

Otaku Nation - sound composition by Udo Moll

The image of the quiet, noble Japanese disciplining himself in Zen aesthetics shows at most half the truth. There are manifold zones of noise in Japanese everyday life, a childlike joy in loud expressions of life - in every noodle bar you are greeted by a choir of cheerfully crowing "Irrashimassees", the louder the better, it's almost a competition. A separate subcategory of Japanese noise is formed by the emissions of a special national passion: playing.

When you enter a pachinko hall, you are immediately submerged in a maelstrom of infernal noise, most of the machines still work electromechanically, thousands of small steel balls are played with, rattling through the machines. Whining announcements about jackpots and prize distributions increase the acoustic density. But even the classic arcades with video game consoles are not bad at all: a lot of whining, tinny explosions, death cries, electronic 8-bit tootling, penetrating game music. And an amazing amount of mechanical noises from the players, who are lost in trance and hack on the keys, joysticks, game controllers in superhuman furor.



An essential part of the piece is based on fieldrecordings I made in Kyoto and Tokyo in 2018. Among them are recordings from the Kiyomizudera temple in Kyoto, where Buddhist lay songs from a group of pilgrims mix with the characteristic sounds of the Omikuji oracle, also a kind of game - you shake a tin can with wooden sticks with markings in it, and then pull out one of these sticks. The markings are then used by the temple servant to give you a piece of paper with a fortune telling.

The early Nintendo and Sega games from the 80s also have their own unique sound, and with very limited technical resources and a reduced sound palette, the developers were surprisingly creative. In addition, algorithms from historical speech synthesis chips are allowed to sing.

The title refers to the so-called Otaku culture, which plays a very important role in contemporary Japanese culture, especially in the popular area. The otaku term originated in the 80s and describes a certain group of fans / nerds / geeks who are completely absorbed in their passion for (mainly) manga, anime and video games (but also pornography and certain types of J-Pop music), but who hardly ever leave their homes (Japanese: taku) and develop a rather socially incompatible social behaviour. So quasi parallel society. The term is rather ambivalent, on the one hand it has negative connotations, but on the other hand it is a distinction and proof of group membership for the nerds themselves.

The only classically spoken text passage in the piece is a historical text from 1890, which describes the romantic double suicide of unhappily loving, mostly adolescent couples (Shinju) and is very poetically exaggerated - there are definitely connections to the Otaku culture. This kind of suicide is obviously still regularly committed in Japan, a country that is very suicide-relevant anyway, and is still considered an extremely romantic expression of highest, unconditional love.



Text documentation / english translation:

Sometimes they just wrap their arms around each other and lie down next to each other on the railway tracks, just at the moment when the express train is approaching. Sometimes they arrange a small banquet for each other, write very strange letters to parents and friends, mix something bitter into the rice wine, and then eternal rest falls upon them. Sometimes they choose an older and more respected method: the lover first kills the beloved with a single stroke of the sword, and then pierces himself. Sometimes again, the lovers tie themselves tightly together with the girl's koshi-obi (the lower belt of crepe silk), face to face, and in this embrace they plunge into a deep river or lake. [...] No one loves life more than the Japanese - no one fears death less. The future world has no horrors for him. It is difficult for him to leave this world because it seems to him to be a world of beauty and happiness. [...] As for the young people I speak of, they have a strangely strong faith from which all secrets sink. They go into the dark with infinite confidence. [...]

They always ask to be buried together. Often this request is refused by the parents or guardians, and it seems cruel to the people, because it is believed that those who die together out of love's gram will not find peace if they are denied a common grave.

(Lafcadio Hearn 1890)



Credits:

Otaku Nation by Udo Moll (Deutschlandfunk / SWR 2020)

Frank Gratkowski: Saxophone & Bassclarinet

Julien Desprez: Guitar

Josh Chuang: Tsugaru Shamisen

Michaela Ehinger: voice

Eva Pöpplein: instrumental recordings & mix (DLF Funkhaus Köln)

Henning Schmitz / Studio X.1: voice recording Michaela Ehinger