Abstract: This article argues that the study of popular culture should move beyond purely representational and semiotic analysis, and acknowledge the ‘social’ elements that have accrued to popular culture in a world of much increased mobility. As such, the author argues that tourism and popular culture are increasingly overlapping and influencing each other, and that scholars need to acknowledge this and adjust their strategies of engagement accordingly. Such engagement should extend to how soft power drives tourism and culture, and how the overlaps between tourism and culture create channels of influence in both directions. Examples are provided from Japan that illustrate the fusing of tourism and popular culture, including Anime Pilgrimages in which domestic and international fans travel to real settings and locations of anime features and series, virtual pop concerts, and outdoor Projection Mapping light shows.

Keywords: mobility, globalizing society, the social, political unconscious, imagination

Introduction

The Political Unconsciousness of Popular Culture

Most people are immersed in the imaginary worlds of characters in movies and TV dramas, in pop music, and other forms of popular culture that surround us in our daily lives. Usually, we are not actively conscious of this immersion. Like the air that we breathe, popular culture is simply another element of the environment in which we live. However, cultural phenomena cannot be understood to exist independently from the society that engenders them.

Popular culture is influenced strongly by ‘the social’. The literary critic Fredric Jameson called this the ‘political unconscious’ in his book *The Political
Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (1981). According to Jameson, even those literary works that may appear on the surface to have no political content, are still never purely symbolic or detached completely from the social and political context. For him, the creation of literary narratives is always a ‘social’ and therefore ideological act. Jameson identifies the ‘political unconscious’ in literature in order to historicize it appropriately, within its structural context. I argue that in the case of all modern popular culture as well, it is important and eminently possible to illuminate the ‘political unconscious.’

Particularly in recent years, popular culture has become strongly linked with tourism, and accordingly, the ‘political unconscious’ has evolved and been shaped by the new material culture, capital, information, and mobility of a globalizing world (Appadurai 1996).

In this study I will first briefly mention the various approaches of research on popular culture that have been undertaken previously. Second, by examining some cases in Japan, I will demonstrate that the study of popular culture should move beyond these approaches, and that research focusing on the ‘social’ and the forms of ‘soft power’ inherent in popular culture has grown in importance and developed as a factor for consideration in tourism. Concurrently, tourism for its part also activates, changes, renovates and transforms popular culture.

I conclude that the interconnections between popular culture and tourism are a key factor in the complex processes of globalization, and as such, more research should be undertaken on the ‘political unconscious’ of popular culture.

The approaches of existing popular culture research

(1) Representation in Popular Culture

This approach focuses on the content of popular culture, asking what it is and what it means. For instance, analyzing popular culture from a semiotic standpoint is standard to this approach. In capturing the content of popular culture in semiotics, the terms “denotation” and “connotation” are highly effective (Endo 2011).
(2) On the Relationship between Representation and Society in Popular Culture

This approach tries to clarify the ties between society and representation in popular culture. The research undertaken in the discipline of Cultural Studies would be a typical example. The discipline of Cultural studies was initially established by researchers at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the UK. Particularly since Stuart Hall was appointed as Director, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies trained a significant number of important researchers such as Paul Gilroy, and raised the discipline to a new level.

The theory concerning representation of popular culture mentioned above also served to bring to light the relationships between social ideologies and popular culture. Cultural Studies however, while taking into account this theory, was compelled to take an additional step. Lurking in the background of popular culture, various discriminations and inequalities existed concerning ethnicity, race, class and gender (Endo 2011).

(3) On the Media of Popular Culture

This approach clarifies the characteristics of the various media that constitute popular culture. Marshall McLuhan (1964) coined the phrase, “the medium is the message”, in order to emphasize the role of the medium itself in communication, in addition to the content being mediated. Media theories pay special attention to the characteristics of media in analyzing popular culture (Endo 2011).

**Soft Power and Tourism in Popular Culture**

(1) Soft Power in Popular Culture

The research of popular culture can be extended to evaluate the ‘soft power’ at work behind all forms of popular culture. ‘Soft power’ is a concept proposed by the American political scientist Joseph Nye. Nye (2004) defined power as the ability to secure desired outcomes by changing the behavior of others. He recognized two forms of this ability: hard power and soft power. Hard power, to put it simply, is military or economic power. Soft power however, is not
based on either direct compulsion or reward, rather it is much more subtle and born of a less direct or unified agency. Nye says that a country’s soft power derives from three sources: its values, its foreign policy, and its culture.¹

The term culture referred to here does not distinguish between ‘high’ or ‘low’, and includes film, television, art, music and fashion, as well as academic culture and education, advertising, material culture, cuisine, and any other category that reflects a society’s values. When the values and culture of one country are spread to another, this increases and is by virtue of the soft power of that country.

Japanese anime is a very fine example of this. The planning, production, and distribution of Japanese anime such as Pokémon, Sailor Moon, Naruto, and Rurouni Kenshin has resulted in them becoming widely known in Western, Middle Eastern, and other Asian countries. The genre’s popularity can be observed at events such as the Anime Expo, held every year in the United States since 1992, and at the BD Expo in France.² The result is that those who have an interest in or are attracted to Japan are increasing in numbers as a result of Japanese animation – an element of its soft power. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has focused on the soft power potential created by Japanese anime, and has begun to deploy various strategies in its utilization.

(2) Popular Culture Induced Tourism

Popular culture is often used to attract tourists, and dedicated attempts to create and adapt it to tourism have been numerous. In this regard, a pertinent example can be found in the ‘anime pilgrimages’ of Japan. The anime pilgrimages involve locations that have acted as a stage for anime that fans can identify and visit. One reason for the spread of this fad was the anime Lucky☆Star. This anime chose as its stage a place called Washinomiya in Saitama Prefecture, and two of the main characters are in fact the daughters of the area’s Shinto priest. Many people who watched the anime made pilgrimages to Washinomiya, and also visited the Shinto shrine that featured in the show (Yamamura 2009).

Since then anime pilgrimages (sometimes called ‘otaku pilgrimages’) have grown in popularity, and currently are a common phenomenon that can be observed throughout Japan. The anime K-On! is about the daily lives of a group of schoolgirls who form a pop group. It is set in Shiga Prefecture and
Kyoto Prefecture, which are now popular sites of pilgrimage for the show’s fans. Other examples include *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* set in Nishinomiya City, Hyogo Prefecture, and *Girls und Panzer*, set in the town of Ōarai in Ibaraki Prefecture. Additionally, the settings of the anime *Slam Dunk* in Kamakura, about high school students and basketball, have become popular not only domestically but also abroad, with many tourists visiting from China and Taiwan.

Movies, TV dramas and comics have become important in generating tourism (Endo 2009). The TV drama *Hana Yori Dango*, or *Boys Over Flowers*, in which a member of the pop group Arashi starred, features a celebrated scene in which the male lead asks the female lead out on a date. The location of the date itself was Yebisu Garden Place in Tokyo, which has now become a very popular site of pilgrimage for the show’s fans. The site itself is otherwise unremarkable, and would be of no interest to tourists or anyone else unfamiliar with *Boys Over Flowers*.3

![Figure 1. Yebisu Garden Place - location used in Boys Over Flowers.](source: the author.)

The case for Manga anime is similar. The popular *From Me to You (Kimi ni Todoke)* is set in Sapporo, Hokkaido, and features a similar key scene set in the Sapporo Starlight Dome planetarium in Teine-ku. The planetarium is now an established site of pilgrimage for fans of the show. Inside the planetarium
there are blankets provided for visitors because of the cold weather, which were also used as props by the characters in the show. The trend for pilgrims, or tourists, is to pose with these blankets with reference to their use in the show, and have their photographs taken. There are many other material items similar to these blankets at other sites. Through the soft power of popular culture, the tourist gaze moves toward and converges on these objects and attractions (Urry and Larsen 2011). This kind of tourism is now conventional, and has spread to many different areas (MacCannell 1999).4

Figure 2. Sapporo Starlight Dome planetarium. Source: the author.

The Touristic Turn of Popular Culture Research

(1) The Touristic Character of Popular Culture

The sorts of tourism discussed above are not merely the one-way consequence of popular culture fads. In fact, tourism itself can also act as a factor that determines transformation in popular culture, and even activates new forms of it. An example of this can be found in the attendance of Hatsune Miku concerts in Japan. Hatsune Miku is a female ‘Vocaloid’ pop idol: an anime character that sings a variety of songs with a digitally synthesized voice. She is entirely fictional, and her ‘presence’ at concerts is fabricated with video projections and other digital technology. Despite her virtual nature, Hatsune
Miku is very popular and sells many concert tickets. Her fans cheer and shout during her concerts as though she were a real pop star.

In asking what lies at the heart of this phenomenon we might subject the content of Hatsune Miku’s music to any number of semiotic analyses, that take into consideration the social and ideological structures within which it might be located, and the unusual nature of the media involved. I argue however, that an approach such as this one, based purely on the theory of Cultural Studies, is insufficient. This is because it does not explain why fans make the effort to attend a concert venue to see a fictional pop star. Given that she is purely fictional, what does the concert provide that a home computer and television cannot? The fans attend the concert to experience the sense of unity and ‘coming together’ that occurs in a large, celebratory social gathering like a pop concert. The point of attending the concert is that the act of travelling, and the dancing and cheering they engage in once there allows them to attain a form of social communication and release that they could not achieve at home with a computer.

In interpreting Hatsune Miku purely as a popular culture phenomenon, we are failing to acknowledge and engage with this social aspect. Travelling to an attraction, as a form of social communication through shared experience, is most certainly touristic behaviour. In examining the Hatsune Miku phenomenon, I argue that its touristic elements should not be overlooked.

Similar observations can be made with ‘Comiket’ (meaning “comic market”). Comiket started in 1975 as an event where Manga doujinshi (comic fanzines) were sold. Normally it is held twice a year, in summer and winter, at the Tokyo International Exhibition Center (Tokyo Big Sight). In its early years, attendance was around 700 people, but now it has grown into a much larger and more established event that draws over 500,000 people (Shimotsuki 2008, p.3-10). While it is true that the current Comiket would not exist without the presence of popular culture such as Manga and anime, this is also an example of ‘recreation associated with touristic mobility’. The event and its attendees are exercising subtle influences on anime and Manga as forms of popular culture.

I offer a final example of this form of social communication in the ‘flash mob’. This is a phenomenon in which a large group of people connect through the
Internet and other electronic media, and arrange a time and location in order to undertake a sort of collective dance performance. Initially, from June to September of 2003, New York-based magazine editor Bill Wasik organized a series of performances that unfolded in various places throughout New York under the name “The Mob Project” (Ito 2011, p.12). Currently in Japan, flash mobs performing dances to Michael Jackson’s “Beat It” and the music of Les Misérables are now a familiar cultural phenomenon. The touristic elements in this phenomenon are again clear. Fusing two kinds of Imagination

Due to the overlaps discussed above, I argue here that we should recognize and further explore the extent to which the ‘cultural imagination’ and the ‘touristic imagination’ have fused together, and how this is affecting modern tourism and popular culture all over the world.

I will offer some final examples in public artworks. Since the 1970s, art has not only moved ‘outside of the frame’, but even ‘outside of the gallery’, as in what is referred to as ‘performance event art’. The techniques of projection mapping allow buildings, stations, schools, as well as cars and much else, to be used like cinema screens. Music and sound can also be applied to achieve various effects that work with the projection and lighting to create a complex, multidimensional artwork. In September 2012, an event that employed these projection mapping techniques was staged at Tokyo Station. Called “Tokyo Station Vision”, it was staged to commemorate the completion of restoration work on the Marunouchi side of Tokyo Station. Many more people than expected attended this event, some travelling long distances specially to see it. In this instance, the art was realized in a touristic fashion.

In March 2014, the Sanmon Gate of the Chionin Temple was also used as a screen for projection mapping. On this occasion, it was intended as a tourist event from the start, as a part of the Kyoto Higashiyama Hana Touro Lantern Festival. The festival is an event unambiguously designed to attract tourists to the city of Kyoto. Locations at Kiyomizudera Temple, Maruyama Park, Yasakajinja Shrine, as well as Shorenin Temple in the neighborhood of Kyoto Higashiyama, were lit up with LED lights that mimicked lanterns, creating a haunting and spectacular atmosphere in the historical city. This and other events were specifically organized to attract tourists during Kyoto’s winter season, which is relatively quieter due to the weather. In this way, the art of projection mapping overlaps with elements of organized tourism.
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Figure 3. The Kyoto Higashiyama Hana Touro Lantern Festival. Source: the author.

Figure 4. A screen for projection mapping in the Sanmon Gate of the Chionin Temple. Source: the author.
These events are born of, and play to, the growing overlaps in the cultural and touristic imagination. In these instances we can say that popular culture and tourism have fused together, and the division between the cultural imagination and the touristic imagination is submerged.

**Conclusion**

Popular culture does not induce tourism one-sidedly; tourism can also activate, renovate and transform popular culture. As these processes continue, what are called the touristic imagination and the cultural imagination will also continue to bleed into each other.

People, goods, capital, and knowledge in modern society are constantly in motion. All over the globe, many careers involve flying to various locations as routine, and many people immigrate, leaving behind the countries in which they were born. Many students travel abroad to study in foreign countries, and athletes, such as Japan’s soccer players and baseball players, move to America, Italy, Germany and other countries to play. According to a report by the International Organization for Migration in 2010, in 2009, the total was 214 million people globally. By 2050, it has been estimated that this number will reach 405 million people. Based on this phenomenon, Urry (2000) formulated the concept of “the social as mobility” to argue that in modern society the movement of people, or ‘mobility,’ has begun to play an important defining role in ‘the social’.

Popular culture and tourism have become connected to each other through the dynamism of mobility. Using Appadurai’s terms (1996), this can be conceptualized as interactions between ‘mediascapes’ and ‘ethnoscapes’. He gives three other dimensions of the ‘appearances’ of global society: ‘technoscapes’, ‘financescapes’, and ‘ideoscapes’. The ethnoscape is the current composition of global society that results from the migration of people, such as tourists, foreign workers, immigrants, and refugees. The technoscape indicates the spread of all forms of new technology across national borders. The financescape refers to the constant flux of global capital, and the mediascape naturally indicates information and culture, and their means of mediation around the world. Finally, the ideoscape indicates ideologies and values and their transference through cultures, populations and places.
According to Appadurai, these five dimensions each have independent movement but are disjunctive, multilayered and interrelated. The popular culture that forms a layer of the mediascape, and the behaviour of tourism which is a key factor in the ethnoscape, are interconnected as though they formed a Möbius strip. It is precisely because of this, that in order to clarify the ‘political unconscious’ of popular culture, and the social qualities of the cultural imagination, we must now take into account the factor of tourism and its interaction with popular culture.

Notes

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1. Nye underlines that Popular culture is only a resource for soft power, and is not soft power itself.

2. BD is an abbreviation of “bande dessinée,” which means comic strip (especially French-language comic strips).


4. To use the terms of MacCannell (1999, Chapter 6), sights are given symbolic power (markers) through the media, that the tourist gaze draws upon when it first encounters its target (an attraction). In that sense, tourism is a product of symbolism.

5. The so-called ‘offline meeting’ is another manifestation of this. Additionally, some events have featured people singing the theme song from the Disney movie Frozen, “Let It Go,” which also results in this form of social communication where people physically travel to a location.

6. Kurose (2013, pp.148-151) emphasizes that rather then merely celebrate this fusion, it is important to discern its consequences. Suzuki (2013, pp.183-194) also expresses similar concerns.

References


