

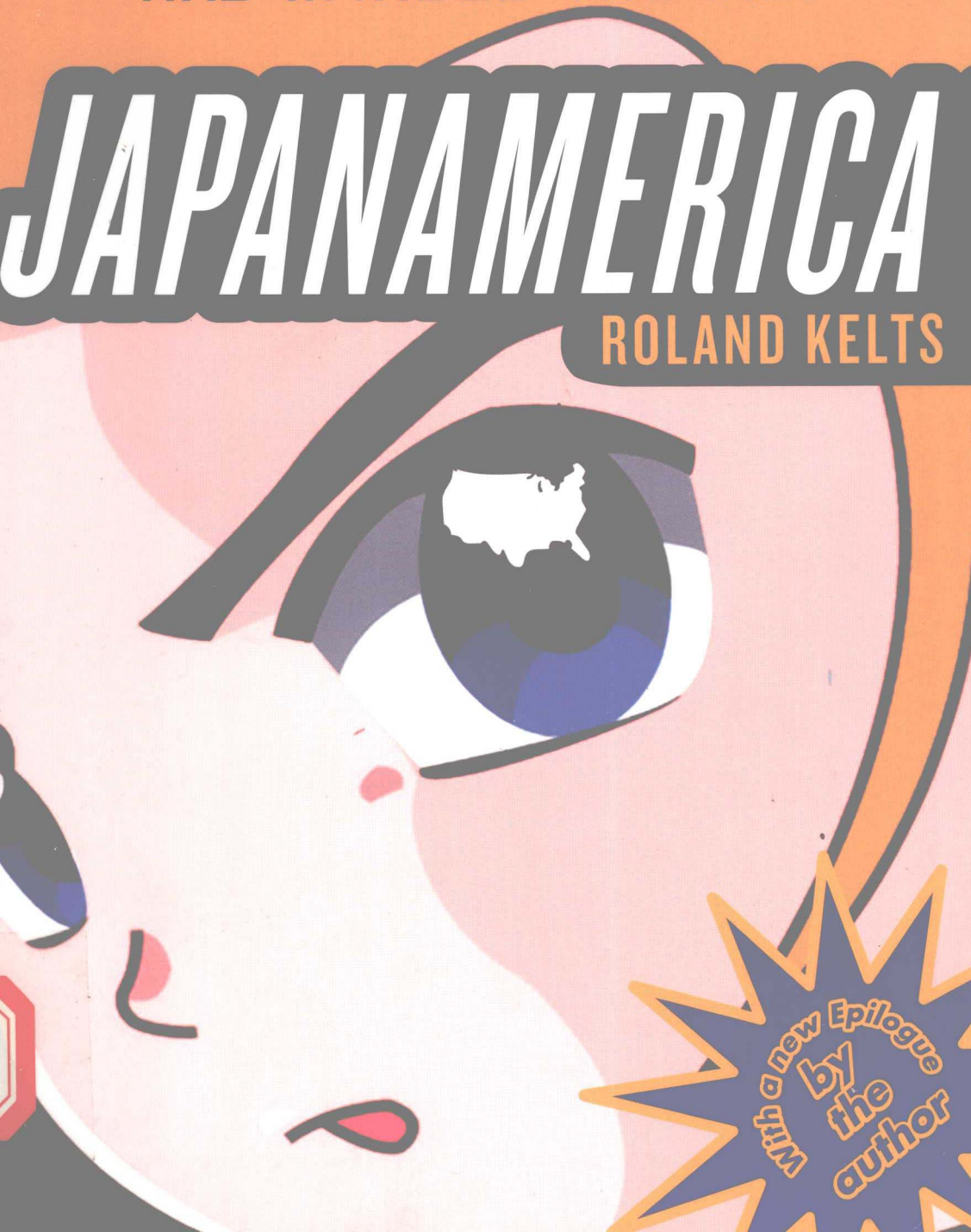
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— PETE TOWNSHEND

HOW JAPANESE POP CULTURE
HAS INVADED THE U.S.

JAPANAMERICA

ROLAND KELTS



With a new Epilogue
by
the
author

japanamerica

How Japanese Pop
Culture Has Invaded
the U.S.

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JAPANAMERICA

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*For my family on both sides of
the world*

The whole of Japan is a pure invention.
There is no such country, there are no such people.
—Oscar Wilde

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j a p a n a m e r i c a

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foreword

A few years ago I flew from New York to Los Angeles to visit some friends and conduct an interview for a story I was writing. I had recently flown from Tokyo to New York, and Japan was fresh on my mind.

At the time, my friends, a husband and wife with a four-year-old daughter, lived in Los Angeles' Echo Park neighborhood. The area was gentrifying fast: hipsters and artists were moving in, rents were rising, cafés were cropping up on corners and side streets. We walked with their daughter in nearby Elysian Park, where you can see both the Los Angeles skyline and Dodger Stadium.

Their house had a Japanese look and feel to it—smooth wood surfaces, subdued hues, straight lines; set back from the street on a hill, and obscured from view by a bank of shrubs and a bamboo grove. But the Japanese look and feel was purely coincidental. Urbane and highly educated professionals, my friends were planning to move into a new home shortly. Neither of them has a Japanese background, or any other reason to be focused on the culture. This house was a temporary landing pad.

One evening I sat in the living room with their daughter, watching the setting sun through the bamboo stalks beyond the window. Suddenly she began to cry. Her parents were rushing to prepare dinner in the kitchen and dining room behind us. I tried to console her myself, making silly faces and asking her about one of her dolls. I failed. Soon she was wailing, and I felt helpless.

Her mother swept gracefully into the room, calm as a mother, voice hushed and soothing. Some version of there, there, honey is what she said. Then: "Do you want to watch *Totoro*?"

I thought that I misheard her, but it was not the appropriate time to ask an intrusive question. When director Hayao Miyazaki's densely verdant countryside filled their widescreen TV, I knew that I had not.

Their daughter was entranced, leaning forward on the sofa, eyes wide as the tears dried on her cheeks, her mouth a slack oval. Miyazaki's plucky sisters and persevering, bushy-haired father came into view, and she uh-ohed and then giggled along with them, uttering some of the lines in unison with the animated figures on the screen.

"It's the only thing that settles her down when she's really upset," my friend explained, shrugging. "She absolutely loves *Totoro*. And we do, too."

I used to tell my American friends that America seemed surprisingly close to me whenever I stayed in Japan, even before high-speed Internet access went from being a luxury to being a necessity. The Japanese media is notably America-centered, partly because U.S. military bases still occupy enormous plots of an already crowded archipelago, and partly because America has a position as role model for the postwar generation. The Japanese who had survived the bombs and heard their Emperor declare defeat sought to rise from the ashes of World War II—and saw in their former conqueror possibilities for material and social wealth and well-being.

American fast-food restaurants and brand names are omnipresent in Japan's urban centers. With slightly less buzz and fanfare, a growing number of mainstream Hollywood movies open on or near their premieres in America, and CDs by American or English artists are sometimes even released earlier in Japan, where enormous Tower Records or HMV outlets prominently feature them, along with massive back catalogs.

In fact, until the deeper linguistic and cultural differences between the Japanese and other nationals become apparent, it is not uncommon to detect a tone of faint disappointment in the voices of first-time visitors, visitors who have landed expecting and hoping for something more exotic.

I used to say that Japan seemed very distant whenever I returned to the United States. American newscasts are generally focused on the fifty states, venturing overseas only for wars, natural disasters, or to dog the president with questions about foreign affairs. The occasional story about a foreign culture's quirky traditions might appear near the end of a newscast, but international stories of any stripe—and especially those about a land as far from U.S. shores as Japan—generally receive short shrift. The Nikkei rose or fell; a typhoon tore through Tokyo. That's about it.

But that has begun to change. And I began to notice the shift in the early years of this century. There is still an enormous imbalance of attention, of course. America dominates the global discourse for reasons good and bad, in positive and (increasingly) negative ways. But since that evening in L.A., I have started seeing a lot more copies of *My Neighbor Totoro* and other Miyazaki films in American friends' living rooms, and also seeing more Pokemon figures on the sides of buses, more *Akira* posters on college campuses, and more Japanese or Japanese-influenced titles of all types on American television. Though I am naturally more sensitive to them, references to Japan as having a cool or attractive culture are not likely to surprise anyone in twenty-first-century America.

The questions are: Why Japan? And why now?

Japanamerica is an attempt to explore the answers. It is not exclusively focused on Japanese *manga* (graphic print narratives) or anime—a word that is a Japanese truncation of the English word “animation” and is applied to all animated images in Japan, but only to Japanese animation in America—nor is it an attempt to analyze, explain, or serve as a guide for the two related media. There are now shelves of other books and print magazines that handle those tasks brilliantly and exhaustively, written by experts, academics, journalists, and aficionados from both countries, not to mention a fast-expanding range of Web sites, blogs, and Web publications created by devotees young and old.

Instead, I have set out to discover the reasons behind what many cultural historians are calling a third wave of Japanophilia—outsiders' infatuation with Japan's cultural character. The first wave occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when European artists discovered a uniquely Japanese aesthetic, and the second in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when beatnik writers and poets were drawn to Japan's ascetic spiritual traditions.

But what is unique about the current wave is the very modern, even futuristic, nature of the Japanese culture being sought. There are always some Americans interested in iconic totems of Japanese culture, like the *bushido* samurai tradition that emphasizes honor and discipline, *ikebana* flower arrangements, tea ceremonies, and Zen.

Now, however, it is the eccentricities, spastic zaniness, and libertarian fearlessness of Japan's creators of popular culture—and of the mind-bendingly acquisitive Japanese consumers of that culture—that are attracting the attention of Americans. These Americans may eventually develop a keenness for calligraphy or sumo, but anime and manga are at the cutting edge.

The story line of Sophia Coppola's 2003 film *Lost in Translation*, as well as the film's box office success, offers useful insights into the Japanamerica phenomenon. From the outset, the film is obsessed with contemporary Japan, from panning shots of Tokyo's animated and vivid neon signs to the electric energy of its flashing and bleeping arcade-riddled side streets; from the sleek, minimalist designs of Tokyo's modern hotels and sushi counters to the hum of its streaming crowds, escalators, and trains; from far-out fashions to funky parties and DJs; from strip clubs to karaoke.

When Charlotte, the female lead, takes the bullet train to Kyoto, the shots of traditional Japanese icons—temples and shrines, gardens with pools of carp, a Shinto wedding procession—feel almost obligatory, as if we are being reoriented with reminders of our more conventional images of Japan before we plunge back into the kinetic prism of modern Tokyo.

The film's popularity is partly the result of the performances of its actors and the skills of its creators, of course. But the story was not set in just any foreign city, or in just any Asian one. Professional reviews and casual responses uttered at dinner and cocktail parties prominently mentioned Tokyo, as well as Japan. As in Woody Allen's films and their renderings of New York, in *Lost in Translation* the city became one of the star attractions. And suddenly, everyone I knew wanted to visit.

The majority of the material in this book is the result of interviews conducted in the United States and in Japan from March 2003 to the spring of 2006, with some exceptions. I spoke to Nigo, Japan's hip-hop fashion guru, twice: once in 2002 and once in 2004. And I have interviewed Haruki Murakami, Japan's most internationally famous and critically acclaimed contemporary novelist, several times since 2000, most recently in 2005.

Most of the interviews were done through personal, one-on-one conversations; some were conducted by phone, and a few, most significantly with the American author Frederik Schodt, were by necessity done through email. When others' writings are paraphrased or quoted, they are cited directly in my text.

I cast a wide net. For me, Japan is not merely a hip Asian nation blipping on American radar screens. It is also my mother's homeland, home to several of my closest relatives and dearest friends, and the land that has taught me more about my own native land, America, than I could ever have imagined when I first moved to Japan as an adult. It is a personal, more than a professional, obligation for me to tell a true story in these pages.

The book tries to adhere to some sense of chronology, but writing about the dense web of interrelations between America and Japan is too complex for a "once upon a time" framework. Instead, I take an approach more akin to manga or anime: I view the story from many angles, many perspectives, to find the thread of awareness that has been sewn into a greater fabric.

A few examples: Many Americans find in anime a vision of the future, a fresh way of telling stories and interpreting the world. Many Japanese, even within the industries that produce the art, are stunned that Americans care about their products. (No one in America is surprised that foreigners like our popular or mass culture.) From the Japanese perspective, they have been making and consuming anime for decades: What's the big deal?

Also, Americans I spoke to tend to assume that most Japanese anime artists and their producers are becoming rich. Not so, at least not yet.

And finally: Japanese over forty still care deeply about what Americans think of them. But younger Japanese do not blink. They strut through their cities with a confidence that borders on punk, and Americans like me are decidedly off their radar screens.

Japanamerica attempts to tell you why this is happening. If you wonder why your kids are more taken by Totoro than mesmerized by Mickey, or if you think *The Matrix* and *Kill Bill* arrived out of nowhere, this book is for you. Thanks to the Internet, nonstop

flights, and restless new generations, Japan is a lot closer to America than ever before.

Last year, a friend in New York sent me a link to a Manhattan Internet dating portal. On it, an exasperated male's blurb was featured on the front page: "If you can't or won't eat sushi—don't even think about getting a date in NYC."

That is Japanamerica.

1

may the g-force be with you