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« The question(s) of representation »

Duplicates of minors sold as “Love Dolls”: disturbance in sexual representation

Agnès Giard

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Abstract

In January 2016, a “grandmother” starts a petition to ban the sale of child sex dolls, portrayed as “sickening aids for pedophiles.” The media then started discussing the legitimacy of laws similar to George Orwell’s thought crime. What is the point in mistaking a depiction for reality? The petition lays the blame on Takagi Shin, managing director of Trotila. He is one of the most important love doll manufacturers in Japan. Love dolls are romantic and/or sexual human replicas. The best-sellers look like prepubescent girls. What is the meaning the designers and doll users give to such transgressive representations? By studying the way love dolls are made and used, I would like expose the logic behind this phenomenon.

Keywords

child pornography, illusion, Japan, *Otaku*, sex doll, simulation game

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“Child sex dolls are not a game”

On 30 January, 2013, Canadian customs officers intercept a package sent from Japan, containing a sex doll of prepubescent appearance, wearing a school uniform.¹ Kenneth Harrison, the 47-year-old who ordered the doll, is arrested for possession of child pornography.² A similar case is reported by the press in Australia: this time, it is a sex doll from China, equipped with a removable vagina. Three years later, while the trial of Kenneth Harrison began, an Australian woman named Melissa Evans, who introduces herself as a “grandmother,” starts a petition on the website Change.org³ entitled “*Child sex dolls are not a game*,” in order to obtain a ban on “the import of child sex dolls in Australia. Ideally, the manufacture and sale of this sickening ‘aids for paedophiles’ will be ceased globally.”

Melissa Evans illustrates her point with a photograph taken from the website of a Japanese manufacturer of “child sex dolls,” whom she nominally accuses of promoting pedophilia: Takagi Shin, founder of the Trottla company (fig. 1), finds himself in the public eye. In three months, over 55,000 signatures are gathered, sometimes with virulent comments. Many Anglo-Saxon journalists wonder: should the owners of child-like sex dolls be imprisoned?⁴ Why should an act that does not harm human people be considered as criminal?

1 “Sex doll seized in St. John's child porn investigation,” *CBC News*, 13 March, 2013. [Online] <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/sex-doll-seized-in-st-john-s-child-porn-investigation-1.1347554> [accessed 3 February 2016].

2 In Canada, according to Article S. 163.1 of the Criminal Code, explicit representations of children are illegal, be they characters made out of pixels or urethane.

3 This petition, started in January, 2016 by a certain Melissa Evans, and addressed to the Prime Minister of Queensland (Annastacia Palaszczuk) is still available online at the same address, although the initiative is now attributed to an obscure Australian association (*Fighters Against Child Abuse Australia*) asking for donations. [Online] <https://www.change.org/p/annastacia-palaszczuk-child-sex-dolls-are-not-a-game> [accessed 6 April and 9 September 2016].

4 Kristen V. Brown, “Should this man go to prison for buying a child sex doll?,” *Fusion*, 1 February 2016. [Online] <http://fusion.net/story/262195/child-sex-doll-legality/> [accessed 9 September 2016]. Dorian Geiger, “Newfoundland's Child Sex Doll Trial Raises Uncomfortable Question About Pedophilia and the Law,” *Vice*, 25 February 2016. [Online] http://www.vice.com/en_ca/read/newfoundlands-child-sex-doll-trial-raises-uncomfortable-questions-about-pedophilia-and-the-law [accessed 9 September 2016]. Cecilia D'Anastasio, “Can Virtual Sex Prevent Pedophiles from Harming Children In Real Life,” *Vice Magazine*, 14 January 2016. [Online] https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/can-virtual-sex-prevent-pedophiles-from-harming-children-in-real-life [accessed 9 septembre 2016]. Martin Knelman, “I, Pedophile dares to empathize,” *The Star*, 9 march 2016. [Online]

Melissa Evans's argument is the following: those dolls are designed to look alive, therefore the use of such dolls normalises the pedophile behaviour. This argument hits home among the signatories, with a majority of them echoing it back: "It panders to the behaviour; normalizes it, excuses it"; "this makes these disgusting acts seem normal"; "this is clearly admitting to accepting pedophilia."⁵

Interviewed by a special correspondent of *The Atlantic* magazine,⁶ Takagi Shin awkwardly defends himself:

I am helping people express their desires, legally and ethically. I often receive letters from buyers. The letters say, "Thanks to your dolls, I can keep from committing a crime."

Takagi's point of view is not backed up by any scientific study, which encourages his detractors to quote counter-opinions of "experts," who ensnare the Japanese manufacturer in a medical rhetoric, rooted in a system of values with a universalistic aim. When Takagi (fig. 2) agrees to answer the Western journalists' questions – basing his arguments on his opponents' discursive model, that of diagnosis/treatment – he indeed justifies the relevance of the accusations he wants to refute and makes a point of legitimating a "monstrous" desire. By doing so, he implicitly acknowledges an idea, the legitimacy of which I would like to question: the idea that the sexual attraction to representations of children would necessarily be indexed on a mental disorder or a "compulsion" as defined by the DSM-5.⁷

There are disorders that are proper to the wealthy modern countries, resulting from "tensions inherent to social life,"⁸ and the manifestations of which stem from a script⁹ collectively developed in response to the pressures exerted on individuals.¹⁰ These disorders are expressed in a specific cultural code and therefore, it is necessary to take their context of appearance into account if we are to tackle them.

In order to understand this widespread and pronounced taste for erotic images of children in Japan, I would like to replace it in the historical context of emergence of the first underage-looking sex dolls. These dolls are called love dolls (*rabu dōru*¹¹). I first came into contact with these objects in 2004. The research I am carrying out on this topic – as part of a thesis in anthropology – originates from a survey conducted for a non-fiction book (*L'Imaginaire érotique au Japon*), which led me

<https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/television/2016/03/09/i-pedophile-dares-to-empathize-knelman.html> [accessed 9 September 2016].

5 Comments published in the *Top Comments* of the website [online] <https://www.change.org/p/annastacia-palaszczuk-child-sex-dolls-are-not-a-game> [accessed 9 September 2016].

6 Roc Morin, "Can Child Dolls Keep Pedophiles from Offending?," *The Atlantic*, 11 January 2016. [Online] <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/01/can-child-dolls-keep-pedophiles-from-offending/423324/> [accessed 9 September 2016].

7 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published by the APA (American Psychiatric Association).

8 Maïa Fansten and Nadia Garnoussi, "Nouveaux troubles et pathologies émergentes à l'ère de la santé totale et de la modernité réflexive," *Socio-logos*, no. 9, 2014. [Online] <http://socio-logos.revues.org/2820> [accessed 9 September 2016].

9 John Gagnon, *Les Scripts de la sexualité. Essais sur les origines culturelles du désir* [1973-2004], translation by Marie-Hélène Bourcier, Paris, Payot, 2008.

10 Nicole Aubert and Vincent de Gaulejac, *Le Coût de l'excellence*, Paris, Seuil, 2007.

11 In Japanese, the term *rabudōru* (from the English love doll) is used as such, in the singular and the plural, since it derives from the *waseieigo* (the English "made in" Japan): it is a phonetic transcription of English words used in compliance with the Japanese grammar. For convenience, I will however use the Western grammar rules: the plural form of love doll will be love dolls.

to meet the major players of this movement: the owner of the biggest doll collection in Japan (Taabō), the founder of the love dolls museum (Sakai Mitsugi), the inventor of the standing love dolls (Kodama Nobuyuki). Over the course of my frequent stays in Japan, coupled with Internet monitoring, I observe the evolution of the doll models, the innovations of which are documented in paper or online catalogues. Between 2012 and 2013, I started a work of doctoral research, over six months, mainly in the field of production: the leading company Orient Industry, which produces around thirty love dolls a month, welcomed me in their factory located in a Tōkyō suburb. I would go there every day during the working hours, as a full member of the team in which I was employed as a researcher. Besides, I made appointments with the founders of the main competing companies – Ōkawa Hiroo (4Woods), Sugawara Fumitaka (Level-D), Takagi Shin (Trotlla) and Natori Sachio (Photogenic doll) – so as to visit their workplace and question them, with a view to understand the conditions of “creation” of these dolls as conscious, loving beings. The materials of my research come from observation sessions in factories and semi-structured interviews (life-story method), followed by e-mail correspondence up until 2017. I also met two love-doll users (Nishimaki Tōru and Hyōdo Yoshitaka), with whom I conducted biographical interviews in an understanding perspective, giving them a significant freedom of speech. Throughout 2014, I devoted myself to the examination of the abundant documentation provided by users’ blogs, press articles, promotional materials and television documentaries. In 2016, I interviewed the commercial managers of two companies specialising in *sex toys* exploiting the underage fantasy: Kimura Takuya (Tamatoys) and Yoshioka Daiki (Rends).

My data – sales brochures, press publications, user-created websites and about fifty interviews – are representative of a “loose” culture, resulting from countless dynamics of adjustment between the various forces involved: the manufacturers, the buyers, the media. I have here kept the images used in a similar fashion by these many players, and focused on the discursive logic that, at the crossroads of supply and demand, constantly redefines the contours of a common imagination used by individuals to negotiate their identities. It turns out that the doll – which use is strongly repressed in Japan – is the object of complex strategies that aim to turn shame into a source of pride.

As scandalous as they may seem, love dolls cannot be dissociated from a movement of positive participation in an “ideal,” as the involved people call it.¹² This ideal is that of “a love that cannot exist in reality.”¹³ It was first supported by a marginal group of Japanese society, which claims the stigmatising name of *otaku*, a term synonymous with *nerd*: “*Otakus* are experts in virtual worlds. Their favourite word is *mōsō*, which means ‘illusion.’”¹⁴ It is this word – usually juxtaposed with *sōzō*, “imagination” – which gives meaning to the deviant imagery *otakus* are so fond of: “they do not want reality. They want an illusion.”¹⁵ In reality, 11-year-old girls are not sexual or sentimental partners. Therefore, it is important that dolls look young, very young, so that the relation takes on a perfectly unreal dimension,

12 Interview with Ōkawa Hiroo, 15 August 2013.

13 E-mail interview with Sakai Mitsugi, 28 September 2004. Cf. Agnès Giard, *Un Désir d'humain*, Paris, Les Belles lettres, 2016, p. 213-214.

14 Interview with Kimura Takuya, 7 September 2016.

15 Interview with Yoshioka Daiki, 7 September 2016, confirming the recurrent remarks of Tsuchiya Hideo (founder of Orient Industry) – “The love doll is designed to offer an illusion” – and of countless doll-owners’ websites. Cf. Agnès Giard, *Un désir d'humain*, Paris, Les Belles lettres, 2016, p. 131-133.

because “this is what the buyers look for: something that will forever elude them” (fig. 3).

I will base the second part of my presentation on this notion of impossibility: if the sex dolls most sold in Japan have the ambiguous appearance of little girls, it is in virtue of an equation stated by *otakus* and involving childhood and non-being.¹⁶ The younger someone is, the least they exist, the more they offer themselves as a vacant space. The doll must be as blank as a piece of paper on which one’s dreams are to be written. However, these dreams never result in any socially-acknowledged life project, because there is no possible future with a doll. Not in this world, anyway. The inevitable failure of the relationship is incidentally part of a cleverly orchestrated rhetorical system based on the notions of purity and innocence. Far from being trivial, the extreme youth of the doll thus constitutes the key element of the power its owner ascribes it with. On this ground, and I will make a point of demonstrating it, it would be inadequate to study this phenomenon as a morbid symptom (a pedophilia epidemics?) and rather recommended to regard it as the structural consequence of a social disruption, the necessary adjustment of a marginal group to orders that are, after all, as unrealistic as these dolls they claim to love from the bottom of “a pure heart.”

An “unreal” product for *otakus*: childhood as the incomplete mirror

The attraction to representations of minors, called *lolicon* (*rorikon*) or “Lolita complex,” coincides in Japan with the emergence of *otakus*.¹⁷ The word *otaku* (“your home”) appears in 1983 in the writings of Nakamori Akio, a *Manga burikko* journalist, and refers to socially maladjusted young men, locked up in an imaginary world, incapable of coming face to face with real women.¹⁸ However, during the 1990s, the term was increasingly associated with the notion of “youth culture,” which also includes women.

In the 1980s, *otakus* were belittled as cloistered, isolated introverts, cultivating their fantasies away from the real world. [...]. In the context of a changing society, that of the 1990s, the community of *otakus* has gained its right to existence and found a legitimate place in Japan, namely through the international success of the animation industry and, more significantly, through the popularisation of the virtual in the everyday life.¹⁹

However, these individuals are still stigmatised, since they refuse to reproduce the social order, declaring that they prefer “synthetic virgins” (*jinzō otome*) to

16 Yoshiaru Iijima, “Folk Culture and the Liminality of Children,” *Current Anthropology*, vol. 28, no. 4, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press on behalf of Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, 1987, p. 42; Mary Knighton, “Down the Rabbit Hole: In Pursuit of Shōjo Alices, From Lewis Carroll to Kanai Mieko,” *U.S.-Japan Women’s Journal*, no. 40, 2011, p. 49-89.

17 Galbraith, “Lolicon: The Reality of ‘Virtual Child Pornography’ in Japan,” *Image & Narrative*, vol. 12, no 1, 2011, p. 104-105.

18 Sharon Kinsella, *Adult Manga: Culture and Power in Contemporary Japanese Society*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2000, p. 11.

19 Iida Yumiko, “Between the Technique of Living an Endless Routine and the Madness of Absolute Degree Zero,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, vol. 8, no. 2, Duke University Press, 2000, p. 428.

“women made out of raw meat” (*namami no josei*). They want to play,²⁰ they say. Implicitly: to play rather than to imitate their parents by starting a family

It is under their influence that the first manufacturer of love dolls, Tsuchiya Hideo – founder of the pioneering firm Orient Industry – launched in 2001 an original model meeting the esthetic criteria of manga (schematised body, child biomorph), being only 140 centimetres tall, approximately the height of an eleven-year-old child.²¹ The product was soon out of stock. This model was so successful that it resulted in the creation of dozens of rival companies. So far, love dolls had the austere appearance of fashion models and there would be no more than 150 orders per year. With the emergence of neotenic dolls – presented as the materialisation of a video game or anime character “into our 3D world” –, up to 3,000 units would be sold each year. Although relative (it is a niche market), the “doll boom”²² became an emblem of the *otaku* phenomenon and of what sociologist Itō Kimio calls “the culture of distancing”²³: the culture of fictional partners only to be enjoyed in dreams... Made out of silicon, the *otaku* idols can only exist when configured, or rather transfused, as explained by the owners. “You have to pour blood from your own heart into them.” There lies the point of the game, apparently: *otakus* take more pleasure in appropriating an object than using it.²⁴ This customisation process is so important in their eyes that they most often buy objects in kit form rather than ready-made ones. “In this field, what sells most is what is incomplete,” confirms Kodama Nobuyuki, who works as an engineer at Orient Industry:

We are attracted to things we cannot fully have, we cannot easily get, which are no sure things, which possess grey areas. The more an object lacks something, the more we fantasise about it.

In an article dedicated to Japanese characters (*kyarakutā*), Anne Allison points out the importance of these entities that “fill gaps and lacks in the imagination.”²⁵ The ambiguous heroes, immature idols, amateur starlets and incomplete objects, especially dolls, are among the most popular “products” in

20 Cf. “*Otto ha ‘Fûfuseikatsu yori ningyō,’ tsuini tsuma ha...*” (The man declares that he prefers “The doll game to the married life” and ultimately to women...), *Yomiurishinbun*, 8 September 2015. [Online] https://yomidr.yomiuri.co.jp/article/20150908-OYTEW55179/?from=dyartcl_outbrain1 [accessed 11 September, 2016]; Kasia Cwierka and Ivo Smits, *How cuteness dominates Japanese culture*, 2012. [Online] <http://news.leiden.edu/news-2012/how-cuteness-dominates-japanese-culture.html> [accessed 7 March 2017]; Timothy J. Craig, *Japan Pop!: Inside the World of Japanese Popular Culture*, Oxford, Routledge, 2000, p. 292-293 and 313.

21 The Japanese sizes correspond to the following grid, with a few variations: 90 cm 1-2 years old / 100 cm 3-4 years old / 110 cm 5-6 years old / 120 cm 7-8 years old / 130 cm 9-10 years old / 140 cm 11-12 years old. Source: [online] <http://matome.naver.jp/odai/2140833739409102201> [accessed 10 September 2016].

22 Cf. The documentary *Rabudōrushī* (The history of love dolls), made as part of the series *Jōji Bottoman no heiseishi* (Heisei by George Botman) broadcast on TV Tōkyō, 17 December 2011.

23 Bryan Lewis, ‘Cool Japan’ and the Commodification of Cute: Selling Japanese National Identity and International Image, Chulalongkorn University, 2015, p. 11-12.

24 This tendency to reappropriate these products takes two forms: customisation (of figurines, for example) and transposition (in the form of fan-fictions or *dōjinshi*). Cf. Fan-Yi Lam, “Comic Market: How the World’s Biggest Amateur Comic Fair Shaped Japanese Dōjinshi Culture,” *Mechademia*, vol. 5, 2010, p. 232-248; Patrick Galbraith, “Akihabara: Conditioning a Public ‘Otaku’ Image,” *Mechademia*, vol. 5, 2010, p. 210-230.

25 Anne Allison, “New Age Fetishes, monsters, and friends,” in Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian (ed.), *Japan After Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990s to the Present*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2006, p. 345.

Japan, for the precise reason that they are incomplete. Actually, what is more incomplete than a child? With its developing body and “uncultivated” mind, the child is similar to an object that remains to be made, hence its attractiveness. As gladly pointed out by users, a little girl is better than a woman because “she cannot talk.”²⁶ From memory, they quote Shibusawa Tatsuhiko, who in 1972 defended the idea that the “young girl” (*shōjo*) is eminently erotic (fig. 4):

Because she is socially and sexually stupid, because she is innocent and because, like the small birds and dogs, she is a pure object, unable to truly speak for herself, she symbolises the creature that can be turned into a toy.²⁷

In a very revealing fashion, the first prepubescent dolls sold on the Japanese market by Orient Industry are named Alice and Mayû (“cocoon”), a reference to the individual’s transitional phase. These child-like dolls are so successful that over the past 15 years, the company has constantly released new models under the same names, available in two versions – open and closed eyes – because the clients “enjoy the idea of buying a sleeping young girl,” explains Kodama, “like Sleeping Beauty,” plunged into a slumber that protects her from the realities of the world of adults.

For the owners of these iconic dolls, childhood is synonymous with recklessness or with its equivalent: stupidity. The dolls’ design is disturbing: their body is but a sketch and their face expresses a mix of absence and stupor. At Orient Industry, the doll heads modeled on a child biomorph (big forehead, small chin) have this particularity that the gap between the eyes is larger than normal, which is a characteristic symptom of Downsyndrome. The doll looks mentally handicapped, which reinforces its appearance of irresponsible being.

When I asked Tsuchiya Hideo about these specific features of the dolls, he explained:

Each and every one of them is my daughter [musume]. When a doll leaves my company, it is as if I entrusted it in someone’s care.

He sometimes used the expression “child entrusted to a childminder” (*satogo*), to emphasize the idea that the dolls are not so much sold as they are “entrusted” to a loving man’s care, who could be her father and who often renames her.²⁸ Passing from the custody of her “biological” father to that of “the baptizing father,” the doll remains a minor.²⁹ The first time you hear it, this paternalistic speech is unsettling.

As I tried to understand why so many men were likely to love an immature girl, Ōkawa Hiroo, founder of 4Woods, gave me the clearest explanation:

I don’t think that this is a taste shared by the majority of Japanese men. In fact, very few people are attracted to these dolls and only a small minority of Japanese men buy them. They are people in their thirties, who feel close to the otaku culture, who have grown up reading

²⁶ A sentence that would often come up during the interviews I have had with doll owners (Sakai Mitsugi, Taabō, Nishimaki Tōru, Hyōdo Yoshitaki) and with the editor-in-chief of the magazine *I-Doloid* (Kawamura Chikahiro), who is a big fan of love dolls.

²⁷ Shibusawa Tatsuhiko, *Shōjo korekushon josetsu* (Introduction aux collections de jeunes filles) [1972], Tōkyō, ChūōKōronsha, 1985, p. 12-13.

²⁸ The person giving the love doll a new home has the right to rename it, in keeping with a custom that was popular during the 19th century up until the post-war period, which had the bride change her first name after her marriage. Cf. Laurence Caillet, *La Maison Yamazaki*, Paris, Plon, 1991, p. 404.

²⁹ When the owner of a doll no longer wants it, he can send it back to her biological father, in other words Orient Industry. The sales agreement encourages owners to “return the package,” euphemistically referred to as “return to the birth house” (*sato-gaeri*).

mangas and living in a virtual world: they have no interest in real women. They only have feelings for fictional, imaginary characters.

The clients want something close to a chimera, because, and this is confirmed by Ōkawa, they are *otakus* and therefore desire something designed in their image: *kirudore*³⁰ (an “eternal child”).

Thus is outlined the central idea of my proposition: the doll looks like a child because it is designed as a reflection of its owner. It is the inverted mirror of the social orders to which they are subjected – to become an independent, successful adult who earns enough money to start a family – in a context of economic crisis that intensifies the pressures, up to a breaking point.³¹ The doll indicates, in spectacularly immature forms, that its owner has joined the dissidents. This is what researcher Thomas LaMarre calls the “strategy of refusal,” which he considers as inseparable from a form of regression in which the *otaku* gets “stuck in this period of sexual transition, adolescence,”³² marked by obsession and helplessness. He refuses to “evolve,” Takagi confirms (fig. 5):

Repressed men spontaneously develop a taste for beings that cannot talk, such as pets or dolls, and plunge deeper and deeper into the world of “entertainment”.

In the world of illusion and game, dolls provide utopia utopian shelter for their owners. “Like guardian angels, dolls will never let their owners down and will never age. They will always be here for them. They can also become sex partners,” declares Ōkawa, emphasising the following idea: in its ethereal essence, the love doll must be consistent with a dream and be impossible. The younger it is, the more the relation becomes unreal. The younger it is, the wider the gap between the two “worlds of belonging” that are the social world and the fictional world, within which the *otakus* collectively establish their identity. The question is: why do the *otakus* maintain such transgressive relationships with these “doubles”?

The taste for the forbidden: childhood, innocence and “strangeness”

Not only do the dolls sold in Japan look prepubescent, but their owners also call them, “my girl” (a synonym for “young virgin”), as if to emphasise the vulnerable aspect of these facsimiles of children, which are left defenseless in the hands of men, who gladly describe themselves as “perverts” (*hentai*) and post pictures of their “girls” in school uniform on the Internet, forcing them to show their underpants or breasts.³³ These pictures usually go together with comments filled

³⁰ *Kirudore* is an *otaku* neologism borrowed from the famous anime *SkyCrawlers* (2008) directed by Oshii Mamoru.

³¹ Janice Brown, “Re-framing “Kawaii”: Interrogating Global Anxieties Surrounding the Aesthetic of “Cute” in Japanese Art and Consumer Products,” *International Journal of the Image*, vol. 1, 2011, no. 2, p. 10.

³² Thomas LaMarre, “*Otaku* movement,” in Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian (dir.), *Japan After Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990s to the Present*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2006, p. 377.

³³ Takagi’s photographs (founder of Trotlla) that illustrate this article are quite representative of those posted by doll owners on the blogs dedicated to their “girls” (cf. Agnès Giard, *Un désir d’humain*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2016, p. 152-157 et 176-178). They stage the doll as a living being taking a bath, eating, walking or fighting against invisible forces. For lack of space, I cannot decipher these images, but I introduce them here in the hope that they inspire further anthropological studies.

with emotions: “Taking pictures of her growing up makes me a happy father,” tells the author of the photograph entitled “Portrait of a virgin.”³⁴ For Kodama:

Users see themselves as fathers. It is their way of expressing the deep intimacy that they have achieved with the doll. It happens that at first, they only thought of her in a sexual way. But as time goes by...

I am surprised that an incestuous relation may seem more acceptable to them, or even more romantic. Kodama nods in agreement.

In fact, the reason why most users call their doll “my child” is because they are ashamed of having a doll as a sex partner. So they pretend that their love doll is their daughter.

According to Kodama, users pretend that they are the doll’s father to avoid any suspicion. However, it is a safe bet that the expression “my child” does not fool anyone and that it is part of a thrilling hide-and-seek game with social conventions. On the pretext of keeping up the appearances, the users who stage “the doll’s innocence” have fun casting doubt on the nature of their images and “casually” make them scandalous. For researcher Christine Yano, this subversive inclination to *sado-cute* (“a mix of cuteness and sado-masochism”³⁵) constitutes an essential motive of the *otaku* culture.

Marked by impediment (what we could call *double-bind*), the scenario chosen by doll owners revolves around the notion of impossible love: to love a child, or even worse, one’s own daughter or little sister, is unacceptable. As if to emphasise this fact, most manufacturers cast a puritan veil on the possible uses of their immature dolls. For instance, Trotla,³⁶ founded in 2006, which sells models between 114 and 144 centimetres tall, equipped with a vulval slit, although there is no vagina: they are impenetrable. The realistic aspect of their genitalia is superficial, which allows Takagi to design his love dolls as “artworks.” “They are not functional, he says. But...” one can rub oneself against it. The dolls produced by Photogenic doll³⁷ (established in 2003) cannot be penetrated either and their designer, Natori Sachio, vehemently refuses their inclusion into the category of love dolls, as if to protect them. They are dolls designed to be loved, he insists, so that they do not fall in the wrong hands. His latest creation, named ALICE (*Alternative Little Intelligence Cybernetics Exoskeleton*) is a 123 centimetres tall “humanoid” with a foam body and silicon head, which he presents both as a “very beautiful girl” and a “robot girl cuddly toy” designed to be hugged.

Up until 2013 (date on which their operations ceased), Orient Industry also produced dolls made out of stuffed cloth, the soft name of which – *Lala dolls* – clearly refers to infantilism. These dolls are not sold on the same sales site as the love dolls and the company carefully conceals the fact that they can be used as masturbatory instruments.³⁸ On the website, the pictures are taken from calculated angles, so that their vagina remains hidden. The company prefers to keep the nature of these dolls “secret,” Kodama confides. Nonetheless, he kindly gives me the information relating to their anatomy. The existence of a slit between their thighs is

34 [Online] <http://www.orient-doll.com/photocon2012/detail.php?pid=67> [accessed 12 September 2016].

35 Christine Yano, “Wink on Pink: Interpreting Japanese Cute as It Grabs the Global Headlines,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 68, no. 3, 2009, p. 686.

36 [Online] <http://www.trotla.net> [accessed 12 September 2016].

37 [Online] <http://www.photogenicdoll.com/specenglish.html> [accessed 12 September 2016].

38 The only hint one can find on the website indicates: “We also produce a frameless model on demand.” The impenetrable (“frameless”) *lala doll* is then optional. [Online] <http://www.orient-doll.com/m/lineup/laladoll10.htm> [accessed 19 January 2014].

not subjected to an absolute ban, but rather to a game of innuendos that aims to preserve uncertainty. The point is to suggest. On the company's website homepage, the first sentences of the introduction state that "*Lala dolls* are in no way exclusively reserved for men. They are designed to soothe the heart and body of all the men and women who love dolls."³⁹

At 4Woods, dolls with a child biomorph are also sold on a separate page – called *Naughty dolls*⁴⁰ – and are disguised as elves, cat-girls or mutants, as if to prevent its clients from having naughty thoughts. Kodama maliciously declares: "This is not a little girl, it is a 400 year-old elf!" In the Kingdom of illusions, children are deceptive. As always, they must look pure, in other words excessively young, so that the game in which they are involved remains occult and the appearances are saved. For instance, the company named Apricot declares that it exclusively targets people who want to possess "innocent young girls" (*adokenai shōjo*). The 132 centimetres tall bodies are exact reproductions of the morphology of prepubescent children, whose "shapeless breasts mesmerise the men who are attracted to virgins in bloom."⁴¹ Although these dolls are mostly designed to "soothe, be dressed up, sleep against them, take pictures of them and enjoy their beauty," they can be penetrated, but this precise piece of data is hard to find.⁴² The company Make Pure⁴³ exclusively sells underage dolls between 100 and 120 centimetres tall. They are called *Pure dolls*, as if to emphasise this point: their age implies that they are to remain intact. It is up to the client to comply with the symbolic limit defined by the manufacturer. It is important to note that *Pure dolls* are penetrable, although their vagina is not provided: should the client decide to make them "operational," the manufacturer would not know about it.

This may seem absurd. However, the marketing strategies of concealment result from a real logic: while they try to preserve the dark side of the product, they have to orchestrate their sales. The customer must not be deceived, so they give leeway: they decide how to *use* his doll. Or not. It is especially up to the customer to withdraw in this area of uncertainty represented by the unsaid. Be it *Lala*, *Naughty*, or *Pure*, the doll only exists in this grey area.

Somehow, the love doll reminds us of these voyeur cafés (*nozokibeya*), where waitresses in skirts pretend not to notice that they walk on a mirror. The clients only look at the reflection of their underpants surreptitiously. Would they look more openly, they would give the presence of a mirror away and the system would become meaningless. The juvenile doll – like any human being – should be falsely unaware of the power of what is between their legs, in order to remain an object of desire, meant to "please."⁴⁴ Since the client also likes to pretend that he is innocent, it is crucial that this doll looks like she is keeping a secret. By concealing on their website all data relating to its sexual use, manufacturers thus spare the illusion of free rein that the client can invest, because they conceal any hint on the fact that the underage doll was designed to be used in a deviant way. The chance to be "dumbfounded" when undressing the doll, while hiding behind the impunity of a

39 [Online] <http://www.orient-doll.com/laladoll> [accessed 19 January 2014].

40 [Online] <http://naughty.4woods.jp> [accessed 12 September 2016].

41 [Online] <http://www.apricot-doll.com> [accessed 12 September 2016].

42 Apricot provides a vagina "made out of an irresistibly soft and elastic material."

43 [Online] <http://www.makepure.com> [accessed 12 September 2016].

44 Keith Russell, "The Glimpse and Fan Service: New Media, New Aesthetics," *International Journal of the Humanities*, vol. 6, no. 5, 2008, p. 105-110.

conventional ignorance represents indeed for buyers one of the attractive traits of the doll. Why?

As it happens, *otakus* frequently introduce themselves as “pure-hearted gentlemen,”⁴⁵ proudly asserting their virgin-status. Following a dual process of reaction and adaptation to the norm, their survival instinct leads them to adopt the extreme behaviour of people who refuse any involvement in reality. In opposition to the world where humans produce and reproduce, *otakus* build an “ideal world”: the world of (free) game, liberated from every material consideration; and of (free) love, liberated from biological constraints. With a doll, especially when it looks prepubescent, the relationship can only be sterile, therefore erotic. The assumed deviance of *otakus* thus goes together with a challenging discourse: to quote Marika Moisseeff, their activities are “activities of ‘artificial’ production, in other words, they are not determined by the ‘instinctual’ requirement of survival of the species”⁴⁶ and therefore fully unalienate themselves.

Cunningly inverting perspectives, the *otakus* turn their status of stigmatised people into something positive. Someone blames them for being frustrated losers? Out of defiance, they declare that they do not need real women, whom they call *mendōkusai*⁴⁷: “unattractive,” “annoying,” exasperating.” With their dream bodies, the love dolls have at least the advantage of being *hi-jitsuzai*, literally: “nonexistent.”⁴⁸ With them, nothing is possible outside the context of consented illusion. “In a way, these dolls are tools allowing for a re-creation of the real, according to a configuration that is soothing for the mind. If I may venture the comparison, they are instruments of belief,” explains Takagi. On his website, the various models are given code names that resemble names of machine parts: LuJ1 type-A, ME-1, MJ-3. The dolls are not people. They are even less so given that their juvenile aspect, excessively emphasised, confronts the user with a kind of

45 The term *gentleman* is widespread in the world of *otakus*, who refer to themselves with words borrowed from the war aristocracy lexicon: *shinshi* and *tonogata* (equivalents of *gentleman*, his lordship, milord, etc). The expression “pure-hearted *gentleman*” (*Pyuanakokorowo motta shinshi*) is now so standardised that the simulation game *Dorimukurabu* (Dream Club) – which invites users to have a relationship with an interactive girlfriend – asks the following question before every new game: “Do you have a pure heart?”

46 Marika Moisseeff, “Mère originaire ou lolita éternelle : les images du corps féminin dans la fiction contemporaine,” *Journal du Mauss*, 12 July 2012. [Online] http://www.journaldumauss.net/spip.php?page=imprimer&id_article=911 [accessed 2 March 2015].

47 I have personally collected these remarks during interviews with doll users like Taabō or Hyōdo. They are backed up by Takatsuki Yasushi, in *Nankyokuichi go densetsu dacchi waifu kara rabu dōru made tokushu yōto aigen ningyō zengoshi* (La numéro un du pôle Sud. Des dutchwife aux love dolls, histoire contemporaine des poupées spécialement utilisées pour être aimées), Tōkyō, Basilico, 2008, p. 197.

48 The expression *hi-jitsuzai sei-shōnen*, “nonexistent youth” refers to the graphical representation of minors and was introduced in 2010 by Ishihara, the conservative mayor of Tōkyō, in the first version of a regional law on the sale of anime and manga to people under 18 years old. Law 156 was nicknamed by its detractors “law of nonexistent crimes.” Cf. Mark McLelland, “Thought Policing or the Protection of Youth? Debate in Japan over the ‘Non-Existent Youth Bill.’” *International Journal of Comic Art*, no. 13, 2011, p. 348-367; Mark McLelland (ed.), *The End of Cool Japan: Ethical, Legal, and Cultural Challenges to Japanese Popular Culture*, New York, Routledge, 2016, p. 64; Alex Leavitt and Andrea Horbinski, “Even a monkey can understand fan activism: Political speech, artistic expression, and a public for the Japanese dōjin community,” *Praxis*, vol. 10, 2012. [Online] <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/321/311> [accessed 13 March 2017].

vacuity that Okada Toshio – founder of the most famous anime studio (Gainax) and theoretician of the *otaku* movement⁴⁹ – associates with the “lost future” (*ushinawareta mirai*).⁵⁰ The child doll is a being without a past or future. The doll’s “estrangement” power increases with her youth, emptiness, featurelessness, and inaccessibility. As pointed out by doll owners, the most attractive doll is precisely elsewhere or comes from somewhere else, an alien to this world, inviting whoever looks at her to exist in the same way as she does: as an abstraction.

“Beyond moral conducts, a significant part of social behaviours is governed by the search for esteem. Whatever the field of activity considered, only a few escape this social ‘rule.’”⁵¹ Based on this statement made by Alice Le Goff and Christian Lazzeri, I would like to suggest that the strong attraction to child representations in Japan, namely in the field of adult sex dolls or toys, does not result from what the media call a “disturbing Japanese permissiveness,”⁵² or from a “shameful laxity”⁵³ toward pedophile behaviours, but rather from a dynamic of adjustment between social norms supported by public opinion and people defying the system, who appropriate the stereotype that is ascribed to them, so as to turn it into a positive provocation. Representing a highly publicised minority, *otakus* are regarded as immature. Every denial of recognition results in an attempt to shape one’s personality in the face of all the norms. When they “play with dolls,” *otakus* aren’t just braving the majority: they are collectively shaping an identity that is the reversed reflection of the usual criteria of success. The *Lolita* aesthetic thus contributes to the radicalisation of what they present as a lifestyle: to live as a couple with a representation. It is crucial that this representation takes on the unrealistic appearance of a little girl – impossible to possess by definition – since the *otakus* define themselves at odds with social values, because of their interpretation of missing, renunciation and loss.

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49 He is famous for having drawn researchers’ attention to the *otaku* movement with his book *Otaku-gakunyûmon* (Introduction to *otaku* studies), in 1996. Cf. Thomas LaMarre, in Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian (eds.), *Japan After Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990s to the Present*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2006, p. 370.

50 Title of a book by Okada Toshio, published in 2002.

51 Alice Le Goff and Christian Lazzeri, “Présentation du Dossier,” *Terrains/Théories*, no. 4, 2016. [Online] <http://teth.revues.org/659> [accessed 13 September 2016].

52 Arnaud Vaulerin, “Le Japon veut mettre fin au laxisme sur la pornographie infantile,” *Libération*, 17 June 2014. [Online] http://www.libération.fr/planete/2014/06/17/le-japon-veut-mettre-fin-au-laxisme-sur-la-pornographie-infantile_1043829 [accessed 13 September 2016].

53 Tim Hornyak, “Japan’s ‘Moe’ obsession: the purest form of love, or creepy fetishization of young girls?,” *Japan Times*, 26 July 2014. [Online] <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2014/07/26/books/book-reviews/japans-moe-obsession-purest-form-love-creepy-fetishization-young-girls/#.V9ifp0XWEae> [accessed 13 September 2016].

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fig. 1



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fig. 2



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fig. 3



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fig. 4



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fig. 5



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