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Nostalgias: Visualising Longing Conference (09<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> November 2013)

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## Consuming Nostalgia in the Japanese Bubble Economy (1986 – 1991)

Using examples taken from the women's magazine, Hanako, and the Sanyo ROBO telephone, this paper will explore the use of nostalgia as part of a strategy of consumption and the significance of its application to young working women during Japan's Bubble Economy of the late 1980s.

In brief, the Bubble Economy was a period starting from 1986 in which the Japanese economy experienced a fully-blown exaggerated asset bubble. During this time assets such as stocks, shares, and property escalated rapidly, and linked to the agreement of the 1985 Plaza Accord which upwardly revalued the yen against the dollar and deutschmark, the liberalisation of the banks, and the historically low interest rate, combined to create conditions for market frenzy and the biggest credit-fuelled asset bubble in Japanese history. When interest rates were finally raised at the end of 1989, this signalled the beginning of the end of the Bubble, but due to the bullish nature of the asset market, as well as belief of the Japanese public in the economy, the end was not fully realised until the beginning to mid-1990s.

However the Bubble Economy was not just a simple matter of a rapidly accelerating financial and asset market, but also had a knock-on effect on the lifestyles, expectations and culture of the people experiencing it, permeating through local, national and international levels, and arguably also once it had burst, with the resulting decade and a half of recession (also called the Lost Decade) continuing the resounding effects of the Bubble. One of these effects can be seen in the culture and attitude towards work, leisure, and lifestyle, and for the purposes of this paper I will concentrate on the significance of nostalgia as a key strategy of consumption, and as marketing to young single working women as a significant demographic during this period.

Although women in Japan have traditionally been seen as highly subjugated through historical and cultural influences ranging from political to religious, women in the Bubble, and young working women in particular, initially appear to be more emancipated than ever before. Building on the feminist movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, post-war liberalisation, and the second wave feminism of the 1970s, more young women were entering work after education, helped along by the passing of the EEOL (Equal Employment Opportunities Law) in 1985.

This is not to say that Japanese women at this time were fully emancipated, and there were many areas in which women's employment was highly problematic, from marginalisation to administrative roles, to lack of career longevity. Seen as primarily supportive to the smooth running of the departments, these women were often referred to as 'office flowers' for their decorative and non-essential quality.

However despite this marginalisation, women were feeling many benefits of the Bubble, from increased access to work to the increased leisure options that conditions of the Bubble created. In particular leisure and the consumption of leisure could be said to be one of the booming industries of the Bubble period. Encouraged by the government who in turn was responding to international pressure to reduce the trade surplus, sources such as the lifestyle magazine for young women, Hanako, were featuring numerous articles on leisure and lifestyle choices, from extensive travel to

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foreign and exotic destinations, to shopping and eating out options closer to home. Young working women, with their disposable incomes and lack of responsibility at work were a prime target audience for this kind of lifestyle, and appear to enjoy themselves immensely, from travelling abroad for leisure to going out to restaurants and bars after work and shopping for luxury brands.

In the Bubble period young working women thus became a new and significant consumer market that had the time and disposable income for the significant and conspicuous spending that characterised the Japanese Economic Bubble. In this sense they also influenced many of the stylistic and consumption choices of the period, in addition to other more global postmodern design influences, from the increasing trend for internationalisation (*kokusaika*) to the rise in popularity for luxury and international brands.

Alongside this the Bubble period also coincided with the rise of international postmodernism, providing many ways for a postmodern condition to arise in Japan. With the advent of liberalised finance and the consumer frenzy that followed in the wake of the accompanying asset boom, life in the Bubble sped up, from industry to consumption and leisure. The turnaround for design became faster to keep pace with the market demand, and sales of flagging products became more dependent upon stylistic and fashion trends than on design quality. During this time of hyper-inflated asset prices and sped-up design and consumption, work and leisure also becomes exaggerated, with tales of *karoshi*, or 'death from overwork' coming to public attention, and tales of excessive spending in bars, restaurants, and travel. The Bubble experience thus starts to develop characteristics that fit alongside postmodern ideas of the hyper-real, from exaggerated experiences in work and leisure, to a focus on surface and image, with a mix-and-match attitude to cultural experiences that derive from an avid participation in international consumption.

Nostalgia then in this hyper-inflated world of the Bubble, seems to be rather incongruous and out of place during a period of speed and internationalisation, and yet it also appears to be a valid part of consumption too. However, on close examination it becomes much more understandable as part of postmodern consumption in the Bubble.

At the height of the Bubble in the 1989, in every issue of *Hanako*, a popular lifestyle magazine aimed at young working women, there is at least one substantial article on travel, mainly to foreign countries. While the emphasis for these articles is primarily on leisure pursuits such as shopping and eating and not conventional tourist sightseeing, nevertheless there appears to be an element of nostalgia mixed in with the exoticism of foreign travel. Paris becomes a city filled with quaint little cafes and historic brand names, and London a city of boutique old name tailors and historic hotels for cream teas. While this does adhere to a kind of international branding of European cities, in another sense, nostalgia here is being utilised as exotic travel for tourist consumption, and while ordinarily this may not be as significant, with record numbers of Japanese women travelling abroad, and at nearly double the number of pages compared to other magazine features, the use of nostalgia as a way to describe foreign destinations becomes much more acute. Additionally as the average Japanese *Hanako* reader would most likely be accessing these countries not in terms of their history, but as exotic travel destinations, we can see how nostalgia becomes part of a general lexicon for the description of place rather than time, and in particular a romanticised or exoticised place rather than localised personal time.

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Likewise in the 1989 December edition the main article on Christmas gifts that features in the place of where the travel section would be, also appears to carry this sentiment of nostalgia as being both geographically and temporally based. While the gifts range from the classic to the modern in style, what is being utilised as visual context and background for these gifts is a general language of nostalgia – that of Christmas-card Santas, roaring fireplaces, and black and white photographs. However importantly the nostalgia being showcased is not local, but is instead Western pan-European, from the Botticelli-style angel prints on the cushions and Art Nouveau photo frames, to the American-style Santa commemorative plates and tartan bags. Although this is part and parcel of the general language of Christmas as a Western-derived festival, what is interesting is how there appears to be little to no Japanese-style gifts or context at all. Christmas, and through it nostalgia, becomes part of a consumption of Western exoticism and international culture, and a way of categorising foreign cultures as not just not-Japanese, but also typical of that particular geographical and cultural location. Nostalgia in this sense thus becomes reduced to signs that aid the general consumption of exotic commodities, but also that which has lost its personal and localised connection.

In Baudrillard's theories on consumption, nostalgia can be used as a strategy in consumption as a system within capitalism. However importantly like all things that get appropriated for consumption, nostalgia through this process becomes emptied of its real signification to become pure but empty sign. This may explain the relative meaninglessness or superficiality of the nostalgia that is portrayed in these articles, whether it is travel or Christmas, and which may also explain the Western-culture bias for these nostalgic items, as easier to use nostalgia as an empty sign for consumption when it has less direct and personal cultural associations.

However this does not mean that while emptied, nostalgia as sign is devoid of context, as Baudrillard puts it,

*'Few objects today are offered alone, without a context of objects which 'speaks' them. And this changes the consumer's relation to the object: he no longer relates to a particular object in its specific utility, but to a set of objects in its total signification. ... This is, then, no longer a sequence of mere objects, but a chain of signifiers, in so far as all these signify one another reciprocally as part of a more complex super-object, drawing the consumer into a series of more complex motivations.'* (Baudrillard, 1998:27)

With this in mind we can see how there is another kind of underlying logic to the images of nostalgic Christmas gifts and clichés of old European cities. While at first glance they may appear to be rather randomised and haphazard, if taken as a whole we begin to see how they make up *'networks of objects in order to captivate that impulse and bring it, in keeping with its own logic, to the highest degree of commitment, to the limits of its economic potential.'* (Baudrillard, 1998:27) – or in other words, these objects and images, taken together as sets, build up an overall image of values associated with the Bubble: a pan-Western internationalism and culture, leisure, travel, and ready access to the exotic – all for which nostalgia becomes a value associated with that, and not with a more personalised and authentically localised value.

Where then is this personalised and authentic nostalgia in the Bubble, and especially for young working women? Granted there are pockets of it occurring throughout the magazine, from the

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traditional way that Japanese food is displayed, to the features on traditional Japanese entertainment such as theatre, and the travel articles on hot spring resorts and Kyoto. However these too are problematic in that they in turn exoticise and commodify traditional Japanese culture, making a cultural past both accessible for consumption but also reified through making it special and away from everyday life. In this way culture thus also becomes an exotic commodity in a distant location to be experienced but not necessarily remembered, and the following extracts by Baudrillard and Debord may partly explain why it is the traditional and distant past that is of particular relevance:

*'The ascendancy of the urban and industrial milieu is producing new examples of shortage: shortages of space and time, fresh air, greenery, water, silence. Certain goods, which were once free and abundantly available, are becoming luxuries accessible only to the privileged, while manufactured goods or services are offered on a mass scale.'* (Baudrillard, 1998:57)

*'With the development of capitalism, irreversible time is unified on a world scale. Universal history becomes a reality because the entire world is gathered under the development of this time. But this history, which is everywhere simultaneously the same, is still only the refusal within history of history itself. What appears the world over as the same day is the time of economic production cut up into equal fragments. Universal irreversible time is the time of the world market and, as a corollary, of the world spectacle.'* (Debord, 1977:145)

The distant past becomes both a spatial and temporal location that fulfils both requirements of a desire for space in contrast to the increasingly industrialised and urbanised landscape, as well as the desire for non-universal, reversible time, and as a result becomes valuable as an exoticised consumable.

Finally there is also the question of the very meaning and applicability of nostalgia in the Japanese Bubble itself. In a time of rising economic power, booming asset markets, industry, employability, and emphasis and encouragement of leisure and consumption, where in this would there be a place for nostalgia for a past at all? This is an especially salient point for women, for whom the 1980s held more opportunities for work, leisure, and lifestyle choices than in previous decades. Yet in the popularity of the ROBO telephone we see this very enactment of an authentic nostalgia being accessed whilst still also being a commercial product.

The ROBO telephone, with its simple geometric shapes, colourful matt plastic, and comically exaggerated extra-large screws, was originally designed by the Sanyo Electric Company in 1987 to be a children's toy as part of the ROBO series of electronic products for children. With easy to push buttons over a standard telephone pad, it is usable as a normal telephone, and has other functions such as memory, a hold-function, volume control and automatic redial. Intended for the under-5s it became surprisingly popular with young Japanese women who adopted it for its fun colourful design. As a new consumer market, encouraged to work and access avenues of sophisticated leisure that included travel, luxury brand shopping and nightlife entertainment, by comparison the popularity of the childish ROBO telephone seems especially incongruous.

However it is in the very childishness of the ROBO telephone that we may find an explanation. Although women were seen to enjoy the benefits of the Bubble through their access to leisure and

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consumption, this in fact belies a more complex reality. Popular media such as the manga, OL Shinkaron and Hanako depicted OLs as having fun, making mistakes, and taking advantage of the system to enjoy themselves and in some cases, actively avoid work, and some OLs like my interview subject, Mika Matsuo were using their soft power to get time off, use the company perks such as access to ski resorts or hotels, and be taken out often on company expense accounts. However rather than being an advantage, in some ways this can be read as deriving from the very lack of stake and access to opportunities that enabled OLs to successfully circumvent the usual system of responsibility and commitment to work, and instead to enjoy and take advantage of workplace perks as much as possible without fear of reprisals or damage to one's career. In light of the denial of women being able to access managerial track work or even career longevity, taking advantage of the company in terms of time, perks and expense accounts, and by proxy the men, becomes a point of reimbursement, and a statement of dissent against the system that excludes women, and dissatisfaction with the inequalities of the system.

In a wider sense, this recognition of women's disadvantages and subsequent compensatory activities through consumption has been observed by authors such as Baudrillard (1998: 96-97) who describes how women are encouraged to consume themselves through the consumption of signs, and Langman whose observation that *'The inegalitarian social reality denies women the pleasures of empowerment'* (Langman in Shields, 1992:70), is augmented by the notion that *'... much of the work of the lower strata – routine production, technical or personal service jobs – are more and more de-skilled and disempowering. ... Thus we suggest that the consumption of goods and experiences that inform self-presentations provide experiences of power and dignity outside the realms of work.'* (Langman in Shields, 1992:63-64)

Thus the popularity of the ROBO telephone can be seen as an expression of this same dissent with the system, and in many ways also a rejection of not just the system, but also of adult working life (with all its connotations for women of self-consuming through signs) for a simpler more authentic childlike one. Although bright, colourful and fun are also the ethos of the Bubble, the lack of sophistication and unrecognisable status branding of this product make this immediately a suspect piece in terms of a normal sophisticated Bubble aesthetic. Instead it appears to express a kind of rejection of the Bubble and its connotations of excessive luxury consumption and internationalisation, for a more localised nostalgic childhood aesthetic.

What this childhood aesthetic is in the ROBO telephone, can be partly determined by what it means. If we take Susan Stewart's analysis of nostalgically significant objects (1993), the ROBO telephone can be categorised as toy, souvenir and kitsch, all at the same time. As a toy, it embodies an interior fantasy world made manifest in physical form, thus enabling the users to transcend lived reality and interact with an alternate interiority. For this to work, the 'authenticity' of the object is key, as the greater the detail, the more significant and effective the object as toy is, and the ROBO telephone's playing with detail and scale in its overlarge screws is important in determining its efficacy as a toy in both its gigantic exaggeration and miniaturisation in its reduced toy-like functions.

It is both this over-exaggeration of toy-like elements as well as its ability to materialise a symbolic interior that defines this also a kitsch item. *'... the kitsch object offers a saturation of materiality... which takes place to such a degree that materiality is ironic... the desire for the kitsch object... marks*

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*the complete disintergration of materiality through an ironic display of overmateriality. The inside burst its bounds and presents a pure surface of outside.*' (Stewart, 1993:167-168)

Finally as souvenir the ROBO telephone also fulfils the function of providing a narrative, not of direct lived experience, but rather an invoked idealised childhood, '*...a childhood manufactured from its material survivals. Thus it is a collage made of presents rather than a reawakening of a past... constructed from a set of presently existing pieces. And it is in this gap... that nostalgic desire arises. The nostalgia is enamoured of distance, not of the referent itself.*' (Stewart, 1993:145) In this way, the telephone has become what Shields (1992:99) has termed 're-enchanted' in opposition to Benjamin's thesis (1968) of commodities losing their aura of symbolic value, it has re-acquired it through losing any original context and being reappropriated for a different symbolic use, that of restoring and projecting an idealised notion of childhood. However this, according to Stewart, '*... can be seen as a response to an unsatisfactory set of present conditions... so the restoration of the souvenir is a conservative idealisation of the past and the distanced for the purposes of a present ideology.*' (Stewart, 1993:150)

In the ROBO telephone, taken up by young women in defiance of its intended use as children's toy, we can thus see how nostalgia for childhood can be used to express a resistance through not just a rejection of the system, but also a disavowal of it as well whilst at the same time shaping another stylistic trend of the Bubble.

### Nostalgia as Research

However in this research about looking back on the Bubble period and the nostalgia within it, there is also the added problem of looking back itself. During conducted interviews with various participants I became acutely aware of a sense of nostalgia in the recollecting of the past. This was not replicated or consistent with all interview participants who differed in their opinion on whether the Bubble period for them had been positive or not, and neither was it consistently nostalgic throughout the interviews either, depending on what aspect of the Bubble the participants were discussing. Mika Matsuo for example recounted the negative aspects of being an OL as well as the positive. Nevertheless nostalgia for the past from interview subjects was a factor to be taken into consideration, and had to be contextualised in relation to a more general nostalgia for the past and youth, as well as a fond recollection for the excesses of the Bubble in relation to the austerity of the Lost Decade in the years following the bust. Nostalgia in this sense thus becomes a problematic factor to be negotiated with the subjectivity of the interviewee in mind.

Additionally another aspect to be taken into account was my own position as a researcher in examining primary source material. Looking through magazines one has to take in both the aspect of materiality of the magazines as well as the visual content in relation to its historicity. The look and feel of the magazine, the smell and yellowing of the paper, the style and colour combinations of the graphics and images – these all conspire to aid a physical nostalgic response to a sensory past one can tangibly feel and experience as authentic. Likewise the content too – that of depicting objects both familiar and unfamiliar, people in retro styles, and places from a recent past, these evoke exciting feelings of recognising an unrecognisable object or unrecognising a recognisable object, both familiar from exposure to countless images of similar objects and photographs of people, and unfamiliar because there is no direct experience of the actual object.

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It is here that therein lies the crux and problem of researching the near past, for the nostalgia that one feels in examining the material objects, or listening to the interviewees may be ultimately false, not only because these things are usually not within the direct experience of the researcher, but also because the past through the research process itself becomes ultimately reified and exoticised as something special and precious, and stands out precisely because the material under examination are throw-away everyday cultural items. In this the nostalgia becomes no different from the depictions of the past as exotic and geographic within the travel and gift sections of the Hanako magazines, where the material evokes suspect feelings for a past, location and culture that is ultimately foreign and exoticised.

Nostalgia thus becomes a problem for the researcher, both in terms of the evocative memories of the interviewees and the self-created fantasy nostalgia the material conjures up. How then to resolve the problematic nature of nostalgia in its distorting of research, and is it completely problematic? In the process of acquiring primary source data, there were instances of slippage between my own interpretation of the material and period, and the opinions of my interview subjects that would belie the assumptions I had formed. Likewise newspaper searches of articles in relation to specific words (for example: 'Bubble Economy' did not appear in use in newspapers until the end of the Bubble after 1991) also helped to ground, solidify and correct any pre-existing assumptions about the period. These points of slippage or breakage thus help to realign and question any distortion of the material, and although the interpretation of material is always subjective to the interpreter, multiple points of subjectivity do help to balance out a potentially lopsided view. Finally, as to the question of whether nostalgia is completely problematic for the researcher, I would say in the main, not. The nostalgia that interview subjects display in itself tells us something about their level of enjoyment and participation during the event in the past (for example, a few interviewees emphatically told me how much they did not enjoy the Bubble). Likewise my own nostalgia felt on reading the magazines and hearing the stories, even though self-imposed as a fantasy or fabrication, tells us much about the enduring legacy and influence of the objects depicted, whether a postmodernist 1980s mobile phone or a particular style of make-up and hairstyle. Nostalgia thus is both beneficial and problematic, depending on the amount of self-awareness and use of it in interpreting the past, but from which ultimately the past has no escape from.

In summary, nostalgia in the Japanese Bubble Economy appears to undergo many changes in its application and usage. At first seemingly at odds with the positive outlook on the economy and rising lifestyles, nostalgia quickly becomes assimilated as another tactic in the consumption system, emptied of its integral value to give sign value to the leisure pursuits of tourism and shopping marketed to predominantly young working women. Then designed into the ROBO telephone as a product for young children, this nostalgic quality is reappropriated by young working women as a way of articulating dissatisfaction with and rejection of the existing system through a withdrawal into childhood. Finally nostalgia as a quality that is imbedded and implicit in all historical research activities is something that requires a constant balancing act between mediated desire for an authentic idealised past, the real experiences of participants, their own nostalgic recollections, and factual evidence; the coming together of which constantly informs and readjusts a researcher's position on the investigation of the past, and especially near-past.