SUPERFLATLANDS: THE GLOBAL CULTURES OF TAKASHI MURAKAMI AND SUPERFLAT ART

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The interactions and exchanges in contemporary processes of globalisation challenge the conventional binary positioning of the cultures of 'East' and 'West'. Contemporary Japanese artist Takashi Murakami and his theory of Superflat art provide a useful case study of the strategies artists can employ to actively negotiate cultural and artistic identities 'in between' this binary. These strategies, both challenging *and* reinforcing the East/West binary, are performed in international art markets, which are dominated by Western interests and yet are also open to the restructuring forces of globalisation.

Takashi Murakami developed his theory of Superflat art in order to negotiate the cultural and capitalist dynamics that structure global encounters. Revealing the complex and fluid dynamics between culture, capital and art in contemporary globalisation, Murakami's strategy involves using the market profile generated from the sales and exhibitions of his paintings and sculptures in the United States and Europe to create a context for Superflat art in Japan. Ultimately the paper examines the tensions between the presentation of Superflat as a specifically Japanese expression and the deterritorialising impulses generated by its global circulation.

The world of the future might be like Japan is today — Superflat. Society, customs, art, culture: all are extremely two-dimensional. It is particularly apparent in the arts that this sensibility has been flowing steadily beneath the surface of Japanese history … [Superflat] is an original concept that links the past with the present and the future. (Murakami, 2000: 9)

Superflat art

Superflat is a concept and theory of art created by the contemporary Japanese artist Takashi Murakami. The *Superflat* (2000) exhibition in Tokyo marked the launch of this new aesthetic which took contemporary Japanese art and identity into a globalised milieu of critical thought. The exhibition, which was curated by Murakami and subsequently travelled to the United States, featured the work of a range of established and emerging artists drawn from art and commercial genres in Japan.[1] As an essential part of Murakami's political strategy Superflat was always designed to travel globally. An elaborate, bilingual catalogue *Super Flat* (Murakami, 2000), which included Murakami's manifesto, *A Theory of Super Flat Japanese Art*, accompanied the exhibition. In this manifesto Murakami affirmed that the Superflat exhibitions were created to provide a cultural-historical context for the new form of art that he was proposing, and which was specifically exported for Western audiences.[2] Superflat art, as a cultural text, is intricately enmeshed in the tensions between the location and representation of local/global cultural identities. These identities, while proffering resistance through the

assertion of difference, are also formed as part of the processes of globalisation rather than in strict opposition to it (Robertson, 1995). In producing Superflat for Western art markets and Japanese art worlds, Murakami addresses existing discursive knowledges of Japanese art, history and popular culture, while simultaneously presenting a new variant of those identities. In this way, Superflat is part of the politics of commodification and expression of cultural difference generated in global consumption.

Murakami's Superflat concept identifies a new aesthetic emerging from the creative expressions produced in Japanese contemporary art, *anime* (Japanese animation), *manga* (graphic novels), video games, fashion and graphic design. Superflat is presented as a challenge to the institutions and practices of *bijutsu* (fine art), which Murakami argues are an incomplete import of Western concepts. Murakami is specifically referring to the modern institutions of *kindai bijutsu* (modern art) that were adopted during the Meiji period (1868–1912) as part of Japan's process of modernisation and Westernisation. To Murakami, the innovation and originality of post-1945 forms of commercial culture represent a continuation of the innovations of the Edo (1600–1867) visual culture. Murakami problematically argues that Edo culture represents a more 'original' cultural tradition, because it was a time of restricted foreign contact.[3] At the same time, Murakami self-consciously uses Western art markets and the popular appeal of Japanese consumer culture to propose the Superflat alternative. That is, Murakami utilises the Western popular imaginings of Japanese culture as a hyperconsumeristic, postmodern playhouse (Morley & Robins, 1995: 147–173) in constructing Superflat.[4]

This paper investigates the Superflat concept and analyses Murakami's art works to expose the tensions and dialogues regarding cultural identity and commodification that are produced by their global circulation. The first section maps Murakami's strategy in constructing Superflat and contextualises this in relation to discourses of Japanese national-cultural identity. The second section applies this theorisation by analysing the visual codes of Murakami's figure sculpture *My Lonesome Cowboy* (1998, oil paint, synthetic resins, fibreglass and iron, 245 x 116.8 x 91 cm <http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/drohojowska-philp/drohojowska-philp1-18-1.asp>). This figure sculpture is part of a series in which Murakami combined the aesthetic codes and markers of *otaku* culture, particularly the prominence of *anime* and *manga* characters, with various art historical references. This piece demonstrates the multifarious local/global codes and cultures that Superflat art engages.

Superflat and global flows

As the interaction between social groups has become increasingly globalised, the meaning-making and expressivities associated with 'art' have also become progressively more engaged through national and transnational gradients (Papastergiadis & Artspace, 2003). In particular, the meanings of art are constituted around the processes of globalisation, identity formation and the transformation-hybridisation of semiotic or meaning-making forms.[5] Thus, the work of artists like Murakami, in many respects, articulates and represents many of the debates and issues that have accompanied this broadening gradient through the global exchange of art, as both expressive ideas and commodities. In particular, the formation of identity and expressive modes in a national genealogy becomes problematic within a globalising cultural sphere.

Globalisation creates spaces in which mobile elements interact with both positive and negative effects. Three key issues emerge in contemporary theorisations of globalisation that are relevant to this discussion: firstly, the problem of how to retain the concept of local/national cultural particularity *and* to concurrently recognise the convergences and overlaps between cultures in a global context (Robertson, 1995); secondly, how to recognise the value in cultural difference as a tool of critical (oppositional) agency (Fisher, 2003) and acknowledge that difference can also become a commodity in the global market place (Hall, 1991), which can potentially be co-opted into dominant discourses and practices; and thirdly, to acknowledge the dominance of Western cultural, political and economic imperatives in globalisation (Hardt & Negri, 2000), but also to recognise that it cannot be reduced to this condition (Held et al., 1999). Consequently, concerns and celebrations are generated by the increasing fragmentation of national and cultural identities (Morley & Robins, 1995). In response to this process of deterritorialising identity, impulses arise to reclaim local and national identities in a form of resistance (Hall, 1995). This resistance is complicated because it is formed in relation to the transnational imaginings of the Self and the Other, stimulated by the constant circulation of people and mediated images through globalisation (Appadurai, 1996). These are unresolvable struggles and they demonstrate how globalisation contributes to rather than eliminates incommensurability (Ang, 2003). Thus, while cultural identities can become territorialised and demarcated, for instance as 'Japanese', they are also challenged by the processes of deterritorialisation activated through interaction and exchange. The meaning of 'Japanese' is therefore open to re-articulation by both global and local forces allowing new strategic identities to emerge. These processes are evident in Murakami's "soy sauce strategy".

Soy sauce strategy

Murakami demarcates the identity of Superflat as Japanese by proposing it as an affirmation of a Pop Art aesthetic that is "born from Japan" and distinct from Western art: a type of post-Pop (Murakami, 2005: 152–153). Murakami asserts Superflat as an example of the current influence of Japanese culture globally and as a model for a future aesthetic, thereby identifying the 'Otherness' of Superflat in a positive way. Even though Murakami acknowledges that this sensibility emerges from the transformations arising from the influences of Western culture, he simultaneously reaffirms the originality of Superflat as a Japanese sensibility.[6] This is what he refers to as his "soy sauce" strategy.

> Japanese contemporary art has a long history of trying to hide the soy sauce. Perhaps they will strengthen the flavor to please the foreign palette, or perhaps they'll simply throw the soy sauce out the window and unconditionally embrace the tastes of French or Italian cuisine, becoming the Westerners whose model of contemporary art they follow ... I see the need to create a universal taste – a common tongue – without cheating myself and my Japanese core ... I continue to blend seasonings ... I may have mixed in the universal forms and presentations of French, Italian, Chinese, or other ethnic cuisines – and I am vigilant in my search for their best points – but the central axis of my creation is stable ... at its core, my standard of 'beauty' is one cultivated by the Japan that has been my home since my birth in 1962. (Kaikaikiki Co. Ltd & Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, 2001: 130)

This essential Japanese identity of Superflat is reinforced by the ways in which Murakami connects (visually and ideologically) the *kawaii* (cute) forms of *anime* and *manga* with the playful aesthetic of Edo period artists and the two-dimensional formal properties of Japanese screen painting.[7] This foundation is then used to propose Superflat as an alternate lineage of Japanese visual culture, one that breaks away from the canon of *kindai bijutsu* and Western art history.

Edo functions in Superflat as the determinant of its cultural authenticity – that is, as the DNA of Superflat (Murakami, 2000: 25). As stated earlier, Edo is presented as the site of Japan's cultural tradition and subsequently as a symbol of its Japaneseness. This is a convention from modern Japanese discourses in which Edo becomes the repository of nostalgic yearnings for a pre-modern, traditional Japan (Ivy, 1995). In the late 1980s and early 1990s this was extended to become part of the debates on Japan's (post)modernity; postmodern cultural expressions in Japan were considered to be a revival of Edo concepts and practices and thus particularly 'indigenous' to Japan (Karatani, 1997).[8] However, as Gluck (1998) points out, the definition of authentic and traditional Japanese expression in relation to a fixed point of origin in Edo culture has been heavily challenged. Therefore, **Murakami's use of Edo to mark the culturally** authentic transmission of the Superflat aesthetic should be treated with caution.

At the same time, Murakami has emphasised that he is not presenting Superflat as the definitive interpretation of Japanese art nor does he claim a unified identity for Japan:

> Unfortunately, I can never give 'Japan' a fixed shape. I cannot meet my real 'self'. Nor can I discern what 'art' really is ... I thought I could solve the problem by lining up a series of images in a powerful procession that words could not clarify. (Murakami, 2000: 9)

Even this position can be critiqued. Murakami self-consciously demonstrates his awareness of the historical interaction between Japan and the West and stresses the hybrid history of Superflat. However, he also tends to celebrate Japan's skill in assimilating and domesticating foreign influences, echoing other discourses on Japan's hybridity as a national-cultural trait (Tobin, 1992), which paradoxically reconstructs Japan's hybridity as an essential identity.

Murakami's intention to create an epistemological context for Superflat is explicitly part of his aim to sell work in international art markets:

1   First, gain recognition on site (New York). Furthermore, adjust the flavoring to meet the needs of the venue.
2   With this recognition as my parachute, I will make my landing back in Japan. Slightly adjust the flavorings until they are Japanese. Or perhaps entirely modify the works to meet Japanese tastes.
3   Back overseas, into the fray. This time, I will make a presentation that doesn't shy away from my true soy sauce nature, but is understandable to my audience. (Kaikaikiki Co. Ltd & Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, 2001:131)[9]

The impulse in Superflat towards the affirmation of a national-cultural aesthetic can be considered as a form of self-Orientalism: an identity formation that is constructed in

relation to the Western Oriental gaze (Said, 1995). While self-Orientalism has been considered (although not specifically in relation to Superflat) as an empowered strategy, because it appropriates the West's gaze of Japan and re-packages it for the same audience (Mitchell, 2000), others have considered it collusive to Orientalism and a continuation of the Japan/West binary construction (Iwabuchi, 1994).

This self-Oriental identity is complicated by a number of factors. First, Superflat does echo conventional discursive constructions of a Japan/West binary, which obscures the connections and power relations in this structure. In particular, Superflat can also be interpreted as being part of the discourses on Japanese identity, particularly the emergence of *nihonjinron* and postmodernism post-1970s in relation to Japan's economic and technological influences (Befu, 2001). There was a tendency in both these strains of discourse to emphasise Japan's national identity as unique and different from the West and the East. Secondly, while Murakami acknowledges the Western influences on the Superflat aesthetic, his simultaneous transposing of this hybrid identity into a reinforcement of a Japanese identity, characterised by cultural assimilation and hybridisation, reinforces a unified national-cultural identity. This identity is supported by the references between Superflat and already existing discursive constructions of Japanese culture as post-modern and the interpretation of the two-dimensional properties of Japanese art, which will be discussed later in the paper. Thirdly, Superflat is also part of ongoing trade relations and cross-fertilisations of visual culture forms between Japan and the West particularly since the late nineteenth century. These include the adoption of *bijutsu* in the Meiji period, the popular consumption of Japanese visual culture in the West (in late nineteenth century *Japonisme* and since the 1990s with the consumption of *anime* and *manga*), and the post-1945 influx of commercial culture from the United States and its subsequent impact on the development of the *anime* and *manga* industries (Kinsella, 2000).[10]

In some ways, the self-Orientalism of Superflat can be interpreted as a post-colonial defensive reaction. Superflat is presented by Murakami as a localised expression of cultural uniqueness resisting the global hegemony of Western art and transcending the imported colonialist history of *bijutsu* by presenting "icons of excessive otherness" (Matsui, 2001: 48).[11] This resistance, in turn, strategically uses identity as a commodity in Western art markets. By explicitly emphasising the differences of Superflat, and Superflat as Japanese, Murakami becomes open to criticism that he is merely providing a futuristic Orientalist spectacle for Western audiences (Shimada, 2002: 188–189). Furthermore, the ever-present danger with this position is that the centrality of the United States and Europe is re-asserted rather than challenged. Murakami explicitly reinforces this centrality through his statements regarding the importance of his profile in New York, London and Paris (Kelmachter, 2002: 76).

Murakami's strategy of merging artistic expression and the commercial imperatives of Orientalism also echoes the export art of the late nineteenth century in which new works were created for foreign markets, according to the dictates of those markets (Conant, 1991: 82–84). Export objects were deliberately constructed to appeal to the taste for *Japonisme* that was fashionable in Europe and the United States at the time. Murakami's affirmation of Superflat as a Japanese-made model for the future also reiterates the recent rhetoric on Japan's global cultural power in relation to the export of *anime* and *manga* (McGray, 2002). These discourses emphasise the symbolic (and subsequent economic) capital of the Japaneseness

of *anime* and *manga* texts and they deliberately emphasise the commodity potentials of self-Orientalism. Murakami draws attention to these politics in the Superflat exhibition *Coloriage* (Colouring) at the Foundation Cartier by referring to it as "post-Japonisme" (Kelmachter, 2002: 103–104), thereby both connecting with the past market in Japanese art and suggesting a new contemporary context for the consumption of Superflat art.

However, to reduce Superflat to a collusive Orientalism, or to see it as *just* a commodification of identity in a pejorative sense, misinterprets the dynamics in play. Murakami is both proffering resistance as well as marketing his work strategically. Firstly, Murakami articulates his identity through the exhibition structures of the West as well as through conventional signifiers of Japanese aesthetics in order to establish his profile and to sell his work. Yet he also acknowledges the ambivalences of his own position and the playfulness of this global soy sauce flavouring:

> In the worldview that holds delicate flavouring as the only concept of 'beauty' with any value, heavy flavouring is taboo, and too much stimulation is definitely problematic ... In order to create something that is understandable both to the West and Japan, what is needed is an ambivalent flavor and presentation ... . (Kaikaikiki Co. Ltd & Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, 2001: 131)

Furthermore, dominant scholarly arguments on the popular consumption of *anime* and *manga* outside Japan hold that these forms express plural cultural identities and, as Allison (2000) shows, are detached from specific representations of space and place. This suggests that the consumption of Superflat, like that of *anime* and *manga*, is not simply based on a desire for reflected images of Japaneseness as a cultural Other; rather, it offers audiences a flexibility of alternate identities, free from specific geo-cultural connections.

It can also be argued that a critical factor in the reception of Murakami's works in the United States and Europe has been the familiarity of the Superflat aesthetic to *anime* and *manga* as part of a common rather than Orientalised visual vocabulary. Superflat echoes the paradox of affirming the non-nationality of texts, while also presenting them as expressions of national-cultural identity. However, there is another way to explain this contradiction of Superflat between the affirmation of non-national and specific cultural identities.

The critical theorist Yoda Tomiko (2000) presents contemporary *anime* forms as a useful example of a coterminous fluidity between local codes that are interchangeable and coexistent with non-local elements. Elements in the text can be swapped around and adapted for different audiences, and these elements are simultaneously collated with non-specific elements drawn from a wide variety of sources; therefore, the overall form remains transportable as well as expressing cultural proximity. While this process of adaptation is not new, what Yoda indicates is that it is increasingly becoming a normative process within the logic of postmodern consumer society. The local identity expressed in Superflat utilises the connections with Edo and *anime* and *manga* culture to articulate its cultural specificity and yet it also expresses a postmodern fluidity and self-reflexivity that enables it to be globally circulated. The following section demonstrates the flexible signifiers and codes operating in Murakami's figure sculpture *My Lonesome Cowboy*.

Superflat spaces of identity

My Lonesome Cowboy acts in the multiple spaces in and between Japan and the West, referencing their intertwined relations. *My Lonesome Cowboy* can be linked to a number of familiar aesthetic forms from both Western and Japanese art history, thus it is a field of knowledge operating both within and between the social, cultural and aesthetic conditions of East and West.

My Lonesome Cowboy is characterised by a large lasso of ejaculate reminiscent of Jackson Pollock's splash paintings in the late 1940s. The confident masturbatory pose of the figure can be interpreted as a parodic and sexualised reference to the phallo-centric ideology of Western Modernism, in which the autonomy and expressive subjectivity (as well as the masculinity) of artists such as Pollock was celebrated. The title itself, *My Lonesome Cowboy*, also references the heroism and romanticism of the iconic image of the cowboy, which was celebrated in relation to the New York Abstract Expressionist painters, and was parodied in the homo-erotica of Andy Warhol's film *Lonesome Cowboys* (1969).

The stream of ejaculation fluid is both an exaggerated and grotesque parody of *otaku* (hard-core *anime* and *manga* fans) imaginings and masturbatory activities and a parody of the 'unique' stroke of the brush of the artist. The overt and ironic decorativeness of the fibreglass splash subverts the modernist ideology of the unique mark of the artist's hand as an expression of interior subjectivity in a manner that is reminiscent of Roy Lichtenstein's series of screen-prints, *Brushstrokes,* created in the mid to late 1960s.

These references are then combined with recognisable Japanese aesthetic markers. For example, the *Dragon Ball Z* character Goku is the model for the head of the cowboy; the splash of ejaculate is also reminiscent of the static dynamism of Hokusai's *ukiyo-e* print *View of Mount Fuji through High Waves off Kanagawa* (ca. 1829–1833). The standing pose of the figure with the power and energy concentrated in the hips thrust forward, accentuated by the expulsion of liquid from the penis, is something that has also been specifically linked to the style of character pose developed in *anime* (Kaikaikiki Co. Ltd & Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, 2001: 96). This is contrasted to the Western comic hero pose in which the concentration of power and muscular strength is emphasised in the pectoral muscles (96).

The sense of dynamism between stasis and movement in *My Lonesome Cowboy* can also be linked to various forms of compositional structures in Japanese screen-paintings and *anime*.[12] One of the key features of early Japanese television animation is an aesthetic based on the frozen pose, in which a figure can leap in the air and freeze the pose, unfixed from gravity. Part of the rationality behind the frozen moment in animation was a response to budget constraints and efficient production processes; by freezing the frame and allowing the dialogue to continue fewer frames of animated movement were needed for the narrative (Lamarre, 2002: 335). As a stylistic tendency, the technique of freezing the action in animation relies on selecting the most dramatic or aesthetic moment to freeze, creating a dramatic pause before the action (2002: 335–336).

This visual aesthetic of the dynamic frozen moment is also evident in other forms of Japanese culture, such as the *mie* pose in *kabuki* theatre, in which the most characteristically expressive pose is frozen. The condensation of action and character in this pose becomes a "thing" in itself

(Yi, 1991: 54). In a similar way, Hokusai's *Wave* emphasises a visual aesthetic that collapses the whole movement into a single instant, much like stop-action effects in photography (1991: 54). When it is applied to the human action in *kabuki* this reduction is referred to as *kamae*, "the assuming of an attitude" (1991: 55):

> 'attitude' is meant here in both its physical and psychological senses ... an attitude presents all action, be it movement that is about to occur or movement that has already happened, in reduced form. It is that single moment of action that contains both the beginning and end of action. It is completely different from the Western concepts of style and form, which treat all action as a discrete unit. An attitude is not static. We can simply say that Hokusai's wave print shows 'the attitude of waves' because it is stillness in motion. (Yi, 1991: 55)

What is evident is that Murakami simultaneously articulates Japanese and Western aesthetic markers in *My Lonesome Cowboy*. While these references can be individually demarcated and identified, there is also an interchangeable flexibility that is addressed. More specifically, what this means is that the splash of semen can simultaneously reference Pollock, Lichtenstein, Hokusai and Kanada. Thus, it becomes a fluid and slippery signifier. It can therefore be argued that one of the reasons for the prominence and popularity of Superflat and Murakami globally is this intertextuality. Furthermore, the art historical and popular cultural references would be considered relatively conventional markers for audiences conversant with these texts. Many of the Japanese works in the Superflat catalogue are held in Western collections, including Hokusai's *Great Wave.* Murakami's works are therefore characterised by a particular inter-determinacy, which enables him to manipulate the Japanese identity of the works while also utilising the familiarity of the visual references for Western audiences.

This strategy is further complicated by the overlapping historical aesthetic relationship between Japan and the West. First, the concept of Superflatness, as an aesthetic of **two**-dimensionality, reinforces the Western image of Japan as a culture of surface. The development of the flat unmodulated surface, which has been interpreted by Clement Greenberg as the underpinning aesthetic realisation of Western modern painting, was influenced by Japanese art, particularly *ukiyo-e* prints, in the nineteenth century (Evett, 1982: ix–x). In particular, an aesthetic of two-dimensionality was identified as a distinctive feature of Japanese art in late nineteenth century Europe (1982: 30).[13] In contrast to the Western discursive construct of Japanese art as *inherently* two-dimensional, Western practices of linear perspective by this time had already influenced Japanese art.[14] Secondly, contemporary *anime* and *manga* forms, which influence the aesthetic of Superflat, are influenced by Western comic traditions and previous graphic traditions in Japan (see Note 6) Additionally, because *anime* and *manga* are increasingly familiar to consumers outside of Japan, particularly since their export in the 1990s, they have become part of the database of visual aesthetics of artists and fans outside of Japan (Craig, 2000: 7). The complex visual cultural relationships between Japan, United States and European art are more politically intertwined than these explicit and obvious references imply because they are influenced by ideologies and constructions of national identity.

The image of Japan as a culture of surface continued into the twentieth century and was translated from the mid-1980s into the confirmation of Japan's postmodernity: Japan as a culture of surface was now celebrated (Barthes, 1982; Field, 1997) and it was constructed (arguably) as the epitome of post-modernity (Miyoshi and Harootunian).[15] This was contrasted to Western modernist discourse of the surface as a manifestation of interior subjectivity. Postmodernism presented a challenge to this concept of originality and interior/exterior distinctions through theories of simulacrum, pastiche and the collapsing of surface/depth models as developed by Baudrillard (1983), Jameson (1991), and Virilio (1991). Even the discourses that emphasised Japan's creative skill in domesticating foreign imports (Tobin, 1992) as a contrast to the earlier pejorative concept of mimicry reinforced the image of Japan as an appropriator of different styles or surfaces.

While the distinction between surface and depth is not absent in Japan, the duality between surface and depth in Western modern epistemology (and even in subsequent discourses that challenge it) is not necessarily expressed using those dichotomous terms in Japanese culture; rather, the surface is considered to be meaningful and creative. For example, the art historian Tsuji Nobuo (2002: 18) identifies the decorative surface as providing a link between the ordinary and everyday sphere (*ke*) and the extraordinary metaphysical realm (*hare*). In this way, the decorative surface does not 'lack' meaning but is active as an intermediary expression and aesthetic. Hendry (1993) also identifies the importance of 'wrapping' in Japanese culture, in which the external layers, whether they be clothing, architecture or gifts, form the critical meaning structure. Wrapping operates as a method of accumulating 'layers of meaning' that are not normally present in the unwrapped object (1993: 17). This process inverts the Western philosophical privileging of the core (the object inside the wrapping) as the primary site of meaning and the external wrapping as obscuring the object. In fact Hendry argues that the meaning of the enclosed object and the layers of wrapping are conceptually embedded in each other and cannot be separated (1993: 17).

While flatness and the emphasis on surface quality and decoration in Superflat art can thus be considered an exploitation of the Western construct of Japan as a culture of surface aesthetics, it can also be interpreted as an assertion of the creative value of the surface in Japanese culture. In this latter interpretation Superflatness becomes a unique aesthetic form that articulates multiple and active spaces, not the erasure or reduction of meaning.

The concept of active flatness and continual transformation is a useful approach to understanding the Superflat aesthetic. It is difficult to differentiate a singular point of origin or a stable and unified subject in the multiple cultural identities embedded in *My Lonesome Cowboy*. Such is the shared history and cross-fertilisation of aesthetic forms that these multiple layers of references and aesthetic histories of Japan and the United States/Europe present a significant complexity to the explicit identification of these references as Japanese or Western. Furthermore, to presume that they will even be decoded as signifying geo-cultural aesthetic territories is equally problematic. It is evident that Murakami's explicitly playful references act as heterogenous and malleable signifiers of identity, and thus can be readily interpreted as a postmodern expression of multiplicity. Furthermore, the intertextual references to Japanese art history, Western art history, and imagined constructions of Japanese identity, play to the

knowingness of audiences. The Westernisation of Superflat and its Japaneseness articulate two forms that can be accessed by Murakami from his database of codes.

The underlying concept of 'Superflatness' is that it represents a flattening of distinctions and the blurring of identities. Thus it appears to represent the ultimate global postmodern expression, offering no transcendent point of view or singular, unified identity. However, it has already been established that Murakami's soy sauce strategy does in fact distinguish and reinforce the differences between Japanese and Western aesthetics.

Strategic essentialism and the soy sauce strategy

Rather than understanding Superflat as non-hierarchical, the re-working of identity in Murakami's works is better understood as a series of "strategic essentialisms". Robertson (1995: 36) identifies strategic essentialisation as a necessary part of the historic phases of globalisation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This discussion extends Robertson's concept of strategic essentialism by applying it to Murakami and the contemporary processes of globalisation.

Strategic essentialism shares a similar approach with self-Orientalism and strategic hybridity (Iwabuchi, 2002: 71). These refer to formations of resistant identity that are constructed in relation to the Oriental/Occident relationship in Japanese and Western discourses. They refer to the ability to manage existing codes of cultural-aesthetic identity through subversion and redeployment. The cultural critic Koichi Iwabuchi (1994) has identified the need for a theoretical position that is able to deconstruct the complicity between Japan's self-Orientalism and Western Orientalism, and that allows for the recognition of the multiple and fluid identities within globalisation. This theoretical position would move away from cultural specificity being cleaved to the 'imagined' unity of the nation-state, but would still allow for the expression of cultural specificities (1994: 78), particularly the ways in which globally circulated images and commodities become culturally flexible in the forces of globalisation.

Strategic essentialism offers such a position. Like self-Orientalism, strategic essentialism can be collusive to a Japan/West discursive binary, but it can also be resistant. Strategic essentialism amplifies the instability of identity and draws attention to the selection of essential codes in its expression. It provides a method to negotiate and articulate the particularities of local/national cultural identities by actively using the commodity potential of cultural Otherness in a global context. Therefore, strategic essentialism encapsulates the mutable and horizontal relations of global postmodern identity.

Strategic essentialism offers a means through which to acknowledge the connections between Superflat and previous discourses on Japanese identity while moving beyond the Self/Other configuration in order to more explicitly acknowledge global intermixing. That is, it provides a means to understanding that the multiple identities in Murakami's work are temporarily hierarchically or historically privileged. These identities can then be assembled and deployed strategically in different cultural contexts.

Denoting this move as strategic suggests a self-reflexive and playful state of identity that is more temporal and acknowledges the potential for this mutability to slip into its own forms

of essentialisation – thereby revealing one of the paradoxes of global postmodern identity. Strategic essentialism does not intend to resolve the dilemmas or contradictions of cultural identity in globalisation. Instead, it accentuates them. Murakami's strategic essentialism could be understood as a model for a new paradigm of identity construction: it provides an opportunity to rethink and re-map territories and points of cultural fixity in global networks.

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Notes

1. *Superflat* was the first in a trilogy of exhibitions curated by Murakami, followed by *Coloriage* (2002) and *Little Boy* (2005).

2. 'Western' is used here to denote a discursive construct, rather than an actual geo-political territory.

3. Despite the conventional idea of the Edo period being closed to foreign influences there was limited trade contact with other nations, including interactions with Western visual culture (Screech, 1996); however, from the mid-nineteenth century, exchange and interaction between the West and Japan increased significantly.

4. Imaginings refers to the sets of ideas, images, beliefs and assumptions constructed in relation to Japan. The image of a futuristic post-modern Japan which arose in the late 1980s and 1990s in relation to Japan's economic expansion, is defined by Morley and Robins as a "techno-orientalist" discourse.

5. Global interactions have obviously previously existed; however, after the 1970s there has been a particular intensification noted by analysts (Held et al.).

6. "'Super flatness' is an original concept of Japanese who have been completely Westernized" (Murakami, 2000: 5). In particular, Westernisation here refers to the post-1945 influx of American popular culture and the European comic and cinematic influences on the development of *manga* and subsequently *anime* (see Note 10).

7. The lineage of Superflat is influenced by the art historian Tsuji Nobuo (1970).

8. For Karatani, the 1980s does not present a new cultural condition for Japan but a revival of the (already) postmodern Edo (1997: 271). In this way Karatani challenged Japan being understood according to Western terms and linear histories.

9. Approximately 70 percent of Murakami's paintings and sculptures are sold in these markets (Kaikaikiki Co. Ltd & Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, 2001: 119).

10. There are precedents for *anime* and *manga* in earlier Japanese illustrative forms (Schodt, 1986), and while there are identifiable influences from Western comic forms these have been assimilated and transformed. It needs to be emphasised that these forms have developed within Japan rather than existing as cultural imports (Kinsella, 2000: 45–51).

11. While Japan was never colonised by Europe or the United States, for Matsui the adoption of Western institutions of art during the Meiji period constitutes a form of colonisation. While it is well beyond the scope of this paper to outline the history of *bijutsu* and the accompanying debates, Matsui's argument is a useful position from which to consider the tactics of resistance expressed in Superflat.

12. In the *Superflat* catalogue Murakami also connects the dynamism of the splash with the specific timing structures of Kanada's *anime*, *Galaxy 999* and the zigzag compositions of Japanese screen-paintings (Murakami, 2000: 9–15).

13. This interpretation was informed by Western concepts of Japanese culture as well as European art (Evett 1982: xiii). In particular, the image of Japanese visual culture as decorative, with skills in mimicry, was contrasted to the Western emphasis on realism in art (Tamamushi, 2002).

14. For example, from the mid-eighteenth century a new genre of print emerged that utilised Western techniques of linear perspective, *uki-e* (Lane, 1978: 78). In addition, artists such as Hokusai synthesised Western and Japanese techniques of perspective (1978: 167).

15. This redefinition was part of the same postmodern discourses which revisited Japan's (post)modernity beyond the terms of Western modernity.