

Desire, Lust and the Glimpse of Manga and Anime

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Abstract

Fanservice is the random and gratuitous display of a series of anticipated gestures common in Japanese comics (Manga) and animated cartoons (Anime). Fanservice gestures include such things as panty shots, and glimpses of breast.

These vagrant moments of libidinous possibility underwrite the anticipation of sensual fulfilment; they indicate the genuine access of the personal aesthetic experience to a realm and/or moment of reality in which the physical and the imaginative are co-extensive. The connection between the eye and desire is re-established in defiance of the general requirement in society to deny the glimpse.

This paper will explore ways of looking revealed in Anime and Manga, in relation to the desire and lust for objects. How much of this special seeing can be universalized in terms of design? How might this way of seeing be used to extend our understanding of personal aesthetic engagement with objects?

Conference themes: Desire and Lust

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Introduction

An essential part of all healthy cultures is the possibility of uncontested personal experience. No matter how constrained the individual may be by society and the laws of a repressive regime, the individual must still experience the sensory reality of their life in order for them to function as a member of a society. No matter how dominating the master may be, the apprentice must still take hold of the tool, as he, the apprentice, alone takes hold of the tool. The apprentice must feel the chisel as it bites the wood and feel the wood as it gives way to the chisel. There is no one else to experience just this cut, just this way.

This uncontested realm of experience is a key grounding condition of object relations in the psychology of Donald Winnicott. For Winnicott, there are special objects that arise in the development of the child's relationship with objects and the world. These objects are best thought of as subject-objects, or transitional objects. According to Winnicott:

The transitional object and the transitional phenomena start each human being off with what will always be important for them, i.e. a neutral area of experience which will not be challenged. *Of the transitional object it can be said that it is a matter of agreement between us and the baby that we will never ask the question: 'Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?' The important point is that no decision on this point is expected. The question is not to be formulated [Italics in original].* (Winnicott, 1997, 12)

Alessi takes up this subject-object quality in his accounts of the design process typical of ALESSI. “Commenting on Phillippe Stark’s designs, he refers to ‘impracticability’; these are ‘objects that are in a certain sense almost useless when it comes to function, objects where at times the function is secondary to the expressive values of the object, such as sensory values.’ He is aware that his products are often purchased in spite of – not because of – their functionality as kettles or pots – bought either as status symbols, which he deplores, or as art objects. ... [according to Alessi] ‘Winnicott insisted that this playing activity – this transitional activity – is not only typical of the child but continues into their entire adult life. Playing helps the child understand the outside world and participate in its creation’ ” (Waller, 1996, 75).

Just as the child is allowed to hold on to its special teddy bear in the transition from infancy to latency, so the adolescent is allowed a special kind of freedom in the transition to adulthood. This free space, in the case of Japanese culture, has been explored and exploited by the everyday art forms of Manga and Anime. In their early development, freedom was key to the extraordinary taboo breaking features that have come to typify these forms. Westerners are fascinated with fart jokes and decapitations and they are astounded by the nature and frequency of gratuitous sexual moments in Anime and Manga. As Schodt points out, “the elimination of taboos in Japanese children’s comics has given rise to many stories of questionable artistic value, it has also been a vital factor in the growth of the whole medium. Freedom from regulation allowed what was originally material exclusively for children to appeal to adults” (Schodt, 1986, 126).

It is this freedom, in association with adolescence, that has given rise to the elaborated function of Fanservice in Japanese popular culture. Left alone to explore the possibilities of the medium (Manga to begin with), there has arisen a unique set of artistic and experiential devices. The philosophical aspects of this Fanservice present design, and product design in particular, with a new way of attending to the affective reception of their products.

Personal experience as a realm of freedom

The everyday world presents us with vast numbers of opportunities for sensory experience that we elect not to talk about, or, if we do, we talk about as adolescents do, with a fumbling incoherence. The fire engine rushing by, with sirens blazing, is something we might mention as a brief and exciting moment. Other random moments of excitement are left as simply random experiences. The following is a tale told by a respondent to an online forum, “Stockings HQ”:

This afternoon, back in San Francisco, I had an interesting sighting driving down Clement Street - it was raining out, and I saw a young woman crossing the street, left hand holding up her umbrella ... and as she crossed, her above-the-knee-length grey skirt rode up a bit, revealing a black stocking top and some bare thigh. However, it looks like she was wearing over-the-knee socks and not necessarily thigh highs or stockings, as the ‘stocking tops’ could be plainly seen, and her calves were covered with black opaque colored cotton (I think! Remember, I was in a car!) and not nylon ... still, it was the closest thing to a stocking sighting that I have seen in the streets of San Francisco in years! Literally years! (Stockings HQ, 2008)

In 1934 Cole Porter wrote the song “Anything Goes”: “Days of yore a glimpse of stocking was looked on as something shocking today heaven knows, anything goes.” The respondent to Stockings HQ reminds us of the power of such a glimpse as it has become re-valued now that women generally do not wear stockings. “When Cole Porter wrote the lyrics for his song ‘Anything Goes,’ public ‘morality’ as it pertained to sex was far different than it is today. And rightly so. I don’t think any of us want to go back to the days when women fainted if men saw

their ankles or were labeled loose if they crossed their legs” (Beker, 2004, 44). Perhaps we don’t want to go back to fainting, but we certainly continue to have the freedom to enjoy personal experience as outlined by the stocking man from San Francisco.

Fanservice and the Glimpse

Fanservice, in its simplest form, is the random and gratuitous display of a series of anticipated gestures common in Japanese comics (Manga) and animated cartoons (Anime). These gestures include such things as panty shots, leg spreads and glimpses of breast. Ideally, these moments arise, naturally, like the sudden and unexpected glimpse of a stocking top. One had to just be there, on that day, in the rain, on Clement Street, to see, just this woman as she appeared. The pleasure is the realization of the potential for such a moment to arise, of itself, available for personal apprehension simply because being in the world allows for such privileged moments of glimpsing.

We glimpse raindrops as light glints and gleams through the suspended liquid attached to a flower. Our attention is drawn to things that glimmer and glisten. Many such callings of our attention are ephemeral: we catch a glimpse of a butterfly and the butterfly is gone. Many such glimpses are of a trivial nature: the shiny object was merely a bottle top and not a gold coin. We tend to see glimpses, in general, as secondary aspects of our visual life. Glimpses are distractions from the main game which, pragmatically, is to establish true values about things that deserve being valued. Yes, flowers and raindrops are fun, maybe even joyous, but nonetheless they are not essential in our serious accounts of being human.

In the events of Fanservice, the glimpse is revealed as a special access to the personal and the transpersonal. Our stocking man may seem at first glance to be perverse in his fascinations, or, at least, adolescent. But, in his expression of his attention to the detail of his experience, it becomes obvious that his interest is a highly refined and well articulated account of his availability to the world of his experience. He is an artist of the everyday; he is an expert at the glimpse.

It is only in their valorization that glimpses indicate a deep philosophical concern with the status of personal experience. To be without this freedom to just see is to be condemned to the fixed world of non-spontaneous reality, the already there, the already accounted for, the mundane. I do not have to tell you of the raindrop on the flower that I see, but strangely, my eye is drawn to see this thing and I value the seeing, if I will.

In the case of Fanservice in Anime and Manga, it is the libidinous moments that dominate critical attention. These vagrant moments of libidinous possibility underwrite the anticipation of sensual fulfillment. In the accidental viewing of the curve of a breast, the adolescent is able to confirm desire and the location of desire. Here, in this glimpse, the physical and the imaginative are co-extensive. What is desired is what is seen even though the seeing is an accident, or is being treated as an accident.

Personal, Interpersonal and Moe

In the case of Fanservice, the personal becomes interpersonal. Anyone reading the comic I am reading is able to see what I see. Where society seeks to cover over the moment of seeing in the everyday world, the Fanservice picturing forth in the comic book confirms a pathway to liberation. What I see I am free to see because it is in the world. What I am able to see amounts to an anticipation of what I might see and others might see. As such, the glimpse, in its form as Fanservice, confirms the imagination as the dimension of the interpersonal: someone else also already understands the glimpse. The author, at least, also knows about such things. This is perhaps the "darker" freedom because it offers to forgive the otherwise unique nature of vantage

(I alone could see from where I stood). What I see you could also see; how I see you might also see.

While the interpersonal nature of the Fanservice glimpse can seem to be little more than the sharing of a male adolescent fascination, (are you a stocking man too?) there are cognitive aspects that point to more general and universal qualities of the glimpse. Our attention is called because it can be called. Within Gibson's ecology of perception (1979), the world we see is there to be seen and it has about it the qualities of being see-able. The glimpse of the breast is as undeniable as the sight of Mt Fuji for anyone who attends to what they see. According to Gibson: "The meaning or value of a thing consists of what it affords. ... What a thing is and what it *means* are not separate, the former being physical and the latter mental as we are accustomed to believe" (Gibson, 1982).

But our seeing is generally taken up with its own symbolic expression of what we wish to recognize as things we see, rather than as an index of what we do see as affordances. For example, we look to the stages in the development of the flower as indications of the fullness of the flower. We see the bud, but in our account we most likely include the bud within the whole flower process rather than reflecting on the precise cognitive event of apprehending bud-ness. In the case of Fanservice, it is the affordance of the gratuitous that is the precise location of the meaning. In Fanservice, the object must remain a subject-object, it must remain transitional and privileged, within the realm of uncontested experience.

Fanservice, in its decades of development, has acquired a variety of subtle distinction. Moe, for example: is a Japanese slang word originally referring to fetish for or love for characters in video games or Anime and Manga" (Urbandictionary.com). The literal meaning of "Moe" is "budding" as with plants. There are qualities of bud-ness, like the development of the breasts of pubescent females, that are guarantees of flowering. For the bud to have appeared, there must be a flower to follow. These indications are open and in the world. They are not in the individual but they are in the world of individual experience; they are not *of* the imagination but *for* the imagination; they are not against experience but they indicate experience in transition. The fact of a budding flower might be narrated symbolically or incidentally, but the budding is just there. Such is the status of Fanservice moments within the aesthetic of Manga and Anime.

These moments, being *for* the imagination, are also available as features in a semiotic system of affordances that we might typically ascribe to objects of design. That is, Gibson's ecology might seem relevant to the natural world of perception but it is the social system of meanings that we would normally call on when relating to design. Desire takes us all the way around this semiotic roundabout and brings us back to the glimpse in its experiential immediacy.

Desire and Lust and the Gaze

Clearly there are parallels to be drawn between the model of the glimpse being explored here and the model of the gaze as announced by Laura Mulvey in her seminal article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). While these parallels are vital to a full elaboration of a model of the glimpse, for the purposes of this paper, the gaze will only be addressed in passing.

Scopophilia, the pure pleasure that we all may take in just seeing, is the basis of object desire whether that desire is contested or allowed to remain free. What we can add to this, from Mulvey, is the extended concept of fetishistic looking. Fetishistic looking, for Mulvey, involves "the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous. This builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself. The erotic instinct is focused on the look alone" (Mulvey 1992, 29).

In this account of looking, we can recognise key features of Fanservice and Moe in particular. Not only is looking, itself, a source of desire and its satisfaction, but the looking authorised by Fanservice is precisely to be undertaken as a fetishistic looking. The Moe object is a reassuring object rather than a dangerous object; the Moe object is a confirmation of the freedom of desire to find itself structured as the structuring of objects for its own satisfaction. That is, the viewer of Fanservice is able to determine erotic values within the orbit of a freedom that defines the erotic object as transitional, special, and therefore not dangerously real. These art forms, after all, are not photorealistic. Their lack of realism is part of the transitional subject-object nature of the Fanservice experience.

Indeed, the closer Fanservice comes to reality the less useful it is as Fanservice. Desire is to be located in the transitional object, not re-determined as an achieved object of lust. That is, the mediation of desire is the purpose, not the gratification. This mediation, performed knowingly, within the interpersonal space of the Manga and Anime worlds, is the redeeming quality of Fanservice that points to the hygienic nature of the glimpse. Somewhere between desire and lust there is a space in which what is experienced is just experience. Fanservice is a figuring of this space.

We may see this figuring space as indicative of a healthy transitional relationship with the world, mediated through aesthetic engagement. The status of the object of desire is not immediately important to this current argument, but it needs to be pointed out that within a Lacanian psychology, the Fanservice object would be deemed a fantasy object rather than a subject-object as in Winnicott. The status of this object is highly contested, for Lacan. The reading, offered by Dino Felluga, can ease our way forward, through this puzzle, towards the usefulness of these special objects to design. According to Felluga:

Our desires therefore necessarily rely on lack, since fantasy, by definition, does not correspond to anything in the real. Our object of desire (what Lacan terms the 'objet petit a') is a way for us to establish coordinates for our own desire. At the heart of desire is a misrecognition of fullness where there is really nothing but a screen for our own narcissistic projections. It is that lack at the heart of desire that ensures we continue to desire. To come too close to our object of desire threatens to uncover the lack that is, in fact, necessary for our desire to persist, so that, ultimately, desire is most interested not in fully attaining the object of desire but in keeping our distance, thus allowing desire to persist. Because desire is articulated through fantasy, it is driven to some extent by its own impossibility. (Felluga, 2008)

The impossibility of the object of Fanservice desire would seem to be resolved in the confirmation, through the glimpse, of the reality of the Moe, or budding. This confirmation maintains the distance while also celebrating the ongoing life experience of bridging the gap between desire and reality. The general social acceptance of this tension opens up the freedom of the glimpse somewhat like the ornament.

There are comforts in ornament and in the superfluous information that attaches to everyday objects. For example, the lip on the aluminium soft drink can affords the user a series of anticipated confirmations that underwrite the intermediate area of experience: the space between desire and the object of desire. There is something libidinous in the lip of a chilled aluminium can. For Henry Petroski the lovely little neck (the stocking top) appears on our aluminum drink cans as a solution to the problem of reducing the weight of the can: "Since the area of a can top is proportional to the diameter squared, a small decrease in diameter resulted in a substantial reduction in aluminum used" (Petroski, 1996). And here was me thinking the dimple was for the pleasure of my eye and my hand and a way to embrace the object?

Glimpse and Branding

Where does this get us in terms of design? The Wikipedia entry on Fanservice, lists six features that have come to be associated with this concept. First is the Sexual aspect which we have been exploring here. Second is Cosplay (the use of costumes that are non-narrative). Third is Side Characters (characters who just appear). Fourth is Cameo (well-known characters just appear). Fifth is Technicals (aspects of special knowledge of no narrative use). And, sixth is Homage (cross-referencing for no real plot reason). Each of these features can be seen as part of an extended understanding of the activities of branding. That is, as the features of branding can be treated as added on to objects, so the features of Fanservice can be seen to be added on to a story line. Just as we can ask “what is the purpose of a logo to the function of an object”, so we can ask “what is the purpose of Fanservice”.

Which gets us back to affordances, but this time within the larger context of the Gibson and Donald Norman variations. The objects of the glimpse maybe *for* the imagination in Gibson’s understanding of affordance, but, in Norman’s terms, these objects are taken up within the conceptual model of the total object. They are to be understood as coming *from* the imagination of the designer and not coming from the perceptual ecology of the person experiencing. That is, for Norman, the erotic aspects are to be read as semiotic; for Gibson they are in the world already as an experience of meaning.

Norman talks about “perceived affordances”. That is, affordances that can be located within cultural systems of meaning. Knobs are for turning; buttons are for pushing, chairs are for sitting on. The closer an object attends to its conceptual model, the closer it comes to an ideal:

To me, the most important part of a successful design is the underlying conceptual model. This is the hard part of design: formulating an appropriate conceptual model and then assuring that everything else be consistent with it. ... yes, the concept has caught on, but not always with complete understanding. My fault: I was really talking about perceived affordances, which are not at all the same as real ones. (Norman, 1999)

Conclusion

From the perspective of branding, most of the features of Fanservice can be integrated into local cultural systems where the extra information is conceptually integrated. Fans, from different cultures, can be accommodated with added extras to suit. This implies that a study of Anime and Manga Fanservice techniques might reveal general features that could be applied. Equally, such a study might reveal the kinds of added extras that could be marketed to specific cultures. Such is the sociology of objects and it is a worthwhile activity that can lead to useful design outcomes.

It is often difficult to isolate our relationships with objects from our immediate uses. The tension is economic rather than erotic. We just drink our can of soft drink. We might reflect on the excuses given for the lip on the can but we resist the larger existential psychology. It is the deeper aspects of Fanservice that offer the designer a new perspective from which to approach the overall activity of design. Adding on things is often an after-market junking of core conceptual harmonies. However, treating add-ons in the purposeful, if gratuitous way of Fanservice, can offer both a liberation for the designer and the opportunity to play in the space where desire, fantasy and lack emerge. Moe, the budding, is something that can be looked for, attended to and integrated as part of the psychology of objects. We can design ornaments for the hand of use and the eye of the glimpse. We can confirm the satisfactions and comforts of intermediate object relations by how we afford.

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