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Loren Y. Kajikawa

"AN ESCAPE FROM THE PLANET OF THE APES: ACCOUNTING FOR CORNELIUS'S INTERNATIONAL RECEPTION"

"Monkey See, Monkey Do": Authenticity, Imitation, and Translation

Abstract: Electronic/rock musician Cornelius (Keigo Oyamada) belongs to a loosely constructed genre of Japanese pop termed "Shibuya-kei." Groups in this genre—Pizzicato Five, Flipper's Guitar, and Scha Dara Parr among others—emulate the sounds and textures of pre-existing tunes, transforming Western popular music and creating a new and unique sound that has become a source of pride to Japanese music enthusiasts. Cornelius has produced a number of imaginative CDs and videos, and fans and critics in North America, Western Europe, and Australia have embraced his work. Yet Cornelius's popularity, which is a rare occurrence for a Japanese pop musician in the West, raises a number of interesting questions about how listeners interpret music across boundaries of language and culture. First, this paper explores how Cornelius has been received by American critics, arguing that written reviews of his music stand as acts of "translation" that interpolate Cornelius's music into Western discourses while overlooking the Japanese cultural context from which such work emerges. Secondly, this paper draws on published interviews to contextualize Cornelius's use of "blank parody" as a possible defense strategy against this burden of Western civilization. And finally, this paper offers its own interpretation of Cornelius's musical significance: Putting forward a utopian, post-national, cybernetic artistic vision, Cornelius's electronic music collages avoid invoking racialized bodies in ways that have been problematic for Japanese jazz, rock, and hip-hop musicians. Using digital technology to "play" with sound information, he offers a musical analogue to the work of Japanese cultural critic Akira Asada whose postmodern philosophy was influential during the late 1980s/early 1990s.

If a monkey were to pick up a guitar and by chance strum the opening chords to The Beatles' "Yesterday," no one would assume the monkey was trying to express a nostalgic longing for lost love. Instead, we would assume the act to be hollow, for the monkey does not speak our language and cannot understand the place of this song in our cultural history. If a jazz guitarist plays the same chords, however, a whole world of interpretive possibilities opens before us. This is because we often assume music displays the subjective intentions of others. When those intentions appear to be muddled or non-existent, the perceived integrity of the musician in question suffers.

Electronic/rock musician Cornelius (Keigo Oyamada) belongs to a loosely constructed genre of Japanese pop termed "Shibuya-kei." Groups in this genre—Pizzicato Five, Flipper's Guitar, and Scha Dara Parr among others—have been active since the late 1980s/early 1990s. Either through direct sampling or by emulating the sounds and textures of pre-existing tunes, Shibuya-kei artists transform Western popular music,

creating a new and unique sound that has become a source of pride to Japanese fans and critics.[1] Praising Cornelius's bold appropriations of Western pop, critic Neil Strauss explains that Cornelius "copies (or apes) an idea and then makes it his own."[2] When reviewers are less generous, they infantilize Cornelius's musical choices and the behavior of his fans. A *San Francisco Chronicle* writer, obviously having difficulty identifying the intentions behind Cornelius's musical fusion labels it a "pointless mish-mash" and points to the stereotypical superficiality of Japanese "kids" and their "infatuations with American pop culture and electronic gadgetry."[3]

When critics of Cornelius's music come up empty in their efforts to find meaning behind his musical choices, they assume, as in the hypothetical case of the chimpanzee, that there is no subjective intent to be found. It could be mere coincidence that Cornelius takes his name from the chimpanzee doctor in *The Planet of the Apes*, but there is more to it than that. Historian John Dower has shown how in the WWII-era the American military and mass media deployed racist "ape" imagery to dehumanize the Japanese. In the post-war era, when the image of the Japanese male was undergoing a renovation, the Japanese as dehumanized ape became the Japanese as imitative little brother—"monkey see, monkey do"—of its American occupier.[4] This trope of the Japanese as diligent imitator of the West has become so ingrained that reviewers and fans effortlessly call upon it to help them classify and make sense of Japanese music.

This occurs, for example in the field of jazz where both Japanese and American critics often categorize Japanese musicians by reference to American players. Take for example, the "Japanese Satchmo", Fumio Nanri or the "Japanese Lester Young", Satoru Oda.[5] Cornelius's critical reception is no different. His international debut album *Fantasma* (1998) earned him simultaneous comparisons to the Beach Boys' Brian Wilson and the contemporary rock phenomenon Beck [Hansen]. Hailed as the "Japanese Beck" or the "Japanese Brian Wilson", Cornelius seems heir to this established naming practice based on a tacit agreement that musical authenticity resides in the West.[6] What separates Cornelius from Japanese jazz musicians, however, is that unlike them, he enjoys success in Western pop music markets. But exactly how has Cornelius been received in the U.S.? And what are the consequences of his sound being so closely tied to Western sources?

To help answer these questions, it is useful to consider music reviews as acts of translation. When music critics pick up their pens, they "translate" sound information into language and bestow it with

[1] Tomoki Murata, *Shibuya-kei Motoneta Disc Guide*, (Tokyo: Ohta Shuppansha, 1996), 2
[2] Neil Strauss, "The Pop Life: Eclecticism Personified," *New York Times,* June 10, 1998 [Arts and Culture, E3]
[3] James Sullivan, "Cornelius Doesn't Quite Translate: Japanese Pop Star Baffling, Eye-Catching," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 17, 1998, [Daily Datebook E1]
[4] John Dower, *War Without Mercy*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 302
[5] Taylor Atkins, *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 32-33
[6] There are many musicians who would love to be compared to Brian Wilson and Beck, and certainly this naming practice reveals the respect American fans and critics have for Cornelius's music. There are, however, consequences to such naming practices that need to be considered.

culturally specific meanings. As George Steiner explains in his book *After Babel*, "…translation is formally and pragmatically implicit in every act of communication, in the emission and reception of each and every mode of meaning…to understand is to decipher. To hear significance is to translate."[7] Music, however, has long been listened to across large cultural gaps in a very different way than spoken language. As musicologist Robert Walser explains, "When we hear someone speaking in a language that we do not comprehend, we understand immediately that we do not understand. Music, however, is always interpreted within the terms of one's own discursive competency but often seems transparent, not requiring translation."[8] To the extent that music-to-language translations occur without a thought to our own "discursive competencies", our own familiarities and assumptions about the musical discourses in question, we are predisposed to totalizing interpretive moves.

In Cornelius's case, American rock critics translate his music with little or no thought about the cultural gap they are crossing, and therefore, such interpretations end up subordinating the expression of Japanese musicians, relocating the discourse about their music to the cultural context of the critics themselves. Cornelius's music takes on meanings that have practical use for the critic, but the original artist and his music becomes what Eric Cheyfitz terms "a usable fiction: the fiction of the Other". [9] In these instances, translation means precisely *not* to understand others.

Consider Matt Cibula's review of Cornelius's album *Point* (2001):

> *Point* might actually be a perfect album, but that doesn't mean that I'm going to end up loving it...I don't learn anything from *Point* the way I learned perseverance from *Mama's Gun* [Erykah Badu] or pain and humor from *Zen Arcade* [Hüsker Dü] or the anger-can-be-power double shot of *London Calling* [The Clash] and *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* [Public Enemy]. Cornelius spent 11 months making this album, and forgot to screw it up. How are we supposed to relate to that?[10]

Cibula makes his opinion clear. There is nothing for him to "learn" in Cornelius's music that he cannot find elsewhere. Cornelius's music is missing something profound, something essential that he finds in the English-language bands from the U.S. (and one from the U.K). Such disapproval is surprising given that the first half of his review consists of lavish praise for Cornelius's musical artistry. The problem seems to be that Cornelius's music, while technically proficient, does not further the discourses Cibula has identified as significant. In fact, his points of comparison are punk and hip-hop, two genres commonly associated with subversive cultural tendencies in the American imagination. Thus, based on the limitations of his "discursive competency" as an American critic, Cibula translates Cornelius's stylish appropriation and transformation of

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[7] George Steiner, *After Babel*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), xii
[8] Robert Walser, Personal Communication, Spring 2004
[9] Eric Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from the Tempest to Tarzan*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1991), 105
[10] Matt Cibula, "Two Semi-Contradictory View Points," On-line Review: *popmatters,* accessed 14 February 2004; http://www.popmatters.com/music/reviews/c/cornelius-point.shtml

these genres as a lack, as a void of consciousness that bolsters the authenticity of Western popular music. Like the example of Japanese jazz musicians "translated" by reference to American counterparts, such interpretive moves reinforce the assumption that authenticity resides in the West, relegating Cornelius to the status of mere imitator.

"Monkey Business": Play as Liberation from the "Weight of a Civilization"

Cornelius's music is different from that of the Western genres he borrows from. Whether liberally deploying overdriven punk rock guitar riffs without the obligatory harsh, angry vocals ("Count Five or Six") or pasting sampled hip-hop beats into a seamless musical collage lacking the rhythmic virtuosity and vocal presence of rap ("Micro Disneycal World Tour"),[11] it is not difficult to understand why some American critics find themselves alienated from Oyamada's aesthetic. In addition, his lyrics are sparse and abstract, his liner notes non-existent, and in interviews he avoids making claims that his music means anything at all. But what if what sounds unproductive and empty to one listener, could in fact be liberating and revelatory for others?

The acclaimed film by Sofia Coppola seems to suggest Japan is permanently incomprehensible to Westerners, forever "Lost in Translation." What I wish to argue, however, is that the idea of cultural distance itself holds the key to new interpretive possibilities based on the history of unequal power relations between the United States and Japan. For example, while Cornelius's fascination with musical surface can be dismissed as superficial, his postmodern collage aesthetic can also be read as an attempt to jam Western codes of signification, protecting Cornelius's art from being too easily translated into pre-existing musical discussions where Westerners automatically have the upper hand. In a New York Times interview, Oyamada comes close to such a position in explaining the genesis of his artistic vision:

> And because of the distance that Japan was from all these other countries, information about the bands, the music and the scene it was coming from didn't necessarily follow. So I had to create my own genres. I remember listening only to orange-colored records, and I'd group them into my orange record series and just listen to them as orange records. Or if there was skull imagery in the album artwork, I'd think of them as the skull bands. I just created my own genres and understandings of them, and that influences what I do and maybe makes it different.[12]

Oyamada also runs a small independent record label, Trattoria Records, affiliated with Polystar and has re-released numerous recordings from their catalogue. In interviews, he claims that decisions about which records to re-release are not made on musical or historical grounds, but rather by his fascination with novelty and, of course, simian-related content: "I saw that Bill Wyman had a record called 'Monkey Grip,' and I liked

[11] Cornelius, *Fantasma*, Matador Records 300 (1998)
[12] Neil Strauss, "The Pop Life: Eclecticism Personified"

the name." Or, "I was looking through the Polystar catalogue one day, and I saw an album cover with a picture of a guy running with a gold medal around his neck and pulling a tire on a rope, and it cracked me up so much I had to release it," are the kinds of answers he consistently gives when interviewed about his musical decisions.[13]

There's certainly an element of good marketing in the way Oyamada flaunts his ignorance. By playing up his idiosyncratic behavior, Cornelius strikes a chord with the modernist ideal of the romantic, mad genius and radiates the ironic aura of "absolute" pop musician in a world of pastiche-driven independent rock. By doing so, some might question whether Cornelius is simply dodging his responsibility to engage with the cultural history of the music from which he borrows. But perhaps his disavowal of such an engagement itself constitutes a response to the historical weight of Western culture that has been pushed on the Japanese for over a century. Unable to beat the Americans at their game of authenticity, Cornelius chooses to shroud himself in a cloak of cultural distance, disavowing the original meanings of musical texts to avoid their attached burdens of signification.

Return to "The Planet of the Apes": Cornelius's Post-Human Artistic Vision

In an article about the Japanese rock band Happy End, Michael Bourdaghs explains how the group chose to sing in Japanese, going against the grain of prevailing notions that rock n' roll needed to be sung in English to be authentic. By forcing the Japanese language into the rhythms of rock, however, Happy End created a hybrid form of rock music that was neither Japanese nor American, a style that frustrated conventional codes of signification. In doing so, the group reached towards a new authenticity of the present, opening a "fourth-dimensional space" resistant to both American hegemony and Japanese nativism.[14]

Cornelius's music displays a similar resistance to conventional East/West binaries. While his source material is Western pop music, interviewers and fans often describe his approach to combining diverse musical elements as "Japanese."[15] Moreover, his musical quotes do not reinforce the superiority or authenticity of American musical discourse. Rather, the "blank parody" of Western sounds suggests the resilience of Japanese creativity in the shadow of American hegemony. With no authentic tradition to rely on, Oyamada chooses to "play" with musical knowledge from the West, using sophisticated digital technology to open up another kind of "fourth-dimensional space," a cybernetic authenticity of the future.

[13] Neil Strauss, "The Pop Life: Eclecticism Personified"
[14] Michael Bourdaghs, "What it Sounds Like to Lose an Empire: Happy End and the Kinks," in Timothy Tsu, Jan Van Bremen, and Eyal Ben-Ari, ed's., *Perspectives on Social Memory in Japan*, forthcoming in 2005 from Global Oriental (UK)
[15] Mike Donk, "Interview With Cornelius," On-line website: *monitorpop,* Accessed 30 September, 2004; http://www.monitorpop.com/cornelius_old/view2.html

At the same moment "Shibuya-kei" musicians were honing their distinctive sounds in the late 1980s, iconoclastic cultural critic Akira Asada offered a widely read dismissal of the ideology behind modern Japan's educational system. Directing his impassioned plea to University-aged Japanese youth facing the hell of rigid school entrance examinations, Asada called for the youth of Japan to "play" with knowledge, to trust their desires and turn creatively towards "style" as a way to escape the drudgery of the system.[16] While Asada called for Japanese youth to rebel against a modern technocracy founded on Japan's commitment to matching the West in science and industry, Cornelius takes aim at the assumption that Japanese musicians should be expected to faithfully reproduce the values and aesthetics of Western popular music. By electronically deconstructing traditional musical subjectivities, Cornelius both opens a space for himself as a Japanese musician in the West and makes a utopian cybernetic plea for harmony across cultural gaps in an age of postmodern dislocation.

Cornelius's identity as an electronic musician seems at least partly responsible for his success outside of Japan because the technological mediation highlighted in his music disrupts comparisons of his music with more conventional "human" sounding American rock or hip-hop. The realm of electronic music, which often celebrates a synthetic, studio-created sound, liberates Cornelius from the expectations faced by a Japanese jazz or rock musician who must rely on his "natural" voice or instrumental technique to persuade an audience. Unlike jazz or rock, which are often assumed to be "black" and "white" genres respectively, electronic music does not so easily invoke the specter of racialized bodies, for it is the machines that are animated, not the bodies of their programmers. One could even argue that being Japanese grants Cornelius an advantage in the world of electronic music. In the Western imagination, Japan, the country of the Walkman and the PlayStation, whose native script runs down the computer screens in *The Matrix*, would naturally produce Cornelius, a musician reveling in fragmented bits of digital information, playfully rearranging them in novel ways.

Unlike the dark and sinister take on the dangers of technology in movies like *The Matrix*, however, Cornelius seems optimistic and hopeful about the libratory potential of his gadgetry. For example, he has been known to have a machine on stage acting as one of his performers, and at one Tokyo event, a local radio station broadcast an extra rhythm track simultaneously with the concert; so attendees were encouraged to bring their Walkmans and tune in while watching the show, enjoying the "live" event and its simulation simultaneously. Oyamada also regularly invites audience members onto stage and guides their hands over a theremin to play the melody from Elvis Presley's "Love Me Tender" during one of their numbers. Oyamada himself dismisses the notion that such juxtapositions are "ironic" or insincere: "The word irony (in Japanese) has this kind of bad feeling to it. It's more that it would be fun and interesting if we did [mix

[16] Marilyn Ivy, "The Consumption of Knowledge in Postmodern Japan," *Postmodernism and Japan*, ed. Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 28

genres/instruments] together. I don't have anything against either [sic] of them." Thus, these aspects of live performance cast technology not as something to be feared, but as something to be gracefully interacted with, a force that provides more interesting and inclusive ways for fans to enjoy the music.

The video for "Star Fruit Surf Rider" is a case in point.[17] It mixes computer generated, Tron-like graphics of cyberspace and stop-frame puppetry with images of Oyamada singing while smoking. When we take a close look at Oyamada, already somewhat robotic looking in dark wraparound shades, however, we realize that we aren't seeing him singing at all. His movements are being broadcast backwards, his lips sometimes in sync with the words and at other times merely gesturing at the lyrics while smoke flows backwards into his mouth and cigarette. The separation of his voice from his body casts his image as just another digitally manipulated data stream. Rather than portraying this separation as a troubling disembodiment, however, the music, which features a drum-and-bass groove beneath a peaceful and serene electronic melody, sets the tone for the stop-frame puppetry. In a brief segment of the video, Oyamada uses the power of music, represented by electronic waves that shoot out from his hands, to make peace between warring hordes of stuffed animals, which appear to stand for warring nations. In this video's strange combination of cyborg imagery and "can't we all just get along" utopia, Cornelius's musical technology playfully dissolves the differences of nations in a McLuhan-esc "global village" fantasy.

It seems that even when Cornelius's compositions come closest to conventional genres, he makes sure to frame them in such a way as to highlight their artificial "constructedness." The song "Chapter 8 Horizon and Seashore" invokes the soft vocal harmonies and acoustic guitar of 1960s rock.[18] The song features A and B sections whose complimentary yet distinct difference from one another is reminiscent of Lennon and McCartney's writing style. While the music is evocative, if not sincerely nostalgic, the sound of someone pressing play on a tape recorder or cueing up a reel-to-reel tape heralds the transition between sections A and B. The implication of these additions is, of course, that what we are hearing was not recorded live, but rather captures the recording of a recording. These added sounds, however, do not disrupt the flow of the music. In fact, the sounds of the tape recorder are interjected in perfect time with the tempo of the music. The sum of these aesthetic choices suggests that the benefits of technology, the ability to rewind and play music from the past at will and draw on the subjective experiences encoded within, more than makes up for the fact that we live in a world of simulation lacking any "authentic" traditions to ground ourselves in.

Cornelius's music is enabled by a history of unequal power relations that have allowed Oyamada to grow up in an environment saturated by Western pop music. It is also a history that has isolated American critics, raising them under the false assumption that they need not care about issues of cross-cultural

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[17] Cornelius, "Star Fruits Surf Rider," On-line website: *matador records,* accessed 30 September 2004; http://www.matadorrecords.com/cornelius/music.html

[18] Cornelius, "Chapter 8 Seashore and Horizon," *Fantasma,* Matador Records 300 (1998)

translation in their reviews. Yet the experiments of Keigo Oyamada and other "Shibuya-kei" artists have created new forms of musical knowledge that foster a sensibility of deconstruction that often runs against the grain of these historical inequities. In Cornelius's music we can hear one person's imaginative attempts at piecing together new sounds out of the shards of the past, creating a world that like *The Planet of the Apes*, is similar to our own, yet strangely different. How we listen to these sound collages will determine whether we hear meaningful art or mere monkey business.