Japanese Neo Pop is a distinctively Japanese form of artistic expression dating from the 1990s, rooted in Japanese subculture and perfectly exemplified by the work of Takashi Murakami. The term "subculture" here refers to widespread elements of Japanese popular culture including manga, anime, and tokusatsu (special effects). Upon hearing these terms, readers more or less familiar with Japanese popular culture may think of Astro Boy (Tetsuwan Atom), Hayao Miyazaki, and Godzilla (fig. 3.1). But Japanese Neo Pop is not a mere appropriation of the imagery of subculture—anime, manga, and tokusatsu—into the realm of fine art. Such a simplistic interpretation unduly consigns this Japanese phenomenon to a subcategory of Pop Art as its East Asian variation. I hope my discussion here will help clarify the cultural and critical meaning of Japanese Neo Pop and place it properly within the historical and social contexts of postwar Japan.

Let us begin by examining Japan’s situation in the 1960s, when the subculture that Japanese Neo Pop has mined so productively first arose. The early 1960s saw Japan struggle back to its economic and political feet after the chaotic postwar years, with the nation’s goal shifting from recovery to rapid growth.
Act. This was the key historical condition that set the stage for the uniquely Japanese aesthetic of Superflat, which has dismantled the hierarchy of high art and subculture and leveled the playing field for all kinds of expression.

While Japanese children bonded with each other on an unparalleled scale by means of the homogenizing and homogenized media environment, the generation gap between them and their parents proved to be far more profound—and far less bridgeable—than that experienced by any previous generation. As these children (that is, the “subculture generation”) reached adulthood and became active members of society, mainstream Japanese society, through the curious eye of the mass media, began to scrutinize and criticize their appearances, behaviors, and values, which varied widely from the established norm. The word *otaku*—literally, “your home”—is derived from a habit of the subculture crowd.
hose members called each other by this generic 'pronoun instead of using their individual names. "Home" the literal sense of otaku implies neither family lineage nor blood ties, but more accurately points to the physical structure or place of the "house." The use of otaku, however, was not exclusive to the subculture generation, according to Mari Kotani, a critic of science-fiction and fantasy literature:

This is merely speculation, but I think that children began to use the word otaku because it was already being used in their nuclear families, in their relationships with their mothers during the era of rapid growth.... If these children began using the word under the influence of their mothers, they also assumed their mothers' shadowy identity as possession of the home, or even identical to it. In other words, the word otaku entered the vocabulary of the maturing subculture generation out of the vocabulary of their mothers, fulltime homemakers whose existence was defined solely by their roles as wives and mothers. Certainly, Kotani's observation is compelling, and I would like to expand further on her idea. Beginning in the 1960s, the Japanese government promoted rapid economic growth over the preservation of national culture and traditions. This policy prompted the dissolution of community life, separating individuals from their extended families, whose smallest unit was the triad of "Dad, Mom, and me." Given the inhospitable urban environment of Japan, where land was scarce and expensive, nuclear families had only two housing options: to purchase land in the suburbs where they could afford a small house, or to live in danchi, "housing complexes," usually consisting of modest apartment buildings in which dwellings are partitioned along a grid. Families that chose the first option caused the explosive increase in the postwar population of the greater metropolitan area. In these households, husbands rose early to commute great distances into the city center on packed commuter trains. Trapped by high mortgage payments stretching decades into the future, they stayed late to work overtime, leaving households without a significant presence of their members.
generation, utterly alien to that of their parents, doubt their rooms appeared inexplicable and creepy—to the eyes of the previous generation—and had little passion for these subcultures. It is ironic that the mass media, which branded the youth as *otaku* and reported negatively on them, comprised the very men who spent most of their waking hours at work and abandoned their wives at home. If *otaku* represented a transference of the isolated communication among abandoned housewives to their children, enthusiastic for the subculture that emerged in the postwar era of high economic growth, then the men who found *otaku* so creepy were unnerved by their very own wives and children.

In 1995, the vague sense of repulsion felt by mainstream society was validated by the Sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway, in which a chemical weapon was released on trains crowded with rush-hour commuters. This extraordinary attempt...
time for Aum followers to unite and fight to overcome the greatest challenge humanity had ever faced.

In this context, Aum's Sarin attack was at once a self-fulfilling prophecy and a punishment on the Japanese populace, which went peacefully about the business of life, oblivious to these (imagined) infiltrations. After the Sarin attack, the police conducted an exhaustive search of Aum's headquarters near Mt. Fuji, which comprised several buildings called \textit{satyam} (derived from the Sanskrit \textit{satya}, or “truth”), and arrested many followers and suspected perpetrators. The police uncovered a vast Sarin refinery located within the ostensible \textit{dōjō} (training site for spiritual and physical practices, such as meditation) and arrested many followers and suspected perpetrators. In addition, they exposed a plot devised by the sect's radical wing to mass produce Sarin and spray it from a remote-controlled helicopter in order to massacre morally corrupt Tokyo residents.
What interests us here is the fact that the magazines and videos Aum followers produced to proselytize their dogma were rife with otaku references, ready accessible to a subculture generation fond of manga and anime. In fact, their preposterous vision of using their supposed supernatural capabilities—as well as the power of science and technology—to guide humanity toward salvation in the aftermath of Armageddon was cobbled together from various conventions of post-1960s subculture. Such conventions were entirely familiar and appealing to a generation once preoccupied with similar narratives. As individual converts rose through the ranks of Aum, they were bestowed with "holy names" as Aum's warriors and donned color-coded uniforms befitting their roles, the better to immerse themselves in the coming Apocalypse.

Inevitably we arrive at the question: exactly when and how did this Armageddon fantasy invade both Japanese society, buoyed by the miraculous economic growth of the late 1960s, and the generation poised to lead the country into the rosy future? In reality, in 1970, the year when Expo '70 (Asia's first World's Fair) was held in Osaka under the banner, "Progress and Harmony for Mankind," Japanese society stood at a crucial turning point. As Expo '70 was underway, a radical New Left group hijacked a domestic aircraft, and the novelist Yukio Mishima staged his suicide by traditional disembowelment. In the next few years, a series of terrorist bombings hit downtown Tokyo, President Nixon's suspension of the gold standard and introduction of fluctuating currency rates provoked the "dollar shock," and the international oil crisis precipitated the "oil shock," which spiraling inflation."\(^7\) These events spurred doubt that the promised bright future would ever arrive. These years also saw environmental crises plague the whole nation, with city children advised against outdoor exercise because of air pollution. A new kind of pessimism was pervasive, even among children.

In 1973, as Japanese society found itself spread despondence, the science-fiction writer Sakyō Komatsu published the novel Japan Sinks (Nihon chinbotsu). In this novel, far from achieving a bright future, the entire Japanese archipelago sinks to the bottom of the sea in the wake of mammoth earthquakes.
against this historical and social backdrop, a subculture landmark emerged: *Space Battleship Yamato*, first broadcast in 1974 (and broadcast in the U.S. as *Star Blazers*; fig. 3.2, pl. 27). This televised anime series gained the overwhelming endorsement of what would be called the subculture generation. It is almost
impossible to find anybody in Japan's Neo Pop generation who has not seen Yamato, and those who most enthusiastically embraced it went on to form the defining currents of ofaku culture.

Briefly, the story of Space Battleship Yamato unfolds in the future on planet Earth. Under violent alien attack, earthlings find themselves at a profound disadvantage because of inferior weaponry. A constant barrage of "planetary bombs" (nuclear weapons) has contaminated the entire surface of the planet with radiation; the earth has become a planet of death. Humans survive by fleeing underground, where they find temporary protection from the encroaching radiation, but their extinction is inevitable. A timely message from friendly aliens inspires the Earth Defense Forces to convert the mammoth battleship Yamato, the pride of Japan's naval fleet before it sank in World War II, into a spaceship and embark on a journey to the distant planet Iscandar.
Earth's survivors hope to plan for the purification and recovery of their radiation-polluted planet.

In all its absurdity, what is significant about *Yamato* is not so much the unreal fantasy it paints in typical science-fiction fashion, but the setting inescapably reminiscent of the Pacific War between Japan and the U.S. Beleaguered survivors eking out their existence in an underground metropolis conjures up a picture of Japanese citizens crouched in bomb shelters, desperately waiting for air raids to end. Aboveground, a civilization burned to ashes closely resembles the image of Tokyo after the massive firebombing by American B-29s (fig. 3.3). An earth transformed into uninhabitable ruins by nuclear weapons dropped by an alien race directly points to Hiroshima and Nagasaki (fig. 3.4, pl. 6). And throughout the story, characters who are driven into life-or-death predicaments often abruptly carry out suicidal attacks. Furthermore, endangered earthlings...
find their only hope for survival in the battleship Yamato—once considered Japan's last hope—now retrofitted for space travel. All of these elements cannot be mere coincidences. Obviously, this story is rooted in the Japan-U.S. war. Actually, Yamato’s references to history were hardly unique within the tradition of subculture in postwar Japan. In the paradigmatic tokusatsu movie, Godzilla, the title character is a prehistoric creature awakened from his ancient slumber by hydrogen bomb tests in the Pacific, and “monsterized” through radiation exposure (fig. 3.1, pl. 7). In 1954, the year the film was released, the Japanese fishing vessel Fifth Lucky Dragon (Daigo Fukuryu-maru) and its entire crew were...
irradiated off Bikini Atoll when the U.S. tested the Bravo hydrogen bomb; immediately afterward, rain riddled with “death ashes” fell across the country. In response, a massive antinuclear movement arose. Japanese Neo Popartists also frequently reference the TV series Ultra Q (1966), Ultraman (1966-67), and Ultraseven (1967-68; pl. 9), whose antagonist monsters were designed primarily by the sculptor Tohô (Téru) Narita, who had worked in the tokusatsu department on Godzilla. In his monster designs, Narita often appropriated images of military weaponry or alluded to radiation-induced mutations (fig. 3.5). As he later recalled in his 1996 book, Special Effects and Monsters (Tokusatsu to kaijû), Narita himself was a victim of the American air raids; as an artist, he made it his lifelong mission to paint the moment that the atomic bomb “Little Boy” exploded over Hiroshima at the end of the Japan-U.S. war.

After Japan’s defeat, the survivors of the war imbued a subculture aimed at children with a latent antagonism toward the U.S., an antagonism that formed the legacy of the Pacific War. This persisted as a potent subtext when a new generation of creators entered the field, and anime replaced the monster-driven tokusatsu. For example, Katsuhiro Otomo’s animated film Akira (1988) depicts a future war of survival, fought by teenagers with supernatural powers in a Tokyo apparently ravaged by nuclear weapons (fig. 3.6, pl. 18). Another memorable example is the TV anime series Neon Genesis Evangelion, introduced in 1995, the year of Aum’s Sarin attack, which went on to become a record-breaking hit in the anime world (fig. 3.7, pl. 33). In Evangelion, the fourteen-year-old protagonists, endowed with unique powers, are called into duty—much like schoolchildren mobilized to labor at factories during World War II—and forced into nearly suicidal attacks against the unidentified invading enemies called Shito (or “Apostles”) in Japanese (and Angels in English). The list of examples goes on and on, but the important point is that while the postwar subculture that proliferated from the 1960s onward drew its narrative inspiration from the Pacific War, Japanese art from the same period rarely addressed this topic. Not that Japanese art never tackled the subject of war. Quite the contrary: during the Pacific War, the ongoing conflict was made an explicit theme of painting. This epoch-making genre
functioned as propaganda directed at Japanese civilians. What is unique is that the Japanese military had no specialized war artists, but practically every famous artist in Japan was recruited to serve the nation with his paintbrush. These oil paintings, a subcategory in the larger genre of "war painting," depict scenes of Imperial Japan's "Holy War" (or "Greater East Asian War," as it was called by the Japanese government), and virtually no painter resisted. These painters included such luminaries as Tsuguji Fujita, who had won a glowing reputation in Paris in the 1920s, and Ichiro Fukuzawa, who had pioneered Japanese Surrealism in the 1930s. Especially important is Fujita, who shocked his audience with his portrayal of Japanese soldiers sacrificing themselves in battles, rendering his subjects with a merciless verisimilitude unimaginable from his previous paintings of cats and nudes. These war record paintings were confiscated by the American occupation forces and eventually returned to Japan in 1970, under the term of "indefinite loan."
remains unwritten.

In the world of subculture, however, things were entirely different. Most notably, the illustrator Shigeru Komatsuzaki was renowned in postwar years for his drawings related to World War II, which embellished the boxes of model kits. His depictions of battle scenes as well as weaponry, battleships, and tanks established a visual vocabulary of war among children (fig. 3.9, pl. 26). Prior to the defeat, Komatsuzaki was the best-selling illustrator of his time, contributing his powerful war images to such magazines as *Shonen kurabu* (Boys club) and *Kikaika* (Mechanization). Throughout his life, he proudly remembered the praise heaped upon his painting, *This One Blow*, by none other than Fujita, the foremost master of the genre. This painting, which depicted Zeros in an air battle, was included in an Army's Art Exhibition in 1942. Leiji (Reiji) Matsumoto, the creator of *Yamato*, was greatly influenced by Komatsuzaki's
Some may argue that Murakami has made no direct reference to war. His well-known sculpture Second Mission Project (S.M.Pko?, 1998-99), however, represents a female cyborg whose body incorporates a fighter jet (fig. 3.14). Careful scrutiny reveals the term “Air Self Defense Forces” (Kōka Jieitai) imprinted on the thigh of this bishōjo (beautiful young girl). Even more direct is Time Bokan (2001), which depicts a skull-shaped mushroom cloud (fig. 3.15). The work borrows its title and iconography from a TV anime series that ran from 1975 to 1983, each episode of which ended with its protagonists’ miserable defeat, always accompanied by a mushroom cloud reminiscent of the A-bomb in the background (pl. 3). (Bokan is an onomatopoeic word signifying the sound of an explosion.) Although Time Bokan...
trafficked in an image almost inconceivable for children’s programming in the only country that had ever suffered atomic bombing, Japanese children eagerly awaited its weekly installments—and its mushroom cloud. In a sense, it may be argued that Murakami has attempted to create “defeat record painting” (hisen kiroku-ga), ironically commenting on a post-war Japan that is oblivious to its wartime history and has become Superflat, so to speak, with no clear boundary between high art and subculture—which are, in fact, intricately entwined.

It then follows that, as absurd and preposterous as they may seem, the narratives favored by otaku are strewn with fragments of the distorted history of Japan. Similarly, the Superflat expressions of Japanese Neo Pop, which varyingly adapt these otaku narratives,
Communist countries, was to return to real socialism, but communism did not have a firm political foundation. The postwar constitution established a democratic order (the postwar Japanese Constitution, which came into effect in 1947, unequivocally declares that "the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes"; it further states, "In order to accomplish this aim... land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained") (pl. 8). Nevertheless, Japan in reality maintains the Self-Defense Forces (déeitai), whose powerful armaments rank among the best held by Asian nations. Their contradictory existence—indeed their very constitutionality—is a matter of ongoing debate.

Rooted in bitter reflection on Japan's wartime militarist invasion of Asian nations, Article 9 was intended to prevent similar events. But once the country was incorporated into the Western bloc during the Cold War, it was assigned the role of bulwark against Communism in the Far East, which necessitated it to rearm. Yet under the constitution, Japan could not have any military forces of its own. This legal conundrum was resolved by allowing the U.S. to establish military bases throughout the nation (the largest being those in Okinawa) under the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty of 1951. The treaty in effect made the Japanese forces—by definition limited to self defense—auxiliary to the American forces, which, unconstrained by the Japanese constitution, would defend the archipelago in the event of international conflicts in East Asia.

The Cold War arrangement thus put in place in East Asia had a direct bearing on the political order of post-war Japan, as exemplified by the so-called 1955 regime maintained by the conservative Liberal Democratic Party, which in practical terms has stayed in power ever since, keeping the liberal opposition, represented by the Socialist Party, on the defensive.
1955, the regime appears to rest on the oppositional relationship between the conservatives and the liberals. The two sides have maintained an equilibrium, engineeredly avoiding lethal confrontations and carefully preserving their respective power bases. As a result, the regime has had a stabilizing effect on Japanese society as a kind of mini-Cold War deadlock in which the ruling party looks out for its own interests.

The positive visions of "peace" and "rapid economic growth" upheld in Japan since 1945 were nothing but palliative constructs, preserved under the guardian of the U.S. as head of the Western bloc, with an eye turned to the bloody proxy wars being waged in Korea and Vietnam. Throughout the 1960s, the New Left repeatedly challenged the power of the state, energizing young people and students who understood that such "peace" was a fabrication preserved through the conflicts of the Cold War. But their decisive defeat in the struggle against the renewal of the Japan Security Treaty in 1970 forced the New Left into irrelevance. With all resistance toward the fiction of peace now silenced, the Japanese people rapidly withdrew themselves into an ahistorical capsule, losing sight of their own history and thus the sense of the wider world in which their past had unfolded. This historical "self-withdrawal" (jihei) eventually led to that which may be called an "imaginary reality": the "bubble economy" caused by the speculative frenzy of land buying in the 1980s. It is no surprise, then, that the bubble suddenly burst in the early 1990s, as the Cold War order itself collapsed.

The generation of otaku and Japanese Neo Pop came of age in the aftermath of the demise of the New Left, when Japan’s "self-withdrawal" was reinforced politically, economically, and militarily. To this generation, everything about war—the war Japan had waged, the proxy wars fought in neighboring Asian nations, and even Japan’s own military (the so-called Self-Defense Forces)—was fiction; as such, it was fodder for their pastime fantasies of manga and anime. This may explain why Japanese subculture has often reveled in an obsessive fondness for military weaponry, engaging contently with this subject as fantasy while making no connection to its importance in the real-life issues of history and politics. Granted, the views presented in subculture may appear extremely right-wing, nationalistic, or militaristic. But the more...
legitimate political consciousness. Instead, they have been transformed into the monstrous catastrophes and apocalyptic delusions depicted in the highly graphic depiction of sex.

Even if this imaginary reality manifests itself in a highly sleek and Superflat manner, its emergence is no doubt informed by the suppression of both the reality and memory of history. In fact, the Superflat world of manga and anime was created amidst post-1970 political oppression, which encouraged a double amnesia concerning the two kinds of violence experienced by Japan in the war: the nation's own aggression in Asia, and the violence inflicted upon Japan by the U.S. in the form of myriad firebombs and two atomic bombs. Since the war, despite the end of the occupation and the restoration of Japan's full sovereignty and independence, the fact that a foreign (American) power maintains military bases on Japanese soil has created a precarious footing for national identity. Furthermore, a series of nuclear tests conducted by the U.S. and the Soviets in the Pacific Ocean and Siberia during the Cold War was more than enough to implant the fear of human extinction in an all-out nuclear war in the Japanese subconscious. Yet, in the imaginary reality of postwar Japan—in which the Self-Defense Forces cannot explicitly be called "military forces"—such memories and fears have never been channeled into a legitimate political consciousness. Instead, they have been transformed into the monstrous catastrophes and apocalyptic delusions depicted in the highly graphic depiction of sex.

Japan's subculture must be understood as a dynamic of ambivalent urges, vacillating between the desire to escape from historical self-withdrawal and to revert to it. By exploiting the creepy imagination of subculture—which has spawned monsters, aliens, supernatural wars—the generation of otaku and Japanese Neo Pop has re-imagined Japan's gravely distorted history, which the nation chose to embrace at the very beginning of its postwar life.
ties of violence and averting its eyes from

Granted, Japan's subculture generation is
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the ancient narrative strata of the Pacific War
ist the reality of the Cold War into another
low many times have they burned Tokyo to
 tireslessly fended off invaders, and persevered
radioactive contamination in order to chip
ay at the imaginary reality that forced them into
drawal? Even though all of this takes place
he closed space that is the otaku's "private room,"
ue history no doubt endures in this space—a
osm of postwar Japan—albeit constricted
ferred.
en we reexamine the massive number of images
af, carnage, destruction, nuclear irradiation, and
is stored in such subculture genres as manga,
and tokusatsu, we begin to understand that the
rflat space of postwar Japan constitutes a
ion of the nation's paradoxical history—
reflection engendered by the suppression of
ies of the twofold violence Japan experienced
victimizer and victimized, as well as its fear
Cold War. If we find anything authentic in
ork of Japanese Neo Pop that goes beyond the
implistic label of Far Eastern Pop Art, it is the
artists' sober acknowledgement of Japan's his-
cal history. The true achievement of Japanese
Pop, then, is that it gives form to the
history that haunts Japan—by reassembling
of history accumulated in otaku's private
and liberating them from their confinement in an
imaginary reality through a critical reconstruction
subculture. In doing so, these artists have
ind taken the delusional path of resorting to
Aum; instead, they have found a way out
universal means of art, transferring their findings to
the battlefield that is art history. In essence, Japanese
Neo Pop, as exemplified by the work of Takashi
Murakami among others, visualizes the
distortion of Japan for the eyes of the world.
Emperor Hirohito accepted the Potsdam Declaration and the nation surrendered unconditionally. In contrast to its ambiguous origin, the end of the period remains a point of debate. Some contend that the postwar era ended in 1951 when the Japanese government signed the San Francisco Peace Treaty, which announced the conclusion of the U.S. occupation and the rapid economic growth of the late 1950s and 1960s, along with the hosting of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics in part to signal the end of its use. Others think that it ended in 1989 with the death of Hirohito, who was succeeded by his son, the reigning emperor. Still others insist that the postwar period will never end unless the Japanese Constitution, enacted soon after the nation's defeat and amended. Personally, I believe that the period will continue as long as Japan is bound by the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, signed concurrently with the San Francisco Peace Treaty, allowing the U.S. to maintain independent military bases within Japan. In other words, it is my opinion that the postwar period, which began in 1945, continues to this day.

4. Japan was awarded the 1940 Summer Olympics, but the games were subsequently cancelled due to the country's involvement in World War II.

5. There is a significant difference between writing in hiragana and in katakana. (This distinction is not easily translated into English.) Hiragana (cursive syllabic script) and katakana (angular syllabary), syllabic scripts (similar to alphabets), syllabic scripts (similar to alphabets) developed in the ninth century, carry significantly different implications in Japanese written language. Hiragana was originally called "women's hand" (onnade), an alternative to the
In other words, rendered in katakana, the word otaku is exported as something “cool,” and the concept is imported as a “culture of value” supposedly legitimized in a process that may amount to a cultural laundering.


7. The suspension of the gold standard in August 1971 led eventually to the abolishment of the fixed dollar-yen exchange rate, which had long kept the value of the yen low, thus benefiting Japan’s exports. The drastic increase in oil prices and restriction of supply by OPEC in October 1973 further accelerated inflation in Japan, and caused economic panic.