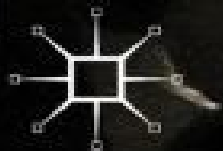




Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture

Edited by Patrick W. Galbraith
and Jason G. Karlin



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University of Tokyo, Japan

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Contents

List of Illustrations

Foreword: Revisiting “Idology”

Acknowledgments

Notes on Contributors

Introduction: The Mirror of Idols and Celebrity

Patrick W. Galbraith and Jason G. Karlin

Part I Systems

1 The Jimusho System: Understanding the Production Logic of the Japanese Entertainment Industry
W. David Marx

2 Megaspectacle and Celebrity Transgression in Japan: The Sakai Noriko Media Scandal
Igor Prusa

3 Through a Looking Glass Darkly: Television Advertising, Idols, and the Making of Fan Audiences
Jason G. Karlin

Part II Desire

4 Johnny’s Idols as Icons: Female Desires to Fantasize and Consume Male Idol Images
Kazumi Nagaike

5 From Boys Next Door to Boys’ Love: Gender Performance in Japanese Male Idol Media
Lucy Glasspool

6 The Homo Cultures of Iconic Personality in Japan: Mishima Yukio and Misora Hibari
Jonathan D. Mackintosh

Part III Difference

7 Idol as Accidental Activist: Agnes Chan, Feminism, and Motherhood in Japan
Alexandra Hambleton

8 Emotions, Desires, and Fantasies: What Idolizing Means for Yon-sama Fans in Japan
Ho Swee Lin

Part IV Image

9 Idols: The Image of Desire in Japanese Consumer Capitalism
Patrick W. Galbraith

10 The Virtual Idol: Producing and Consuming Digital Femininity
Daniel Black

Index

Illustrations

- I.1 AKB48 will “save the nation,” from AERA (6 September 2010)
- I.2 The wa of Japanese mass media self-referentiality
- I.3 Television insets (waipu) and captions (tsukkomi terropu)
 - 3.1 Arashi play Nintendo Wii in a television commercial and on their weekly variety show
 - 3.2 Ayase Haruka in a television commercial for Ezaki Glico “Giant Cone”
- 3.1 Album cover of Moritaka Chisato’s Hijitsuryoku-ha Sengen (Non-Ability Proclamation)
- 3.2 A store selling photographs of AKB48 in Akihabara, Tokyo
- 3.3 An advertisement for a store selling “raw photographs” in Akihabara, Tokyo
- 3.4 A “perfumed picture” of AKB48
- 3.5 “Costume card” of Kawashima Umika
- 3.1 Hatsune Miku, the “virtual idol”
- 3.2 “Miim” the HRP-4C android engaged in cosplay as Hatsune Miku

Foreword: Revisiting “Idology”

It was back in 1988 that I decided to explore the conspicuous realm of popular cultural performance in contemporary urban Japan that was being represented by young media-promoted personalities called *aidoru* or “pop idols.” As a novice of symbolic anthropology, I considered idols to be personified symbols that operated as tricksters in the public initiation of Japanese youngsters. My dissatisfaction with the fact that the few academic sources I could find on idols back then were all anecdotal statements by their authors about how the social meanings of idols could be interpreted led me to cultivate a new field of empirical studies on the idol phenomenon.

Naming this new field *gūzōgaku* or “idology,” I spent the next ten years conducting fieldwork in Japan’s entertainment industry and its surrounding areas, gathering concrete data on how young talents, their promoters, and supporting fans co-developed a domain in which idols were celebrated, commoditized, transformed into adolescent role models, and consumed. With many thanks to countless collaborators in Japan’s entertainment world as well as in academia, my venture resulted in the publication of *Islands of Eight Million Smiles* in 2005.

This accomplishment was not free of shortcomings. In my book, I emphasized female idols, instead of male idols or queer icons, since it was the subject I knew best. My work has been criticized from time to time for its apparent focus on the aspects of conformity and its neglect of points of conflict—meaning that I had to open Pandora’s box by highlighting the “behind the scene” underside of idol performance, including such issues as ethnic minorities and mobster politics. Perhaps, it was my sense of moral and ethical boundaries that configured the seriousness of the ethnographic approach and my inclination towards culturalism (i.e., my emphasis on the idea that enculturation is a compulsory praxis), which I inherited from anthropology, that prevented me from exposing these perspectives.

Idol performance has demonstrated new turns since I introduced its symbolic significance to the world, and changed in ways I would have never expected. Instances are the growing popularity of Japanese pop idols alongside cutesy phenomena, manga and anime, as well as centers of “Cool Japan,” such as Shibuya and Akihabara, among European and American audiences in a form that may be called neo-Orientalism; the influx of Korean idols, such as BoA, Jinki, Kara, and Shōjo Jidai, into Japan’s pop idol scene; the transformation of idol imageries from cutesy to more sexy, classy, and/or hip personal configurations alongside emergent hybrid buzzwords, such as *erokawa* (sexy-cutesy), *kirekawa* (classy-cutesy), and *kawakakoi* (cutesy-trendy), as manifested in neoidols, such as Amuro Namie, AYU, and Kōda Kumi; and the revival of cutesy idols in forms represented by Morning Musume and AKB48. For someone who expected that the clumsy representation of cutesy idols would fade away before long by becoming passé—and who commissioned ideology with the classical anthropological task of

recording traditions, customs, and lifestyles that would never be rightly understood once lost or forgotten—these new changes in idol performance demand a new wave of extensive research on the idol phenomenon.

In this sense, this volume is something I was waiting to see for a long time: a series of case studies by the next generation of idolologists who have managed to expose what I could not, carried theorization on idol-pop phenomena a step further, and achieved what many students who majored in media studies, cultural studies, and cultural anthropology could only touch on at the level of term papers and theses. I am convinced that this volume will provide an invaluable contribution in our ongoing Baconian venture to deduce the mechanism of idol mystification.

Aoyagi Hiroshi

Acknowledgments

It's a little counterintuitive, but acknowledgments are perhaps the most difficult part of a book to write. They are written last, with much happening from the start to the finish of a project, meaning all sorts of loose ends to tie up. More importantly, the audience for this singular and strange genre is completely bifurcated: those who don't care at all and those who care a great deal. You seldom find people who just skim the acknowledgments. They either skip them entirely or pore carefully over every word looking for academic genealogies, strategic alliancemaking (or breaking: the snub), and perhaps personal recognitions and resonances. In this most seemingly insignificant genre of writing, the stakes can be extremely high. It's hard to find a middle path and please everyone.

The logical conclusion is to thank everyone generally and no one specifically. Keep it short and offend no one! Indeed, such a set of acknowledgments makes a good deal of sense. To wax poetic, it seems to us that everyone we ever met and every conversation we ever had have deeply impacted the choices we have made and what we have written. More practically, in a book project that spanned many years from conception to completion, there are far too many people to thank individually and properly.

This book began with encounters at the University of Tokyo, Japan, in 2009, and then coalesced into a graduate seminar on celebrity and fandom. Many students in the Graduate School of Interdisciplinary Information Studies shared an interest in media and celebrity studies, and a few shared a more personal fascination with Japanese idols. It was hard for us not to notice the gap between the omnipresence of idols in everyday conversations in Tokyo and their absence in academic debates. In our readings on Japanese popular culture, we also found a surprising lack of dialogue and engagement with scholarship in the fields of media and celebrity studies outside Japan. As editors, Patrick, who was completing ethnographic fieldwork on Akihabara concurrently with the emergence of AKB48, brought a focus on female idols, and Jason, who had an abiding interest in Japanese masculinities in history, collected data on male idol groups. Seeing an opportunity to collaborate on a project that would address a dearth in the literature and be attentive to the gendered dimensions of Japanese idol culture, we jumped enthusiastically (read: recklessly) into a publication project. Our sincerest gratitude goes to all those who saw potential in a few scribbled notes and joined or supported us on this journey.

We would also like to thank all the students in the Information, Technology, and Society in Asia (ITASIA) program at the University of Tokyo who participated in the seminar on celebrity and fandom and contributed to our dialogue on idols. We would especially like to acknowledge the assistance and participation of the students in hosting a conference on idols at the University of Tokyo in December 2011. Aoyagi Hiroshi, Yoshimi Shun'ya, Gabriella Lukács, Anne Allison, David

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Hirata Kaori and Tsurumaki Akihiko from Asahi Shimbun and Wachi Isao and Miyazaki Makoto from Yomiuri Shimbun generously agreed to the use of images for the book. Thanks also go to Nakashima Motoki and AKS Co Ltd for additional permissions. Kunda Nobuyuki from CEATEC Japan Management went out of his way to scan through thousands of archived images and liaise with Crypton Future Media, the National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology, and Yamaha Corporation concerning images in Daniel Black's chapter. Nishimura Keiko assisted in taking pictures in Akihabara for Patrick W. Galbraith's chapter. Also, Nakamura Jin shared his private collection of primary documents collected during AKB48's early career.

Our friends and family deserve special thanks. We suspect it means little to them to see their names in print at this point, and that they would just as soon not hear another word about this book. Issues of idols and celebrity in Japanese media culture have dominated our thoughts and conversations for quite long enough, they say. May they take some comfort in knowing that we will perhaps finally be able to talk about something else over coffee. Suffice it to say that without the great reserves of patience, input and well-timed wake-up calls we wouldn't have made it through this long and involved process.

And the process was long. While soliciting, writing, and editing chapters, we witnessed the rise and fall of many idols. The one we felt most acutely was the "graduation" in 2012 of Maeda Atsuko, whose image at the AKB48 General Election in 2011 is on the cover of this book. A book like this always risks being "untimely," in the sense of being out of its proper time. Reading from the individual chapters to the introduction to this set of acknowledgments reveals how the flow of time twists in on itself. What was new is now old, here made new again; everything is out of order, but comes into clearer focus due to framing and juxtaposition. Following the lead of anthropologist George Marcus, we choose to embrace our untimeliness. The past returns, a recent past, a present that we once knew and don't want to know again. The unwelcome return of idols, the uncomfortable presence. It all seems "off" somehow, and so is open to interrogation.

Maeda Atsuko is gone, leaving behind only an image. But isn't that a fitting introduction to idols in Japanese media (and consumer) culture? We notice the arch of her career from start to finish—a series of mediated and marketed event appearances, and disappearances—because of the untimeliness of academic publication. So, too, there is a revelation in untimely acknowledgments, directed not at the people we noted here, who have long since been personally thanked or have ceased to care, but rather aimed at others—the readers of this book. Why are these acknowledgments necessary? Who are we selling them to, and what are we selling them as? An image of earnest and experienced scholars? No: a moving image. Heart. Our own and one for the book. We have to thank idols for teaching us how to inscribe such a thing in commercial (re)production.

Contributors

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Introduction: The Mirror of Idols and Celebrity

Patrick W. Galbraith and Jason G. Karlin

The idol project

On 9 June 2011, news of nuclear contamination in earthquake-stricken Japan took a backseat to the AKB48 General Election in the mass media. The third election of its kind for the all-girl idol group formed in 2005, it was a massive promotion and marketing blitz. In addition to fan-club members, anyone who had purchased their 21st single, “Everyday, Kachūsha,” could vote. In a week, it sold 1,334,000 copies, a new record for a single sold in Japan.¹ The results of the General Election were announced during a live ceremony at the Budōkan, where some of the most famous musical acts in the world have performed. The ceremony was also streamed live to 86 theaters (97 screens) in Japan, everywhere from Hokkaido in the north to Okinawa in the south, and in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea (Barks Global Media 2011a). Fans were desperate for a seat—be it at the actual venue or the theaters—but tickets sold out almost instantly. This was more than just fanaticism. It was a media event and a public spectacle.

The girls of AKB48 were pronounced “national idols” (*kokumin-teki aidoru*)—the performers “we” “Japanese” “all” know and love. The election was given prominent coverage by both print and television media, with as many as 15 outlets reporting on the event (Morita 2011). People were constantly updated on which of the members, nearly 200 by this point, would come out on top. They were kept up to speed on developments by online sites, cell phone news feeds, commercial and news spots on trains, and, of course, friends, family, coworkers, schoolmates, and everyone else who was talking about it. On the day of the General Election, the streets of Tokyo were buzzing with the names of AKB48 members. It was hard not to be involved in some way, if not intimately so.

Such is the power of “idols,” a word used in Japan to refer to highly produced and promoted singers, models, and media personalities. Idols can be male or female, and tend to be young, or present themselves as such; they appeal to various demographics, and often broad cross sections of society. Idols perform across genres and interconnected media platforms at the same time. They are not expected to be greatly talented at any one thing, for example singing, dancing, or acting; they are interchangeable and disposable commodities that “affiliate with the signifying processes of Japanese consumer capitalism” (Treat 1993, 364). From popular music and photo albums to fashion and accessories, idols are produced and packaged to maximize consumption. At the same time, they are the currency of exchange in the promotion and advertising of all manner of other

products and services. For the Japanese consumer, immersed in a culture of celebrity, the idol is coterminous with consumption. In the Japanese media system, organized around idols, the consumer is positioned as a fan.² For the fan consumer, the idol as an object of desire is a fantasy or ideal construct, a “mirror reflection, which resonates with deep affective or emotional meaning.”³

The “idol phenomenon” (*aidoru genshō*) in Japan, which began in the 1970s, has grown to the extent that one critic argues that the Japanese nation is ruled by the principles of idolatry (e.g., the emperor) and that its most important cultural products are idols (Nakamori 2007). Hyperbole aside, it is nearly impossible to grasp Japanese media culture without a substantial discussion of idols. Such a project is already underway in Japan, spearheaded by journalists, critics, and fans, but there is a growing awareness of a lack of academic organization and analytical rigor, leading to obsessive description of the “here and now” (Nakamori 2007, 115). Some scholars do analyze idols, but often without theoretical motivation or engagement.⁴ Where discussion has occurred outside Japan, it has largely been a popular one; idols are embraced or dismissed, but either way go unproblematized. Despite sitting at the center of one of the biggest media markets in the world, idols have until recently for the most part been overlooked in scholarly debates about the Japanese mass media ([Figure I.1](#)).

This is unfortunate, as a discussion of Japanese idols has much to offer to the global and comparative analysis of media systems. With a uniquely dense, accelerated, and interconnected media market, centered on idols, Japan could be brought into productive dialogue with celebrity studies and media theory developing elsewhere. Japan has proven to be a place where CDs continue to sell despite music rental shops and digital file sharing, with a single customer buying multiple copies of the same CD to obtain extra information on idols, goods featuring them, and access to them. In other words, idols stand at the center of the music industry, organizing and holding it together; the same is true for television and film. Indeed, the movement of commodities is also greatly influenced by the use of idols in advertisements (see [Chapter 3](#), in this volume). Nowhere else in the world is celebrity such an integral, visible, and important part of the culture. Further, with abundant writings by insiders, journalists, critics, and fans, the rich literature in Japanese offers insights into the often-opaque workings of the media and entertainment industries.



Figure I.1 This article from the 6 September 2010 issue of AERA, a Japanese news magazine, says that AKB48 will “save the nation” (Nihon o sukuu).

This edited volume is a modest first step in exploring the significance of idol. The purpose of focusing on idols specifically, and celebrity more generally, is to understand the Japanese mass media by focusing on its most prominent characteristic. By situating the study of idols within the framework of media and cultural studies, we engage with debates in such areas of scholarship as stars in film theory, celebrity culture, audience studies, and fandom. This is the first book in English to feature work on both female and male idols, on issues of both production and consumption, and on the performances of idols and fans from an economic, social, political, and cross-cultural perspective. Much of the existing English-language literature on idols, celebrity, and fandom is anthropological (Robertson 1998; Kelly 2004; Aoyagi 2005), and tends to tell us more about Japan than about the workings of idols in media and consumer society. These sorts of arguments keep the nation hermetically sealed,⁵ and impede contributions to, and engagement with, broader academic debates outside the study of Japan. While sensitive to the local, the essays in this volume are by a group of interdisciplinary scholars who insist on the use of theory to challenge notions of Japanese uniqueness.

In what remains of this introduction, we will map out the discursive terrain of idols and celebrity in Japan. Rather than summarizing each of the chapters in the volume, we introduce some of the issues that they address, individually and collectively. We do not presume to speak from a position of authority or on behalf of all the contributors; many of the chapters challenge received notions about idols and celebrity, including those we are about to lay out, in whole or in part. However, we think that it is worthwhile at least to attempt to offer some touchpoints and orienting ideas to structure future debates and critiques, which we anticipate and welcome.

Idols in context

The word “idol” (*aidoru*) began to take hold in Japan after the French film *Cherchez l'idole* was released in 1963 under the title *Aidoru o Sagasu* (In Search of an Idol) (Aoyagi 2005, 4–5). Early movie stars aside,⁶ the word idol is most associated in Japan with young performers who sing, pose for photographs, and appear frequently in the media. They are popular, and project themselves as clean, healthy, and energetic. The year 1971 is often remembered as the “first year of the idol era” (*aidoru gannen*) (Kimura 2007, 260). In that year, Minami Saori,⁷ Amachi Mari and Koyangi Rumiko—“friendly looking” girls as opposed to incredibly beautiful and talented ones (idols not stars)—formed the group Three Young Girls (Sannin Musume); Minami was introduced as a “teen idol” (*tin naidoru*) at the 22nd NHK *Kōhaku Uta Gassen* (Red and White Song Battle); and idols began to be mass-produced on TV shows like *Sutā Tanjō!* (Birth of a Star) (from 1971 to 1983).⁸ Among male performers, the “new big three” (*shin gosanke*)—Gō Hiromi, Saijō Hideki, and Noguchi Gorō—were referred to as idols and the Four Leaves (*Fō Ribusu*) presented an early example of group idols produced by Johnny & Associates. It is estimated that between 1971 and 1979 some 700 idols debuted in Japan (Okiyama 2007, 260). An entire industry sprang up around the products associated with and endorsed by them.

The 1980s is popularly known as the “golden age of idols” (*aidoru no ōgon jidai*) when between 40 and 50 new idols could appear in a year.⁹ The formation of a pool of local idols and celebrities helped to center the Japanese media on the domestic market.¹⁰ In time, the cult of celebrity came to function as a defense against global media flows. Japanese local idols and celebrities indigenized television programming by inviting proximity and familiarity through their regular appearances in a variety of different programming and media outlets (Lukács 2010). The late 1980s was also the period of the bubble economy, when Japan became a post-industrial society organized around information and consumption. The idol system reached maturity amid intense changes in Japanese media and entertainment. Throughout the 1980s, celebrity was becoming an important means of organizing audiences and consumers in television, music, and advertising. The competition between commercial broadcast networks resulted in casting contracts to secure popular performers for serial drama (nine to 11 weekly episodes), which established the practice of broadcasting television

dramas in four seasonal rotations (kūru). Even the genres of television changed as “variety shows” (baraeti bangumi), talk shows, and music shows became popular for featuring idols. At the same time, tie-ups between pop songs and products in television advertising became widespread (Stevens 2011). Idols not only began appearing in commercials, but also provided the “image songs” (imē songu) that played during commercials. Corporate sponsors began retaining popular idols and celebrities for advertising campaigns as a means of branding their products to achieve greater media exposure. The bubble period brought with it an emphasis on leisure, brand fashion, travel, and idols that formed a new ethos of everyday life. This formed the basis for the “affective turn” in lifestyle-oriented media in the 1990s centered on “talents” (tarento), when super-idol groups like Morning Musume and SMAP took center stage in the media.

Idols and talents

In Japan, idols in many ways overlap with the category of tarento, or, as Gabriella Lukács (2010, 13) defines them, “celebrities who perform in various media genres simultaneously.” Practically, tarento can refer to almost anyone, though it is typically reserved for those whose “talent” is not specifically singing, dancing, or acting. Tarento are mostly an interchangeable group of largely untalented celebrities. They epitomize what Daniel J. Boorstin (1992, 57) describes as “a person who is known for his well-knownness.” Though in some ways similar in use to “star” or “celebrity” outside Japan, tarento has a very different valence. We therefore translate tarento as “celebrity performers,” and in this sense see idols as overlapping, but with marked differences.

Tarento color the Japanese media landscape, obviating the need for ordinary people, whom they represent. They perform as a responsive audience for the media content that features them, talking to and about one another in shared or viewed media appearances (more on this point later). Despite the numerous genres of Japanese television, there is nothing identified as “reality television.” While one is unlikely to find reality TV featuring ordinary people in Japan, the same qualities that define reality TV are central to Japanese television programming and its celebrity system.¹² Celebrity voyeurism, scandalous behavior, reenactments, and unfiltered performances do not require their own category in the Japanese television landscape since these qualities are in abundance, particularly in variety TV. Japanese variety shows, with their endless parade of idols and celebrity guests and regulars, incorporate all the elements associated with reality TV. Like reality TV, the genre of variety TV in Japan is a hybrid format that combines factual and entertainment programming (Brunsdon et al. 2001). Much of Japanese television content, including even what is aired during “golden time” (prime time, 19:00–22:00), consists of “infotainment” on subjects that range from science and diet to current affairs and travel. Rather than being broadcast as straightforward factual television, these shows are often bifurcated into segments that involve a panel of celebrities (hina-dana) who discuss and interpret the informational content in an entertaining way. By cutting

back and forth between factual and entertaining content, celebrities remain central to Japanese televisual discourse. As opposed to a continuum defined by fact and fiction, Japanese variety TV generally alternates between fact and celebrity. The tarento provide balance to variety TV as a way of attracting audiences and holding their attention.

As opposed to the category of tarento more generally, idols are first among equals in the Japanese entertainment industry. They organize the market into fan communities that allow predictable patterns of viewership and consumption. In addition to carrying the top billing on many shows, they often are the focus of the viewing experience. When appearing on talk and variety shows, idols are interviewed and their personal history is chronicled in detail. They will often sit at the center of the panel or studio set, whereas the hosts, typically comedians (*owarai geinin*), will be on the periphery. On music television shows, like TV Asahi's popular Music Station, the politics of the idol industry—not just the given groups' relative popularity—is reflected in the order of introducing guests, seating position, and the number of minutes guests are questioned by the host. On variety shows, the other performers, particularly comedians, are expected to inject humor but not steal the limelight from the idols. All of this indicates the important status of idols in the entertainment industry.

Idols are in most cases contracted to entertainment management companies, or "agencies" (*jimusho*), which produce and promote them, and in the process determine their degree of success in the industry. This is not to deny idols their own agency; idols can produce themselves and operate outside agencies (Lukács 2007; see [Chapter 7](#) in this volume for a discussion of how an idol exercised her agency). However, the idol that enjoys the greatest popularity in Japan belongs to an agency and operates in a field crisscrossed with power relations that enable and disable movement. If a power struggle emerges, it is likely that the corporate agency trumps individual agency in creating and circulating the idol's image. This is certainly not without precedent. In his classic analysis of the Hollywood studio system, Richard Dyer (1979, 10–11) points out that stars were the studio's capital, represented a guaranteed return on studio investment in a film, had to be handled carefully as a major outlay for the film production, and were used to organize the market. This is still very much the case in what we might call the Japanese "agency system." Since the 1950s, production and advertising companies in Japan hire talent from agencies, which have a roster of celebrity performers kept on stipend and under control.¹³ This is necessitated by the structure of the entertainment industry (see [Chapter 1](#), in this volume). Mark I. West (2006, 186) argues that many dealings are based on reputation and information ties, which creates an incentive to avoid bad publicity. Because much of the agency's revenue comes from idols appearing in commercials, it becomes even more important to provide a stable, safe image that is controlled so as not to damage the image of corporate sponsors and advertised products. The agency takes up this role, training and micromanaging its talents. This is especially true for female idols, who cannot drink alcohol, smoke, or be seen in the company of men.¹⁴ West also notes that the value of Japanese media personalities is not

talent, but rather personality; they need “to be accepted in the living room as one of the family, warts and all” (Ibid., 177). There is little distance between the performer and the audience in terms of ability, so an appealing image must be maintained so as not to betray the expectations of fans, who feel that they know the idol on a personal level (reinforced by near-constant media exposure).

In discussing the idol system in Japan, we tend to think of the idol as a performer who is produced by a talent agency and lends his/her image to the promotion of goods and services. However, as Bruno Latour (2005) argues, a better approach perhaps is to consider agency as distributed across a network of actors that all contribute to how interactions take place. That is, idols not only promote the sale of goods and services, but actually are produced by the goods and services that they sell. Rather than idols selling products, we have a system of commodities that is selling idols. By focusing on the idol alone, one loses sight of the network of relations that go into producing the idol. We falsely assume that agencies produce idols to perform on television or some other media stage, but the capitalist system too needs idols to advertise the products that it produces. The idol, then, is but a node in the network of the capitalist system of commodities that links producers to consumers.

Celebrity and media intimacy

With their cross-platform media ubiquity, an idol group like AKB48 or Arashi is integrated into everyday life in Japan today. On a morning “wide show,”¹⁵ a news report discusses Arashi’s recent concert. Billboards in train stations feature the members of AKB48 in advertisements for everything from computers to coffee. The magazine racks of convenience store and kiosks are crowded with magazines featuring members of these groups on their covers. On the subway, a hanging advertisement for a tabloid magazine features gossip about the groups’ members. On television, they star in dramas, host variety shows, and appear in commercials. Altogether, with no effort or intention, one might easily encounter countless images of AKB48 or Arashi in the course of a day. The frequency with which these and other idols and celebrities present themselves within Japan’s media-saturated culture makes them not only identifiable but familiar. In the daily routine of life in contemporary Japan, one might have more contact with a particular idol or celebrity than with one’s own family. This is the basis for feelings of intimacy.

The intimacy with idols in Japan derives largely from the central importance of television as a medium in postwar Japan. During the 1950s, due to the high price of television sets, there were few private owners, and audiences assembled in public spaces to watch television in the streets (*gaitō terebi*).¹⁶ By 1960, more than half of all households owned a television (Yoshimi 2003, 37). As television moved from the public sphere to the private sphere of the home, it had an immense impact on the experience of celebrity. Once television was anchored in nearly every home by the 1970s, it became part of everyday life and a medium of greater intimacy. The experience of celebrity was no longer liminal and collective but routine and personal. Television celebrities, mediated through the

interjection into the cycles of everyday life, became part of the structure of the new television family in postwar Japan.

The medium of television is a technology of intimacy. T.J.M. Holden and Hakan Ergül (2006, 106) refer to the production strategy of Japanese television as a form of “intentionally engineered intimacy,” and attribute its success to the form and content of its programming. Similarly, Andrew A. Painter (1996, 198) observes that intimacy is a result of Japanese television’s construction of an “electronically created uchi” (in-group). He argues that Japanese producers and directors work to create intimacy by emphasizing themes related to unity and unanimity. The intimacy that is created through television is not unique to Japan—it is a function of the medium’s capacity to form an emotional relationship between the viewer and the television performer—but it is arguably more pronounced in Japan due to the performance of idols and celebrities across media genres and platforms.

While recent scholarship has affirmed that intimacy is central to the structure of Japanese television, the agency of its audience in its affective relationship to celebrity is also important for understanding media intimacy. Though intimacy is structured in terms of rhetorical forms and patterns, the importance of affective intimacy in Japanese media culture demands greater attention to the forms of identification in star-audience relations (Stacey 1991). Intimacy revolves around the audience’s establishment of affective emotional ties to particular celebrity performers. Lukács (2010, 29–31) argues that the “culture of intimate televisuality” in Japan is derived from its “tarento system.” Celebrity performers in Japan make the programming more appealing to Japanese viewers, who take pleasure in accumulating knowledge about the tarento. Owing to the ubiquity of celebrity images across the Japanese media, even non-fans are familiar with most popular tarento. However, rather than focusing on the tarento system and its intertextuality, Lukács examines the genre of dramas as “vehicles for the transmission of information about the tarento” (Ibid., 31). Drama is but one node in the complex network of information about celebrities in Japan that includes wide shows, tabloid newspapers, weekly magazines, variety programs, social media, and so on. The intimacy of celebrity is not reducible to any particular genre or platform, but is rather a function of the complex intertextuality of the larger Japanese media system.

Celebrity and media intertextuality

Japan has one of the highest rates of media consumption in the world. With the intensity of its media culture, idols and celebrities create an intertextual web of meanings that link forms and contents together to produce new meanings. In film, television, music, and advertising, meaning is contained not within individual texts, but rather across a network of textual relations. As John Fiske (2011, 109) notes, “intertextuality exists [...] in the space between texts.” The idol, as multimedia performer, is always operating within a system of meanings and codes that are referencing other texts. The intertextuality of idols, through its potential to activate audiences, is fundamental to the structure of the Japanese media.

First, the intertextuality of the Japanese media is reflected in the way that idols perform across genres and platforms in the entertainment industry. From drama to game shows, music, travel, and sports programs, they mediate the television viewing experience. Moving freely between genres, they form the axis around which the media revolve and are the locus of audience identification. To understand Japanese television, the audience must draw on a vast cultural knowledge about celebrity. This intertextual knowledge activates the audience to produce meaning by tracing the relations to other texts or past performances. For example, when an idol appears on a variety show, the audience's knowledge of his/her roles in other programs, like dramas, will be an essential part of the interpretive process. While this form of horizontal intertextuality is common in the medium of television, the performers more than the genres are fundamental to the organization of intertextual relations in the Japanese media.

Second, idols appear in both fictional and nonfictional contexts, and their performances reference both their real and their onscreen lives. With the private lives of idols and celebrities forming a site of greater knowledge and truth, the journalistic discourse on celebrity creates new opportunities for the production of intertextual meanings. This form of intertextuality in the Japanese media necessitates a high degree of familiarity with the performances, as well as the gossip and trivia about idols and celebrity performers that circulates on wide shows and in weekly magazines, tabloids, and other media. Consequently, Japanese idols, even more than their counterparts in other countries, cannot escape their "real life" persona when they appear on the screen. Due to the sustained exposure, across genres and platforms of performance, they cannot help but appear as themselves in a drama or other fictional context; the perception is that they are not playing characters so much as they are playing themselves. As a result, the real world and the onscreen world cease to be different, and instead a deeply intertextual form of televisual pleasure is created between the performer and audience. The audience's desire for knowledge about the private lives of idols becomes the means for staging publicity.

Third, the idol is an intertextual commodity that circulates in the media landscape to link different media forms and to produce promotional discourse. An immense media industry exists in Japan for the purpose of promoting and selling other media, particularly through the idols and celebrities who provide the means of connecting disparate media texts. Often, celebrity performers appear on variety, talk, and game shows for the purpose of promoting other programs or products. While intertextuality describes how texts relate to other texts to produce meanings for the audience, the celebrity as an intertextual commodity engages with the interactive or fan audience by expanding promotional discourse across cultural forms and different media outlets (Marshall 1997). With the media industry's attempt to cultivate loyal audiences to engage in greater consumption, cultural commodities are endlessly cross-referenced between newspaper, magazines, online social media, and television. Through the audience's familiarity and knowledge of the idol, intertextuality seeks to create a deeper and more affective relationship to the audience that will facilitate promotional discourse.

Fourth, intertextuality in Japan is nostalgic. With intertextual knowledge based on a shared cultural framework of texts, it is historically rooted in the employment of past forms. As Linda Hutcheon (1989, 81) notes, “the past is only known to us today through its textualized traces.” Hutcheon argues that intertextuality finds expression through parody. We can see this in the idol industry with, for example, Matsu’ura Aya, who came to prominence in the early 2000s during the revival of idols under Hello! Project. Matsu’ura cultivated a camp image that parodied, with a sense of irony, the female idols that dominated the 1980s.¹⁷ With her cute songs and dress, she embodied nostalgia for the idol culture of an earlier time, before the economic stagnation of the 1990s. Indeed, the nostalgic production of intertextual knowledge is a staple of Japanese television programming. Music shows will often spend as much time featuring segments about the past (usually in the form of countdowns) as they do featuring performances of the latest artists. Idols, like other cultural forms in Japan, are nostalgic texts that link the past to the present through the intertextuality of their image and performance.

Intertextuality in the Japanese media sustains and nurtures a close relationship to its domestic audience, but limits its broader appeal. Since the popularity of Japanese idols in large part derives from the intertextuality of the Japanese media system, once removed from the Japanese media context, idols must appeal to audiences for reasons beyond the mere reproduction of their celebrity. Without the intertextual knowledge that comes from a shared understanding of the cultural codes that circulate across media forms within Japan, the idol is reduced merely to his/her ability as a singer, dancer, or actor, which is limited. As a result, Japanese popular culture does not translate well cross-culturally, since its forms are overdetermined by the self-referential structures of the domestic media landscape.¹⁸ That said, idols have been relatively successful in Asia (Aoyagi 1996) and producers are increasingly considering how to expand into Asian markets and better serve fans there.

Celebrity and self-referentiality

Throughout the world, the mass media are becoming more market-oriented. As a result of increased competition, a vast entertainment-driven economy has formed for the purpose of expanding audiences and maximizing profits. One consequence of this shift has been a worldwide growth in the spectacle of celebrity. As Michael J. Wolf (1999, 28) notes, “in the entertainment economy, celebrity is the only currency.” Celebrities are the nexus between producers and consumers that facilitates the circulation of media discourse. In Japan, the mass media have since around the 1980s turned towards the production of media spectacles centered on idols and celebrities to generate self-referential or autopoietic systems of media text reproduction or commentary. This system of self-referentiality in Japan has resulted in voluminous mass-media discourse about idols and celebrity.

The self-referentiality of the Japanese mass media operates within a close circular system without origin (Figure I.2). As spectacle, the people, products, and events that are the focus of media attention are important only because they are

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