

# JAPAN PANIC

As Britain prepares to celebrate the spectacle of Japan, **Kevin Robins** and **David Morley** examine the West's fears that its own culture of modernity is being undermined

The West, we know, has a problem with Japan. The West resents what it sees as the inscrutable, the remote and the ambiguous nature of Japanese culture. What disturbs the West most of all is that this alien culture has now become 'Number One'; Japan has become the model of economic and technological progress. Japan is now more modern, and maybe even more postmodern, than the West. In the United States and in Europe there is a powerful sense of Japanese *tesis* and a growing fear of the might and power of that 'Other'. In political and media circles, the question being asked is whether Japan is the enemy, and there is even speculation about 'the coming war with Japan'.

It is in this context that we should situate the Japan Festival 1991, now taking place in Britain and described as 'a nationwide celebration of Japanese culture and society'. As Mark Holborn writes in the catalogue for the Barbican's Beyond Japan exhibition, 'the dialogue between Japan and the West is frequently described in terms of Japan's absorption of the West... In contrast, the West's absorption of Japan is inconclusive and rarely described.' With this festival we might, perhaps, be forced to confront and absorb that other culture. The question is whether we shall be able to use this opportunity to get ourselves 'beyond Japan', beyond a fantasy of the mys-

terious and sinister Orient which says a great deal about the xenophobic and neurotic condition of contemporary Western culture and which works to obstruct any more adequate understanding of, and negotiation with, the Japanese Other.

Hollywood is a good place to begin. Through the 20th century, Hollywood has been one of the most powerful symbols of western cultural ascendancy, centrality and self-confidence. Hollywood, has also been a powerful force in constructing our images of Japan as an alien and menacing civilisation. Think of the 'yellow peril' in movies like *The Sands Of Iwo Jima* or *Bridge Over The River Kwai*. More recently, think of *Black Rain* and its plot to swamp America with counterfeit dollars in revenge for the 'black rain' that fell on Hiroshima. Or just think of Shredder in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, hidden away in the sewer system, practising the art of ninja, of 'stealth', to corrupt and undermine American culture and civilisation. Hollywood has projected and reflected western anxieties about the 'Japanese enemy'.

And now something unimaginable is happening. The cultural stronghold of Hollywood is falling into the hands of that enemy. The Japanese are 'stealing in' to the citadel of western culture and self-identity. Sony led the assault. Having already acquired CBS Records, it purchased Columbia Pictures in 1989 for

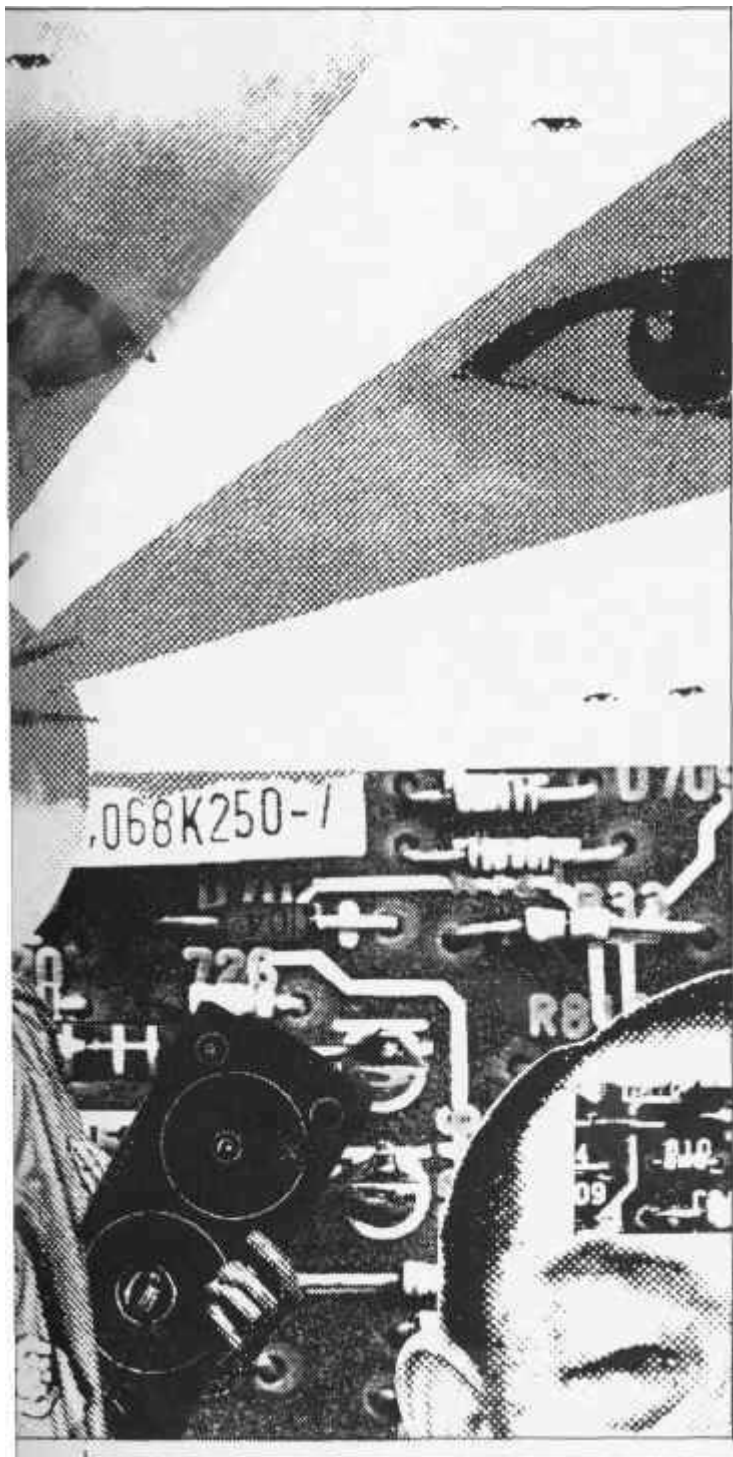
\$3.4 billion, spending a further \$600m to absorb the Guber-Peters entertainment company, renowned for box-office hits like *Gorillas In The Mist* and *Batman*. This was followed by Matsushita's purchase of MCA-Universal for a massive \$6 billion, and by a \$600m Japanese investment in Walt Disney Corporation.

Hollywood is penetrated. But the wound is also symbolic: it is as if American culture, and maybe even western culture as a whole, were coming under enemy occupation. There is the foreboding that Japan might be turning 'cocacolonisation' into 'sake imperialism'.

There has been outrage about Japanese investors 'buying a part of America's soul', as *Newsweek* magazine put it. The fear is that, in contrast to western freedom and openness, Japan is characterised by a rigid culture of self-censorship. Whereas America is characterised by 'ethnic democracy' and pluralism, Japan is seen as a society of 'ethnic purity' and homogeneity. Such discipline and self-control is seen as inimical to the spirit of artistic creativity.

As American economist Robert Reich points out, 'Bruce Springsteen doesn't lose his value because he's working for Sony chairman Akio Morita instead of CBS chairman Larry Tisch'. The observation that Sony is not going to 'take over' or 'possess' Bruce Springsteen or Michael Jackson in any fun-





damental sense seems to be beside the point, however. What remains is a deep aversion to the manner in which Japanese interests appear to be working behind the scenes, operating through a kind of Trojan horse strategy of economic and cultural entryism. Moreover, the Japanese seem to operate with an unnerving dedication to their cause. If it had been the French or the Canadians making these acquisitions there would surely never have been such a visceral response. What is striking in the case of Japan are the deeply fearful and irrational emotions that are stirred up through this perception of invasion and infiltration. We must take very seriously the psychic defences that are now being mobilised against those encroaching 'strangers'.

Japan has been the West's Other for nearly five centuries now. It has been seen as an alien culture, a dehumanised martial culture (kamikaze, ninjutsu, samurai), to be feared. And it has been seen as the exotic culture (zen, kabuki, tea-ceremonies, geishas) of aesthetic *Japonisme*. Its difference has been contained in the idea of some mysterious ambiguity. It is this ambiguity in the image of Japan that has given it a particular resonance in Western phantasy. What underlies this ambiguity, however, as the French prime minister has recently declared in a television interview, is the conviction that the Japanese system 'is completely different from ours and cannot be understood through our norms and our ways of thinking'. It is, as Madame Cresson emphasises, 'another universe'.

The Japanese are the ultimate 'strangers', and there has always been a deep-seated fear that these strangers are engaged in an inexorable struggle with the West, whether by military means or through trade wars. This is reflected in Cresson's publicly declared belief that 'the Japanese have a strategy of world conquest'. The Japanese, she says, are 'little yellow men' who 'stay up all night thinking about ways to screw the Americans and Europeans. They are our

**'Today, the modern era is in its terminal phase. An awareness of its imminent demise has made Americans, the most powerful Caucasians since World War II, increasingly emotional, almost hysterical, about Japan' Ishihara Shintaro**

common enemy.' Cresson likens the Japanese to ants. Her fear is that these 'ants' will colonise the world and take possession of the future.

What all this betrays is an explicit western racism towards its oriental Other. The Japanese are held to be sub-human. There is a feeling that the Japanese have no feelings, no emotions, no humanity. One way in which this Japanese character can manifest itself is in terms of bestial and brutal behaviour. *The Star* recently described a 'Banquet Of Blood' in which 'raw whale meat was on the menu at a sickening feast for Jap VIPs'. 'During the banquet in Tokyo', it went on, 'they gorged themselves on chunks of the animal's tongue and uncooked slices of its skin.'

The cold and callous Jap-

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anese can also seem threatening because of a perceived lack of emotional connection to the rest of the world. In his book, *The Enigma Of Japanese Power*, Karel van Wolferen describes 'the active suppression of the personal inclinations of the Japanese... through a programme of character-moulding that helps ensure predictable and disciplined behaviour'. In these different ways Japan has come to

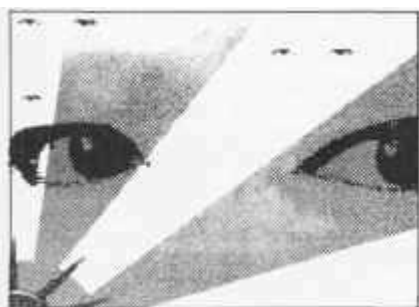


figure in our cultural unconscious as the symbol of barbarism. In 1989, the Japanese overtook the Russians in opinion polls as the nation which Americans fear most.

What seems contradictory is that even while the Japanese are perceived as alien and barbaric, there is also a recognition that they may be more modern and advanced in certain ways than the West itself. Japan is seen as the society where technology and rationalisation have fused perfectly. It is now virtually synonymous with the technologies of the future - screens, networks, robotics, artificial intelligence, simulation. Any contradiction here is only apparent, however. Japanese achievements do not make them seem any less alien. As the dynamism of technological innovation has moved eastwards, so have these new technologies become subsumed into the discourse of racism. The technologies have become associated with Japanese identity and ethnicity. What they do is to reinforce the image of a culture that is cold, impersonal and machine-like. The barbarians have now become the robots.

In this new language of techno-racism the Japanese are seen as cyborgs - part

cybernetic machines, part human organisms. The western media have begun to pick up on the *Otaku* generation - kids who are said to despise physical contact in favour of immersion in media and computer worlds and realities. At one level, these kids are seen as electronic aliens, as people who are mutating into machines, but they can also be idealised as oriental mutants that have evolved into the life form of the post-modern future. Jean Baudrillard exemplifies this techno-exoticism. For him, Japan has now become 'a satellite of the planet Earth', and 'whether we like it or not the future has shifted towards artificial satellites'.

It seems that the West can never see Japan directly. It is as if the Japanese were always destined to be seen through the fears and the fantasies of Europeans and Americans. Japan is the Orient, containing all the West most lacks and everything it most fears. These projections clearly respond to some deep need. Against Japanese difference, the West fortifies and defends what it sees as its superior culture and identity. And so the West's imaginary Japan works to consolidate old mystifications and stereotypes: 'they' are barbaric and 'we' are civilised; 'they' are robots while 'we' remain human; and so on.

What is at stake is the identity of western modernity, no less. It was the West that created modernity, and modernity has always been associated with that imaginary space and identity called 'western'. On this basis, we can say that modernity was endowed with an ethnicity (albeit an ethnicity that was invisible to the West itself). Modernity was conceived through a barrier between Europe and America, on the one hand, and the rest of the world, on the other. This barrier was always vulnerable, however. The logic of technological progression and progress which underpinned the modernisation project was always dynamic, always expansionary, always threatening to transcend and be-

tray its western origins and exclusiveness.

Now it seems to have found a new and ideal host culture in Japan. It is as if the future had passed from Europe to America to Japan, from 'us' to 'them'. This has created a disturbing sense of insecurity around western modernity. If the Japanese can become modern, then what any longer is distinctive about the West? Where and what is the West now? Who is us? This is what the Japan panic is about.

If it is possible for modernity to find a home in the Orient, then any essential, and essentialising, distinction between East and West is problematised. Japan can no longer be handled simply as an imitator or mimic of western modernity. It is not possible to dismiss Japanese modernity as some kind of anomaly. Its distinctiveness insists that we take it seriously.

The centrality of the West is now being assaulted by an assertive Japan that is no longer content to provide Europe and America with spectacle and fantasy. This has become clear in a recently translated book, *The Japan That Can Say No*, by the Liberal Democratic politician and former minister of transport, Ishihara Shin- taro. Ishihara directly accuses the United States of adopting a racist attitude towards Japan, even suggesting that American planes used atom bombs against the Japanese, and not against the Germans, 'because we are Japanese'. This racial attitude is, he maintains, based on the cultural belief that the modern era is the creation of the white race'.

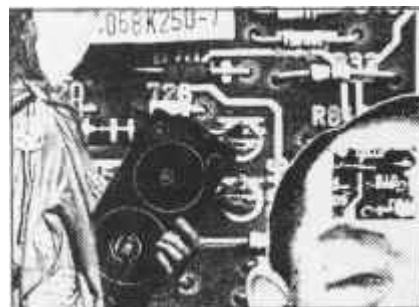
While Ishihara accepts that what he calls 'the Caucasians' deserve much credit in the creation of modern civilisation, he claims that 'the creative energies of these people are now becoming exhausted'. Technologies are the key to the future, he argues, and Japan has a growing lead in technological development (to the extent that the US weapons industry is increasingly dependent on Japanese suppliers, as the Gulf war made very

clear).

Japanese technological superiority now puts it 'on the verge of a new genesis'. In contrast, Ishihara suggests, Europe and the United States are on the verge of decline. Americans, he challenges, 'should realise that the modern era is over. Their cherished beliefs in materialism, science and progress have borne bitter fruit... America harnessed science and technology and spent a fortune to get to the moon, only to find a barren rock pile. All that money and effort and what does the nation have to show for it?'

Japan is the future, and it is a future that is transcending and displacing western modernity. For Ishihara, there are other sources of modernisation and modernity. 'We are in and of the Orient', he writes: 'How preposterous to assert that somehow modern Japan sprang full-blown from western seeds!'

Much, if not most, of Ishihara's thinking about technology, modernity and Japanese identity is highly contentious and problematical. The book has already been used as ammunition by those who have a stake in creating a panic around 'the coming war with Japan' (significantly, the first translation was a pirate edition from the



CIA). It has been taken up as a evidence of Japanese ambitions to global hegemony, and used as a testimonial to what Cresson calls 'their mentality'. Cresson has gone so far as to liken *The Japan That Can Say No to Mein Kampf*. But can it be dismissed like this, as just another symptom of the Japan problem?

Perhaps we should - and perhaps we shall increas-

ingly be compelled to - take seriously this Japan that can say no. Perhaps we should be less concerned with what we think it reveals about 'them', and more attentive to what it could help us to learn about ourselves and our own culture. Japanese no-saying is important because of the radical challenge it now presents to our understanding of modernity and of the cultural and ethnic conditions of its existence until now.

Japan is significant because of its complexity: because it is non-western, yet refuses any longer to be our Orient; because it insists on being modern, yet calls our kind of modernity into question. Because of this Japan offers possibilities. It potentially offers us a way beyond that simple binary logic that differentiates modern and traditional, and then superimposes this on the distinction between West and Orient. In so far as Japan complicates and confuses this impoverished kind of categorisation it challenges us to re-think our white modernity. This kind of intellectual and imaginative challenge cannot, and will not, obviate conflicts between Europe and America and Japan, but it could make it possible to handle real differences of interest in more complex ways.

Contrary to Ishihara's argument, the modern era has not entered its terminal phase with the displacement of 'Caucasian' modernity. Modernity is now, more than ever, the condition of all cultures in this world. The issue is on what terms they are inserted into that modernity, and on what terms they will co-exist. Japan's achievement is that it is now no different from Europe or the United States in terms of its modernity. What is significant about Japan is its ethnicity, and the fact that it is the first non-white country to have inserted itself into modernity on its own terms. In so doing it has exposed the racist foundations of modernity as it has been constructed until now. Hence the Japan panic.