

Mutual  
Images

ISSUE 3

AUTUMN 2017



VISUALITY AND FICTIONALITY OF JAPAN AND  
EUROPE IN CROSS-CULTURAL FRAMEWORK

MUTUAL IMAGES

ISSUE 3 – AUTUMN 2017

# MUTUAL IMAGES

## A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

FOUNDED BY

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EDITED BY

MARCO PELLITTERI & MATTEO FABBRETTI

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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/10.32926/3](https://doi.org/10.32926/3).

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MUTUAL IMAGES RESEARCH ASSOCIATION – Headquarters  
1810 Route de la Champignière  
42800 St Romain en Jarez – France

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# MUTUAL IMAGES

## ISSUE 3

### TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial

**MARCO PELLITTERI & MATTEO FABBRETTI** (Kōbe University, Japan; School of Modern Languages, Cardiff University, UK) .....1-4

### ARTICLES

Telling stories about the “Land of the Rising Sun”:  
Contemporary Italian literature re-inventing Japan  
**FABIO DOMENICO PALUMBO** (University of Messina, Italy) .....5-25

Alternative narratives of Japan in contemporary media:  
Kobayashi Yoshinori’s *Sensōron*  
**ODA TOMOKO** (Kōbe University, Japan) .....26-42

“Thinking of Spain in a flat way”:  
Visiting Spain and Spanish cultural heritage through contemporary Japanese anime  
**MANUEL HERNÁNDEZ-PÉREZ** (University of Hull, UK) .....43-69

Twice hypervisual: Expanding on North American and Western European critiques of  
the Visual via Azuma Hiroki’s theory of postmodern hypervisuality  
**DYLAN HALLINGSTAD O’BRIEN** (University of California, San Diego, USA) .....70-91

Interpreting/subverting the database:  
Character-conveyed narrative in Japanese visual novel PC games  
**LUCA PAOLO BRUNO** (Leipzig University, Germany) .....92-122

### REVIEWS

*Media, propaganda and politics in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Japan* – The Asahi Shimbun Company;  
Transl. Barak Kushner  
**JUDIT ERIKA MAGYAR** (Waseda University, Japan) .....123-127

*A study of Japanese animation as translation: A descriptive analysis of Hayao Miyazaki  
and other anime dubbed into English* – Adachi Reito  
**JAMIE TOKUNO** (Independent Researcher, USA) .....128-133



# Twice hypervisual: Expanding on North American and Western European critiques of the Visual via Azuma Hiroki's theory of postmodern hypervisuality

Dylan HALLINGSTAD O'BRIEN | University of California, San Diego, USA

[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.32926/2017.3.HAL.TWICE](https://doi.org/10.32926/2017.3.HAL.TWICE)

## ABSTRACT

*In this article, I contend that attending to the intersections of embodiment and cultural experience is especially fruitful in considering Azuma Hiroki's postulation of hypervisuality. Putting hypervisuality into dialogue with North American and Western European work on the visual, and senses more broadly, I argue, offers a chance to see how the culturally and historically contextual privileging of sight and processes of representation coincide to help produce a modality of narrative engagement that conflates an individual's singular reading with the potentiality for such a reading's universal experience.*

*While Azuma Hiroki's *Dōbutsuka suru posutomodan: otaku kara mita nihon shakai* (2001) has often been considered in Anglophone reception as a work examining a specific Japanese subculture, I turn in this article to his theory of the 'hypervisual,' and place it into relation with work on the cultural contours of the visual. Herein, I place such an idea of hypervisuality in relation work that is critical of North American and Western European cultural elevation of the visual as the most valued sense and preeminent way of knowing. Together, I hold, these bodies of work push us further towards an understanding of processes of interpretation and narrative engagement in the present.*

## KEYWORDS

Hypervisuality; Media Studies; Cultural Theory; Sensory Studies; Embodiment; Consumption.

*Date of submission: 02 March 2017*

*Date of acceptance: 07 June 2017*

*Date of publication: 19 December 2017*

## Introduction

The conception of sight as deeply beholden to cultural and historical context (Classen 1993; Nanay 2016), along with the material reality of ocular perception and its ability to be cultivated in certain ways (Jacob and Jeannerod 2003; McLuhan 1963; Ong 1991; Soltis 1966), may be quite familiar to those acquainted with work on the embodied nature of sight in Anglo- and Francophone (Jay 1993 & 1999) academic and philosophical discourses. In short, scholars reflecting on the 'hegemony of vision' (Levin 1993) in North American and Western European<sup>1</sup> contexts have importantly argued that there is never a

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<sup>1</sup> While somewhat broad, throughout the article I refer often to North American and Western European contexts. I wish to note that here, North American is meant to refer as shorthand to U.S. America and

“view from nowhere” (Fredriksson 2015, 12-13), rather, the experience of viewing must be processed through a living viewer and their consciousness (Fredriksson 2015, 13; Burnett 2004, 23-24), and via aspects of personal experience, ideology, and context (Aumont 1990 & 1997).

Coinciding with assertions that the contours of sight are inextricably intertwined with varied contexts of experience has been a body of burgeoning work on how technological advancements do not merely reorient sensory experience, but also how the adoption of technologies is determined in part by sensory hierarchies already at play in cultures. Scholars have thus begun to argue for further integrating embodiment – a conceptualisation of the interworking of the mind and body – into scholarship, in order to realise the culturally constructed nature of everyday, embodied experience, and the role of not merely the mind, but the body as well, in determining the specificities of cultural processes and social structures.

Taking impetus from pushes to understand the interface between embodiment and cultural experience, I herein place Azuma Hiroki's theory of hypervisuality into conversation with North American and Western European scholarship on the visual. Doing so, I contend, offers a chance to see how the cultural privileging of sight and processes of representation coincide to help produce a modality of narrative engagement that conflates an individual's singular reading with the potentiality for universal experience – something that occurs along the fault lines of already at-play embodied experience and cultural hierarchies of sensory experience. Reading Azuma's work in the above manner complements his departure from works focusing on narrow readings of intertextuality and narrative structure to situate these elements in relation to a (culturally and historically contextual) modality of readership and its attendant processes.

Azuma Hiroki's exploration of changes in everyday engagement with narratives and their elements is outlined in *Dōbutsuka suru posutomodan: otaku kara mita nihon shakai* (2001; hereafter *Dōbutsuka*)<sup>2</sup>. In *Dōbutsuka*, Azuma charts a substantial shift in how consumers around the world are engaging with the proliferating multimedia

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Canada. While Western Europe is a broad net to cast, and one may wonder why designate West instead of including the whole of Europe, myriad scholarship on ocularcentrism has examined how the roots of the modern version of this tendency arise with specific Western European (namely English, French, German, and Italian authors), whilst noting the presence of privileging the visual as far back as the ancient Greeks (see Classen 1993, for example).

<sup>2</sup> The original Japanese edition was published in 2001, followed by Korean (2006), French (2008), English (2009), and Italian (2010) translations.

products that inundate everyday life. Azuma develops a theory of how, within post-modern contexts – for Azuma, those following the 1970s and characterised by a significant rupture precipitated by reorganisations of political power, and disillusionment with various vaunted fixtures of modernity (see Azuma 2009, 7-9) – readers engage with narratives in profoundly new, and fragmented ways.

Key to Azuma's explanation of these changes is his elaboration by way of *otaku*, perhaps best understood here as an avid fan of Japanese *anime* (animation) and *manga* (comics), but applicable to fans elsewhere as well (see Azuma 2009, 3-7; Saitō 2011, 11-19). Azuma builds upon prior commentators on *otaku*, such as Okada Toshio (1996) and Ōtsuka Eiji (1989) to situate *otaku* as a new type of consumer, as for Azuma they are not merely technology savvy and plugged into the latest trends, but they engage in a fundamentally new relationship to narratives themselves, consuming narratives in pieces. Drawing upon Ōtsuka Eiji's theory of narrative consumption, and connectedly, Francois Lyotard's (1979 & 1984) arguments for a shift in knowledge transmission roughly contiguous to post-modernity, Azuma argues that no longer do consumers such as the *otaku* seek out "grand narratives" which will give them ideals to live their lives by, nor even engage in Ōtsuka's model of narrative consumption – the fervent consuming of many "small" narratives that, taken together, provide a window into a larger one.

Rather, Azuma proposes that the *otaku* represent a form of relationship to narratives gaining more purchase by the second in postmodern society, one that he says is based on affective investment in the tropes that compose Ōtsuka's small narratives, and endless re-assembly and intertextuality. In *Dōbutsuka*, Azuma argues that consumers such as *otaku* are not drawn to a specific work but *the elements that compose it*, and that such elements are found in innumerable similar products. Yet each tropological element cannot be thought outside of a realisation, thus promoting a *hypervisual* paradox – one that we will examine subsequently in much more detail.

And while Azuma's work has mainly been used within the Anglophone context to examine Japanese subculture, his work provides fertile ground to think through other aspects of a postmodern context. Key amongst the contributions *Dōbutsuka* can offer to numerous fields of inquiry are Azuma's multifaceted consideration of how changes in culture and society have reconfigured everyday engagement with cultural products and

the narratives these products represent, and also how postmodernity promotes a specific modality of engaging with the visual - taken here as a realm of human sensory experience, enmeshed with the other senses and not in isolation (Howes 1991 & 2003).

*Dōbutsuka* and subsequent commentary on it have often used examples of richly visual projects such as anime and manga, as well as presenting numerous pieces of visual evidence for the theory contained within, such as charts and visual models. While within *Dōbutsuka* there is not a direct consideration of the material reality of visual perception, sensory experience, and embodied engagement with culture more directly, contemporaneous work suggests the fruitfulness of integrating Azuma's theory with observations on postmodern culture's sensory dimensions. Numerous contemporaries that Azuma in part responds to, namely Saitō Tamaki, Murakami Takashi, and Okada Toshio mention in different ways the role of visual attention in their theories of a post-modern cultural context and the viewing of manga and anime (Saitō 2000 & 2011, 136-144; Murakami 2000, 8-25; Okada 1996). These aforementioned authors' arguments about specific modes of visual attention for the reading of manga and popular (Japanese) visual culture as a whole, while not located in an ever-growing body of work on sensory experience and embodiment, deftly (albeit briefly in some cases) point to the ways looking is socially and culturally constructed.

Drawing upon prior work in cultural studies, the social sciences, and philosophy of sensory experience and embodiment, particularly related to vision, herein I contend that further theorising and observing the embodied nature of viewers in the postmodern context that Azuma theorises is critical for understanding concepts such as the hypervisual side-slip in an even broader context (Azuma 2009, 104-105). Thus, I argue that attending to the relationship between body and technological developments, vision and engagement with representation, make the points in *Dōbutsuka* relevant to an even larger array of research agendas, as we can approach an understanding of how the postmodern context promotes a specific engagement with narrative and images alike, one that is hypervisual in two ways; at once privileging the visual and suggesting the potential for universal experience of the subjective. In sum, by understanding the processes of reading up (Azuma 2009, 30-33) and the hypervisual side-slip as not solely textual nor metaphorical, but having a dimension that is made up of literal, tangible, embodied engagements with cultural products crucially impacted by socio-cultural changes, both the salience, importance of *Dōbutsuka's* conclusions are extended and explicitly related to work on spectatorship elsewhere.

### Changes in Postmodernity, Viewing, and Contextual Sensoriums

From its outset, *Dōbutsuka* is chiefly concerned with mapping how the shift from modernity to postmodernity has produced a markedly different form of everyday engagement with narratives, and for that matter, how narratives are assembled. Central to the motivation for the present essay is that *Dōbutsuka* sees Azuma elucidate how postmodernity does not signal merely a change in the construction and ‘consumption’ of narrative, but narrative’s relationship to the visual.

Here, I find it prudent to attempt, with some degree of brevity to summarise the points in *Dōbutsuka*<sup>3</sup>, particularly in relation to their commonalities and utility to other extant criticism, most particularly, work on the visual. Central to Azuma’s arguments is that postmodernity is a context that can be characterised by a shift in the engagement with narratives, and the increasing construction of narratives by tropological elements that reference previous iterations of themselves; such elements are tied explicitly to visual or aural elements, Azuma suggests (2009, 42). Drawing on Ōtsuka Eiji’s conclusions in *Monogatari Shōhiron* (1989), Azuma contends that while there has indeed been the decline of grand narratives that Lyotard (1984) writes of, small narratives’ have not replaced grand narratives’ predominance, but rather a mode of engagement characterised by valuing tropes over narrative is now dominant. Consequently, he argues, a new process of engaging with narratives has come about, one characterised by tropological engagement with pieces of small narratives – narratives that do not provide an entry point into a larger world, but are valued for their relationship to prior depictions of that same trope.

This conception of small narratives is indebted to Ōtsuka’s discussion in *Monogatari Shōhiron*, where Ōtsuka contends that consumers are no longer interested in solely the product being bought, but a larger “grand narrative” that the small narrative offers a window into (Azuma 2009, 31; Ōtsuka 1989, 105-107). Upon observing numerous cases of Japanese subcultural consumption, Ōtsuka writes,

What is being consumed is not an individual drama or thing but the system itself that was supposedly concealed in the background. However since it’s quite impossible to sell the system (i.e., the grand narrative) itself, consumers are tricked into consuming a single cross-section of the system in the form of one episode of the drama, or a

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<sup>3</sup> Herein, I do not attempt to exhaustively chronicle Azuma’s arguments in *Dōbutsuka*, rather, I here examine those that correlate or expand upon ideas of subjective visual engagement in North American and Western European scholarship, and at the same time, suggesting the embodied nature of some central characteristics of postmodernity that *Dōbutsuka* presents.

single fragment of the system in the form of a thing. I would like to call this state of affairs “narrative consumption.” (Ōtsuka 1989, 109)

Azuma expands upon this in *Dōbutsuka*, suggesting that while the postmodern context does indeed instil a desire for narrative consumption, the reality is that there is no monolithic grand narrative that viewers can easily ‘revert’ (Azuma 2009, 30-33 & 104-106) back and forth from (the system that Ōtsuka speaks of above – entered through numerous “small” narratives). Rather, the consumption of small narratives is increasingly compulsive, and not reliant on them tying into larger grand narratives, such as ideology. Azuma thus introduces the concept of ‘database consumption’ (Azuma 2009, 53-55) as reliant upon an interest in consuming works much akin to how Ōtsuka describes narrative consumption. However, database consumption suggests there is no interest in an underlying narrative; rather, consumers are interested in a work’s tropes (Azuma 2009, 47-55). Whereas Ōtsuka’s narrative consumption captured a desire of readers to ‘consume’ the larger narrative that small narratives provided a window into, Azuma’s conceptualisation of database consumption speaks to a desire to consume and reiterate endlessly the fragments that make up small narratives, with no illusion of a narrative in the background that unites them all.

The key change that leads Azuma to depart from Ōtsuka’s conclusion is the change from what he labels a ‘tree model’ to ‘database model’ of narrative engagement. That is to say, rather than a cohesive body such as ideology determining a largely uniform engagement of work or construction thereof, he defines postmodernity by locating agency within the spectator engaging a narrative; they are the one making the meaning (Azuma 2009, 30-33). Similarly, as the consumption of narratives, and cultural products more generally, is dependent on spectators developing contextual, subjective readings, moving between a level of overarching societal discourses and the small narratives being consumed everyday becomes impossible (Azuma 2009, 30-33). Reflecting on modernity’s difference from postmodernity, Azuma notes that in modernity,

...[P]eople were able to revert back from the former [small narratives] into the latter [grand narratives]. To use the metaphors of “the visible” and “the invisible,” there were first small, visible things in modernity and behind them there was a large, invisible thing; the model of understanding of this world was to revert back from the former to the latter, by turning the invisible into visibles one after another (Figure 21a). Modern transcendence is, first and foremost, such a visual movement. (Azuma 2009, 105)



Here, we find Azuma's contention that modernity cannot simply be defined as the age of the dominance of grand narratives, but rather, it is characterised by an analogous relationship between small and grand narratives, where the former offers an *entry point* into the latter.

Azuma explicitly contrasts the above with a postmodern situation,

In the database world of postmodernity, however, these two are no longer directly connected. Reading the grand nonnarrative partially creates small narratives, but numerous different small narratives can be created from the same nonnarrative, and no agency exists that determines which is superior. In other words, one can revert back from small narratives to a grand nonnarrative...Unlike in the visual, modern transcendence, one reverts from one layer to another but will never reach a stable final level of agency in the hypervisual, postmodern transcendence. (Azuma 2009, 105-106)

I would note forthrightly, although I will address this in more detail below, that such a conception of meaning making as in the hands of the spectator connects clearly to critical scholarship on visual perception and engagement.

As I have noted in the introduction, a key part of what I wish to accomplish with this piece is contributing to a preliminary theory of how, in the postmodern context, the cultural effects outlined in *Dōbutsuka* are experienced, and engaged, by embodied subjects<sup>4</sup>. Of course, the body in and of is not the focus in *Dōbutsuka*, rather, the work is more of an address as to how society has changed (and thus consumers engagement with its cultural products). As such, we are not dealing here with an omission, but rather, using Azuma's work as a platform to construct a more robust model of the relationship consumers have to narrative, and the co-constitutive role of the visual therein.

Integral to the ideas of *Dōbutsuka* is that technological changes such as the Internet, and computers at large, have mediated a series of changes to human engagement with narrative. For instance, *Dōbutsuka* routinely returns to a database model to describe the referential modality of narrative engagement Azuma terms 'reading-up.' Expounding upon the relationship of reading up to a database model, he writes,

...[N]o hidden grand narrative regulates all Web pages...On the internet, rather, there is distinct *double-layer structure*, wherein, on the one hand, there is an accumulation of encoded information, and, on the other hand, there are individual Web pages made in accordance with the users "reading them up." (Azuma 2009, 31)

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<sup>4</sup> I note that this may at times be somewhat implicit rather than explicit.

Exemplifying the prominent usage of models derived from the Web and computers, Azuma points to how a line of text in a computer can be 'read' differently by different programs, and displayed in numerous ways (2009, 98-99 & 102-104). These changes brought upon by technology, and the modes of spectatorship they enable, are fundamental to Azuma's contention that otaku subculture reflects 'animalization', or an affect-driven impulse to consume the tropes that make up small narratives. Such a mode of consumption hinges on otaku's usage of technology to sort out tropes (2009 42-47) and technology that itself promotes referential engagement through repetition (Azuma 2009, 78-83), both of which then enable and mutually inform their distinct mode of spectatorship. Summarily, technology has helped to cultivate a specific relationship to narrative in postmodernity.

Such ideas of technology as integral to cultural change are ultimately not unprecedented. For example, Marshall McLuhan (1963), in his influential *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, makes the argument that technological changes can deeply reorder not only society but also human bodily and sensory experience. To expound on McLuhan's ideas in particular, he outlines how not only can the relationship between the senses change, but the human experience of them can be altered by new technologies that promote specific usages of the senses. McLuhan's primary example is how the printing press not only prioritised the visual as a key way of knowing and observing, but also installed a textual mode of understanding and engagement with the world in Western culture. Following McLuhan, this strand of his work has been further developed as technological determinism, for instance in the work of authors such as Derrick de Kerckhove (1991 & 1995; for reviews of this body of work, see Heilbroner 1994; McNally 1986)<sup>5</sup>.

Returning to Azuma's contentions around how a certain view of our world, a hyperflat one, is enabled by the flatness of the computer screen and its lining up of parallel information (2009, 102) it becomes quite easy to imagine the role of peoples' bodies and sensory perception in such a process. Namely, if authors have already contended that the television and culture in its wake have taught us to anchor our gaze to observe the whole of television (and subsequently, computer screens), rather than looking at individual aspects (McLuhan 1963; Soltis 1966, 30-36), we can apply such ideas of learned, contextual bodily engagement to how *Dōbutsuka* looks at the hyperflat.

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<sup>5</sup> My thanks to an anonymous peer-reviewer for suggesting I mention technological determinism explicitly.

### The sensorial dimensions of narrative engagement

Pertinent to our discussion is that Azuma proposes peoples' relationships to narratives are increasingly mediated by the visual. Above I have noted how he draws upon Ōtsuka's conception of small narratives – ones that offer no overarching, life-orienting narratives, but rather, are episodic and offer glimpses in to larger worlds. For Azuma in *Dōbutsuka*, the postmodern context relies increasingly not only on viewers' subjective readings, but their understanding of elements of small narratives in relationship to each other (Azuma 2009, 38-54). More specifically, he argues that narratives are engaged with referentially and digested in pieces, right down to elements of the characters' appearance. This reality comes about, he contends, because what we traditionally conceive of as a narrative – story, setting, etc. – becomes secondary to an incredibly heightened environment of referentiality that relies on visual, aural, and affective queues, directing viewers' of any given small narrative to process its tropological elements in relation to prior iterations of them (Azuma 2009, 38-54).

I note this change in narratological engagement in large part because of how Azuma defines a new form of reading, largely contiguous with a move to postmodernity, as largely reliant on sensory queues that viewers must engage with, and use to build their own understandings of the work; such a conception deeply echoes ideas of how spectators are always engaged in subjective interpretations of images, reliant on other factors such as context (Aumont 1997, 2). But, *Dōbutsuka's* theory goes a bit further than aforementioned work, as Azuma suggests what has typically been true for images is now becoming true for *narratives*.

When we consider that the interrelationship between the senses, the cultural valuation of them, and even the human experience of sensory data, is subject to change, the changes in narrative engagement outlined in *Dōbutsuka* become more concrete, and more applicable to everyday life. Specifically, if we take the computer and its screen, the inundation of everyday life with images, as helping to cultivate a distinctly embodied form of spectatorship, *Dōbutsuka's* more abstract discussion of changes in engagement with narrative and images, that is anchored only in broad observations of a specific subculture, becomes understandable in part by recognising that *embodied* consumers are the ones who are having their relationship to stories and visuals alike reconfigured.

Ultimately, the analysis of postmodern engagement with narrative that *Dōbutsuka* contains is expressly important and relevant beyond subcultural studies as it illuminates a *process* of consumption and calls into question an enterprise of analysing texts in and of themselves due equally to the contours of their construction and consumption. One can find wide import in *Dōbutsuka's* conclusions due to the delineation of how viewers create the meaning of small narratives in fragments, always already in reference to tropes' manifestations elsewhere; in short, reading small narratives in isolation will prove an address of fleeting meaning, specific to a singular reading only. This is due equally to works being assembled with tropological elements first, and then the story as a sort of connect-the-dots filler, and also that each work cannot be taken apart from others. In this way, a sort of genealogy of tropes and excavation of processes of reading-up could be more illuminating in studying postmodern works.

What I also find key to note here is that the engagement with narratives which Azuma outlines as characteristic of postmodernity calls to mind a sort of frontal, textual, rationalcentric spectator that U.S. American, Canadian, French, and German authors have written of – and its pitfalls. That is, in *Dōbutsuka* we are given an outline of a modality of engaging with narrative that tends to extol shared experience whilst the spectator is located in a context marked by the impossibility of such shared experiences. Similarly, North American and Western European scholars of visual culture have continually pointed to a widespread cultural impetus to treat the visual as holding meaning within itself, as well as retaining possibility for a monolithic experience thereof, and the actual impossibility of this (Buck-Morss 1996; Burnett 2004, 23-24; Fredriksson 2015). Similarly, such a conclusion has deep implications for the analysis of 'texts' (many of which would fall under the umbrella of small narratives); per *Dōbutsuka*, given the referential, subjective nature of not only reading/spectatorship in the postmodern context, but of the composition of small narratives, an approach to analysing culture that relies on texts clearly demarcated from each other is decidedly outmoded. As I see these points and the contentions around them quite important and enriching for discussions more widespread in American and European academic literature, I wish to elaborate on this a bit more.

### **The relationship of the Visual and Narrative**

A significant part of *Dōbutsuka's* pertinence to, and intersection of, discussions elsewhere is the relationship between the visual and narrative that Azuma sketches out.

Namely, Azuma argues that visual stimuli reference various ‘databases’ of tropes, and that spectators’ experience of tropological assemblies is always a subjective one (Azuma 2009, 102-106); while many spectators may have similar ideas, the act of viewing a postmodern multimedia project does not permit some insight into a universal grand narrative, but rather, provides the ground for a subjective ‘reading up.’ As such, we see a commonality emerge in how Azuma posits the visual as referential and the grounds for always already subjective, personalised engagement, and how North American and Western European scholars have suggested the visual can never be universally experienced, rather it is always about spectators’ mediated relationships to images (Burnett 2004; Fredriksson 2015; Soltis 1966, 30-36).

Azuma repeatedly notes how the visual and narratological tropes that comprise postmodern multimedia projects (Azuma 2009, 38-47 & 98-106), and thus viewers’ affective engagement with cultural products, increasingly take on a deeply subconscious, perhaps preobjective, tilt; that before viewers can think consciously of their relationship to tropes on display, they are processing them referentially in relation to other instances of the same trope (Azuma 2009, 60-62). This interplay of the context of viewing, the medium of the image (whether manga, television, figurine, etc.), personal experience, and ideology at the level of the (embodied) viewer intersects North American and Western European discussions of how the visual is never transmitting information directly to spectators, rather, providing visual stimuli that are interpreted by a confluence of factors (Aumont 1997; Burnett 2004). Yet, the conceptualisation of reading up narratives and images as not just an embodied, subjective encounter, but a deeply affective one (Azuma 2009, 74-79) and subjected to a specific mode of referentiality and intertextuality in the digital age further builds on discussions of spectatorship I have referenced above.

Taking the above similarities and changes in mind, I want to move in the next section towards analysing and expanding upon what is cast as the ‘hypervisual’ in *Dōbutsuka*, and also, North American and Western European work on visual culture. Specifically, given the intersection of numerous points in *Dōbutsuka* with ideas of how sensory experience and processing of information are variable with regards to sociocultural and temporal context, what does the changing engagement of spectators’ signal?

### **Hypervisual, Two Ways**

Thus far I have attempted to elucidate how the postulations of changing engagement in *Dōbutsuka* bears much in mind with theory from outside of the Japanese (subcultural) context in attempt to extend further relevance to the points in *Dōbutsuka* beyond subcultural studies. I have also noted how there is a marked relevance in Azuma's arguments of an increasing move towards tropological construction of narratives, once again, echoed in work commenting on other contexts. Namely, postmodernity sees not only a decline in grand narratives, but a move towards the hyper-consumption of what he terms small narratives, and the underlying, unstated cultural assumption that the meaning viewers take from narratives can be shared.

This final point underlines what is cast as 'hypervisual' in *Dōbutsuka*. While Azuma does not outline the hypervisual at great length in *Dōbutsuka*, its capacity to explain myriad parts of the processes and changes wrought by changes characterised by postmodernity, and also its promise outside of the analysis of otaku culture, is significant. To understand the definition of 'hypervisual' offered in *Dōbutsuka*, it is helpful to return first to the idea of a 'hyperflat' context. Such a context, as outlined above, collapses difference between different narratives and suggests the connectivity of different works through recurrent tropes, all the while promoting a certain accessibility to tropes, and encouraging subjective modes of readership; or in other words, consumers are drawn to specific tropes embedded in small narratives and encouraged to read them in relation to those tropes' realisations in other small narratives. However, as noted above and also by Azuma, viewing images is always a subjective experience, yet the differences between subjective viewings is flattened by a hyperflat context and a set of technologies that suggest the possibility of transcendence, or the ability to easily share the totality of one's subjective experience with others – but as an objective one (Azuma 2009, 104-105).

In reference to the idea of tropes that are animated in relation to prior iterations, Azuma suggests that the tropes realised anew by subjective readings can be seen as the invisible, inner-layer of a database, and the subjective, agential readings as the visible "outer surface layer" (2009, 30-33). On the paradox of people wanting to share their subjective experiences as objective, drawn to the idea of universal and decontextualised ideals of tropes, Azuma notes,

Furthermore, such a hyperflat world provokes a paradox, in which one cannot help pursuing the invisible *precisely because* the invisible is turned into the visible and lined up on the same plane one after another. (Azuma 2009, 104)

To expound, as one pursues some sort of objective, universal version of a trope, the minute one articulates it, it becomes yet another subjective, contextual representation, and thus, the grounds for a different person to conduct a subjective, contextual reading-up. Azuma labels such a phenomenon as a ‘side-slip’ (2009, 104), which closely informs the hypervisual, or the “excessively visible.” (Azuma 2009, 105).

I use the term [hypervisual] to mean to be “excessively visible,” pointing to the quagmire in which one tries to turn the invisible into the visible endlessly and ceaselessly...This trying without success to go back from the visibles (small narratives, i.e., simulacra) to the invisible (the grand nonnarrative, i.e., database) and, instead, slipping sideways at the level of small narratives is the structure of misfire that I call “hypervisuality.” (Azuma 2009, 105)

The hypervisual, Azuma presents, is thus the ‘structure’ (2009, 105) of attempting to represent referential tropes discussed above, yet in the attempt to construct a monolithic, universal experience for other spectators, one only creates the ground for other divergent readings.

The conceptualisation of the hypervisual side-slip as a distinct problem of the post-modern context, when coupled and set into a mutually dialoguing relationship with perspectives on embodied experience, offers a particularly trenchant insight into post-modern engagement with images and narrative, as well as their myriad intersections. Hypervisuality, as I take it here, is a culturally and historically contextual structure of engaging with narrative by way of tropological fragments, underwritten by a cultural sense of individual readings as able to be universalised. In *Dōbutsuka*, the outlining of the hypervisual read-up we are given is one of a process that is determined by the deluge of information in the digital age, the flattening, and erasure of distinction between original and derivative works, and spectators’ treatment of images as inherently beholden to their subjective experiences thereof. As such, hypervisuality in *Dōbutsuka* primarily structures a mode of spectatorship: a process of treating tropological fragments of small narratives as reproducible in their exactness, but always already the result of a subjective reading-up, and their further representation always the ground for further drift from the initial premise.

However, I would like to propose treating hypervisuality as both a structure and a context, through bringing together two complementary and supplementary ways: both in the manner that David Howes (1991 & 2003) suggests of a cultural context that privileges the visual sense over all others, affording it a large degree of objectivity as well as a (or perhaps, *the*) foundational role in determining knowledge (Classen 1993, 6; Fredrikkson 2015, 86-89; Howes 2003, xii-xiii; van Ede 2009, 62-63), and in Azuma's sense of a specific modality of engaging with narrative and images (2009, 104-106).

The paramount status afforded to the visual in North American and Western European cultures has constructed the visual as a central way of not simply knowing, but *knowing objectively*. Historian Constance Classen (1993) describes the objective status often afforded to the visual, remarking that,

...[A]n emphasis on visual metaphors for intellectual functions, such as one finds in scholarly writing, for example, has to do in part with a desire to have or convey a certain detachment from the subject under consideration: to be objective. (Classen 1993, 58)

Classen continues to note that a means of knowing predicated on the visual promises a certain *accessibility* of objects being observed through the adoption of a top-down, objectifying view. Such a mode of spectatorship is in numerous ways analogous to Azuma's contentions of the hypervisual as promising a transcendence that in the end escapes consumers.

While North American and Western European scholarship on the visual may seem markedly separate from Azuma, if we turn to the discussion of the hypervisual in *Dōbutsuka*, the case for expanding upon both discussions is easily discernible. Azuma's defining of the hypervisual as an attempt to retain control over meaning, to construct a stable representation viewable by others, and move seamlessly between the levels of consumable cultural products and ideologies – all items that Azuma suggests are not possible in the postmodern, hyperflat context – recalls myriad criticisms of the treatment of the visual in North American and Western European modernity.

To draw this out further, the definition of the hypervisual pursuit offered in *Dōbutsuka* undoubtedly enriches one that is used by Howes (1991) and other theorists commenting on what is also termed an ocularcentrist (Levin 1993; Jay 1993 & 1999) context. Namely, Azuma's contribution to discussing (visual) culture in a context beset by the Internet and inundated by images is the illumination of a specific process that closely aligns with macro-



theorisation and criticism of North American and Western European sensoriums that have installed vision as the most privileged sense. Azuma notably suggests that a key trait of the hyperflat context is that controlling meaning appears possible to consumers and producers alike, yet, remains an impossibility: the foundation underlying the hypervisual pursuit.

### **The importance of the Hypervisual Paradox in larger context**

Ultimately, the labelling of such a pursuit as hypervisual in *Dōbutsuka* may be disconnected from critical discourse on visual culture in North America and Western Europe, but it can certainly help to enrich this discourse in several ways. To this point, *Dōbutsuka* intersects and expounds upon the usage of hypervisual in a sense that alludes to the place of the visual in a hierarchy; the nature of the hypervisual in *Dōbutsuka* is not merely a context, but an outlook on how consumers can interact with visuals and narratives alike, and the control they have over them. Further, *Dōbutsuka* presents the hypervisual pursuit as one that seeks recovery of that which is cast as authentic and true, laying just behind the image, waiting to be recovered and wielded – except that it is always already simulacra, another subjective representation that will be there. This criticism of seeking what is cast as transcendently true, or perhaps what has elsewhere been scrutinised as the ‘objective,’ bears much similarity to critical scholarship on North American and Western European treatment of the visual. On this point, Azuma writes,

...[W]hen we write a text ourselves, the dominant approach is to think of it as pouring meaning into concrete strings of text – in other words, “turning the invisible into the visible. (Azuma 2009, 98)

Following this, he proceeds to cast doubt on such an idea, suggesting that the postmodern context is one characterised by contours of ‘hyperflatness,’ discussed above (Azuma 2009, 102-104). Additionally, Azuma argues that in a world dominated by computers, beliefs that there is one true meaning to a string of text is in error; whereas the printed media previously presented readers with ink on paper in a singular form, the digital age presents an array of programs and views for singular strings of text, each displaying it differently (2009, 98-104). In short, the postmodern, hyperflat context renders all digitised lines of text polysemic and multivalent without alternative; such a radical shift in everyday engagement with information helps to constitute the radical disjuncture *Dōbutsuka* seeks to address.

Yet, bearing this in mind, *Dōbutsuka* poses a paradox: Azuma contends the postmodern age is characterised by the lack of any transcendental, universal meaning behind subjective moments of reading up, yet, there is a marked impulse for consumers to share their subjective experiences as objective. Such a paradox can perhaps be reconciled to earlier suggestions that sensoriums, or culturally and historically specific relationships between the senses instituted by and embodied via a variety of factors, reflect deeply held cultural values (Geurts 2002, 10). Further, we have already discussed how changes instituted by technology can promote specific modalities of engagement. In this way, I want to suggest that the hypervisual pushes us towards viewing in a certain way, and with a certain relationship to meaning; namely, one that sees meaning as inherent, and transmittable, rather than all meaning being constructed by the spectator. Further, the cultural value placed on narratives existing behind products that Azuma outlines – the idea of some underlying meaning – informs the ideas that enable and push spectators towards hypervisual movement. While the hypervisual may be deeply paradoxical due to the incongruence between its treatment of images and the actual realities of spectatorship, it emerges as a reflection of the paramount values of the postmodern, digital age; both an emphasis on consumption, and a carry over of the modernist ideal of transcendence.

As such, starting from the understanding of the hypervisual as it is treated in *Dōbutsuka*, and putting it into conversation with critical scholarship on the visual in North American and Western European contexts, there is a sense that what could be referred to as hypervisuality is the interplay between various factors such as context, ideology, and individual experience. To expound on this, hypervisuality is simultaneously informed by cultural and economic logics around consumption and spectatorship, and tempered by the increasing proliferation of different, subjective readings (themselves subject to individuals' unique experiences). Beyond the utility of capturing such a range of meaning with one word, taking hypervisuality thusly promotes a specific understanding of interconnection, spillover, and crossover between the above bodies of work.

### **Sketching the conditions of the Hypervisual**

To elaborate on what provides hypervisuality its conditions, I want to momentarily pivot and reflect on the contextual nature of the postmodern, as well as address the compatibility between the conclusions of *Dōbutsuka* and North American and Western European scholarship. First, pulling together numerous strands from within *Dōbutsuka*, we are

given a multi-pronged set of conditions that produces hypervisuality: specific realities of consumerism, new technologies for engaging cultural products, and the attendant reorganisation of daily life. As such, Azuma's points cannot necessarily be marked as solely pertinent to the Japanese context; rather, he explicitly notes the postmodern context as global to a large degree. Key to this essay has been outlining the relation of Azuma's points to critical North American and Western European scholarship on vision, suggesting implications of taking the two together. Yet, much of the latter is explicitly addressed to what is cast as its own cultural milieu – a critique of the privileging of the visual as internal cultural critique. It must of course be said that there will be variations in the cultural treatment of the visual in Japan, even if we accept postmodernity as conceptual model able to be exported beyond “Western” contexts. This having been noted, to return to the rather globalised conditions that Azuma posits as giving rise to hypervisuality, they dovetail with critical scholarship on the visual I have outlined. Whereas the latter suggests the need to locate criticism of what is cast as ocularcentrism or hypervisuality in a bounded “Western” (perceivably an analogue for a large swathe of North America and Western Europe), the value of adopting aspects of Azuma's theory is the emergence of a theory applicable more broadly. In sum, I want to be clear that I am not suggesting the above bodies of work are even roughly contiguous with each other, but instead, enrich each other quite profoundly. Noting this, it likewise cannot be taken for granted that hypervisuality is produced through certain conditions, that while largely present across the globe, cannot be taken as universal nor equally experienced.

But to return to *Dōbutsuka* and Azuma's conclusions more directly, taking the hypervisual side-slip as embodied within *a certain* viewer whenever it occurs, allows for an understanding not solely of cause (ideology and context) but also effect. If we treat the hypervisual engagement as a process occurring through the viewer's body (ocular perception, attention, and processing) and conscious, as well as subconscious, thought, we can understand that the viewer themselves will have a specific relationship to images and narratives. We can understand as well that not only are there processes of consumption and construction of narrative that are brought about by changes in postmodernity, but the cultivation of specific ways of using aural and visual senses to experience the tropes Azuma writes of.

This notion of embodied spectatorship is particularly key in understanding hyper-visual spectatorship as a cultural process. *Dōbutsuka* extensively elaborates on narratives, and how they are tropologically assembled in hyperflat contexts. Similarly, the elements of narratives themselves – tropes – are always present as reference. They stand in for, and are only legible through, every other alien-girl-with-green-hair-and-a-cowlick (Azuma 2009, 60-62). Taking the hypervisual as melding together aspects of context, ideology, and process sees the hypervisual understood as instituting, through its accompanying discourses, simulacrum, and technologies, a relationship between viewers and narratives that moves from an interest in whole narratives to merely pieces of them. From a change of consumers previously caring what has given rise to the narrative and being able to access this themselves, but now in the hypervisual environment, being interested in controlling specific pieces of the narrative and taking it as harbouring not only meaning, but potentiality for a shared, perhaps monolithic experience. This pursuit of a shared experience is immediately reminiscent of criticisms of North American and Western European holdings of the visual as context-free (Fredriksson 2015), objective (Classen 1993; Howes 2003), and stable, with inherent meaning (Bucks-Morss 1996). Azuma of course warns that trusting the visual as communicating a singular experience to different viewers is always a misleading enterprise, as nothing in the hyperflat world is able to be universally experienced (nor is it universally true, for that matter). However, the hypervisual context treats narrative and images alike in this manner. Here, I would emphasise that Azuma's identification of the hypervisual as a distinct modality of engagement with narrative as well as encompassing context, is a crucial supplement and expansion upon other critiques of the visual.

When observing the theses of prior scholars critical of the privileged place of the visual in North American and Western European contexts, and how such sensoriums and contemporaneous ideologies have tended to privilege textuality specifically (McLuhan 1963; Stoller 1997, xv-xvi & 5-6), wedding Azuma's usage of hypervisual with that of other authors appears as a critically important elaboration to further understand the conditions of the visual in a postmodern context. Namely, the move from modernity to postmodernity could be seen as characterised by a preference for textuality as well as the hierarchisation of vision, to a postmodern context that advances a conceptualisation of the subjectively experienced as able to be universalised with the referential at times treated as objective; or in short, a hypervisual pursuit and context.

## Conclusion

While *Dōbutsuka* draws the majority of its examples from anime and manga projects, Azuma's theory contained therein has implications that stretch far beyond subcultural analysis and criticism. While writing apart from (at least via any detectable, traceable pathway of citations) a body of largely English, French, and German scholarship on the place of the visual in U.S. American and Western European, and increasingly certain 'globalised,' contexts, he cuts directly to a key contention of such scholarship. Namely, there is an unspoken, but firmly established, tendency to treat visuals as holding meaning within themselves and a potentiality for shared experience. Yet, whereas other scholars have merely ended with such a proof, Azuma goes further to sketch its failing out (the hypervisual side-slip) and argue that it is becoming a more and more salient part of everyday engagement with cultural products.

Taking the points in *Dōbutsuka* as corollary to aforementioned work on the visual expands it in numerous ways. Most keenly as I have tackled in the prior section, it allows us to understand that not only is there a tendency towards taking meaning as embedded in images and thus, compelling us to treat them as able to be universally experienced, but that a text-oriented culture in the wake of postmodernity moves towards treating narrative not only as able to be disassembled, but controllable, and 'hyperflat[tened]'.

Understanding 'hypervisual' as denoting the interplay of context, ideology, and embodied subjective experience goes beyond mere utility, but also offers an understanding of a postmodern relationship between consumers and cultural products that fall under the heading of small narratives. These small narratives are increasingly outside of what has been treated to this point as a text – for instance, Ōtsuka's work that Azuma extensively draws on intricately analyses Japanese children's experience of Bikkuriman chocolates and their trading cards.

Here, there is a sort of challenge that emanates from putting Azuma's thoughts into conversation with U.S. American, French, and German criticism of the hypervisual. Critical work on vision has long held that viewing images is always already a subjective, contextualised experience dependent on the viewer; no meaning is ever given, only visual stimuli. As such, myriad authors (for example Burnett 2004; Fredriksson 2015) have pointed to human engagement with images as one defined by creativity, and one depending on viewer's drawing on prior experience, ideologies they have been exposed to, and elements of context from the medium of expression to building the image

is viewed in. When one recalls Ōtsuka's example of the children assembling a cohesive story of the Bikkuriman universe via fragments – the trading cards packaged with the chocolates – as Azuma suggests, they only offer a mere glimpse into the universe, prompting the children to subjectively fill in the blanks; each going home with a different experience of the Bikkuriman grand nonnarrative, or assemblage of tropes.

In this way, we can see from a more embodied perspective how the changes in society via myriad phenomena and a hypervisual context, have led in the direction of what Azuma (2011 & 2014) responds to in his more recent work, as have increasingly myriad other critics and social theorists – a fragmentation of perspectives amidst a rapidly proliferating sea of information. Azuma's Baudrillardian take on postmodern society, one beset by a mass proliferation of copies without an original (i.e. Baudrillard 1993), is both buttressed and made more multifaceted by the attention to the individual within *Dōbutsuka*.

I would close by suggesting that one of the most important results of bringing these two definitions of the hypervisual together is not merely an enriched, cross-cultural theorisation of visual culture, but a furthering of examinations of the North American and Western European tendency to view the visual as objective and rational, and to engage with the visual along the lines of textuality. While prior authors have most certainly contended that there are numerous pitfalls to taking photographs and films as objective or divorced from subjective choices and readings, the value of building a corollary to such theory with *Dōbutsuka* is that narratives in a postmodern context are likewise beholden to the same rationalcentric impulse that moves in search of the objective, and places a cultural premium on it. In short, threading together both strands of work on the hypervisual fleshes out even further a sense of how the postmodern everyday promotes specific relations to information, and continues a long-standing cultural, and now globalising, valuing of objectivity and rationality; something so thoroughly indicted by scholarship to this point.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Dylan HALLINGSTAD O'BRIEN** is a PhD student in anthropology at the University of California, San Diego. His work, broadly, examines the figure of radical alterity and contemporary cross-cultural theoretical exchanges. His previously published work examines such interests in relation to animals especially.