolls, only ever given to wealthy children, Lolita fashion success comes at a high price, a barrier to entry that effectively operates as class segregation to mirror its racial segregation. Whatever political radicalism was latent in Lolita fashion, however much it ever seemed to provide a countercultural space within which to actively resist a dominant cultural hegemony, either on a national or international level, the built-in conservatism of Lolita fashion, together with its early emphasis on etiquette and deportment, seems to condemn it as an evolutionary, sartorial dead-end, a worn out idea that starts to fade as quickly as it came to life.

As a case study in performed postmodern identities negotiated through consumerism, Lolita fashion lays bare the socio-economic contradictions of its cultural hegemony and milieu, highlighting, too, the ways in which these structures morph and change in the light of the digital revolution and its concomitant globalisation. Equally significantly, it illustrates, perfectly, the phenomenon of 'production in use', defined by Storey, which is a means through which the mediation of the body through consumerist fashion trends enacts the fundamental relationship of the subject of modern identity to the ideologies of mass culture, sometimes with disquieting consequences. In doing so, it renders visible, in an extreme way, the negotiations of self and society that we all, as highly mediated postmodern subjects, must contend with.

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