

Article

Kawaii Aesthetics from Japan to Europe: Theory of the Japanese “Cute” and Transcultural Adoption of Its Styles in Italian and French Comics Production and Commodified Culture Goods

Marco Pellitteri

School of Journalism and Communication, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai 200085, China; marco.pellitteri@gmail.com

Received: 19 April 2018; Accepted: 26 June 2018; Published: 4 July 2018



Abstract: Kawaii culture and aesthetics are a peculiarity of contemporary Japan and move across mass media, impulse goods, creative industries, and juvenile tendencies. The concept, graphic styles, and commodities related to a kawaii culture are composite. This article, in its first part, outlines the theories and general features of this cultural trend in Japan and as it is framed in most western countries. In the second part, it also focuses on whether and how the concept and the related styles and commodities have found a place in Europe, with particular reference to Italy and France. These two countries, in fact, have been since the late 1970s the key markets in the Euro-American region for Japanese contemporary culture for youths, namely Japanese comics (generally called manga) and commercial animation (or anime). Anime and manga are, in effect, an integral part of the theoretical discourse on kawaii in the two markets considered, as it is discussed accordingly in the second part of the article. In its last section, the article addresses the impact of kawaii styles on youth cultures in Europe, which is, although limited, multidimensional: it has involved spontaneous drawings among children, a certain amateur and professional comics production, amateur and commercial animation, toys and a diverse merchandising, street art, and fashion design.

Keywords: kawaii; youth cultures; Japan; Europe; trans-acculturation; manga and anime

1. Introduction

A culture of cuteness is widespread in Japan and part of a transcultural phenomenon that has, at various degrees, become indigenous to groups of distinguishing fans in Europe. The peculiar expression of cuteness-related aesthetics in Japan is called kawaii,¹ on which, in the first part of this article, I provide a theoretical discussion. In the following parts of the essay, an exploration and description of children’s and comics creators’ artwork in Italy and France will be presented as evidence of the adoption and adaptation of a kawaii culture in the two countries. The so-called Euromanga (comics made by European creators but influenced by the visual and/or narrational clichés of Japanese comics, which are usually named manga) and the wide popularity of Japanese animation are also

¹ This article is in part devoted to an analysis of the concept/term kawaii and of kawaii aesthetics, things, and commodities. I shall not make use of italics to underline the word, because I use it systematically throughout the text. By a convergent logic, I will almost always use kawaii instead of cute, because the English translations of the Japanese word do not catch the many nuances of the original term. The same treatment is accorded to other Japanese keywords such as manga and anime, introduced in the article’s abstract, and in general for all terms: if they are rendered in italics, they are only at their first appearance.

further evidence of the fusion of Japanese and European aesthetics in certain fields of youth culture and visual-narrative media in general.

This phenomenon is not entirely new: many other processes of creolisation and transculturation could be analysed, drawing from the past or from present time; however, the one here discussed is peculiar. Among the elements of interest in the graft (Pellitteri 2002) of Japanese aesthetics into the local youth culture by Italian and French fans, practitioners, and professional artists, there are: (1) the cultural causes, which are not based on a process of acculturation/assimilation from a dominant culture to a dominated one, as it happens during colonial dynamics; and (2) the cultural outcomes, which profoundly differ between the manifestations of this culture in Japan and the interpretations of it in the countries here considered, whose practitioners are not just receivers but active users who have interpolated the Japanese *kawaii* aesthetics with local elements, in a process that is still in progress; (3) the socio-demographics and width of the audiences interested: while in Japan the culture of *kawaii* is quintessentially a female-oriented one, widespread across a wide age range and definitely mainstream in the country, in Italy and France *kawaii* things and aesthetics are relegated to niche subcultures and more specifically belong to a (still, mainly female) youth culture and to a little girls' culture, just episodically expanding to the adult world professional forms of expression.

The discussion on the *kawaii* that I will conduct is certainly not the first of its kind: even just thinking of contributions in European languages, many analyse the topic from within different disciplines, providing sociological conceptualisations as well as experimental/clinical evidence on the psychological processes elicited by objects considered as cute or on the commodification of the *kawaii* as a set of clichéd styles into merchandised products (Pellitteri 2002; Pellitteri [2008] 2010; Sabin 2004; Sherman et al. 2009; Borggreen 2011; Sherman et al. 2013). It is, therefore, a little puzzling to me that the authors of a more recent article claimed that “the academic literature offers no significant effort to describe and understand the concept of *cute*” (Granot et al. 2014, p. 68), not mentioning the six sources I have just listed within parentheses and despite that article itself mainly provides a ten-page dense and multidisciplinary literature review of other, numerous, previous and valid contributions focusing precisely on theoretical and empirical, multidisciplinary research on the cute; while offering a bare one-page “Discussion” that does nothing but summing up the insight emerging from the literature review itself.

On the contrary, and besides the sources aforementioned, the reader should refer to a special issue of the *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* (Dale 2016b). The volume is a thorough and comprehensive review and discussion of “cute studies”—that is, studies on the concept of cute. This extensive set of contributions, and especially the introductory essay by Dale (Dale 2016a), teaches or reminds us, among the many elements of information and analysis: (1) about the inter- and transcultural dimensions of the aesthetics of cuteness in the East Asian region—the cute and its Japanese declinations are not part of a dynamic that interests Japan and western countries only but, on the very contrary, strongly involves the Asian region as well; (2) that the word cute in English originally holds negative nuances, an element that should be taken into account in current analyses; (3) certain physiological/psychological bases for the feelings of attachment or attraction to objects or animals or persons deemed as cute; (4) important distinctions between the manifestations of cute products and visual stimuli circulating in the consumer cultures that originate in the creative industries of western countries and those of *kawaii* products, and visual stimuli circulating in the consumer cultures that originate in the Japanese creative industries and are then disseminated in many Asian and non-Asian countries; (5) a fundamental set of differences between a “field of cute” and a “field of *kawaii*” (these definitions are mine), according to which it is sociologically and experimentally studied that the implications of *kawaii* are other and deeper than those of cute; namely, this is explained by Hiroshi Nittono (2016), included in the journal issue here mentioned.

The discourse of this article is, up to a point, conducted in the wake of that set of analyses.

2. Kawaii as a Composite Concept

In the study of phenomena that are not—or not yet—fully legitimate in the scholarship or renown in the general press and public opinion, it is customary to introduce the main concepts of the subject by providing at least summary genealogies, definitions, and labelling. A habit which, while it can perhaps be thought of as superfluous by specialists, is undoubtedly useful to readers who are not. This is also true in the case of this article's main concept. Therefore, before tackling the core topics of this essay—kawaii aesthetics and their presence in Europe—I start it by reminding that kawaii is a Japanese adjective, as the reader has already foreseen. Nowadays, kawaii has a relatively agreed-upon range of meanings that go from “cute” to “sweet”, from “tender” to “childish”, from “innocent” and “gentle” to “honest” and “soft”, and from “small” to “lovely”; more rarely are the meanings associated to the word negative, such as “clumsy” or “stupid” (Lieber Milo 2017).

An adjective, then; but a word that is also utilised in the non-Japanese scholarship as a noun, i.e., “the kawaii”. Not so different, after all, from the way the late Italian art critic and philosopher Gillo Dorfles distinguished kitsch things and “the Kitsch” as an aesthetic category (Dorfles 1968). Similarly, in this essay, I will refer to kawaii things as well as to the kawaii intended as a general concept to which those kawaii things, more or less cogently, refer and by which are informed.

However, first, as I suggested above, genealogy, definitions, labelling.

My underlining the necessity to provide semantic genealogies and theoretical and/or operational definitions of the notions that will be discussed thereafter comes from the fact that in all the sources I have been consulting since 2000, when I first began to study and then publish on kawaii, this device has often been particularly zealous; as if an in-depth look at the linguistic origin of a word were crucial to a greater understanding of the phenomenon currently labelled with that word. Two of the latest—and indeed highly informative—contributions to this end are an article (Nitto 2016) and a conference paper (Lieber Milo and Nitto 2017). In them, the semantic nuances currently associated with the word kawaii are shown as deriving from a long history that dates to the 11th century's *Pillow Book* by Sei Shōnagon and evolves until the 19th century, when the acceptations of the adjective came closer to those that are associated to the word nowadays (cf. also Burdelski and Mitsuhashi 2010). In this sense, those contributions conform to the very same formula of the scholarship on kawaii in the last fifteen years. The information on the word has not changed much and is repeated by most authors, more or less exhaustively. Including this writer, up to a point. In fact, while I am not willing to delve into the many and multilayered historical steps that brought the word kawaii to its current set of meanings and nuances, I will selectively follow the consolidated trend and provide information and, hopefully, insight, on the concept, with the function to introduce the reader to the final theme of this article—kawaii aesthetics in France and Italy.

In contemporary Japanese, the adjective kawaii comes from the noun *kawaisa* (“sweetness”, “nicety”). The word has many meanings, depending on the context and the topic of the sentence in which it appears. However, we can say that it mainly points out, in the context here under examination, an emotional attachment to creatures such as chubby pups and roundish objects of small dimensions; the word is more often than not associated to a girl/girlish culture, as in opposed to a supposedly “manlier” aesthetics (Lieber Milo 2017); and it has been studied, as a contemporary phenomenon, as coming from youth subcultures, with particular reference to female teenagers (Kinsella 1995).

The concept of kawaii and what is marked as kawaii-like in most instances contain and involve a hyper-consumerist stress which, in the words of cultural anthropologist Anne Allison, is “technologically advanced and nomadically portable” (Allison 2004, p. 35). The category of kawaii/kawaisa can frame a peculiar type of cyclical conflict between the adult world and the young Japanese, and especially young females, born after the early 1950s. The themes of such contrast have been renewed from the end of the 1960s onwards and include an unease for the stereotypical gender roles imposed on women in Japanese society as well as the pressure about becoming wives and mothers at an early age. The evolution of a kawaii culture has never stopped, consisting also of media fads such as the *Tamagotchi*: developed by Aki Maita and Akihiro Yokoi and commercialised

since 1996 by Bandai, the Tamagotchi was an electronic capsule (*tamago* means “egg”) whose software simulated a puppy needing constant care. The phenomenon of a commodified kawaii culture then moved over the *Pokémon* monsters’ in-built-designed roundness, puppy-like look, big eyes, and soft and graceful shapes. Like *Hello Kitty* or other childish-looking characters, they feature a design easy to reproduce for millions of little ones in their private drawing activities. (More on this later.)

In studying the kawaii in non-Japanese environments, a preliminary semantic factor regarding the difference between the Japanese context and non-Japanese observers must be considered:

The use in the western [European-American] scholarship of the word kawaii and of all its acceptations (kawaii culture, the concept of kawaii, aesthetics of kawaii, kawaii phenomenology, etc.) is a functioning simplification used by scholars to label with a precise name an aspect of reality. [. . .] To the Japanese, expressions like “kawaii culture”, “concept of kawaii”, etc. can appear weird [. . .]. The only exception is in Japanese sociologists who are familiar with the (mostly western) scholarly works in which the word is used. In the Japanese language there exists a good deal of [. . .] [definitions] replacing what westerners call kawaii culture. [. . .] Kawaii is instead a common and quite old adjective. Hence it does not [necessarily and only] belong to a juvenile slang and one should be careful enough to not use it solely in relation to new generations. The adjective kawaii is such an ordinary word that several common variants exist. To sum it up, it is us [Europeans-Americans] who speak of “kawaii concept” and “kawaii culture”, while in Japan it essentially remains an adjective which, without designating an object, has little to define. [Martorella and Pellitteri 2002, p. 268, in Pellitteri 2002. Translated from Italian].

We should, therefore, attempt to understand kawaii culture framing it as a “kawaii sentiment”: an attitude toward things, cubs, or persons that is informed by the category of *kawaisa*. In doing so, we need to examine the kawaii in its original Japanese context of development, but this is a necessary step to later recalibrate the concept—and its commodified applications—in the European contexts: without an understanding of the kawaii’s original cultural milieu of birth, our comprehension of its presence in European pop (sub)cultures would be maimed.

I believe that a necessary step in a critical survey on the genealogy of the Japanese cuteness could, or perhaps should, at least briefly mention and illustrate the work of Shūzō Kuki (Kuki 1930). We could define the adjective kawaii as a mutation/evolution from the concept of *iki* (“grace”, in the sense of aesthetic elegance), a term that is not used today and was instead common in Japan’s Edo period. Following Kuki’s discourse, we can argue that the kawaii has some points in common with the *iki*. For instance, a certain kind of liberation from conventions through pleasure. In comparison to the *iki*, in the kawaii there is a push toward garishness and above all a proximity to sweetness; but, just like the *iki*, the kawaii keeps a strong link with the notion of *distinction*. A typical element of the kawaii is indeed the search for such distinction: the desire and aspiration to being different, but not against something, as happens in countercultures. For further considerations on the *iki* and the ways Kuki’s writings have been used in recent scholarship for theorisations of the kawaii, cf. Martorella 2002; Botz-Bornstein 2011, XXIII ff.

Another important element to understand the origin of a kawaii culture is the Takarazuka revue. This relation does exist, but it is indirect and passes through the work of influential artist Osamu Tezuka (1928–1989), as I explain in a few lines. Takarazuka revue’s origins date back to 1914. That year the entrepreneur Ichizō Kobayashi decided to found, with his wife, a theatre made up only by girls, strictly virgins, to increase the attraction of a small town, Takarazuka, not too far from Ōsaka (Robertson 1998). At a first look it may be difficult to see, in the Takarazuka revue—either that of the 1920s and 1930s or that of present time—explicit signals of the kawaii. Moreover, today the Takarazuka revue has assumed narrational and aesthetic tones that have moved far beyond its originally more idealised, abstractly graceful styles. The actresses impersonating male and female figures are, in current Takarazuka revue, slender and adult-like, for instance. The Takarazuka revue has, today, also become the symbol of an androgynous aesthetic model, an indifference to gender in the name of a superior aesthetic

ideal, as is clear when seeing the scenes, costumes, and the actresses' movements displayed in any of the many shows staged by the five crews of the company. In addition, this should not astound, considering the insistence on the identification of Japanese ethics in an aesthetical, comprehensive form (Martorella 2002). However, the revue can, or perhaps should, also be seen as a monument to a culture that originally was informed by the *kawaii*, characterised by an "extreme" concept of femininity and childish innocence. Here enters Osamu Tezuka. He was born in Tokyo, but he soon moved with his family to Takarazuka, where, as documented in all biographies on the artist or in any good book on the history of Japanese comics (Schodt 1983; Piovan 1996; McCarthy 2013), he frequently saw Takarazuka revue shows with his mother and met some actresses. The visual and content-related impact of the aesthetics of this form of theatre on the young Tezuka would later produce an effect on several features of the artist's work and on the settings, character design, and plotlines of some of his manga stories. One in particular is in deep resonance with the aesthetics of the Takarazuka revue, *Ribbon no kishi* ("The knight with the ribbon", 1953), a story that is considered a template for modern Japanese comics for girls, or *shōjo* manga. Elements such as the characters' clothes, their wide eyes and marked eyelash, the graceful body shapes, the plot, all bear resemblances with the overall aesthetic and thematic mood of many Takarazuka revue shows. If we add that the aesthetics and visual motifs of many *shōjo* manga since the 1970s are in accord with the *kawaii*, as well as with the standards established by Tezuka via the influence on him of the Takarazuka revue, we cannot avoid acknowledging this visual and thematic circularity.

Therefore, the *kawaii* is not to be merely seen as a subculture, but rather as an integrated and fundamental part of Japanese general and popular/massified culture. A hyper-consumerist and technologically developed society such as the Japanese one appears as needing the resources (also) of a *kawaii* culture to promote consumption and the development of that consumerist system. This culture of *kawaii* is integrated in Japanese society. It has contributed to the birth and growth of some of those highly profitable creative industries that have allowed the flourishing of a wealthy society which has known wealth more than any other since the 1970s (Ōmae 2001); so much so that *kawaii* things and commodified fictional characters, such as aforementioned Hello Kitty, have been discussed in relation to their presence in international newspaper headlines and as catalysts for the boosting of certain fields of Japan's creative industries and overall appeal (Yano 2009).²

On the other hand, and clearly, the *kawaii* is not a concept, in the Japanese debate, far from criticism and analysis. Since the 1990s, *kawaii*-themed trends and the very usage of the word in the youth languages have been discussed and investigated by Japanese intellectuals and academics, among whom Kazuma Yamane (1993); Sōichi Masubuchi (1994); Eiji Ōtsuka (1997); Reiko Koga (2006); Inuhiko Yomota (2006); Takamasa Sakurai (2009); Shinji Miyadai (2010), and others. Along with the differences in perspective among the mentioned scholars, a common trait in all their approaches to the topic is that the *kawaii* (as a word, concept, set of trends) is theorised as a relevant element of Japanese culture in the 20th and 21st centuries.

2.1. *Kawaii as a Pattern Crossing Contemporary Youth Culture*

I touched upon the fact that *kawaii* things, characters, and commodities—as a peculiarity of Japanese contemporary culture—move across mass media, impulse goods, creative industries, and juvenile tendencies. The basic concept, visual styles, and merchandise related to an often-mentioned *kawaii* culture are extremely composite. While this article is outlining the general features of this

² The same author has later on published a monograph on the birth and commercialisation of the Hello Kitty intellectual property in Japan and its success the United States (Yano 2013). Yano's book is a rich anthropological and mediological study of the franchise's history and its impact on wide consumer audiences. It focuses on the US context, that is, on a specific national environment, and it does it thoroughly. However, the way the analysis is conducted may at times lead the non-Japanese and non-American readers to wrongly assume that discussing the impact of this (or any other) Japanese pop-cultural phenomenon in the United States holds a universal validity in terms of cultural analysis of the consumer cultures.

cultural phenomenon in Japan, it also focuses on whether and how the notion of *kawaii*'s styles and commodities found a place in Europe, with some particular references to Italy and France.

These two countries, in fact, have been for the last forty years the key markets in the West (there included the Americas) for a commodified Japanese contemporary culture for youths, namely Japanese comics (generally called *manga*, that is, precisely, “comics” in Japanese) and commercial animation (or, as they are often shortened in Japanese, *anime*, a buzzword that is highly widespread in foreign languages too to designate Japanese commercial animation). The impact of *kawaii* styles onto growing fringes of European youth cultures is, although indeed limited, multidimensional: it has involved spontaneous drawings among children, a certain amateur and professional comics production, amateur and commercial animation, a multi-faceted merchandising, toys, street art, and fashion design (Pellitteri 2002, 2018; Koma 2013a, 2013b, 2014).

In a book on the impact of Japanese visual cultures in western contexts (Pellitteri [2008] 2010), I identified three main thematic and aesthetic patterns in the ways entertainment forms such as *manga* and *anime* arrived and were perceived in Europe. I called one of them “the model of the Infant”. The word *infant* comes from the Latin *infans*, *infantis*, i.e., someone (a newborn) unable to speak. The infant is here intended in a symbolic fashion, as the typical *kawaii* puppet, which resembles a cute puppy; or the technological object requiring constant attention, such as aforementioned *Tamagotchi*, an electric creature asking for non-stop care; or *Hello Kitty*, so helpless that it is drawn without the mouth in order to make it look more infantile, exteriorly as well as etymologically; and *Pikachū*, the well-known little Pokémon rodent that is only able to say the syllables of its name, repeating “pika-pika-pika-chu” as in a litany. It is not a coincidence that the prototype and, still today, the apotheosis of a *kawaii* style in the world of imaginary characters of consumption stemming from Japanese companies is indeed *Hello Kitty*, which became a multimedia star since the early 1980s and is loved today across the wealthy world and increasingly appreciated and present in developing countries in East/Southeast Asia and the Middle East. The worldwide licensing rights of *Hello Kitty* are since 1976 a property of the Japanese company Sanrio; the character has become globally famous as an emblem of the *kawaii*. Besides *Hello Kitty*, Sanrio has conceived a microcosm of similar characters: *Badtz-Marū*, *Kerokeroppi*, *Airu no Pekkle*, *My Melody*, *Pochacco*, *Pudding*, and others. The merchandise of *Hello Kitty* represents a prodrome of what later has happened with the Pokémon. *Hello Kitty* integrates all the characteristics of a *kawaii* object: it (or “she”) is small, defenseless, in simple pastel colors, and its looks have the proportions of a newborn—large head, small body. In short, it is designed to inspire tenderness and affection.

Italian scholar Cristiano Martorella, pointing out that no mouth is ever drawn on *Hello Kitty* and that its face is basically expressionless, argues that children can

project their emotions [on the *kawaii*-style characters and dolls] [. . .] much more easily. If the child is sad, it sees *Hello Kitty* grow sad, if he/she is happy, it sees the character smile. This is the power of imagination, and it is much stronger with simpler and more essential graphical representations. After all, it was Italo Calvino who proposed lightness, rapidity, visibility, multiplicity as virtues of the new millennium [. . .]. And this kind of design corresponds to such demands. (Martorella 2002, pp. 172–73; the reference is to Calvino 1993)

This is a phenomenon similar to the “Kulešov effect”. Described by Alfred Hitchcock in his conversations with François Truffaut (Truffaut 1967), the Kulešov effect was the result of an experiment on cinema editing. It consisted of showing a close-up of actor Ivan Mosjoukin followed by the image of a dead newborn: at that point, the observer would see some compassion on the face of Mosjoukin. Then the image of the child was replaced with that of a dish of food and now the observer would perceive an expression of appetite on the face of the actor. Finally, when the image of the food was replaced with that of an attractive woman, the observer would interpret the face of Mosjoukin as showing some sexual desire. In what I would like to define the “*Hello Kitty* effect”, the iconographic suggestions—which should reveal the feelings of the expressionless character to the observer—are replaced with the state of mind of the observing child, who reads on the impassive face of the kitten

feelings defined according to the child itself's current humor. As Yukio Fujimi concludes (Fujimi 1998, pp. 18–20)—following the theory of psychologist Donald W. Winnicott (1971)—figures such as the Pokémon or Hello Kitty are visible as “transitional objects”, points of contact between the external world and one's own self, a way to make concrete reality interact with one's own imagination. In that, it appears that we move further from a more institutional genealogy according to which the psychological processes embedded in the relationship with a kawaii character/object are related to the theorisation scientist Konrad Lorenz had established between neotenia and instinctive affection in his classic *Kindchenschema* (Lorenz 1942, as also reported in Lieber Milo and Nittono 2017). To this end, it has been empirically proven that feelings and attraction for objects deemed as kawaii in style are socially driven—guided by positive, approach-motivated feelings—rather than purely psychologically driven (Nittono 2016, p. 89 ff.; Kringelbach et al. 2016). The transitionality of kawaii-styled products is also connected to the sentiment of nostalgia for the toys of childhood, which in many cases have round shapes, soft colors, and are generically associated with a sentiment of sweetness and tenderness (Yomota 2006; Dale et al. 2017). It has to be added, however, that analyses on nostalgia and nostalgic practices among adults remembering “Japanese things” of their childhood (robot toys, dolls, stationery, etc.) can be—and it has been—extended far beyond the realm of kawaii styles (Pellitteri 1999, 2018).

Sociologist Nobuyoshi Kurita believes that the kawaii will determine “the future of Japan”, even suggesting that the prosperity or decline of the country may depend on how the creative industry of kawaii objects, narratives, and visual media will look in the near future (ref. in Kageyama 2006). Consumerism in Japan, as I argued above, is extremely distinctive, not only for the quantity of goods and commodities purchased and consumed, but also for the types of products and goods on the market and for the fetishised relationship that Japanese consumers often create with these products. According to Jean Baudrillard, consumption is not a passive mode of satisfaction of needs, a way “of appropriation to oppose against the production process in order to balance naïve patterns of behavior and alienation” (Baudrillard 1968; It. trans. 2004, p. 249); it is “an active mode of relationship not only with the objects but with a community and the world” (ibid.) and an activity “of systematic manipulation of signs” (ibid., p. 250). What is consumed is not so much the object, but rather an idea: what might be called the simulation of a relationship between the object and its owner. Baudrillard argues that consumption is a “total idealist practice” (ibid., p. 254) in which the purchase and in-depth use of the object mean that “a will to live” (ibid.) is hidden in the connection with the subject that is, in turn, also symbolically consumed. The objects, finally, multiply indefinitely because they fill “every moment [with] an absent reality. Consumption [. . .] is based on a lack” (ibid., p. 255).

One of the reasons for the overconsumption of kawaii-themed merchandise would then be the perception of a lack. Not of physical objects but of personal relationships. When they are scarce, the result is a psychologically-induced retreat into objects that in various ways suggest friendly, emotional, supportive relationships, and that are reminiscent of childhood: Hiroto Murasawa, professor at Ōsaka Shōin Women's University, argues that kawaii styles and the acquisition of objects in those styles are symptoms of the fact that those who buy them “do not want to grow up” in their attitude, deemed as “not self-assertive” (ref. in Kageyama 2006). It does not seem a coincidence that many adults and youths—not only children, not only in Japan—are very close to things such as the Tamagotchi (as argued in Allison 2006) and that the video games and toys related to Pokémon and similar franchises sold/sell so well, being based on a plotline in which the monster trainer cultivates a relationship of affection and love with these fictional creatures.

The theory of the lacking space, suggested by media scholar Henry Jenkins regarding the watchers of TV series such as *Star Trek* and then videogamers, could somehow also be tailored to this context. Jenkins (Jenkins 1992; Cassell and Jenkins 1998, pp. 263, 278–79), sensitive to the ideas of Michel De Certeau (1984), links the passion of US-American fans for both television adventure and science-fiction series, and for video games, and the practices of rewriting and sharing places, opinions,

and emotions, to a lack of physical space in the lifestyle of many youths in big cities. Space, missing in physical reality, is replaced by an imaginary space shared with other fans.³

2.2. An Important Distinction in Kawaii Aesthetics: Character and Kyara

Among the many features of manga/anime aesthetics (which strongly inform the kawaii and are by it also mutually nourished), one is particularly cogent in the discourse on kawaii culture and in its declinations and applications in the non-Japanese contexts: the stylised or naturalist morphologies of characters, in connection to the narrative scope of the stories in which they star, the graphic expressiveness, and the marketing strategies of products based on them. This framework is not at all new in Japan or in the West, but its recent developments originate from a debate between two manga scholars, Gō Itō (in Itō 2005) and Eiji Ōtsuka (in Ōtsuka and Ōsawa 2005). The theoretical event prior to this debate is a distinction that has been in place for a while in the field of Japanese scholarship on manga, which is the one between *character* and *chara* (contraction of the former) or, considering the Japanese transliteration, *kyara*. The matter had already been discussed in the 1990s by prominent manga scholar Tomofusa Kure. In some of his works, Kure emphasized the concept of *kyara ga tatte iru*: of a story “with well-defined characters”; that is, in the words of Kure himself, of a narrative “where the heroes are the most important thing” (Kure 1999, p. 31).

The *kyara* is, in the Japanese context, a type of very stylised character, often in animal form, an iconic figure with a recognisable name that lends itself to the most varied kinds of marketing: by its visual design as well as the narratives it conveys, *kyara* can be hugely successful in the creative industries that commodify heroes and figures of manga or anime. In fact, many manga’s main characters, and even today most of the best-known ones, belong to this category. They are allegedly superficial their contents, and, often, they sport kawaii styles. On the other hand, the character is a figure which, since the manga stories of the postwar period by aforementioned Osamu Tezuka, has acquired a status going beyond that of the *kyara*, which is an icon with the function of supporting a comic episode or an action story. The character has risen to become a dramaturgical persona with subtler and subtler facets, in accordance with the evolution of the manga medium’s complexities. From Tezuka on, in fact, manga characters have gained increasing substance, particularly in “story manga”—serialised manga with interconnected episodes, a format introduced in Japan by Tezuka—and in *gekiga*, dramatic-themed manga with rawer styles of drawing.

Itō’s book organizes most of its reasoning on this alleged dichotomy between *kyara* and character: between icons devoted to commercial exploitation and characters with narrative “substance”. The Japanese critic seems to complain about this opposition, commenting that today manga are dominated by the market power of the *kyara*, to the detriment of characters and stories as Tezuka had conceived them. For his part, Ōtsuka notes that criticising the *kyara* means attacking the same creative and commercial process that made the US-American creative industries promote to the wider public iconic characters such as Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck, which after all are nothing other than *kyara*, according to the meaning given here. A related topic, which, however, will not be discussed here, is in the work of French cultural anthropologist Clothilde Sabre (2014), who analyses the development and role of so-called *yuru-kyara* in Japan-located tourism: that is, the kawaii-styled mascots designed to promote locations, towns, or companies. There, *kyara* are almost constantly deprived of any narrative content and only exist in the context of tourism promotion.

It appears that, as underlined by sociologist Kiyomitsu Yui (2006), according to Itō there is a transformation going on from Tezuka’s characters to current *kyara*, in a process of narrative simplification and commercial sophistication, whereas originally the process put at work by Tezuka

³ In a similar fashion, it is possible to connect the success of kawaii- and sd-styles (sd: super-deformed), gadgets, games, ornaments, and mobile phones among many Japanese and non-Japanese to deficient and instinctively longed-for emotional relationships.

had often been the opposite one, with an evolution from kyara to character. Moreover, according to Itō, character and kyara often overlap on each other to form the same narrative figure. To sum up, kyara is a kind of root from which the creator can then develop the elements of the character. Hiroki Azuma has a similar opinion (Azuma 2001) and analyses the kyara from a postmodernist viewpoint, framing it as able to “migrate” from one work to another among the media, unlike characters, which are seen as unable to “escape” from the medium for which they were originally created.

Whereas it is true that Tezuka created his characters adopting various rules of the Disney design, it is also true that, as psychologist Tamaki Saitō suggests (Saitō 2000, pp. 18–22), the rhetorical processes at work in Disney characters—and in other similar animals of US-American animated cartoons—and in the Japanese ones are different. Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck work as metaphors, and kyara such as Doraemon and the Pokémons work as metonymies. The first rhetorical figure is based on shared abstract similarity, the second on an abstract contiguity. It is for this reason that Warner Bros’ Sylvester the Cat can act in adventures where humans are absent, while in their narrations Doraemon and Pikachu “serve” human characters or, as with Hello Kitty, exist outside of a human-referred narrative context (ibid.). Yui and Itō then note that the Tezukian heroes, represented in iconic style, i.e., as kyara, are involved in stories where their substance is not abstract but solid, vulnerable and, at times, mortal. In addition, this is in clear contrast with the actual physiognomy of kyara, which are figures where the concept of mortality is usually not contemplated. Kyara’s physical bodies are usually dehumanised and/or superhumanised, abstract and inanimate (Inoue 2007, pp. 161–85). According to Ōtsuka, the mortal substance of the postwar Japanese kyara is due to the all-Japanese arisen born from the destruction caused by the atomic bombs. It is also true that, from the 1970s, the mortality of post-Tezukian kyara has disappeared: characters such as Doraemon, Qtaro, Arale, Hello Kitty, and Hamtarō, which clearly belong to the kawaii kingdom, have become dolls of carefree fruition and great economic potentiality. The hypothesis that can be here proposed, based on Ōtsuka’s theory, is that the memory of the corporeity offended in the armed conflict is bypassed by more consumerist tendencies, in line with the current times and with the Japanese’s desire to leave the war behind and fully plunge into the postmodernity. However, it is a postmodernity in the broadest sense, frantic and oblivious: because if it were true that, as Anthony Giddens (1990) posits, postmodernity is a radicalised modernity that ponders on itself, then the theme of self-reflection would not seem to be present in the kawaii and in kyara, the way it is contemplated in other genres, especially science-fiction. Regardless, in the commercial world, the kawaii aesthetical category was born from a strategic desertion of problematic content and the exasperation of the visual and emotional traits connected to the concept of kyara.

Let me, however, present a criticism or, if you will, a corollary to this theory of immortality of the body of kawaii-styled kyara that should be considered when thinking of cute characters. Figures sporting kawaii traits have not always been “light”. This, not only in Tezuka’s work but in general in much animated production for children, and for decades.

Most critics of the kawaii have, in fact, neglected to add or they failed to realise, in their studies on kawaii kyara presented in anime series, that being a kyara does not necessarily mean to be an immortal and/or a psychologically mono-dimensional character. This bias is probably due to the fact that so many critics—especially the non-Japanese ones—do not know in depth the vast and diverse production of the anime industry, especially that of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. In those decades, plenty of animation studios and several anime-makers introduced in the casts of many series figures that corresponded to a certain, or a pronounced, kawaisa in the visual representation, but were fully tridimensional characters, both in psychological terms and in their narrational development. A paradigmatic example is Joli-cœur from *Rittai anime: ie naki ko* (“3D anime: boy without a home” by Osamu Dezaki, 52 eps, TMS, 1978), a visually fascinating and profoundly educational transposition from the 1878 novel *Sans famille* by French novelist Hector Malot. Joli-cœur is a funny and lively little monkey, part of a band of itinerant street artists formed by an old tenor singer and musician, an orphan boy, three dogs, and the monkey himself. Joli-cœur is supposed to be a comic relief in a mainly dramatic social novel for the younger, and in most cases he is, with his funny behavior and

facial expressions; and his visual design corresponds, overall, to styles that can be assessed as *kawaii*. However, at a certain point in the story Joli-cœur falls sick (a strong fever due to staying too long exposed to winter cold) and dies, leaving his friends, as well as the series' audience, in despair. The storytelling of these events is tragic and realistic, and totally contradicts the idea, circulating in much scholarship since the Itō/Ōtsuka debate, that *kawaii kyara's* body is not concerned with mortality any longer. Joli-cœur is a tridimensional figure, has a story, a psychology and a narrational depth, and a mortal body. Many more examples of psychological complexity would be possible, such as the dog Spank and the cat Torakichi from *Ohayo! Spank* ("Hello, Spank!", from Shun'ichi Yukimuro and Shizue Takanashi's manga; by Shigetsugu Yoshida, 63 eps, TMs, 1981). (On *Ie naki ko* and *Spank* cf. Pellitteri 2018, pp. 838–41, 927–29).

That said: as stated at the beginning of this set of theoretical contextualisations, the understanding of the *kawaii* in Europe cannot be separated from a framing of it in broader terms. In fact, the *kawaii* in Europe has assumed different aspects than it had and has in Japan. In Japan, the *kawaii* is, as we have seen, a well-established part of contemporary culture and aesthetics and it is present, in more specific ways, as one of the features of youth subcultures such as, for example, the Gothic Lolita (Nguyen 2016) and others. However, in the main European national markets for manga and anime, the *kawaii* styles do not appear to be dominant/relevant aesthetics within the field of Japanese pop cultures. There are, nonetheless, some specific subfields of what has sometimes been called "J-culture" (Richter 2008) in which we can observe features of the *kawaii*.

3. A Blending between the *Kawaii* and Manga Aesthetics in European Contexts

In the late 1970s and in the 1980s, especially in Italy, Spain, and France, the first great arrival of Japanese animated TV series occurred in Europe, accompanied by a wide displaying of collateral publications: illustrated books, original and bootleg manga pocket albums, toys and gadgets, licensed products, and goods of all sorts. It was the so-called first anime boom in Europe (Pellitteri 2014) and it established the first step of a Japanese pop culture for youths in the Old Continent.

In those years the imagination and imagery of millions of West-European kids changed. The influence of hundreds of Japanese anime series on television, new anime-inspired toys in the households, illustrated books with anime characters, and soon afterwards manga in kids' magazines, created a new sensibility and taste for more than one generation of children. These kids would later become teenagers and young adults and would buy, in the 1990s and 2000s, tons of translated manga during the second step of this expansion, when not only European publishers and TV networks asked for manga and anime as in the previous phase, but now also Japanese companies began to strongly promote the exportation. British anthropologist Sharon Kinsella, in an early 1997 article, spoke of a "Japanisation of European youth". This definition, although a little exaggerated, is not far from truth if we focus our attention onto those fans of J-culture whose cultural taste and personal expressions in terms of lifestyle, in relation to Japanese pop cultures, fall into that composite category named *mangaesque*, by which German scholar Jaqueline Berndt (2007a, 2007b, 2012, 2013) not only indicates a set of styles and attitudes related to manga as literary and graphic texts but also, and above all, a corpus of production and distribution attitudes of cultural products that have an impact on the consumer's and prosumer's cultures. Today many items, products, social- and community practices could be defined *mangaesque*, and this converges with the notion of *trans-acculturation* (as introduced and defined in Pellitteri [2008] 2010): an array of Japanese literary and entertainment forms and products that have in recent years become the center around which communities of youths but also of former youths assemble. In other words, I would label this process a "mangaisation" of certain intermediality-based processes which involve production and consumption of cultural artefacts, regardless of their link to the world of manga intended as narratives and products for the publishing market.

Connected to this phenomenon, there is a factor that we can see as in correlation with the adoption and success of *kawaii*-like products and *mangaesque* styles among European youths: a change in the supply strategies of Japanese anime series in European television channels in the transition between

the late 1980s, in the 1990s, and in the following decade. This change mainly interested the genres of anime series broadcast. As a natural consequence, it produced a shift in the composition of the audience. In Italy and France mainly, and in the same years, to various degrees, in other countries, in the 1980s strong concerns among adults, educators, politicians, about the alienness of Japanese cartoons led many television stations to reduce or stop the broadcasting of anime with adventurous or allegedly violent content, e.g., giant robots, science fiction, adventure at large. The anime series that were left untouched and those whose rights were purchased with more conviction from that phase on, all belonged to genres where protagonists were young females: *majokko* (teenage witches), romance, and transpositions from European-American novels for girls.

This change constitutes a process that I summarise under the label “from cool to kawaii”: from adventures based on a certain degree of action and addressed to an audience of kids without distinction of gender, to series devoted to an audience of girls only. This transition was not only aesthetic and related to genres, but also involved music: the anime songs associated to these series for girls (both the original Japanese versions and the ones produced for the local broadcastings) had very different atmospheres and melodies, started to be sung by female artists only, and contributed to a stereotypical genderification of the perception of televised anime as a whole. The result of this composite dynamic led, subsequently, to what I here argue to have been a “feminisation” of the reputation of Japanese anime due to the genres released on television and in theatres.⁴ I also need to specify, however, that the words “cool” and “kawaii” are not widely used in Italy or France. As for cool: in these two countries the usage of English words is, in the standard language, limited; in the Italian context, the local idiom is very rich and nuanced, and English is limited to a few established words, such as *hobby* or *okay*, or terms related to digital technology (*computer*, *mouse*, *browser*); in French society and cultural establishment, English is convincingly disregarded at all levels of the population. As for kawaii: it is used by the most committed fans and practitioners of manga, anime, cosplay, and Japanese pop-cultural commodities and narratives in general, but it has not entered the common language, despite having been recently included in some dictionaries.

The implications in the European scene of this composite process have become clear since the late 1990s and more strongly since the early 2000s: (1) a majority of anime for girls was observed to be airing on television; (2) the release in theatres of Japanese animation films almost exclusively by the Ghibli studio and the absence in the cinemas of virtually any anime film related to science fiction or adventure; (3) the rise of a completely new audience for comics: a female readership, focusing on a suddenly enormous supply of manga for girls and young women.

The last element to be outlined is that communities of elder fans, who had lived the first phases of anime and manga’s success in their own countries and now are often part of globalised communities, still see animation, comics, toys and gadgets coming from Japan as something deeply, typically, absolutely Japanese; especially in Italy, the one country in which the Japanese origin of anime was never hidden and, on the contrary, overtly presented as coming from Japan (a similar phenomenon, however less generalised and therefore less impactful, occurred in France and Spain as well); whereas, now, many among the younger members of such communities can be defined “J-culture natives” and—despite perfectly knowing that manga, anime and the like do come from Japan—do

⁴ This phenomenon, if you let me in this footnote be a little more complete and thorough, was made of two distinct processes that mutually intertwined. I just called the first “from cool to kawaii”. The second process that was at play in those years can be called “from universal to particular”. When anime first arrived in Italian, French, Spanish television stations in the late 1970s and over the course of the 1980s, the themes and meanings delivered by those series (originally made in Japan in the 1960s–70s–80s) were very diverse, coming from directors and animators who were kids or adults during WWII, strongly influenced by their own life’s experiences and cultural taste (such as European and US-American cinema and music), and addressed to a very broad audience of children and teenagers. Kids and girls, in Italy and France especially were able to enjoy all those kinds of anime series with no gender divide (unlike it occurred in Japan), and the supply itself of the anime series that aired in those years spanned through a stunning variety of genres. However, this second process is not under analysis here. For more information and insight on it, cf. (Pellitteri [2008] 2010; Pellitteri and Giacomantonio 2016; Pellitteri 2018).

not necessarily see J-culture's products and stylistic features as appealing as their elder fellow fans do because of their Japanese origin, or in some cases they do not qualify such items, styles and narratives as Japanese at all. In other words, this culture—however it is today widely shared that Japanese anime and manga are Japanese—is not always perceived by young fans as a foreign culture, but rather as their own culture, stratified, or literally molten, with European ways of expression. In addition, this is one of the expected effects of cultural globalisation: not just the notion of glocal—that is, the local dimension absorbing and melting with the inter- and transnational ones (Robertson 1995)—but the very fact that a culture that once was foreign now becomes the native culture of these new fans, and they do not even realise that this process has taken place, for they are young and currently do not care much of what happened before their time.

3.1. Key Aspects of Kawaiisation/Mangaisation in Italy and France

In the following subsections I will tackle, by proposing a short account of them, the outcomes of what was described above and in which we could observe, among other elements, also kawaii features since the late 1970s and with more documentation from the 1980s and 1990s.

The first outcome is a widespread practice among children, kids, and teenagers: that of emulating or reproducing—in their private graphic production at home or at school—characters, features, and styles of famous Japanese animation series broadcast daily or weekly on national or local television channels. This phenomenon has been rarely recorded in academic scholarship, hence it is difficult to offer a precise account of it; nevertheless, direct observation along the years and research by fellow scholars and myself show some evidence of a process that has been neglected despite being before our eyes for decades. The other outcome is the use of stylistic and linguistic elements taken from manga and anime by French and Italian comics artists, in the domains of both professional and amateur production. Such use has been and is in some cases deliberate and in other rather instinctive; sometimes overtly declared, other times more nuanced.

In all these cases, it must be noted that the kawaii or kawaii-like features are only a part (in many cases indeed secondary) of a set of inspirations from manga and anime. In my account, moreover, I will take into consideration these two kinds of production without distinction between drawings by male and drawings by female subjects; but it has been generally observed that the production of kawaii-like drawings (faces and face details like eyes and noses, objects, sceneries, etc.) pertains more to female than male drawers.

3.1.1. Kids Drawing Anime-Like Characters and Things

Alongside the growing commercial “colonisation” by Japanese pop-cultural products, something has happened and is still happening in western autochthonous production, and in Italy and France in particular. Until recently few observers, along the years, seemed to have realised that two generations of children and then former children, since the late 1970s, in their own drawing practices had begun to change their ways of graphic production, to increasingly often reproduce somatic types and conventions of Japanese animation. Their drawings dramatically turned towards figurative styles that tended to emulate anime and manga's images, items, and characters.

Moreover, in the 1990s and 2000s some of those former children would become either amateur or professional comics creators and their drawing styles would be, consciously or not, influenced by manga and anime: settings, division of the pages in panels and their dimensions and shapes, visual codes, body and face morphology of the heroes, even the ways narratives were composed, or the characters' psychologies, and so forth. This fact had been already noted, thirty years ago, by psychologists Bertolini and Manini [1988] (1993). In their book, they took note of some brand-new practices of children's graphic production influenced by the consumption of those successful shows, in a complementarity between television viewing and artistic practices:

figures of robots, flying machines, chiseled [mechanical] men with horns appeared in children's graphic productions at the same time as, and after, the television broadcasting and the production of space-themed comics and cartoons. (Bertolini and Manini [1988] 1993; rev. ed. 1993, p. 90. Translated from Italian)

The scarce attention paid to such indications, even by those very psychologists who analyse children's artistic production, can be seen in much research: for instance, a study titled *Il disegno dei bambini* ("Children's drawing practices", Cannoni 2003) shows a large number of drawings clearly based on the faces and big eyes of anime and manga characters, but does not offer any comment on it or, perhaps, without even realising it. However, other contributions take note of these trends, such as *Un ponte d'immagini* ("A bridge made of images") by art therapists Maria Grazia Cocconi and Loretta Salzillo (Cocconi and Salzillo 2001), as well as other works focusing, to different extents, on the relationship of anime and manga with the drawings of little boys and girls and their multilayered imagination/imagery (Pellitteri 1999, 2018; Pellitteri [2008] 2010; Filippi and Di Tullio 2002).

The consequences of this phenomenon at the expressive and cognitive levels to date are still to be analysed. In the doodles of children accustomed to television animation and therefore, inevitably, to anime, eyes, faces, bodies, objects, spaceships, and symbols such as stars, flowers, and beads of sweat on the faces of the characters tend to imitate the expressive codes of the Japanese shows. In the workshops on comics and animation cinema I have conducted with Italian children and teenagers in schools and libraries (Palermo, Rome, Bolzano, Brixen, 2000–2016), I have seen with surprising consistency how boys and—even more frequently—girls draw faces and bodies in a way that is similar to or even virtually the same as manga characters, very often in an SD/kawaii version. The often-syncretic traits of anime, in which graphics and themes taken from both Japanese and Euro-American traditions coexist, extended so deeply into the minds of the young viewers as to soon influence their graphic habits, in so yielding a partial mangaisation of their drawing strategies.

The most evident traits of kawaiisa in the observed drawings can be found in the shapes of the faces and in the size ratio (about 1:1 or 1:2) between the head and the body of the human and animal figures; in the particularly big dimensions of the eyes and small size of the nose; in the choice of the subjects to draw since the 1980s (from Yōichi Kotabe's design for Zuiyo Eizō's 52 episode-long *Alps no shōjo Heidi* animated series directed by Isao Takahata in 1974 to Sanrio's Hello Kitty and similar characters, to the more recent Pokémon and others); and in the colour choices, systematically inclined towards white as well as light, pastel, and subtle tonalities of pink, green, yellow, blue.

3.1.2. Glocal Drifts: Euromanga and Manga-Flavoured Comics

The other phenomenon of interest tackled here is a fusion between the above-mentioned procedures of spontaneous artwork creation and the dynamics of semi-professional publishing output containing comics that follow the canons of Japanese manga. This kind of productions comes mostly by amateurs, linked to fandom communities. Such productions represent an effect of the cultural process that has weighed on the new generations' modalities of artistic expression. This familiarity to manga occurs in many settings. Fanzines, homo-erotic-themed manga created by women and intended for a niche female audience (Sabucco 2000), and amateur artists who at comics-conventions take little writing-desks here and there and exhibit, sell, or give for free, their manga-like comics. This is the burgeoning activity as observed in events such as *Japan Expo* in Paris and *Lucca Comics and Games* in Lucca since the mid-1990s.

Nevertheless, besides the above-mentioned phenomena there are three specific modalities with which that trend, called Euromanga (Cravotta 2007), has occurred in the world of professional production. The first, the coarsest but with a deep significance, is the one that in the 1990s was named in Italy—with a bit of scorn—"spaghetti-manga": comics made by Italians—and the discourse is easily extended to France—where manga-like plot lines were melded with a character cast and visual clichés based on mangaesque design (either in the characters' figures or the panels' design). This trend, however, did not last. Manga, in Italy and France, had conquered the aesthetic taste of

many readers and of several comics artists much more deeply than in other countries. In addition, in the two countries Japanese influences have produced, in professional comics, two more modalities for Euromanga. On one side, the middling of styles recalling manga in *fumetti*- and *bande dessinée* (or BD) series of big publishers such as Bonelli, Disney Italia, Dargaud, Soleil. On the other side, the self-aware and artistically driven use of both visual and narrative manga's suggestions and atmospheres from creators peripheral to the big publishers' industrial production and favoured by the reliance of some small and medium publishing houses. As for what France is concerned, among the most interesting creators of BD active in the field of Euromanga there are comics-makers whose works have appeared in the mangaesque magazines of Les Humanoïdes Associés, among whom Lord Shion, Shupak, Kalon, Karos, Mika, Liliàn, Ueza, Andrea Iovinelli, Massimo Dall'Oglio.

On the other side there are creators informed by more sophisticated poetics and who are experiencing a process of progressive ripening, such as (in Italy) Andrea Accardi, Giovanni Mattioli, Davide Toffolo, Vanna Vinci, or (in France) David B., Mathieu Blanchin, Frédéric Boilet, Nicolas de Crécy, Étienne Davodeau, Emmanuel Guibert, Fabrice Neaud, Bastien Vivès. They are creators of works that are recognisably European in the settings, narrative and graphical techniques, literary quality, and issues tackled. However, they do not give up a participation in Japanese imagery. This is evident in some of the visual and narrative rhetorics.

In Italy, the main magazines and publishing houses that have hosted the works of the aforementioned Italian creators were *Fandango*, *Mondo Naïf*, *Scuola di Fumetto*, and Kappa Edizioni (now KappaLab). In France, the abovementioned artists have been publishing for many of the big mainstream publishers (Dargaud, Soleil, Casterman, etc.) but also for the main "independent" French BD publisher, aforementioned Les Humanoïdes Associés (*Shogun Mag*, *Shogun Shonen*, *Shogun Seinen*, *Shogun Life*). It must be noted, however, that the kawaii elements are, in these works, quite sporadic and peripheral even in the series written and drawn by female authors. The general trend of these Euromanga travels in fact on a double track: on the one hand, there is the attempt to follow the patterns of the Japanese manga series for young adult and adult readers (where kawaii features are seldom), and on the other hand these comics creators, being European, display a fusion of narrative and stylistic elements taken from Japanese manga with their local tradition in terms of drawing styles and settings. This has also happened recently, in 2014, with a book that collects short stories by sixteen French young comics artists deeply fond of Japan (Monard 2014). Named *Kokekokkô*, the book displays a wide range of styles which only slightly mention or use kawaii features. There is, however, in the graphic mood of this publication as a whole, a clear reference to kawaiisa and to the same attention shared in Japan for everything that is generally deemed cute.

All this supports the notion of a transversality in the reception of Japanese pop-cultural forms in these two countries, not only in the perception by young audiences but, most interestingly, in autochthonous cultural production, which in recent times has reached the domain of TV animated series designed in Italy or France and yet intended for a globalised market. The commercial success of comics/animation series such as *W.I.T.C.H.* and *Winx Club* are the most telling cases. In addition, it is here that we can recognise a more visible presence of kawaii aesthetics, blended with features of European comics and American and Japanese commercial animation for children and teenagers.

3.1.3. *W.I.T.C.H.*, *Winx Club*, *Sky Doll*, and Transcreolisation: Bites of Kawaii

There is no need here to retrace the media career of *W.I.T.C.H.*, *Winx Club* and *Sky Doll*, Italian comics series successfully published in France as well. *Sky Doll*, in particular, was first published directly for the French market and only afterwards in Italy and other countries, among which the United States. Created by artists Alessandro Barbucci and Barbara Canepa, this science-fiction and fantasy series displays a graphic style that overtly merges Disney-like design, Japanese manga features, and a mix of "cool-kawaii" (as framed in Botz-Bornstein 2011) visualisations and motifs (on this topic cf. Pellitteri 2009). *W.I.T.C.H.*, *Winx Club* and *Sky Doll* are the major emblems of how in Europe, during

the 2000s, processes of aesthetic and commercial hybridisation in the sector of characters for the very young have been carried out.

The first two series are based on five witches/fairies, each with her identifying marks, personality, colour and/or totemic elements, style of clothing, and special powers; in both series, sequences of battle against the forces of evil or rivals of various types are alternated with sentimental moments and scenes of daily life. The ludic-narrative and psychological model is the same as in the Japanese *Sailor Moon* series (by Naoko Takeuchi, 1991), which in turn incorporated the pattern of a five-member team from some classic science-fiction televised anime series of the 1970s (for instance and above all, Tatsunoko Production's 1972 celebrated series *Kagaku ninjatai Gatchaman*).

While *Sky Doll* is a series for adult connoisseurs, in the case of the other two the merchandise and mediatic power they displayed made them two mass phenomena, which instead of having boys as a target were aimed at girls. The fact that Italy, a somewhat marginal country in the transnational creative industries in relation to contemporary mass- and pop culture for youths, is the source of two composite media-commodities that have won tens of millions of young spectators, fans, consumers around the world (Asia, Europe, the Americas), is stunning. However, it is a little less surprising if we link the graphic-narrative style and themes of both to their sources of influence, namely the anime and manga franchises that for over thirty years have been successful at the mainstream level in Italy and France (and Spain), much more than in any other western country.

Numbers say that *W.I.T.C.H.* and *Winx Club* have been for years to girls what *Pokémon* was to boys in the early 2000s: the first used to sell over 16 million copies of its magazines across the world, the second sported an animated series scheduled in 130 countries with significant ratings. The turnover of the merchandising was hundreds of millions of euros for both franchises (Caprara 2005). These results would have been impossible to achieve if *W.I.T.C.H.* and *Winx Club* had not been blatantly modelled on anime, adding a touch of European (for the former) and American (for the latter) visual appeal. Here we are faced with a case of transcreolisation: the convergence of a dominant aesthetic factor (themes, narrative structure, general morphology of the characters taken from manga and anime) and two side factors (France-inspired comics design and US-inspired fashionability) in a professional milieu treasuring the traditional Italian know-how and a favourable period for certain media trends.

4. Conclusions. Enlarging the Perspective on the Kawaiisation of the Aesthetics of Youths' Commodified Visual Culture in the European Scenario beyond Amateur Manga

Is the kawaii, today, a strong trend in the reinterpretations of J-culture in Europe?

The answer should be, very simply put, "no, it is not". In my observations and study of the multi-faceted J-culture in Europe, I have found that the dominant trends, styles, and themes of Japanese pop cultures as they have been displayed and consumed in Italy and France since the late 1970s are, for the most part, something else. They follow in most cases very different visual and thematic paths, which are translated in graphical and narrative moods *other* than those referring to the kawaii, such as the giant robots and the alien violent invasion of Japanese soil, the cyborgs and technological superheroes, the science-fiction sagas, the sport champions, the young orphans struggling against adversities and searching for their parents or a place in the world, the fighting warriors, etc. In most manga and anime series published in the two countries, the main styles have been different and so has been most of the related merchandise, such as toys, stationery, etc.

Elements of kawaiisa, however, are very often present as side traits in many of these dramatic narratives and visual worlds. First of all, in the shape and psychology of some secondary characters (children, little animals, robots), meant by the production studios—in the case of anime series—to add elements of cuteness in narrative contexts otherwise excessively dramatic. In other words, we can see the presence of psychologically monodimensional kyara figures in narrative worlds populated with psychologically tridimensional characters, keeping in mind the kyara/character distinction presented above as well as my remarks on the mortality some kawaii figures can be assigned.

Secondly, we must not forget—and this is the main context in which kawaii features appeared and that made kawaii's initial success in the most receptive European markets—the many anime series devoted to young magical girls, such as *Mahō no tenshi Creamy Mami*⁵ and many similar franchises, plus a quite rich set of related merchandising for little girls, whose dominant colours were, easy to imagine, the many shades of pastel pink, gold, and silver. In these series, the roundness of characters and objects, the delicate colours of the cinematography, the plethora of stars, flowers, smooth and curvy visual motifs, all of this is pure kawaii as intended in this context; and we can argue that, during the 1980s and then 1990s, these series were, together with the powerful Hello Kitty merchandising, the primary propeller of the fascination for the kawaii among young girls. By surveying the fashion products addressed to little girls and teenage girls in the 1980s and 1990s, we find brands such as Naj Oleari (Najoleari.com), the famous Italian textile/clothing company, or Poochie, a Mattel property of the 1980s: a cute, white-and-pink female dog, far too overtly based, in its visual features and fore purely commercial purposes, on Hello Kitty.

The long-term effect of these objects and motifs is visible in fashion brands created recently, such as the world-famous TokiDoki by Italian designer Simone Legno (Tokidoki.it), whose products can be seen as a syncretic fusion of kawaii elements directly taken from the 1980s–90s; kawaii in street art (Radosevic 2012); the world of *gashapon* (little, portable plastic gadgets very popular among kids and girls and frequently used as accessories: Daniele 2008); the visual moods of Neo-Pop art works by celebrated artists such as Takashi Murakami (Testa 2010a); the spontaneous organization of young female communities referring to the Japanese “Gyaru” subculture, one of whose fashion codes is the use of kawaii or kawaii-like items and accessories.⁶

I conclude this succinct exploration by arguing that, according to what was observed along the years, there is a basic difference in the way kawaii styles have appeared and been performed and consumed on one side in Japan and on the other side in the relevant European markets. Whereas in Japan kawaii motifs, characters, and fashion items are, as stated previously, a part of Japanese culture deeply embedded in the general society, in Europe girls who dress “kawaii”, or use products and objects that can be labeled under the kawaii category, usually follow aesthetic and fashion trends that are seen in their general cultural context as something “other” and “weird”, far more pronouncedly than it happens in Japan. It is the case, among others, of the Gothic Lolita fashion, which has gained in Italy, France, and Germany (and also among practitioners from other emerging markets for manga and anime, such as Russia, Hungary, Poland, etc.) the status of a well-defined, all-female subculture whose meanings go beyond the fashionability of the clothes and accessories (Testa 2010b; Koma 2013a, pp. 71–79; Nguyen 2016). To this end, it would be possible to posit that in the world of applications of kawaii styles to daily life, a kind of stigma might be at work, similar to that (in the meaning introduced in Goffman 1963) which was found in the subcultural practices related to the passion for manga and anime in the 1990s (Bouissou 2008; Pellitteri [2008] 2010). Hence, a relevant research topic to explore would be the otherness and the weirdness of kawaii culture as a constellation of niche subcultures in the European contexts: not only the alleged otherness/weirdness of a culture of kawaii and of its practitioners as seen from the outside, but also the possible otherness/weirdness of that culture of kawaii as possibly perceived *within* the context itself of those very practitioners. That is: do European fans (especially young women fond of manga, anime, J-culture) recognise kawaisa and kawaii items as part of their own culture, or are they exotic and exoticised elements wittingly used as

⁵ By Osamu Kobayashi, 52 eps, Pierrot, 1983. In Italy: *L'incantevole Creamy*; in France: *Creamy, merveilleuse Creamy*. Like many anime broadcast in France, *Creamy* too was roughly based on a previous Italian localisation. Many anime series appeared on French television from 1985 to 1992 were in fact broadcast on the LaCinq channel, which was a property of the Italian/Fininvest (currently Mediaset) holding. A similar process occurred in Spain (with Tele Cinco) and Germany (Tele Fünf), all Fininvest/Mediaset properties.

⁶ Italian and French examples: [Kawaiigazette.com/jfashion-gyaru-style-in-italia-due-chiacchiere-con-honey-pop](http://kawaiigazette.com/jfashion-gyaru-style-in-italia-due-chiacchiere-con-honey-pop) and <http://gyaru-sa-france.skyrock.com>. These are micro-communities, formed by very little numbers of young women; that is, they are at present time strictly niche subcultural fringes.

markers of distinction in terms of extravagance? Is the kawaii perceived by its practitioners and among external observers as something *Japanese* or something culturally and culturally/national not defined or “odourless” (as in Iwabuchi 2002)? The alleged indeterminateness of many cultural products made in Japan, indicated as without a marked cultural identity by Iwabuchi, is, moreover, at the center of an articulated debate: cf. (Daliot-Bul 2009; Pellitteri [2008] 2010; Koma 2013b).⁷

To further link this provisional ending of my discourse to the theoretical contextualisation by which I have opened the present essay, I would like to refer again to the concept of “perception of a lack” in Jean Baudrillard. If the practice and use of kawaii items, motifs, attitudes can be intended as a symptom of a lack among young Japanese practitioners, is there some kind of lack in the European practitioners too, and, if there is, the lack of what is it?

A very last observation concerns the expansion of a kawaii culture and related styles in Europe into a context that has not, to my knowledge, been analysed yet and that certainly deserves to be. It is a most interesting process of *transgenerational transmission* of kawaii culture (as part of a broader culture of anime and manga) from young mothers to their little daughters. It has been recorded that in these latest years women in their thirties or early forties who in their childhood and teenage were fond of Japanese animation and manga, and who today, having formed a family, have become mothers of daughters up to eight, ten years old, tend to dress their daughters and provide them with accessories that directly come from their own childhood and youth imagery of the late 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. Characters and kyara such as Hello Kitty, Doraemon, Candy Candy, Creamy Mami, Sailor Moon, and the whole plethora of female kawaii or kawaii-like heroines of Japanese anime famous in the 1970s–80s–90s are a significant part of the visual legacy of these mothers to their little daughters (Impegnoso 2018). This process has been identified as pertaining to parents who define themselves “Italian otaku”. For a survey on this notion and for a discussion on the so-called “European otaku” cf. Pellitteri 2008.

This probably means that—as it happens for any evolving cultural process—also for what concerns this phenomenon, while we try to analyse as much as we can its history and its current situation, we have already found out that there might be in the close future a further development of the cultural parable of the kawaii in inter- and transgenerational terms.

Funding: The research for parts of this article could be carried out thanks to the support of the JSPS (2014–16), the Hōsō Bunka Foundation (2017–18), and the Toshiba International Foundation (2017–18).

Acknowledgments: Parts of this article are re-elaborations from a few paragraphs already published, in early versions, in Pellitteri 2002 and Pellitteri [2008] 2010. The form which those early paragraphs has been changed into for the present venue abundantly advances the knowledge and insight they provided previously.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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⁷ The concepts of cultural odour and odourless cultural products introduced by Iwabuchi work very well in several domains of Japanese creative industries. They just do not in the field of anime and manga. The acceptance and adoption of the concept of odourless culture in relation to things like manga, anime, and kawaii objects is based on a general laziness by most scholars dealing with this topic. I have noticed that far too many scholars simply embrace (because of a perceptual bias and, I would argue, a lack of further reading and analysis) and accept as granted the idea that in manga and anime—as Iwabuchi posits—the features of Japaneseness are erased, omitted, or downtoned. My explicit criticism to this alignment to the notion of anime/manga as “odourless” is based on the realisation that most scholars who accept this idea are not competent in the languages, aesthetics, and production histories of manga and anime and in the complex but not at all hidden visual codes of these two forms of expression. In fact, plenty of cultural, thematic, morphological, and racial markers are displayed and easily spotted in the visual idiolects of almost all manga series and anime shows produced since the 1960s. For an explanation on why and how it is not possible to adopt the concepts of odourless and other associated conceptual monstrosities such as “racial neutrality” in the visual and cultural analysis of manga and anime, cf. Pellitteri [2008] 2010; and Pellitteri 2018.

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