

Special Feature

Disciplines and Distance

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The current state of “Japan studies,”—alongside the smaller subfield of “Japanese film and media studies”—was recently interrogated in a roundtable discussion, held on the virtual platform “Zoom” in light of the various complications arising from the spread and management of COVID 19/the coronavirus. The discussion was partly guided by the critique of Japan Studies offered by Masao Miyoshi in his controversial essay “Japan is Not Interesting,” as well as by a posthumous tribute to Miyoshi by the critic Karatani Kojin. That said, Noel Burch’s 1979 book on Japanese cinema—*To the Distant Observer*—became one of the poles around which the discussion fluctuated, perhaps even more than the guiding light of Miyoshi.

Along with the unexpected centrality of Burch’s work—maybe more in spirit than in specifics—much of the familiar rhetoric returned—ideas of nationalism, transnationalism, discipline, language, technology, capitalism, orientalism. This sense of repetition under apparently new conditions might provide a space to reflect on what, if anything, has changed over the course of the past couple decades, as much as what has changed over the past couple years of “distancing,” isolation, fear, mass death, and intensified security. But through some of the discussion, I sometimes felt like a distant observer myself. I’d like to reflect on some of my concerns below, drawing a bit on my personal experience—meaning much of this will be anecdotal and speculative, but may still resonate with some shared experiences and concerns.

As I listened to the conversation, I was struck by the return of these familiar terms, especially as I couldn’t be sure what people meant by them. Do they still have the same sense or resonance? My sense is that things have changed, or at least feel like they have—the politics around nations, states, globalization, culture, neoliberalism, and so on have intensified in recent years with a worldwide backlash against liberalism. The coronavirus didn’t cause this, of course, but it did magnify it. Although the most prominent marker of this shift may be the rise of “authoritarian” rulers and parties, or “anti-democratic” currents, it is by no means limited to this, or to a particular political perspective. However, it

has meant that the terms “nation,” “state,” “globalization,” and so on have taken on ever more contradictory resonances, in which attachments, defenses, allegiances, and critiques proliferate endlessly and, at least to me, confusedly. This has considerable but hard to specify implications for a number of critiques involving Japan studies.

If we begin with technology for example, of late, these tensions and disputes have emerged primarily through on-line spaces, which have taken on an increasingly important role (including for the discussion itself). These are not new either, but once again, amplified and ubiquitous as a result of the virus. This has certainly contributed to some new openings and reflections, such as online workshops—including on Japanese film and media studies, for example—now unhampered by the costs and logistics of travel. The virtualization of film festivals temporarily provided remarkable access. They have also enabled solidarities to emerge—including offers from scholars in Japan to access and transmit materials to those who cannot be there. At the same time, these spaces have also exposed rank misogyny. Relationships of geography and power also become hazy. One commentator offered a Land Acknowledgement before pointing out how virtual spaces render this acknowledgment ambiguous at best. At the very least, such media spaces remain highly capitalized, and securitized, but in less visible ways than conventional border patrol. The geography of the medium and its relations to power are thus presumably even more ambiguous. Given that the same digital conduits may increasingly provide the means for conducting research, this is not a trivial concern. The medium may be the message, but in this case the medium remains mysterious to most people, even as securing the medium—the technical policing of information—becomes of the utmost importance.

The question of access in this sense was a focal point in the discussion, though less directed towards the security of transmission. That said, with physical access cut off in order to secure the population from viral transmission, the question of what will happen to fieldwork and scholarship is serious. The relationship between the virus and Japanese history or culture can't be discounted as a possible research topic, including for media studies. But there are other factors as well that may seem less obvious—especially around “Japan” itself. During the discussion, one student spoke about the relationship between texts and the “Japan of her imagination,” and something about that resonated with me. When I go to Japan, I may visit archives or buy books, or even attend conferences, but there is a difference for me between data/discussion and simply being in a place. This is hard to specify or quantify though. This might mean that Japan Studies also becomes increasingly abstract—disembodied in literal terms, regardless of whether the methodology is theoretical or empirical, qualitative or quantitative, in terms of art or science. At this point, however, it is too soon to say.

The sense of distance I felt was also guided by other factors. For the most part, these

critical discussions have been led by scholars at a handful of elite universities. But what does the study of Japan look like at a university where there is no “Japan Studies,” “Film Studies,” or “East Asian studies.”? None of these have majors, let alone graduate programs where I work, so the question of access primarily affects undergraduates who wish to study abroad, typically as part of language learning. At this stage, discipline is not an immediate concern but it is not likely that anyone will be studying Japanese film, as film is irrelevant for the most part in terms of history/theory, or as a part of urban culture. Film history/thematic classes do fill up, but serious interest in film as an important creative or political form of expression is largely absent. Few students watch films, apart from more prominent titles on popular streaming networks, and all theaters in the city are owned by two media corporations that show virtually the same films at every theater week after week.

Japanese, however, is quite popular—it is among the most popular languages (according to recent data in the Chronicle of Higher Education, the University of North Carolina Charlotte ranked 5th in the country for the number of Japanese majors). But a major means mostly language classes. Students can effectively graduate with a degree in Japanese (typically as a double-major), but take only a minimal number of “content” or “culture” classes. To the best of my knowledge, there are only three people on campus who teach upper level Japan-related content courses consistently. Despite the linguistic popularity of Japanese, there are no scholarly Japanese books in the library. There is more scholarly work on China in multiple disciplines, but there are no scholars on Korea (in spite of a student petition to hire one). As with many universities, classes on pop culture or anime are common, but these are largely frivolous in terms of the students’ second majors, which, in my experience, hew closer to international relations, business, or computer science (though English, Psychology, and Communication majors are also present). Translation is also an increasingly popular major and concentration, which requires classes in theory (though almost exclusively European) and practicums, which are focused on developing strong skills in the actual practice of translation (though this also leaves open the possibility for critical reflection linguistically, culturally, and historically).

At the same time, however, the absence of Japan studies or other area studies doesn’t necessarily mean that some of the problems associated with these disciplinary configurations are missing. There is a concentration in “Asian Studies” within the International Studies major. This is listed as “critical” but this is primarily in terms of strategic US foreign policy. That said, it isn’t clear what the framing of the coursework is, or what classes are currently being offered (the list for Japan related classes is partly outdated). Students have received “critical language scholarships” from the US state department, and otherwise secure government jobs at the state and federal level, for example.

But today, it is not entirely clear whether this is the worst possible scenario. I think this is related to the concerns noted above in the abstractions and mutual implications of states and corporations. From such a perspective, whether the state department is a worse proposition than Tesla, or Google, or Harvard, could be an open question.

We could consider the example of militarization. At my university, connections between the university, American hegemony, and militarism are fairly matter of fact, even as war proliferates endlessly (and, until the recent invasion of Ukraine, mostly out of sight as if it were an abstraction). Connections between this war machine and the university (private and public) are evident in funding. Though “publicly” funded, the biggest external benefactor of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences is the department of defense. Research in exchange for military funding is not uncommon. But this is not only an issue in terms of the official military (North Carolina is a state that prides itself on its support for the military, though this isn’t always apparent in its treatment of veterans, according to some I’ve spoken with). At the same time, the military in the state maintains close relations with many militia groups. There is a sense of an atmosphere of violence, but I don’t mean this exclusively in the sense of clouds and tensions. America’s propensity, at official and semi-official levels, for weapons and killing extends to criminal and “accidental” violence as well.

Although the university would seem to remain outside of this general militarized environment, it is not so simple. An on-campus shooting a couple years ago is a horrible reminder for myself and many others. Responses to this horrific act mainly took the form of honoring the memory of the slain in a kind of communal bonding. While attending to this grieving is important, it also took place without attention to the larger sweep of violence at work. More, not long before this shooting, the university hired a new director of security, a former commander of American prison camps at Guantanamo Bay, who also operated secret detention centers in Iraq and Somalia. Questions from faculty about this quiet hire were met with derisive dismissal by the former chancellor. All forms of violence must be rigidly compartmentalized but it is getting harder to maintain the lines of demarcation.

The encroachment of militarization—of “sanctioned” force—in the university—through funding and administration, both legal and extra-legal—is a concern, but not a surprise. I’m reminded of *Shin Godzilla*’s sardonic view of the militarization of bureaucracy and the bureaucratization of the military. Although the bureaucratic military is successful in *Shin Godzilla*, the result is simply that the now evolutionary beast has been temporarily frozen. For how long, no one knows.

The interpolation of security and violence into the bureaucracy, far from ensuring a sense of safety seems rather to amplify feelings of disconnection and pervasive mistrust.

More, if we go by this scenario, the return of the sovereign mode of violence in the legal architecture of the constitution seems unlikely to dispel the senses of mistrust and anxiety in Japan itself. In Japan and elsewhere, those currents are similarly deep and vast when not obscured by the harried pace of survival demanded everywhere.

Even in its most horrifically visible manifestations, this violence is not outside questions of Japan or Asian studies, though outside the generalized critiques American violence, the relationship is obscured by other disciplinary lines and institutional measures. For example, violence towards Asians and Asian Americans—especially women—is an almost daily occurrence in the US. But there has been only minimal acknowledgement of this from the University. Neither Asians nor Americans of Asian descent are typically seen in light of movements against systemic racism or addressed by the University's DEI efforts. These efforts, moreover, are by no means incompatible with more conservative forces. The 17 campuses of the UNC system fall under the rule of the Board of Governors, a highly conservative group, that works in tandem with the state legislature, in the hands of a reactionary GOP since 2010. This fact has recently come to light after a scathing report of the entire UNC system was published in the *New York Times*. The report, issued by the American Association of University Professors, indites the UNC system for gross violations of academic freedom, endemic racism, and willful efforts to stymie participation by faculty in governance. There are ways in which this report could be questioned or critiqued. Nonetheless, there has been no response from the administration or system. The need to avoid liability may be driving this avoidance, but the conditions of funding in the state offer few easy solutions to this.

Recent efforts to shift the university to R1 status, along with plans to re-organize the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, remain uncertain, but seem likely to drain funding from the humanities more generally. This may lead to closer ties between promotion and fundraising, among a host of other issues. But what to make of such developments? While some of the particulars may differ, no university is free of such concerns. Nonetheless, there is still something peculiar when I think about these issues from my current perspective. Given these conditions, the attractions of a critical disciplinary arrangement cannot be denied. At the same time, these same conditions may limit any critical purchase, or real-world effects. While this dilemma will be familiar to many, in other ways, the dilemma itself feels like a pipe dream, as it seems highly unlikely that there could be enough desire, resources, or funding to support a stronger scholarly community around film, Japan, or Asia at any point in the near future. There are also undoubtedly larger concerns—some of the work that is being recognized and encouraged is in fact important though it remains unclear whether this will be another form of institutional capture.

I don't know how representative my experience is, but I'm guessing it is not uncommon, and that there are far worse cases in the US. Nor is there a complete absence of concern about these issues—among students, staff, faculty, and even administration. More, insofar as Japan studies flies under the radar, there may also be considerable freedom (though this poses larger difficulties for hosting conferences and workshops). Nonetheless, if my experience is more common, then these various senses of distance may be worth discussing. Is there any such thing as a non-distant observer?