GLOBAL GEEKDOM

The Rise of Anime and Otaku in the Information Age

by

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DEDICATION

To my beloved husband, Dr. Ji Yu, whose geeky interests and sensibilities are the key inspirations of this project. Also to my parents, Huilai Li and Caishu Jin, who supported my critical decision to change the direction of my academic path from biological science to cinema studies.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the emergence and development of global *anime* (Japanese animation) and its fandom—*otaku* culture—in the context of the changing technological, social, and economic conditions of the current information age. By examining the global organization and activities of the network-based otaku subculture, as well as the narrative motifs and visual aesthetics of anime products, the dissertation decodes the trans-national, cross-media phenomenon of anime and otaku as a manifestation of a distinctive mode of techno-culture—so-called *geek* culture. The thesis argues that the visual/narrative forms of anime provoke unique consumer experience of *cybernetic pleasure* and *techno-intimacy* that are especially appealing to the cyber generation, and the worldwide organization and communication of otaku communities, which are characterized by massive user participation through vast computer networks, put forward a new mode of global cultural flow that I would call a *distributive globalization*. Both the textual qualities of anime and the fandom practices of otaku exemplify a large-scale global geekdom movement, which reflects a new cultural logic under the current socio-economic changes marked by the rising cultural capital of an emerging cosmopolitan knowledge class in a new global economy dominated by information capitalism.

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INTRODUCTION

Global Anime in the Information Age

Japanese animation, often called *anime*, has become increasingly popular in the global marketplace nowadays. Enjoying a rapid international market boom since the late 1980s, anime and manga (Japanese comic strips) are marked as Japan's major cultural exports. They are being distributed, consumed, and sometimes even produced, worldwide. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, anime's U.S. market alone was worth approximately $4.35 billion in 2007.[1] Together with Japanese toys, video games, and consumer electronics, anime and manga come to be celebrated as what Douglas McGray once famous called "Japan's Gross National Cool," an indicator of the nation's rising "soft power."[2] These Japanese "cool" products also generated an active and proliferating subcultural fandom worldwide that is often identified as "otaku." The rising otaku culture further energized a new wave of global interest in Japan, which is neither about the nation's exotic past nor its postwar economic superpower, but is about Japan's newly found cultural identity as a world-leading producer of fun and cool cultures. The Japanese government is also eager to cash in this "cool engine." In 2007, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced an "anime ambassador" program to promote

[1] Biana Bosker, "Manga Mania" *Wall Street Journal*, online publication, August 31, 2007, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB118851157811713921.html?mod=googlenews_wsj

[2] Douglas McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy* 130, no. (May/June) (2002): 44–54; The notion of "soft power" was first raised in Joseph S. Nye, *Bound To Lead: The Changing Nature Of American Power* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1990).

Japan's international image through a "manga diplomacy campaign."[3] In 2010, the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry established a new Creative Industries Promotion Office, whose mission is to expand the global market share of the Japanese pop cultures under the brand name "Cool Japan."[4]

Such mounting global popularity of the so-called Japanese new cool has led many to speculate a changing structure of the current cultural globalization. The rise of Japanese pop culture worldwide seems to challenge the traditional model of a Western-centered process of global cultural flow that has often been equated with "Americanization" or "Westernization," and suggest an alternative concept of "Japanization."[5] Harumi Befu, for instance, proposed to "consider Japan as another center of globalization."[6] Iwasbuchi Koichi famously announced that the transnational popularity of Japanese culture represents "a recentered globalization," which is recentering the global cultural flow from the US to the Far East.[7] With Japan being hailed as a new center of globalization, anime, or otaku culture in general, which has always considered authentic to its Japanese roots, has now increasingly been taken as a "global"

[3] Biana Bosker, "Manga Mania."
[4] Tomomichi Amano, "How to Promote 'Cool Japan'?," *The Wall Street Jornal*, June 14, 1010, http://blogs.wsj.com/japanrealtime/2010/06/14/how-to-promote-cool-japan/; Peng Er Lam, "Japan's Quest for 'Soft Power': Attraction and Limitation," *East Asia* 24, no. 4 (October 2007): 349–63.
[5] For the concept of "Japanization," see Tony Elger and Chirs Smith, eds., *Global Japanization?: The Transnational Transformation of the Labour Process* (Taylor & Francis US, 2010); Harumi Befu and Sylvie Guichard-Anguis, eds., *Globalizing Japan: Ethnography of the Japanese Presence in Asia, Europe and America* (Psychology Press, 2001).
[6] Harumi Befu, "Globalization Theory from the Bottom Up: Japan's Contribution," *Japanese Studies* 23, no. 1 (May 2003): 19.
[7] Kōichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Duke University Press, 2002).

culture. In Susan Napier's words, "the Japanese national cultural identity put forward by anime is increasingly, and perhaps paradoxically, a *global* one [author's emphasis]."[8]

The new global flow of Japanese fantasies is stunning and puzzling. I cannot help but wonder: What makes anime and otaku culture, once only part of the Japanese domestic youth imagination, now suddenly become so appealing to worldwide consumers? What exactly about this Japanese new cool that leads it to assume the cutting edge in today's ever changing cultural trends marked by globalization and postindustrialism? The answers to these questions, according to many, are to be located in the cultural specificity of Japan, despite the fact that these Japanese products have recurrently been described as "global." Anne Alison, for instance, wonders if there is "something distinctive about Japan as a particular place/culture/history or about Japanese cultural industries that accounts for the production of a fantasy styles that is gaining so much currency in global circuits today."[9] And such distinctiveness about Japan, Allison believes, is Japan's postwar historical conditions and its consumer aesthetics shaped by Japan's unique postmodern landscape — as "an alternative capitalism"—that is different from the Western form of capitalism rooted in the United States. In a similar fashion, Susan Napier also looks at Japan's distinctive history and cultural identity for the ultimate answers behind anime's sudden rise in international popularity. Anime's unique appeal to global consumers, according to Napier, relies on its three distinctive aesthetic

[8] Susan Jolliffe Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*, Updated ed., [Rev. ed.]. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 292.
[9] Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 11.

modes—apocalyptic, festive, and elegy—all of which are deeply rooted in Japan's specific history, cultural tradition, and contemporary postmodern conditions.[10]

There are certainly some insights in these Japan-centered arguments that seek to explain the global popularity of anime and otaku culture within the framework of Japanese contexts. After all, Japan is the national origin of anime, and its historical and geopolitical specificity has greatly impacted the anime phenomenon. For Western viewers, their initial encounter with Japanese anime in the 1970s and 1980s — through daytime television, sci-fi conventions and fan clubs — was certainly paralleled with the rapid rise of postwar Japan as a new economic and technological superpower. The rising "Japan Inc" spread both fascination and anxiety toward Japan and its culture in the West, with a touch of long-existing Orientalist fantasies and imagined power negotiations in a new global paradigm. All of these various kinds of real or imagined anxiety, desire, and fascination with Japan climaxed in the 1980s, and formed an important historical background and cultural connotation for the rapidly growing popularity of Japanese goods in international markets.[11] For Asian consumers, on the other hand, Japan's dominating cultural power in the region is footnoted by the half-century history of Japanese imperialism and colonialization, as well as the popular discourse of Japan as a unique hybrid between the East and West, between tradition and modern. The discursive perception of Japan as an intermediate cultural linkage between Asia and Western

[10] Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle*.
[11] Discussions on the Western obsession and fear toward Japan and Japanese culture can be seen in Susan Jolliffe Napier, *From Impressionism to Anime: Japan As Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).

modernity connotes the symbolic appeal and hegemonic dissemination of Japanese pop culture—as something similar but more modernized— to its Asian neighbors.[12]

Recognizing these specific historical and geopolitical factors associated with Japan, however, does not make anime an exclusively Japanese cultural phenomenon that has to be analyzed completely within its national contexts. The transnational flow and cultural currency of anime and manga, I would argue, cannot be entirely framed within the somewhat awkward notion of "Japanization," which seems to risk essentializing "Japan" as the new "global." In fact, whether or not anime and otaku culture can be contained within the national identity of Japan is highly debatable. We may ask: to what extent does the Japanese national identity that we discern in the virtual imagination in anime represent the concrete physical context of Japan in the real world? Or it this animated image of "cool Japan" simply constructed and imagined?

By all counts, the medium specificities of animation have already rendered anime a uniquely transnational image form, whose cultural identity is highly ambiguous and intangible. Animation's artificial nature and its lack of indexical connections with the physical realities, first of all, free it from the physical restrictions of settings, locations, props, actors, and etc. Thus, animation often appears to lack the production country's specific cultural markers that could be changed or erased from the animated images quite easily. Furthermore, animation's unique power of *metamorphosis*, the process in which an animated figure literally changes shapes, gives animation a special quality of what Eisenstein called "plasmaticness," in which the animated body could dynamically assume

[12] For analysis of the geopolitical contexts behind the dissemination of Japanese pop culture in Asia, see Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*.

any forms, thus potentially transcends and destabilizes the boundaries of identity, be it gender, class, race, ethnicity or nationality.[13] Such identity fluidity offered by plasmaticness, as suggested by Susan Napier, renders animation an ideal aesthetic form for the increasingly globalized world, in which the lived experience of fragmentation, mobility and flux is in synch with the fluid and mutable animated world. Such plasticity and flexibility gives animation a greater potential to become a truly "universal language" to be easily consumed globally without encountering cultural barriers, and thus transcend the traditional notions of "national" or "international" to fashion a truly new form of a "global culture."

In anime, the plasmaticness and the cultural non-specificity of animation are further manifested by its famous quality of *mukokuseki* (statelessness). It has been widely acknowledged that anime is designed, produced and marketed to appear culturally ambiguous, such as characters without apparent racial or ethnic bearings, as well as fantastic settings that are short of recognizable signs of nationalities. Because of its *mukokuseki*, anime rarely evokes cultural connections with its national origin, and most international viewers, though aware of the "made-in-Japan" label, tend to consume anime completely out of the cultural context of Japan. For instance, Anne Allison observed that the American viewers of *Pokémon* tend to ignore its Japanese cultural origin.[14] Antonia Levi also once complained that most American anime fans don't care about the authentic Japanese cultural meanings and rather prefer to consume anime and manga within their

[13] Sergei Eisenstein, *Eisenstein on Disney* (London: Methuen, 1988).
[14] Allison, *Millennial Monsters*.

own familiar American cultural contexts.[15] From this perspective, anime's global popularity is dramatically different from the international appeals of other Japanese cultural elements such as pop idols, TV dramas, music, and cuisines that do bear tangible connections with cultural realities of Japan. As is rightly argued by Iwabuchi, it is the global spread of *mukokuseki*, instead of the concrete Japanese cultural identities, that articulates the universal appeal of Japanese anime, manga, and video games, all of which are intentionally designed to be "culturally odorless." And the "Japanese new cool" celebrated in anime and manga will not evoke a cultural imagination of any real physical signs of Japan, but will only popularize an "animated, race-less, virtue version of 'Japan'".[16] In a similar fashion, Hiroki Azuma also argues that the Japanese identity articulated in anime culture is only a "pseudo-Japan" — a re-constructed and imagined Japanese identity that has already been filtered and translated through American consumer cultures.[17] In this sense, the so-called Japanization is "actually a highly materialistic Japanese version of the American 'original'"[18] (after all, Hollywood and Disney can also be argued as the cultural origin of *mukokuseki*).

If, the national identity embodied by anime is only a culturally odorless "pseudo-Japan," then, is it really productive to solely focus on the national context of Japan as the only explanation behind the transnational cultural significance of anime? If, the cultural space occupied by anime, as is suggested by Napier, "is not necessarily coincident with

[15] Antonia Levi, "The Americanization of Anime and Manga: Negotiating Popular Culture," in *Cinema Anime*, ed. Steven T. Brown (New York: Macmillan, 2006), 43–64.
[16] Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 33.
[17] Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, trans. Jonathan E. Abel (U of Minnesota Press, 2009).
[18] Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 35.

that of Japan;"[19] then, why are we still so obsessed with the Japanese cultural identity as the only valid resort to locate our discussions of anime, regardless it being "Japanese" or "global"? In fact, the whole cultural phenomena of anime as what we perceive and consume today no longer solely belong to Japan, but have largely been shaped by the global landscape both culturally and economically. Not only have the activities of global distribution and consumption dramatically transformed anime's cultural meanings and social functions, but anime production itself has also moved from national to transnational. Since Japan can no longer claim the cultural ownership of anime, the whole Japan-centered debates —whether anime is Japanese or non-Japanese – become increasingly irrelevant, because the very cultural meanings of these globally distributed images have less to do with *where* these images are to be located than *how* they are circulated and consumed.

More importantly, the "Japanization" arguments, which claim the ownership of anime and otaku culture within the national border of Japan, also blind us to a much wider picture of worldwide socio-economical transformations that have also contextualized the anime phenomenon. Till today, most discussions of anime are still primarily focused on the discourses of Japan, despite the wide recognition of its global aspects, while leaving the wider international background largely untouched. But in fact, what has happened in the past three decades in a global context is equally—if not more—important as the historical/geographic specificities of Japan in determining the cultural currency of Japanese new cool in the intentional circuits. What is most interesting about

[19] Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle*, 24.

the cultural significance of anime and manga is not simply in the notions of "Japanization" or "recentered globalization," but rather in the fact that the global popularity of this unique cultural form may represent a new cultural logic that has emerged and spread out along the fast changing socio-economic conditions in an increasingly computerized and cyber-connected world. This much broader context of worldwide changes points to another side of the anime phenomenon that I would like to tag as *global anime*.

The notion of "global" here, of course, is not simply to define anime as a global culture instead of a national one. Neither is it to smooth out local differences or cultural hegemony that are also associated with the anime phenomenon — in fact, as I mentioned earlier, the still-existing geopolitical power structure is an important factor in shaping the cultural connotations of anime in both Asia and the West. Not to naturalize the power unevenness or to reduce local specificities, the notion of "global" here simply tries to suggest that the cultural phenomenon of anime should be situated in a much larger context that is far beyond the containment of Japan. If the traditional notion of Japanese anime tends to frame the whole story within the national context, then the new notion of global anime seeks to look at the same story from a transnational perspective. The purpose here is not to replace the national differences with a global totality, but to address the fact that the cultural meaning of anime is not solely determined by Japan itself, but is largely shaped by a proliferating fandom that is transnational in nature, as well as by social, cultural and technological conditions that are increasingly global in reach. Therefore, through the notion of global anime, I hope to raise a new set of questions

about the transnational, cross-media cultural phenomenon of anime: Instead of asking, in Allison's words: "Is there something distinctive about Japan… that accounts for the production of a fantasy style that is gaining so much currency in global circuits today?"[20] We should also ask: what has happened around the globe in the recent decades, in a far-reaching context, that suddenly made this animated image of "cool Japan" culturally hip for worldwide consumers?

This new question matters not only because of the skyrocketing boom of anime and otaku culture in the global marketplace, but because the global rise of this "cool Japan" happened at the precise moment of profound historical transition in human life, which has been widely described as *the coming of an information age*. As Manuel Castells famously claimed, "around the end of the second millennium of the common era a number of major social, technological, economic, and cultural transformations came together to give rise of a new form of society, the network society."[21] And this particular period with a rising network society, interestingly, is exactly the moment that global anime emerged and developed around the world. Although anime has been a major part of popular mass culture in Japan for decades, its global success is actually a very recent phenomenon. Despite the fact that several early anime TV series such as *Astro Boy* (1963), *Heidi* (1974) and *Robotech* (1985) had created occasional intentional hits, it was not until the early 1990s, when cyber technologies had largely intensified the speed and scale of globalization and had dramatically transformed our social and cultural life, that

[20] Allison, *Millennial Monsters*, 11.
[21] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA; Oxford, UK:: Blackwell, 2000), xvii.

anime has become far more ubiquitous in a global range, mainly through active fan participation, creation and sharing under an increasingly digitalized and networked media condition. Ever since the wide spread of personal computers and the Internet, anime's international fandom developed quickly and widely, through cyber platforms such as USENET, BBS, newsgroups, IRC channels, fan websites, forums, blogs, and today's social networks. It is through such vast computer networks and portals that anime products, materials and cultures get distributed and consumed worldwide and quickly developed into a global otaku subculture outside Japan. To a large extent, global anime is a cyber-age cultural phenomenon, and its emergence and development coincided with the fast rise of information technologies and networked communications. In the words of Mizuko Ito, the growing global visibility of anime and otaku culture "is keyed to the unique conditions of our current historical moment, a moment in which networked and digital culture has energized peer-to-peer and participatory forms of media creation and sharing."[22]

Conspicuously, this new wave of global appetite for Japanese new cool in our current information age is radically different from the previous generations of Western Japanophilia in the postwar years or in the 1980s. By the time that the success of anime and otaku culture truly took off in the international market, Japan's glorious Bubble years had passed. By the 1990s, the country's economic landscape had quickly transformed from the fastest boom to the decade-long recession, and the myth of the so-called "Japanese miracle" had all but collapsed. But curiously, it was in these painful busting

[22] Mizuko Itō, "Introduction," in *Fandom Unbound: Otaku Culture in a Connected World*, ed. Mizuko Itō (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), xi.

years, when the imagination of "Japan Inc." as a techno-future has almost been forgotten, that the Japanese fantasy culture finally positioned itself in a radically transformed technological and cultural landscape globally. More interestingly, the newly populated cultural goods of "cool Japan," which appear more virtual, fantastic, and culturally "odorless" than other tangible and "realistic" Japanese products, are notably lacking the apparent historical or cultural markers of "Japaneseness," but are rich in signs and sensibilities that are particularly appealing in the computer age. These Japanese fantasy products, ranging from anime and manga to Nintendo and Pokémon, seem to bear less cultural heritage from their widely acclaimed national ancestors such as kimono, haiku and Zen that are clearly associated with Japan's ancient cultural traditions, or from the famous Japanese brands such as Honda, Mitsubishi, and Panasonic that have come to be taken as the symbols of Japan's postwar economic success; but instead, the Japanese cool products in the new millennium appear to be more at home with an ever-changing wave of cyber-age fanfares from *Harry Potter* to *Halo*, from iPad to Xbox, from YouTube to Facebook. Indeed, for today's postindustrial youth, watching *Yu-Gi-oh!* on YouTube probably feels more similar to playing *Angry Bird* on iPad than learning tea ceremonies in a Japanese culture club. To a certain extent, when Japanese anime transformed to global anime in the information age, it has become a cultural phenomenon that is less about Japan in particular than about the upcoming information societies at large.

Anne Allison has also recognized Japanese new cool as a specific cyber-age phenomenon. She asks, "why has Japan assumed the cutting edge…. in what Manuel

Castells calls the cultural logic of today's informational global capitalism?"[23] The answer, for Allison, is "something distinctive about Japan." Allison's question, however, can be answered from another direction. Instead of looking for "something distinctive about Japan," we may also wonder: is there something distinctive about this "cultural logic of today's informational global capitalism" that is driving the worldwide consumer desire for this particular form of animated fantasies at this special moment of critical transformations? What exactly is it about the present information age, or the so-called "network society," that is calling for the symbolic meanings of anime and otaku culture to be cool and cutting edge for the new generation of global youth? What are the "unique conditions of our current moment," to borrow from Mizuko Ito, "in which networked and digital culture" has animated a global wave of consumer frenzy around the database of references that appear to be "Japanese" but also feel utterly familiar?[24] These are the questions I want to explore, and hopefully answer, in this dissertation, whose aim is locate, decipher, and critically examine a distinctive new set of symbolic values that are unique to the information age from the cultural phenomenon of global anime. These new values, I would argue, are not necessarily to be found in the notions of "Japaneseness" or "Japanization," but are to be situated in a much broader context of the changing cultural sensibilities under the so-called information technology revolution. In other words, for this particular dissertation, what is most interesting about global anime is not the uniqueness of Japan (though the case here is a Japanese product), but instead, the key question is what is so profoundly affective in the cultural logic of the information age that

[23] Allison, *Millennial Monsters*, 11.
[24] Itō, "Introduction," xi.

created and popularized the global fanfare of such a peculiar form of youth culture. The answer that connects the century-old medium of anime with the current new world of the information age, I believe, is to be found in the sudden, dramatic rise of a distinctive global subculture called "*geekdom*."

Global Geekdom: The Cultural Logic of Informational Capitalism

In an increasingly wired world, the term "geek" does not sound unfamiliar to today's audience — there has even been a popular reality TV show called *Beauty and Geeks*. Neither does the word still carry the negative connotation that used to be associated with freaks. In fact, with the dramatic rise of cyber technologies and new media in the 21st century, the meaning of "geek" has undergone a radical transformation from a negative slang to a badge of honor. As *Associated Press* told us in 2005: "Whatever the reasons, being a nerd, a geek, a dork—whatever you want to call the tragically unhip—is becoming a source of pride."[25] Similarly, reporting on a series of nerdcore movements in the summer of 2007, a *Washington Post* journalist, Anthony Faiola, also convinced us that the so-called geek pride had indeed emerged into a prominent subculture, which "is changing what it means to be a modern nerd."[26] Indeed, the current information age, as it turns out, is a great time for geeks.

With the radical transformation of the meaning of being a geek, the cultural items that are often associated with geeks and nerds, which are described as geek culture, also

[25] Martha Irvine, "Suddenly, It's Hip To Be Square," *Associated Press*, July 19, 2005, http://www.firstcoastnews.com/news/strange/news-article.aspx?storyid=40734.
[26] Anthony Faiola, "Geek Pride Blooms Into a Real-World Subculture," *Washington Post*, July 15, 2007, sec. A.

come to be celebrated as cool and trendy. In a *Time* magazine article entitled "The Geek Shall Inherit the Earth," Lev Grossman accurately observed: "What was once hopelessly geeky—video games, fantasy novels, science fiction, superheroes—has now, somehow, become cool… Rappers and athletes trick out their Hummers with Xboxes. Supermodels insist in interviews that they used to be losers in high school."[27] Indeed, celebrated by Jon Katz as "the new cultural elite," geeks, apparently, are now being pursued by the entertainment industries as a new breed of premium consumers and trendsetters, redefining what is cool or chic in popular culture.[28] Hollywood and TV networks, more than ever, are eager to embrace this rising community of "the new cultural elite." When stereotypical fanboy movies, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *Spider Man*, *X-Men*, *Batman*, and *Iron Man*, have become a series of franchises that can almost guarantee highly successful releases, the studios knew that they had hit right at the nerve of geek culture. As *Variety* once rightly reported: "Putting a fanboy in charge of a US$70mn movie with 2,100 CGI shots is just one sign of how Hollywood's going geek and geek is going Hollywood… As fandom has become fashionable, Hollywood has targeted and wooed geeks."[29] In fact, today's Hollywood is so occupied by geeky, fanboyish blockbusters that a *Washington Post* journalist, Ann Hornaday, once bitterly complained that America's summer theater was almost completely ruled by "teen boys at their pimpliest, stutteringest and downright geekiest."[30] Along with these geek-oriented

[27] Lev Grossman, "The Geek Shall Inherit the Earth," *Time*, October 3, 2005, 98.
[28] Jon Katz, *Geeks: How Two Lost Boys Rode the Internet Out of Idaho*, 1st ed. (Villard, 2000), xi.
[29] Ben Fritz, "GEEK CHIC ... but 'Netsters Wary of Showbiz Wooing," *Variety*, no. 11 (2004): 1,41.
[30] Ann Hornaday, "Nerdy Teenage Boys Define the Zeitgeist of Summer '07," *The Washington Post*, Sept. 9, 2007, M5.