

Censoring the Real World

Lisa Nakamura's complaint that the cyberpunk genre envisions the future as Japanese is true, but not necessarily a bad thing. Fictional futures like the ones in cyberpunk are just showing the most likely future: one heavily influenced by Japan. This is because Japan *does* heavily influence our future by being the most technologically advanced culture in the world; we have no choice but to follow them. However, sometimes we need to follow them a bit more closely than just adapting their technology; we should adapt the proper behavior that goes with that technology.

For example, in "Pop and Ma: The Landscape of Japanese Commodity Characters and Subjectivity," Larissa Hjorth says that the Japanese consider talking on cell phones in public a faux pas. (162) Why isn't America like this? In America, it's almost like people *try* to use their phones in public, either to avoid face-to-face contact with strangers and/or try to impress them somehow with their fancy middle-class gadgetry. The Japanese take this showing off to the next level, by attaching personalized characters and trinkets to their phones, but they don't get to use them in public so how do they show them off? Americans, however, are so anxious to bust out our shiny gadgets in front of everyone we don't even need the personalized **Hello Kitty** dangling from our **Osama Bin Ladin faceplate**. We just need to **gab** loud enough so everyone around us knows we are connected (yet at the same time disconnected from our immediate surroundings). Ipods are nearly the same principle. It's like people just want to buy the excuse to plug in, log on, and not deal with others in a public environment.

Often I'll be sitting on the bus, looking around at people. Whenever my eyes meet a stranger's, she'll play the shy game and try to look away. More and more I've noticed she will open up her cell phone, pretending to check on some late-breaking information the little device just had to tell her at that exact awkward moment. It's like we're just looking for an excuse to stare at those little video screens, those little windows into another reality that is much more personal, comforting and forgiving than the real world. Even if you're surrounded by strangers, you can always read your text messages from your dearest friends, or look at pictures from that party last night, or play your favorite games: anything to replace the uncomfortable *now* with the soothing nostalgia of your *virtual* connection to the world.

Cell phones are an escape from reality: escape from driving, escape from the cashier at the grocery store, escape even from eye to eye contact of people walking by. The cell phone in public says, "I'm too busy. You're not important enough to acknowledge, dammit, I'm on the phone!" It's like people are trying so hard to show others that they are important enough, loved enough, to be called on their phone.

The very opposite thing happens to the people on the other end: the people sitting at home on their land line, trying to talk to something **half-person, half-static**, who was considerate enough (or not considerate enough) to call right in the middle of traffic, or while sitting in the grocery line, because he needed to converse *right that second*.

Nothing can wait anymore. Everything must be done now, at the same time as everything else. Multitasking has shoved the personal, intimate contact out of our everyday life and replaced it with a flurry of busyness and the overwhelming necessity to *get things done*. No longer is just the stranger so unimportant you can completely ignore

him, but the people you're calling are also unimportant, only worth the fraction of your time allotted by the cell phone and whatever else you happen to be doing at that moment.

The 'I' takes utmost precedence, shoving everything else to the background. *I* have a call, *I* have a meeting, *I* have a text message, *I* am listening to *my* music on *my* little white earbuds so loud as to drown *you* out. Nothing you say to me in the real world interests me because I have all the connections to my world in my little mobile device, completely under my control, completely packaged and accessible and standardized and personalized. No one can talk to me unless I want to talk to him, thanks to my personalized ring tones. If I don't recognize the number calling me I won't pick it up, like having a 'conversation firewall' installed.

Indeed, where would we be without this firewall, this nice shiny selective inlet of information? With the barrage of information coming at us from all sides all the time, it is comforting to have a filter at our command, to weed out the junk and the unwanted contacts that seem to keep popping up when we don't want them to.

The other day I was hanging out with my friend Amy, who is a bit of a drama queen. She ran out of her room and said, "Oh my God, I cannot believe who just texted me!" Some person who she had had a major falling out with and had not talked to in four months sent her a simple and mysterious message: "Amy?" She replied with a curt "Yes?" and left it at that. Amy refused to call her back because she was still mad at her and wanted nothing to do with her, *even if* the brief text message was an attempt to bridge their falling out, maybe even the start of an apology. **Good thing** the extra layer of protection was there so they wouldn't have to amend their faults towards each other and actually work things out to exist peacefully in the real world. Now Amy can go on

through life as if this other person doesn't even exist: **extending to close friends what cell phones do so well to random strangers.**

Maybe soon we can all have cell phones just implanted into our heads permanently, so we can always be immersed in our little worlds with no regard to the physical space we occupy nor any acknowledgement of our fellow occupants. Why not replace all face-to-face communication with electronic communication through these phones, allowing for automatic filtration of strangers, rejected friends, angry wives, poor bums on the street and other unwanted contacts?

We are getting close with the Bluetooth headsets. Ever since those came out, I have noticed more and more people walking along talking out loud even though no one is near them. Normally such behavior was reserved for schizophrenics wandering downtown, but now talking to yourself is culturally accepted, even revered as a very productive and time-saving activity. Too bad the Japanese are wondering if you're talking to them or if you're just muttering like an amazingly well-groomed loon.