

Against Techno-Animism: Androids, Dolls and Animate Objects in Contemporary Japan

Dr Fabio Gygi

East Asia Seminar Series
Lent 2019
At the University of Cambridge



Contemporary Japan is sometimes described as a Latourian utopia where humans and non-humans, specifically robots, live and work together in harmony. This acceptance of non-human others is explained by anthropologists as stemming from an “animist unconscious” (Allison 2006) that allows people to attribute ‘life’ to robots and other man-made objects, a notion that is usually linked to the “Shinto universe” of “native animist beliefs” (Robertson 2010). Contrary to the darker tone of robot fantasies in the Euro-American tradition, this “techno-animism” (Block and Jensen 2013) turns technological objects into non-alienating allies.

This paper will critically examine the ontological underpinnings of these arguments and will suggest an alternative account of Japanese animism. I will argue that the distinction between ‘ancient animism’ as the underlying structure of belief for ‘modern techno-animism’ is problematic and that it makes more sense to treat Japanese animism as technology tout court. Following Komatsu’s suggestion (1999)

that the distinction between gods (kami) and monsters (yōkai) is the degree to which they are worshipped, I will suggest a relational theory of animism in opposition to the “ontological gambit” (Graeber 2013) that hinges on the assumption of the radical alterity of worlds.

Fabio R. Gygi is lecturer in anthropology with reference to Japan at SOAS University of London. He specializes in material culture and medical anthropology and is particularly interested in how getting rid of things is understood and facilitated in different cultural contexts. Recent publications include “The Metamorphosis of Excess: ‘Rubbish Houses’ and the Imagined Trajectory of Things in Post-Bubble Japan”, in *Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan: A Transdisciplinary Perspective* (edited by Katarzyna Cwiertka and Ewa Machotka) and “Things that Believe: Talismans, Amulets, Dolls and How to Get Rid of Them” in the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (45/2). He is currently working on a book manuscript on hoarding in Japan.

All are welcome // Monday, 28 January 2019 // 5-7pm

Rooms 8/9
Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies
Sidgwick Avenue, Cambridge CB3 9DA
For further information email: fs468@cam.ac.uk



The Japanese Studies Group gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation towards this seminar series