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CONDIÇÃO DIGITAL E PANDEMIA NO JAPÃO
DIGITAL CONDITION AND THE PANDEMIC IN JAPAN

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Abstract

The digital condition has been part of the Japanese scene since long before the current pandemic. Some precautions suggested to deal with COVID-19 contamination were already part of Japanese daily life, such as the use of masks, restricted physical, and the intense use of screens. Even the voluntary cloister was initially named in Japan as *hikikomori*, although it exists in various parts of the world. The aim of this article is to ask how the longevity of these unique conditions and ways to deal with the relationship between body and technology, make Japanese culture a reference to think how we have never been so digital. It applies even having already immersed ourselves in unusual processes of creation, such as holographic idols, digital artistic experiences and even transdimensional love stories. The methodology used combines bibliographical discussion and several field studies conducted in Japan, the latter ones especially from 1995 to 2018. The research result points out the need to understand the singularities of Japanese culture beyond usual stereotypes.

Keywords: Japanese culture, Digital body, Confinement and creation

1 Introduction

The presence of technology in Japan is intertwined with the country's own history. Through a national past of pre-technologization and contact with Western innovations, a trajectory of extraordinary technological development has been forged that now permeates the daily life of Japanese society, in a way that has spread in the lives of millions of Japanese. Long before other Asian countries –such as China and South Korea– gained a technological projection, Japan established itself as one of the world's leading countries in the field of creating innovative technologies. This was not an accident. A political project was planned by successive Japanese governments (Sohn, Pempel, 2019) who believed in encouraging technology as a way to develop the Japanese nation as a whole. Although other Asian countries have excelled in this area, especially in the last two decades, Japan continues to have vital importance in technological production, as well as in its implementation for everyday life, both on the Asian continent and in the rest of the world.

In geopolitical terms, Japan is the main ally of the United States and the European Community in Asia, mainly due to the fact that it represents a political regime very different from the Chinese one (Schultz, 2019). This opposition also concerns the way high technology produced in both countries has been used by their respective political and economic regimes (Vogel, 2019). Chinese technology has an explicit bias in controlling and government surveillance of people in everyday life, while Japanese technology seeks to facilitate the interactions and demands of daily life itself. Therefore, the purpose of technology in both countries demonstrates some technical similarities, but at the same time reveals radical differences that are reflected in the ways of life.

Thus, it is worthy to note that Japan created Society 5.0 Project (HUT, 2020), developed by the government in 2016, in the 5th Basic Plan of Science and Technology, and presented in 2017 at CeBIT in Hanover, Germany. The Japanese proposal was to create a new social and economic contract integrating the technological innovations of the fourth industrial revolution. The concept of Society 5.0 addresses climate change, food security, limited availability of natural resources, clean energy, and sustainable development. The intention is to make use of technologies for purposes other than economic enrichment itself, and there is a convergence between all technologies to rationalize and improve people's lives through a social organization in which big *data*, artificial intelligence, and the Internet of Things are used to create solutions focused on human needs. More than the planning of fully connected cities, what the Japanese Society 5.0 seeks is to create a technological infrastructure through which Japan's serious problems, such as the decline in the birth rate, the aging of the population, the lack of labor and economic inequalities – aggravated during the so-called "lost decades", referring to the 1990s and 2000s – can be adequate and solved by creating specific technologies to deal with these specific problems. Through an interconnected environment, in various senses, it will be possible to integrate, interact, and even predict different technological services that are necessary. Thus, while Asian countries continue to dedicate themselves exclusively to 5G, the Japanese government has already launched incentives for companies to develop the 6G network, which is expected to launch in 2030 at a speed of 1 TB per second (Gaiato, 2020).

For all this, Japan is a fertile environment to observe the particularities of the current moment, which has as one of its main highlights, the ubiquitous rise of technology in its digital format. When the COVID-19 pandemic arrives in Japan, it seems the country was, in a way, prepared, since it already had the infrastructure of digital technologies. For those who have constant access to technology, as is the case of the majority of the Japanese population (Tsai, Iwai, 2019), the digitization that has become urgent in the face of the pandemic, has only radicalized a condition previously tested (although to a lesser extent) by Japanese bodies, simultaneously connected and, not rarely, confined. To better analyze some aspects of this historical, technological, and social evolution, we built the following panorama, with examples that highlight the uniqueness of the digital condition in Japan.

2 A customary process of scanning life

Even before the pandemic, the digitization of life had already been incorporated into everyday life as a habitual process and, to some extent, naturalized. This has made most social activities, from the singular to the collective, from the private to the public, to operate through digital detection, communication, and coordination infrastructures. One of the specific distinctions of this digital condition is that it is able to handle much larger volumes of information than the preceding infrastructures, which enables a quantity of data and operations created by humans and machines that spreads and involves everything from the simplest to the most complex actions.

According to Marshall McLuhan (2003), technologies become invisible from the moment of contact, constant habit, and continuous use. Not by chance, digital is the present way that people have to express themselves and experience everyday life. Something that goes beyond a mere submission to digital media and also reflects a whole path of appropriation of these means that have the aptitude to be continuously transformed.

Thus, it is important to note that, by their very nature, these technological revolutions for general purpose are also highly disruptive. This disruption occurs precisely because the new technologies are very flexible and widespread. Consequently, many changes emerge not only from the adoption of technology but from the adaptation, acceptance, and conversion of technology into a common action that encompasses a whole range of activities. Therefore, it is essential to pay more attention to the way digitization intervenes with other daily activities in specific contexts, but also on how this digital condition itself is recreated and remodeled in these activities.

In Japan, there is a vast set of examples that accompany a whole history of modernity and industrialization from the end of the 19th century to the 21st century. Many aspects of Japan's history have an intrinsic link with the invention and production of different technologies. The term *Japanese technology* has become a kind of brand, respected and copied around the world.

It is curious to note that technology is not only restricted to technical instrumentalization but affects modes of perception and knowledge in various sectors of everyday life. Seth Jacobowitz (2016) explains how technology transformed the discursive practices that reworked Japan's literary, visual, and linguistic landscape of the Meiji era (1868-1912). Years later, during the 1964 Olympics, the technologies were once again used by the Japanese government to enable an urban remodeling project that transformed the city of Tokyo to reinvent it as one of the most technologically sophisticated and efficient cities on the planet.

In the change of the millennium, digital agencies cease to be an extension of human possibilities, as McLuhan had suggested in the twentieth century, to become sociability shared by different spheres. The process of contemporary digitization is expressed by a digitized dimension of things, people, the environment, and territories. This context has been radicalized in order to evidence how the digital condition fosters ecosystems, making the Japanese and their surroundings a primary source of information and habits. Public identities are built through various services related to consumption, leisure, work, relationships, activism, and narratives (Beiguelman, 2019).

In the confluence of technological devices, consumption, leisure, work, relationships, activism, and narratives emerges a digitized dimension through which a regrouping of the disparate layers of Japanese daily life is enhanced (Tsutsui, 2020). The very notion of everyday life is digitized when there is the possibility of distension of space from housing, the city, the country, the continent, and the planet. Mobility at different levels of residence expands with the digital condition, in which, at the same time, the geography of things enlarges. A resident of the Japanese neighborhood of *Roppongi* can, without leaving home - or even being in transit in a public place - explore, examine and get to know Tokyo's best *konbinis*[1], the most appropriate means of transport and paths for a trip to *Hokkaido island*, the nicest beaches for a stay in the Maldives, the most sought-after shopping shops in New York and even enjoy a completely different landscape from what you see daily, connecting to some platform that gives access to what telescopes, satellites, probes and robots are broadcasting from the deserts of Mars. Just get access to Internet browsers and mobile apps.

Digital has undoubtedly become a form of reality. A good example is the peculiar customization of *vocaloid idol* Hatsune Miku (Aoki, 2018), which can be described as a Japanese speech synthesizer software that generates a vocal character with the human voice of the actor Fujita Saki. Miku is a singer who has millions of fans, releases her songs in clips on YouTube and tours on various continents attracting crowds. As a pop idol, she is not a real person in the strict sense of expression. She is a digital and holographic person with the appearance of a character of anime and, although he does not even have a body that reproduces the similarity of a human anatomy, Japanese fans and consumers establish a series of affective relationships with her. Thus, although it is digital, a Google search allows you to find your date of birth, the height and even the zodiac sign of Miku, information that was being inserted to naturalize her increasingly as a being with characteristics common to his Japanese fans. These are details that attest to the reality of the character. Just as seeing Hatsune Miku sing and dance on stage[2] reinforces to the Japanese audience who are watching an authentic event, in the live performance, the *vocaloid* appears as an autonomous and aware figure who can sing and move by herself. It doesn't matter that the public knows that it is a hologram simulation, that is, a digitized encoding.

The level of acceptance nurtured by the public is created from the continuous bond with the digital condition and allows you to enjoy the performance singing and dancing the latest singles of his *Idol*. Fans sing along, photograph, record, create narratives and share their adventures across multiple platforms. This type of celebrity attests to how Japan is immersed in an intense level of creative production and intimate engagement with digital technologies that deeply mark the paradigms of ultra-connected Japanese and that admit digital as another stage of the real.

3 Online life, offline affections

Japanese demographic surveys of access to digital goods show that commercial Internet service providers began operating in 1993. In 2019, it was estimated that the number of registered Internet users would be 108.1 million (the last census conducted in 2018, reports that the Japanese population is composed of 126.5 million people) and the Internet penetration rate would be 96.1% (Steinberg, 2019). Three factors have contributed significantly to the increase in Internet use: the rise in the number of mobile phones with mobile convergence services, the implementation of an extensive wi-fi network, and the fact that Japan has one of the cheapest broadband subscription rates in the world. In 2019, 93.9% of households and establishments had access to broadband, of which 82.2% had fiber optic services (Mitomi, 2020). Such statistics prove the exacerbated presence and performance of Japanese digitization, but these data also require an extension of this concept of digital condition.

Another prominent aspect of this everyday digitization that has a sensitive presence in Japanese society is robotics (Hirofumi, 2010). Like Hatsune Miku, the everyday presence of robots reiterates the Japanese personalization of simulated characters that naturally coexist with people in everyday life. The development of robot technology in Japan is considered one of the priorities to combat the shrinking population and workforce. The Japanese government and large Japanese corporations have begun exploring interactive service robots that represent the latest development of Japanese robotics, following the emergence of industrial robots, mainly used by the automotive and home appliance industries. Gradually, Japanese robot manufacturers expanded the scope of operation of these service robots using them for safety, cleaning, medical care, specific purposes such as care for people with disabilities and the elderly.

In Japan, each service robot has a variety of different features and formats, tested in a wide range of common activities. Robotic characters make sushi, plant rice, act as receptionists, as cleaners, prepare tea, minister Buddhist ceremonies, play baseball, play musical instruments, assist in medical surgeries, act in the form of pets, work as actresses in plays and TV series. All these types of robots are included in the scope of so-called artificial intelligence and within what has been called artificial empathy, which designates the so-called robot caregivers, designed to meet people's special needs. Elderly, adults and children with cognitive diseases, locomotion problems, visual, verbal or auditory disabilities, or with the need for a company for solitude, began to acquire technologies with digital interaction resources that function as support for these deficiencies of different groups of the Japanese population. This artificial empathy seeks a balance between machines that perform programs in a mechanical way and the stimulus of actions that require, above all, an emotional sensitivity. Empathy appears as a consequence of the type of relationships that an individual with specific needs is encouraged to establish with these robotic characters and with digital processes that have an empathic principle.

More than a simulation of an organic empathy, it is expected that living with these models of Artificial Intelligence awakens affective and personal relationships according to each type of specific need of individuals. In this sense, a good example is the use of robotic seal *Paro* in the treatment of Japanese patients with dementia. This robot is, in many ways, a digital version alternative to pet therapy, which provides emotional support to patients. Cameras, sensors, artificial intelligence features and motors allow *Paro*[3] to respond to caresses and react to patient calls and commands. Once again, we find a personalization of the digitized reality that starts to constitute emotional bonds that harbor a logic of approximation with aptitude to generate new ways of life (Sone, 2017).

The Japanese digital condition materializes new forms of socialization to the same extent that it favors means of use that also spread through other possible fields, such as the interfaces between creativity and digitization created by Japanese artists who work, even before the pandemic, at the intersection of art, design, engineering and technology. In a way, *teamLab represents* this type of transdisciplinary and transdimensional activity. This collective is composed of artists, programmers, engineers, computer graphics animators, mathematicians and architects, who aim to make collective and digitized art. The group's main production is the immersive experience ***teamLab Borderless*** presented at the Mori Museum of Digital Art in Tokyo[4]. This work occupied a space of ten thousand square meters and integrated a series of enclosures with fixed and itinerant installations. Through the digital principle was explored the concept without borders (*borderless*), which by a nonlinear sequence connected to the audience that, live and with mobile applications, could see, touch, hear, feel and witness situations, landscapes, places and sensations in which everything was part of a dialogue with the digitized dimension. Through five hundred and twenty computers and four hundred and seventy individual projectors, each step through the enclosures promoted different refined events, developed as immersive art and interactive experiences.

Upon entering the exhibition, luminous virtual cocoons appeared on visitors' clothes, as if people had become the artists' canvases. Then they turned into butterflies as the visitor/artwork moved through the surrounding space and along the walls. When placing a hand on a butterfly, it died, when walking towards a digital waterfall, it fell on the visitor. It was also possible to choose to follow animals that turned into flowers and

then remain suspended in space watching birds. Those who wanted to could also visit a Japanese tea house with virtual flowers blooming in each drink. With mobile applications the visitor walked through an area with crystals that changed color and shape according to the touches in the application. Art and the user affected each other and, once again, the sense of simulation is reconciled, and the boundaries between real and digital are diluted and recombined.

After the pandemic, other artistic experiences were rethought, including among those who worked fundamentally with the face-to-face arts such as theater. Theater director Toshiki Okada, for example, departed from his *Eraser Mountain*, performed at New York University (NYU) early in the pandemic in Japan. This piece was based on Timothy Morton's book *Ecology without Nature, Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2008). Faced with the pandemic, Okada extended the proposal of the piece to a version for the ZOOM platform, calling it *Eraser Fields*[5], in which, in collaboration with visual artist Teppei Kaneuji, he began to explore the relationships between people and objects, asking how to establish a non-hierarchical landscape between different materials, projections, performers and sounds. The experience begins when a washing machine breaks down and therefore seems to have no use anymore. Performers disappear between objects and indistinguish zones between living beings and objects are created. Okada's research began, in fact, to be thought from the tragedy of 2011, caused by a tsunami, followed by the atomic catastrophe in Fukushima. This made the director question what would happen if human life ceased to be the protagonist of the planet.

Now, in the face of the pandemic, the research of Okada and Teppei Kaneuiji began to take new forms, with what came to be called the *Eizo Theater*, asking what kind of landscape emerges when we stray from the anthropocene. *Eizo*, as its name suggests, it is a video theater. *Beach, Eyelids, and Curtains* are six video-pieces developed with video designer Shimpei Yamada. The proposal was to explore the sensory experience from what happens when dealing with the image projection format. Okada imagined clues to reflect on the connotations of borders, lines and walls[6]. Instilling about the perception of environments (objects and other living beings), without exclusively addressing human life on the planet, has been increasingly strengthened as a possible way for artists and activists to think about issues related to ecology, philosophy and the importance of other living beings to the planet, such as plants, bacteria and insects.

4 Digital policies: before and after the pandemic

In addition to artistic experiences, there is a strengthening of the so-called cyberactivism (Isin, Ruppert, 2015), which has been another prominent Japanese facet of digital and everyday relationships. Cyberactivism arose from the appropriation of social networks by activists who defend humanitarian, political, cultural and economic causes, through established and triggered strategies, to happen in this convergence of the real and digital and, most of the time, as an attempt to confront state, political and financial power. Something that depends not only on posts, messages and digital movements, but also on the construction of public events and concrete projects that outline demands, proposals and actions for effective changes in society. Cyberactivism in Japan is a space for mobilization and politicization that works through digital media, organizational practices and collective action repertoires. Government compensation after Fukushima, rights guaranteed in cases of *matahara*[7], treatments available for *hikikomoris*[8], housing laws for *Kamagasaki*[9], are some of the serious problems of Japanese society exposed and discussed, and for which solutions are sought through cyberactivism. The viralization of connections and the construction of dialogues through a network of information and relationships allows these cyberactivists to have a real and digital effect so that spontaneous aggregations and individuals gain an important role within the social dynamics. Japanese cyberactivists have been able to mobilize participants from all ages and layers of society, most of whom had never previously considered attending a protest demonstration or participating in social rights associations. Something that happens, again, because of the current moment in Japan, which juxtaposes and condenses a digital condition that finds possible ways for the Japanese to organize different sections of their daily lives (Couldry, Hepp, 2016).

This type of mobilization also marked some phases of the calamity caused by COVID-19, in Japan. The country was hit, right at the beginning of the epidemic, because of its close ties with China. He reported his first case on January 16th and his first domestic infection on January 28th. With the increase in cases between February (the month when the government proposed the first interruption of classes) and March (when the government asked the population to avoid unnecessary exits), a state of emergency was enacted in April 2020. The Japanese government did not impose a mandatory quarantine, but allowed municipal authorities to recommend residents to limit their travel, encouraging businesses, schools and other establishments to close temporarily, while maintaining only essential services. Japan has implemented a digital system for monitoring cases of the disease, but has not implemented high-tech applications to track people's movements. A restriction on the entry of foreigners from more than 100 countries was imposed and a tracking policy was established, focusing on monitoring the contacts involved in a single case of COVID-19, to map where the individual was infected, identify with whom he was and monitor who else has gone through the so-called “zero infection milestone”.

Instead of making tests available to everyone, the Japanese government preferred to limit them to certain cases, in order to avoid crowding in hospitals and provoke new outbreaks of contagion. Until October 2020 (International SOS, 2020), there were still no mandatory constraints, fines or quarantines. Establishments and means of transport have become full again and the government runs campaigns to encourage the population to resume collective habits as a strategy to recover the economy (Kyodo News, 2020). Japan opted for measures and protocols that were severely questioned by international health agencies, especially when it announced the decision not to contain the virus with strategies to ban mass behaviors, but rather to learn to live with this condition, since epidemics are a recurring part of Japanese history.

Despite all the technological advances described above, Japanese society also has some internationally felt problems, such as the lack of digital updating for work and education (Brands, 2020). This implied the necessary development of forms of home office and e-learning, which were not yet being practiced extensively in the environments of online performance in Japan. There were also changes in daily practices, such as the use of carved stamps (*hanko* or *inkan*), present in all aspects of daily life in Japan, such as receiving a parcel delivery service, making a notification at a bank or receiving something in the mail. Such stamps are also necessary for borrowing, buying property, making business contracts, for legal proceedings, for government business. COVID-19, in a way, made the engraved stamp unnecessary, challenging an ancient tradition of culture and explaining an ambiguity that is always present in Japanese culture that lives immersed in a digital condition, but continues to maintain certain traditions (Shimizu, 2019).

5 Conclusion

Some Japanese culture experts say that Shintoism –the country's characteristic religion– explains its natural coexistence with robots, *vocaloids* and holograms. Shinto is a form of animism that attributes spirits, *or kami*, not only to humans, but also to animals, and other elements such as mountains and even everyday objects such as pencils. According to this view, there is no categorical distinction between humans, animals and objects, so it is not so strange for a robot to demonstrate behaviors similar to humans, as it is just showing its particular type of *kami*. Anne Allison (2006) has investigated what she considers a global imagination through the study of Japanese toys that, in a way, flirt with traditional animism. The author argues that *Pokemon* toys, *Mighty Morphin*, *Power Ranger* and *Sailor Moon* share the distinct ownership of characters who are seen as having a life of their own. This characterization not only refers to manga or anime characters, but also serves to understand how many Japanese inanimate figures are imbued with life and consciousness. The main point is that Japanese narratives routinely make spirits, robots, and animals cohabit in the world in ways that ignore the boundaries between human and extra human realms. Artificial empathy, mentioned earlier, triggers what has been discussed as techno-animism (Yoneyama, 2018) or a way of relating to the world that opposes the usual modes of knowledge between a subject and an object, as occurs with applications, chat bots, algorithms and numerous other digital devices.

In view of the unique ways of dealing with the digital condition, as we have presented so far, it would be an exaggeration to say that Japan has established an ideal way out to face COVID-19. However, there is something to note in the sense that Japanese culture has always neglected dichotomies (and hierarchies) between subjects and objects, real and fictional contexts, nature and culture. Therefore, if the digital condition was already being tested before the pandemic, imbued with these assumptions, the Japanese experience may open possibilities to ask how to dive into the digital condition without living under ostensible control, but rather, testing networks of affection based on encounters between humans, characters and robots. It is not a question of considering Japan as a utopian territory or as a place where, indeed, answers are made to the fact that we have never been so digital. But perhaps the non-exclusivity of human life as a holder of spirituality and intelligence will teach us something to face other types of pandemics that are generated not only by viral waves but also by power relations that insist on defining who has the right to life.

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1 *Konbinis* are small convenience stores that exist throughout Japan.

2 Clip available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rL5YKZ9ecpg. Accessed: 27 Oct. 2020.

3 Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yYFLVFni1to. Accessed: 27 Oct. 2020.

4 Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNvLFNHQ9Fg. Accessed: 27 Oct. 2020.

5 The premiere can be seen in: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NF96_kZeU1c&t=1224s, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiJdIHUMjeQ. Accessed 3 Jul. 2020.

6 The six videos had the scripts written and directed by Okada, with the participation of performers Izumi Aoyagi, Mari Ando, Shingo Ota Wataru Ohmura, Mariko Kawasaki Yo Yoshida Yuya Tsukahara. Are They: *A Man on the Door, The Fiction over the Curtains, A Woman Reading a Script in the Dressing Room, The Fourth Wall, Portrait of 3 People Who Seem like They're Not Hard Workers* and *Standing on the Stage*.

7 *Matahara* could be translated as a type of harassment of women who work and who suffer discrimination and bullying.

8 *Hikikomoris* are people who live in seclusion and usually stay connected all the time on the Internet

9 *Kamagasaki* is a kind of slum in Osaka and has been dominated by heavy drug trafficking and the action of the Yakuza mafia.