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The Performative Force of Cultural Products

Subject Positions and Desires Emerging From Engagement with the Manga *Boys' Love* and *Yaoi*

By Mona Lilja & Cathrin Wasshede

Abstract

This article deals with questions about the performative power of cultural products that travel the world. The Japanese manga genre Boys' Love and Yaoi has gained a broad readership outside of Japan during recent decades. This has cultivated an image of Japan as sexually radical and 'as more than Japan', something which has produced alternative subject positions and practises regarding gender and sexuality among Swedish Boys' Love/Yaoi followers. With the help of the concept hyperreality and elaborations on materiality within feminist theories, this article discusses: Which images of Japan and Sweden are produced as manga Boys' Love/Yaoi – as cultural products – travel from Japan to Sweden? Which subject positions and forms of desires emerge?

In order to understand how cultural products create new subjectivities, images and desires, we also ask: What can a sharper focus on materiality and the agency of matter add to the understanding of the concept of hyperreality and the construction of new realities? We argue that embodied experiences of certain subject positions and desires challenge the idea of the hyperreal as a surface phenomenon. Further, the article shows how the image of "Japan" is often coloured by the desires that West cultivates about the 'other'.

Keywords: Cultural products, Manga/Boys' Love/Yaoi, Subject positions, Desires, Hyperreality, Materiality

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Introduction

The Japanese manga genres Boys' Love (to be known from now on in this article as BL) and Yaoi are visual or text-based fiction where the storylines revolve around love relationships between beautiful boys. BL and Yaoi are umbrella terms that are often used interchangeably and are referred to as the couplet BL/Yaoi in this article. During recent decades the BL/Yaoi has gained a broad and enthusiastic readership outside of Japan, something which seems to cultivate an image of Japan 'as more than Japan'. BL/Yaoi's connection to homosexuality, gender bending and sexual desires (e.g. Kinsella 1998; Levi et al. 2010; McLelland et al. 2015) has produced images of Japan as ultra-modern, exotic and sexually free (cf. Morley & Robins 1995; Tsai 2016), as well as resulted in performances of alternative queer subject positions and sexual practices. All together, this made us interested in questions about representations of reality and the performative power of cultural products. The texts and pictures about young men in love and having sex with each other in the manga BL/Yaoi are cultural products with performative power, i.e. they do things. Cultural products are material and symbolic products encountered in all strata and sections of society; for example in the form of art, clothing, music, dance, symbols and rituals (e.g. Hall 1980, 1996; Edgar & Sedgwick 2008; Craig 2013). With the help of the concept of hyperreality and elaborations on materiality within feminist theories, as well as interviews with eight Swedish, female manga followers, this article discusses: Which images of Japan and Sweden are produced as manga Boys' Love/Yaoi – as cultural products – travel from Japan to Sweden? Which subject positions and forms of desires emerge?

Departing from theorisations of the material within feminism (e.g. Haraway 1991; Franklin 2003; Alaimo & Hekman 2008; Ahmed 2008) we also aim to elaborate on the concept of hyperreality. Jean Baudrillard's theories about hyperreality are interesting, relevant and applicable when studying cultural products, in our case the manga BL/Yaoi which mediate different notions on homosexuality, gender bending and sexual desires. Baudrillard (1981, 1983, 1988) proposes that mass culture and consumer society have contributed to replacing the real with models that are more real than the real and addresses this process in terms of hyperreality. We argue that the hyperreal worlds produced in the manga BL/Yaoi become real when manga followers interact with and relate to them and contextualise them, for example in Swedish manga fandoms and everyday life. In this article, we will explore what a sharper focus on materiality and the agency of matter can add to the understanding of the concept hyperreality and the construction of new realities.

The article is structured as follows: In the next section, we contextualise our study by describing the manga genre BL/Yaoi, the phenomenon 'cool Japan' and the Swedish manga fandom. In section three we elaborate on the theoretical concepts hyperreality, materiality and cultural products. In section four we discuss

our methods and materials. Section five consists of our analysis, focusing on a) the interviewees' imaginations of BL/Yaoi's different meanings in Japan and Sweden (Japaneseness and Swedishness) and how 'Japan' is to be seen as something more than Japan and could be understood in terms of a hyperreal; and b) BL/Yaoi as producing political and sexual desires. In the last section we summarise our conclusions and propose some areas for further research as well as some preliminary elaborations of the concept hyperreality.

Manga and the 'Cool Japan'

Japanese manga – illustrated serial novels combining artwork and text – have moved through cartoon strips, books, films and the internet to various localities internationally. They are part of what has been called 'the cool Japan', which embraces the explosive global export of 'Japan' and Japanese products, such as manga, computer games, technique, cars, food and music, from the 1980s and 1990s, onward (Morley & Robins 1995; Iwabuchi 2002; Allison 2006; Toyoshima 2011). In 1990, the Japanese Ministry of Education officially recognised manga as a Japanese artistic and cultural resource (Sasaki 2013). In an interview, a Japanese Director of a non-governmental organisation pinpointed how powerful manga is as a cultural and political tool: "I think the government tries to export, not only the manga culture, but also the Japanese culture to other countries. Manga is a part of the current Japanese culture. (---) It is a main industry that is promoted by the government." (interview carried out by Mona Lilja in Tokyo 2013)

The global export of 'Japan' and Japanese products is an example of how cultural products are exported and travel from a non-Western context to Western contexts – from the East to the West. These reverse cultural flows can and have been interpreted as a form of resistance to the domination of Western cultural power (Morley & Robins 1995; Berry et al. 2003; Dasgupta 2006). Japan has been characterised by ambiguity, positioned in between 'the West' and 'the Rest', as both a powerful and exploited nation, but as David Morley and Kevin Robins claim, it has become the leading nation of technologies. The futurism of modernity, in which technology has a central position, has positioned Japan as *the* future (Morley & Robins 1995: 149-160). What is significant about this is that Japan has inserted itself into modernity "on its own terms" (Morley & Robins 1995: 171), or as Joseph S. Nye puts it: "It is the first non-Western country that was able to fully modernise to the point of equality with the West in income and technology while showing that it is possible to maintain a unique culture." (Nye 2004: 85) The Japanese massive export of culture has been described in terms of soft power, i.e. the cultural power to influence other countries (Nye 2004; Toyoshima 2011; Tsai 2016), which in turn can – or already has – positioned Japan as a "superpower"

nation (McGray 2002: 49; cf. Morley & Robins 1995).

When discussing manga, there are several sub-genres. As mentioned above, BL and Yaoi are umbrella terms often used interchangeably to refer to homoerotic male romantic genres of manga, animation and text-based fiction (McLelland 2015). Although there is still much debate within the fan community about how to define the terms, BL and Yaoi mainly revolve around love relationships between beautiful boys, also called bishōnen. Yaoi is sometimes described as fan-produced adaptations of commercial visual or text-based fiction, in which fan writers use the strong bond between two male characters – who are pictured as friends or rivals – to reinterpret them as being involved in a homoerotic relationship (cf. Kosofsky Sedgwick 1986). Most studies on fan fiction are interested in how the original texts are reinterpreted and how they deal with traditional gender roles and identities (e.g. Gibbs 2012). BL, on the other hand, often refers to commercially produced original stories that are either visual, e.g. anime, live action drama series and movies, or produced as text, e.g. manga, novels (Santos Fermin 2013; McLelland et al. 2015).

Manga fandoms have, with the help of technology, especially the internet, emerged all over the world (e.g. Ito 2012; Levi et al. 2015; Tsai 2016). Manga fandom is a community that is based on the fans' passion for manga, leading to investments in reading, writing, drawing and interpreting manga, sewing costumes, visiting conventions, collecting commodities related to manga, gaining specialised knowledge and participating in other ways in the community of belonging that the fandom constitutes (Tsai 2016). Due to Sweden's high connectivity, i.e. the citizens' high access to internet, and young people's high English-language proficiency (manga is often translated from Japanese to English), Swedish manga fans are able to engage in a variety of fan activities (Olin-Scheller & Sundqvist 2015). *NärCon*, a convent for cosplay[1], gaming and East Asian Culture and *ConFusion*, an association/convent for East Asian Culture, are among the biggest fandoms in Sweden, gathering manga followers, gamers, cosplayers and people interested in East Asian popular culture.

Theoretical Concepts

Hyperreality

Morley and Robins warn about a new form of racism related to "high-tech Orientalism", in which Japan is portrayed as technological, cold, impersonal and machine-like: "lacking emotional connection to the rest of the world" (Morley & Robins 1995: 169). They also discuss Japan's creation of a new domain of virtual reality in which the line between the real and the electronic becomes blurred, so that the real in the end will be confined to simulation (Morley & Robins 1995: 168–

169). This resembles Baudrillard's (1981, 1983, 1988) discussion of hyperreality in which he suggests that an object, phenomenon, experience or the like, reproduced in mass culture, replaces or is preferred to its original. Signs no longer represent reality but implode in their meaning and simulate their own hyperreality (Baudrillard 1983: 3).

According to Baudrillard, hyperreality could be seen as a copy with no original. A notion fundamental to hyperreality is the concept of representation. Representation, Baudrillard writes, starts from the principle that the sign and the real are correspondent (Baudrillard 1988: 169). However, the relationship between sign and reality is wrenched out of order and the image comes to bear no relation to reality whatsoever:

> Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. (---) It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real. (Baudrillard 1981: 1–2)

According to Baudrillard representation starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent. Even though he thinks that this equivalence is utopian, it is a fundamental axiom. Simulation, however, starts from the *utopia* of this principle of equivalence. Baudrillard (1983) maps the transformation from representation to simulacrum in four "successive phases of the image": 1) it is the reflection of a basic reality; 2) it masks and perverts a basic reality; 3) it masks the absence of a basic reality; and 4) it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum (Baudrillard 1983: 5). Baudrillard argues that today's common life is hyperrealist, and that we live in an "aesthetic hallucination" of reality. Or in other words, the hyperreal is "the real retouched in a 'hallucinatory resemblance' with itself whereby the real implodes on itself" (Baker 2004: 91). With implosion, Baudrillard describes the process leading to that the boundaries between the real and the simulation collapse. For example, television comes to simulate real-life situations, executing worlds of its own, rather than representing the world (Baker 2004: 91).

Umberto Eco, just like Baudrillard goes "in search of instances where the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake" (Eco 1986: 8). However, Eco distances himself from Baudrillard. Rather than claiming that the real is supplanted or erased, he argues that the imitations – because they are newer and more complete – are preferred to their ancient or unavailable originals (Eco 1986: 30–31). As we will show in this article, many BL/Yaoi followers, at least at first, see the manga images, i.e. the texts and

pictures in the manga, as more real and preferable than the 'real' Japan.

With the help of feminist theories about materiality we will now try to elaborate further on the concept of hyperreal worlds. Thus, focusing on materiality, and granting agency to non-human entities, we want to show how the creations of a hyperreal 'Japan', become new realities in other contexts – which are no longer to be seen as hyperreal. Here, what we propose differs from Baudrillard, who concludes that reality is nothing more than a fairy tale (Oberly 2003).

New Material Feminisms

Without falling into narratives about feminism as being trapped within the 'linguistic turn'[2], we embrace the so-called material feminism or new materialism and its focus on the agency of matter and the complex interactions through which the social and the biological emerge, persist, and transform in close juxtaposition (e.g. Haraway 1991; Franklin 2003; Alaimo & Hekman 2008; Lilja 2013). The material is embraced as more than a passive social construction, and instead stands out as an agentic force that interacts with, develops and changes discourse (Alaimo & Hekman 2008: 4–7). Not only humans, but also non-human elements – like neurons, animals, artefacts, objects, buildings, technologies, machines and nature – are entangled and involved in the becoming of the world and the construction of a phenomenon (Barad 2008; Åsberg et al. 2012). In the case of BL/Yaoi, non-human actors like the internet, data computers, manga texts, clothes and pictures – as carriers of meaning around gender and sexuality – can change how people live their lives, their bodily practices and how they feel; the cultural, material products have agency (Black 2014) and create realities. As we will see below, manga is a cultural product that informs the processes of becoming. Embodied experiences of performances related to BL/Yaoi produce certain subjectivities, practices and materialities (for example, gay identifications, manga nerds, gender bending, etc.) These embodied experiences challenge the idea of hyperreality as a surface phenomenon (Baudrillard 1983). Instead, cultural products prevail as important artefacts with performative power that construct other realities (cf. Haraway 1991; Alaimo & Hekman 2008; Barad 2008; Åsberg et al. 2012; Black 2014).

Cultural Products

Cultural products often manifest values and beliefs of the hegemonic society, but are also important tools in political struggle and resistance in different forms of communities of belonging. When writing about cultural products, such as BL/Yaoi, as tools for resistance, there is a risk of embracing capitalism since cultural products create desires and thrills, and are instrumental in constructing consumers and sustaining the market. However, the capitalist market, like everything else, is not a static or predictable entity, but in the process of becoming. In spite

of its own logic, on an everyday level capitalism can thus enable resistance. This resistance, though, takes place within the idea of free circulation of individuals and goods in the advanced liberal democracy, which aims at sustaining capitalism and hindering unwanted acts of resistance (Osborne & Rose 1999; Lemke 2011). Further, it is important to situate the cultural products studied in relation to other social practices, relationships, political discourses and social hierarchies such as race, class and gender.

Cultural products like BL/Yaoi ought to be discussed in relation to transnational currents and the shrinking world. Inderpal Grewal (1999, 2005), for instance, discusses transnationalism, connectivities, travelling material and/or discursive goods and the formation of new consumer subjects. Inspired by Stuart Hall, she highlights how goods, media and information get transcoded, i.e. are involved in processes of interpretation and localisation, at different sites (Grewal 1999: 801; cf. Davies 2007). Grewal exemplifies her reasoning with the Barbie doll, and how Barbie, as a material and cultural product, enables different subject positions for the consumers, which make the doll marketable in different locations. The same seems to apply to the BL/Yaoi characters, which seemingly come to mean different things in a Swedish or Japanese context respectively – something which make BL/Yaoi highly commercialised and exoticised products (Otmazgin 2008; McLelland et al. 2015).

Cultural products seem to be more dependent on digital distribution than ever before (Morley & Robins 1995; Colbert & Courchesne 2012; Craig 2013; McLelland et al. 2015). Through the internet, and the wide and rapid spread to many different contexts, the meanings of BL/Yaoi are shared and transformed. Digital technology breaks down barriers between creator and spectator due to the formation of virtual communities for geographically dispersed individuals in which virtual collaboration on the creation of cultural products takes place (Colbert & Courchesne 2012; Craig 2013). Further, cultural products can be experiential and, especially when transmitted via digital media, favour emotional involvement (Colbert & Courchesne 2012), something that will be illustrated below.

Japan and manga have been seen as exotic in relation to the West and Western consumers of manga (Ito 2012; Tsai 2016; cf. Morley & Robins 1995). The exoticification of cultural difference have been addressed in terms of 'eating the Other' (hooks 1992; Hall 1993), and of appropriating the Other's culture. Cultural appropriation is the process of practicing/wearing artefacts, customs, rituals and/or dresses, which are connected to another culture but used in a slightly different way than before (in their original societies). Critics argue that cultural appropriation is a power-loaded practice mainly performed by privileged people, who temporarily borrow 'exotic' artefacts from subaltern groups and marginalised settings (cf. Hall 1993). In the case of manga, Japan does not prevail as subaltern, but rather as ex-

ercising soft power, in the form of disseminating manga comics globally (Morley & Robins 1995; Nye 2004; Toyoshima 2011; Tsai 2016). However, when white women from the West consume products portraying Asian men from the East, such as in Swedish young women reading BL/Yaoi, race becomes relevant to discuss. Tobias Hübinette and Carina Tigervall (2009: 11–12) describe representations of the East Asian man in Swedish visual culture as weak, sensitive, unmanly, homoeroticised, ugly and nerdish. In the analysis below, this will be elaborated upon.

Methodological Discussion

We connect to the practice of multisited ethnography (Marcus 1995) of following a phenomenon, an idea, a debate or, as in this case, manga, to enable research on material that moves unpredictably and rhizomatically, rather than linearly and in a structured way. Moreover, this methodology aims to grasp and conceptualise new connections and new articulations since the cultural products are transformative as well as in transformation into new contexts (Deleuze & Guattari 1988; Ringrose & Coleman 2013). The cultural product BL/Yaoi will be analysed as open and fluid with no given or fixed meaning or content, but as a performative force that, for example, enables subject positions and desires, and offers spaces for new realities. It is seen as an active agent that makes things happen.

Manga exists both on and off the internet and it influences what people do and how they view everyday life, as well as how they interact with their surroundings. In line with this, Julia Davies writes: "(---) online spaces provide an arena where collaboration over meanings can be transformative, impacting on how individuals locate themselves within local and global contexts." (Davies 2007: 3). Images in these new local contexts bring their histories and earlier meanings, but new nuances and associations are added. When objects survive their original contexts it is possible to generate new meanings. The digital context constitutes a sort of material-symbolic transformation; it accrues and accumulates meanings – sometimes obscuring previous meanings and other times developing them (Davies 2007). For our interviewees, machines (computers) and artefacts (books, comics) are different materialities that provide access to BL/Yaoi manga, which interact with the bodies and minds of the interviewees and create a material-symbolic phenomenon that they have to work with and against (cf. Lenz 2011).

This article builds on qualitative data from interviews with eight Swedish young women involved in manga culture that were carried out in 2015. Three of them were interviewed in a focus group (see for example Wilkinson 1999), the others in individual interviews. One participant was interviewed on Skype. We found the interviewees via ConFusion, NärCon, Serieskolan in Malmö (a school for cartoonists) and finally, through snowballing. The interviewees were all female

and between 21 and 34 years of age, except for one that was 15 years of age. Seven of the interviewees had middle-class backgrounds and one working-class background. Seven persons were white and one had an Asian parent. Most of them lived heterosexual lives. Almost all of them had studied Japanese at university and some of them had visited and/or lived in Japan for some period. The group of people that were interviewed is small and the aim is not to tell the truth or to make generalisations. We see the study as a case that sheds light on something bigger – how cultural products can produce subject positions and desires – i.e. the case is transcending the specific experiences of these eight women (Wieviorka 2000: 161).

The interviews were all open-ended, semi-structured and conducted in Swedish. The interviewees were informed of the aim of the project, confidentiality, their right to withdraw and to not answer if they did not feel comfortable with a question. The interviews lasted between one and 2-and-a-half hours, were recorded and later transcribed. During the interviews, the interviewees were given the opportunity to address questions that were relevant to themselves in order to get a broader understanding of the processes at work.

Hyperreal Images and Desires

Below, we will analyse the interviews focusing on BL/Yaoi as a cultural product with performative force that makes things happen and produces different realities. Firstly, we address different images of Japan, and in connection to this we briefly touch upon images of Sweden and Swedishness. Secondly, we address the different desires that BL/Yaoi gives rise to, i.e. political and sexual desires, which are often deeply entangled with each other.

Images of Japan

Even though the hyperreal image of 'Japan' that emanates from manga seems to bear little resemblance with the real Japan, some of our interviewees describe how for long periods they thought they were performing subject positions created in and corresponding to a Japanese reality. After spending some time in Japan, they realised that this was not the case. One of our interviewees revealed how at first she took the Swedish manga culture to reflect the real Japan, but later realised that the two do not overlap:

> When you read manga in Sweden you think that Japan really is full of wonderful things. That it is like in manga. The Internet is full of images of how Japan is. For example, a lot of images are published with the heading "Meanwhile in Japan…" Beneath the heading the image

> shows people dressed up in crazy styles or in other ways acting manga. However, when you go to Japan, it is completely different from your expectations.

Several of the other interviewees also talk about an initial romanticisation of Japan. One of them formulated it as follows: "To me, Japan was a fantasy world, an exotic, wonderful, mysterious world. In my teens I longed for Japan. (…) But later on I realised that Japan does not like foreigners and women. Then it became less fun". Another interviewee stated that Swedish manga followers generally, or at least often, read manga as simulations of real life in Japan. However, according to her, the comics should just be seen as artificial products that do not correspond with real life in Japan, but execute their own worlds:

> Here in the West, we misunderstand the whole phenomenon of manga in relation to Japan. What happens in manga does not match the Japanese reality and how people live in Japan. But when reading manga, people get that impression: "So, this is Japan!" (---) The Japanese population distinguishes and separates manga storylines from the Japanese reality. Some people might think that gender and sexuality in Japan are nuanced, changeable, twisted and open to negotiation and bending when they read manga. However, the gay movement is marginalised in Japan. It exists in manga, but not in Japan; what happens in manga stays in manga.

A woman in the focus group interview said that manga is a closed culture in Japan, and that it takes place "at home", while the Swedish manga culture is "social". Together with the words above; "what happens in manga stays in manga", the respondents seem to portray manga in Japan as digested more in private, while implicitly they produce an opposite image of manga in Sweden; as more connected to communities of belonging.

According to the interviewees above, the images of 'Japan', produced by the cultural product manga and its followers, bear little or no correspondence to a Japanese reality/materiality but "it is its own pure simulacrum" (Baudrillard 1988: 169). The relationship between the sign and the reality that it is said to signify, is twisted and out of order. Swedish manga followers, through their interpretations of the representations of Japan in manga, initially created a 'Japan' that they later find to be far from the real Japan. They can thus be said to substitute signs of the real for the real itself (Baudrillard 1988: 167).

When problematising the image of Japan as modern, open to homosexuality and sexually free, the interviewees created another representation of Japan in

which Japan is seen as traditional and homophobic. One of them said:

> You can play around with gender roles within manga, but not in reality. Being gay for example is taboo in Japan, however homosexual love is still visible in manga comics. Japan appears to be much more accepting in manga, but it is not.

Further, in their critique of the romanticisation of Japan as free and open to different sexualities, Japan is portrayed as strict and ordered:

> It is a little bit more pure-bred (---) especially within the BL culture; everything has to be very clear and labelled. (---) In Japan, categories and subheadings [in the genre BL] are very strict. Japan has always liked that type of order and… not fascism, but something like that. While Sweden always has been more dopey, hippie, seventies... people could blossom. (---) It has also to do with the fact that they [the Japanese] are so many. If you are many people in a country that live close to each other, it is important with order and structure.

These kinds of accounts about Japan have often been interpreted by postcolonial scholars as part of a long tradition of portraying Japan as a dehumanised machine-like nation where self-censorship and lack of emotions are prerequisites of the national soul (cf. Morley & Robins 1995). Using the other as the carrier of negative features may be seen as a way to construct the own identity as good and legitimate (e.g. Morley & Robins 1995: 172). In the quotations above, Sweden and Swedishness are both implicitly and explicitly described as open and positive towards women and homosexuality, as well as a country that allows people to "blossom". The cultural product BL/Yaoi is seen as more fluid and open when it is experienced in Sweden than in Japan. Jasbir K. Puar (2007), among others, has interpreted these kinds of images as a result of an endless need to represent the West as more modern, tolerant and gay-friendly than the rest of the world.

The analysis above displays a gap between the Japanese real and the 'Japan' created by manga and its followers. 'Japan' prevail as a fantasy world, an exotic, wonderful, mysterious world were gender bending and sexuality are twisted and open to negotiations. However, this image, often presented in manga, do not correspond with the reality the manga followers meet as traveling to, and interacting with, the materiality of the real Japan. The 'Japan', which is sexually free and full of wonderful things do not correspond with the respondents' interpretations of Japan while actually going there. This imply that new realities are created through manga, which seem to implode in their cultural meaning and create their own

hyperreal worlds. Sometimes 'Japan' is seen as *more real than the real* (Baudrillard 1983, 1988). But, even though the hyperreal world of 'Japan' is detached from the original Japan, we argue that it is still material and real. In this article, the creation of alternative possible subject positions for the subject, here the Swedish manga follower, is of relevance. Below we will discuss how these subject positions are connected to desire for another real(ity) as well as to sexual desires, including gender bending.

Desire for Another Real(ity) and Sexual Desires

As suggested below, the construction of a hyperreal Japan, which in turn creates Swedish communities of belonging and new realities for their members, emerges from a range of different but related desires. The interviewees expressed a political desire, i.e. a longing for another reality (Mouffe 2005), in which gender is fluid and different sexual identifications are embraced. But there were also expressions of a more sexual desire, as in sexual cravings, pleasure and practices, in the interviews.

Our interviewees expressed a wish to transgress societal boundaries, through gender bending and other ways of experiencing sexual pleasure and desire. However, they differentiated between their own desires and the desires that they attributed to the BL/Yaoi followers and creators in Japan. One interviewee suggested that the different understandings of BL/Yaoi are a result of different longings of young women in the Japanese and Swedish contexts. In Japan, BL/Yaoi was, according to her, created as an expression of a strong desire for a reality free from patriarchal notions, rather than a desire for sexually transgressive pleasure:

> Yaoi is about men who have relationships with other men. Yaoi was originally not about sex, but it was a form of resistance. It was a political action, which used taboos. Women who like Yaoi in Japan are called rotten women [fujoshi]. This label is provocative. The creators of Yaoi are like feminists, even if they do not call themselves feminists. They use sexuality as a means to disempower macho heterosexual men. They want to resist and change the hegemonic masculinity. Originally the Yaoi illustrators drew the male characters with features such as cats' tails. Later, they started to depict these macho male characters in love with each other or having sex with each other. It was just another way to ridicule these manly men. However, here in the West, that underlying idea and historical account gets misinterpreted most of the time.

In this quotation, male homoeroticism is portrayed as a feminist tool and described as something shameful that can be used to ridicule men, in the same way as a cat-tail being placed on a man can. It is seen as a way to feminise men and through

that diminish and disempower them, in line with how Hübinette and Tigervall (2009) argue that Asian men often are represented in Swedish visual culture. Interestingly, according to this interviewee, the Japanese men are also feminised and homoeroticised in Japan – when there is a need for disempowering them.

Even though Japanese women were said to mainly use BL/Yaoi as a means to try to change patriarchy, they are, according to the interviewees, also using it as a tool to liberate themselves sexually. However, the interviewees again emphasised the difference between Swedish and Japanese women, claiming that Japanese women have less sexual space, more taboos and are more trapped than Swedish women:

> I think it is a difference concerning the need in Japan compared with Sweden. I think it [sexual and pornographic manga] is so big in Japan because there is a need for sexual liberation among the women. (---) Because the social structure is different. Of course, even Swedish girls have a certain frame and conditions and are stuck, but the women in Japan have less space, more taboos and harder restrictions. So there is a huge need for liberation. While here… (---) it is just another piece of the puzzle, a taste of all the choices and opportunities [you have].

Even though Swedish girls and women are said to have "frames", "conditions" and are "stuck", they are seen as much more liberated and free than Japanese girls and women. BL/Yaoi is described as just another "piece of the puzzle" for the Swedish followers; one opportunity for pleasure among many, one choice among many choices.

When describing Swedish women's desires for BL/Yaoi, gender bending and other alternative subject positions and forms of sexual identities were highlighted among our interviewees:

> Some manga, especially for girls, use role-playing with gender and sexuality. There are more variations in the way women and men are depicted [than in reality]. This opens up the possibility for the reader to identify as something other than what that person is born with. Young people in Sweden like it. They want to be able to be who they want to be and bend the gender norms. I met two girls who realised while reading Yaoi that they were in love with each other. So they defined themselves as gay people: women in love. However, when they dress up in cosplay they choose to act as gay men. Such gender bending is wonderful!

Materialities, like manga, clothes and communities of belonging (like cosplay conventions) are here described as entangled in the becoming of these young women and their subject positions and desires. This was confirmed by one interviewee, who emphasised: "(…) in the West [the Japanese] gender role-playing becomes real and we take it seriously".

The BL/Yaoi culture seemingly provide a refuge for its fans by helping people to navigate in the world and to work on their identifications and desires (Kinsella 1998). The same pattern can be seen in other localities too. In her research about BL/Yaoi and manga culture in the Philippines, Tricia Abigail Santos Fermin (2013) found that Filipino manga followers also interpreted Japan as open to radical sexual norms and binary gender transgressions. For example, one of her interviewees said: "I think Japan has a very interesting culture, because they are open to such relationships [as seen in Yaoi and BL]. (…) So I think Japan is really interesting and unique". (Santos Fermin 2013) According to Santos Fermin the representation of the 'open Japan' led to an elaboration and strengthening of the LGBTQ community and LGBTQ identities in the Philippines. She claims that BL/Yaoi in the Philippines is more related to LGBTQ culture and politics than the original BL/Yaoi in Japan, and that Japan represents a fantasy, "a Mecca-like world of beautiful gender bending and colourful transgression that they hope to take part in at least once in their lives" (Santos Fermin 2013). According to her, this often means that many fans tend to idealise homoerotic relationships in their reading and writing of BL/Yaoi – for example through describing them as more intense and ultimate; as "a love against all odds" (Santos Fermin 2013). This appropriation of the travelling cultural product BL/Yaoi is significant even among our interviewees. They (re)write, (re)read and transform meanings of BL/Yaoi in new localities in ways that provide them with what they need, for example models of alternative subject positions and practices regarding sexuality, gender and pleasure.

Several of our interviewees see BL/Yaoi as a way for heterosexual women to reclaim their sexuality. The sexual pleasures and desires connected with BL/Yaoi in Sweden are described as related to a stretching of gendered sexual norms and to the fact that there are two men and no women in the fiction. According to our interviewees this is relevant from at least two points of view: firstly, if you like men and masculinity, you get twice as much, and secondly, since there are no women involved, it is easier for women to explore different sexual roles and activities. No woman is exposed to subordination. Since there are no women in the comics to identify with, the female readers of the comics can elaborate more freely on their sexuality in relation to BL/Yaoi. One interviewee stated:

> In the beginning I routinely identified with the passive recipient, the one that was penetrated. But I began to play with the thought: "What

> if I was active?" (…) BL/Yaoi has changed my sexuality, I have greater freedom sexually; it has changed what turns me on.

Another interviewee expressed it as follows: "Yaoi is interesting for young women (…) who want to read comics about sex without being forced into a female subject position". An interviewee who produces manga about homoerotic relations between women, so-called *Yuri*, said: "It is both good and bad that the stereotypes exist, but there have to be other [possible figures to identify with] so that you can choose". The important thing to her is to provide manga that enables for her and other women to experience sexual pleasure. She creates manga that allows the characters, and the readers, to switch positions and identifications; she is not trying to eliminate power hierarchies in sexual relations:

> It should not be that the submissive one is girlish. (---) But if both were submissive or dominant then nothing would happen. No one is going to take the first step, nothing is going to happen. But you should not be able to see who is who [passive or dominant] just by looking at them.

In this quotation, sexual activity demands one active and one passive person. The interviewee states that we are all "stuck" with pictures of "how it should be" and she herself does not even mention the possibility of creating another constellation than the active-passive. Instead she aims at expanding sexual desires and pleasures by making it possible to switch roles and to be surprised by the characters' features. For her BL/Yaoi also represents another type of masculinity than the one usually portrayed in mainstream popular culture: "I just liked to see guys that were nice to each other, that they weren't macho and that kind of things. And guys worrying: 'oh, I wonder if he doesn't like me', all that kind of things, weak guys." This could maybe be interpreted in line with putting a cat-tail on a man in the fiction, i.e. as diminishing the male character, but this interviewee did not talk about it in a ridiculing way, but rather with tenderness. She expressed love towards these "weak guys". Still, the portrayal of the Asian young man as weak is in line with the findings of Hübinette and Tigervall (2009) and may thus be read as a form of eating the Other (hooks 1992; Hall 1993). In BL/Yaoi, it is the cartooned Asian man that enables Swedish young women to explore their own identifications and desires.

Sexual desire may stretch our understanding of the social world through what Johanna Oksala calls limit-experience; something that "throws us outside of ourselves" (Oksala 2004: 111). It is an understanding of experience as something beyond the subject, reaching the unpredictable and unintelligible by transgressing the limits of normality. The so-called experiential body can "multiply, distort and

overflow the meanings, definitions, and classifications attached to experiences, and in this sense it is capable of discursively undefined and unintelligible pleasures" (Oksala 2004: 112). Exploring and widening the sexual sphere, sometimes in the form of limit-experiences, can be seen as a way to resist heteronormative ideas about female sexuality and gender binarism. When our interviewees were asked why Swedish young women – who often are supposed to be quite liberated and free regarding gender and sexuality – find pleasure in BL/Yaoi, they argued that Swedish girls and young women consume, produce and love BL/Yaoi because of the possibilities it opens up regarding sexual self-development and sexual agency. The interviewed women explicitly talked about their commitment to manga as a feminist, even a queer feminist, process. Here, the sexual and political desires of our interviewees seem to interact, creating gender-bending and sexually transgressive practices. In this way pleasures, embodied as limit-experiences, are a locus for resistance. Judith Butler's words about sexuality and desire as characterised by a potential to transgress regulations and as "an improvisational possibility within a field of constraints" also point at the entanglement of sexual and political desires (Butler 2004: 15).

As argued above, the cultural product of the manga BL/Yaoi thus seems to open up the possibility of other subject positions and desires. Similar patterns were noticed by Santos Fermin who states that BL/Yaoi offers tools and spaces for Filipino women to "temporarily remove themselves from androcentric society's regimentation of their sexuality and be free to confront, explore and realise their desires in a non-threatening and distanced manner" (Santos Fermin 2013). Images of weak men, submissive men, feminine men and men engaged in sex with other men can be seen as a hyperreal ideal enabling constructions of other real worlds of love, gender bending and sexuality.[3] And, as demonstrated by the quotations, the embodied experiences related to BL/Yaoi produce certain subjectivities (gay identifications), practices (gender bending) and other materialities (like clothes). These experiences, in some sense, challenge the idea of hyperreality as a surface phenomenon. Cultural products prevail as important artefacts with performative power, creating new realities. In this way, matter, in the form of pictures, texts, comics, the internet, computer data etc., becomes part of the processes of becoming (cf. Haraway 1991; Alaimo & Hekman 2008; Barad 2008; Åsberg et al. 2012; Black 2014).

Conclusion

In this article we have analysed the cultural product manga, in the form of Boys' Love/Yaoi, and its meanings and performative power, with the help of the concepts hyperreality and materiality. We asked questions about images of Japan and

Sweden, subject positions and desires. We also aimed to elaborate the concept hyperreality.

The hyperreal world, created from interpretations of BL/Yaoi manga, has little connection with the original bodies, soil, buildings, etc. in Japan, but is rather a (re)interpretation of representations. Nevertheless, after travelling to Sweden, the manga BL/Yaoi creates other reals with material bodies and artefacts. Embodied experiences of certain subject positions and desires challenge the idea of hyperreality as a surface phenomenon. The new reality is constituted, not of Japanese bodies/matter, but of *other, unpredictable* bodies (manga followers) and material-symbolic products (comics, computers, clothes etc.). In the analysis we have showed how this emergence of other realities is permeated by cultural appropriation of Japan and the Japanese culture, people and artefacts. By the very same gesture that positions Japan as a node that is involved in the construction of the free, radical and gender-bending Swedishness, Japan is positioned as more backward and traditional, as well as exotic and interesting (Morley & Robins 1995; Hübinette & Tigervall 2009; Ito 2012; Tsai 2016). The cartooned Asian man in BL/Yaoi enables Swedish young women to explore their own identifications and desires, something which can be interpreted as a form of eating the Other (hooks 1992; Hall 1993).

While the interviewees argue that BL/Yaoi has provided a means of resistance against patriarchy and dominant notions of masculinity in Japan, in Sweden it prevails as a performative force for both the desire for another reality regarding gender and for alternative, maybe queer, sexual desires and practices. Various scholars have paid attention to the queer and transgressive use of gender and sexuality in manga, like BL/Yaoi. Christy Rebecca Sally Gibbs, among others, has emphasised how these images can challenge normative models of sexuality (Gibbs 2012). Gibbs argues that particularly within the manga genres of male/male (BL/Yaoi) and female/female (Yuri) erotica, sexual fluidity and the lack of gender boundaries play a key role. In our study the interviewees did not explicitly talk in terms of challenging gender binarism, but rather about gender bending, i.e. stretching the limits for the two gender categories and switching roles within the gender binary model. Further research about the subversive potential of different manga texts is needed, especially in relation to different contexts and the discussion about cultural appropriation.

Political and sexual desires are both reasons behind the adoption of cultural products, and the effects of interactions with cultural products. Desires related to the cultural product BL/Yaoi thus cultivate alternative subject positions, practices, communities and form new real worlds. Manga followers try to build elements or whole worlds of a different imagined reality, embodying their aspired future. The future is invoked in the present through pre-figurative politics or construc-

tive resistance (Epstein 2002; Young & Schwartz 2012). Thus, it can be seen as a struggle around temporality; it is a practice used by the manga followers and producers, who materialise the future in the present as a form of resistance, similar to a nutopia/nowtopia, a utopia played out in the present (Thörn 1997). The new reals that are produced from hyperreal signs are potential sites for resistance, in both personal and political ways.

This paper does not offer a complete picture, but opens up opportunities for further research in relation to cultural products and their performative power. One such area concerns gender. Rather often it is stated that BL/Yaoi has been developed by young women and largely has a female heterosexual audience – the majority being working-class girls (Kinsella 1998). However, later research has opposed this, showing that many boys and young men also produce and read BL/Yaoi (Levi et al. 2010; Nagaike 2015). In this article, we have focused on young women's engagement with BL/Yaoi, but look forward to undertaking research that also involves young men and their engagement in BL/Yaoi. Further, when emphasising the agency of matter and artefacts, it is important not to lose sight of the subjects behind the cultural products, who interact, create and read the material artefacts in the process of meaning-making. The agency of an artefact differs from the agency of a human subject, primarily by its limited ability to reflect upon social relations and prevailing discourses (cf. Black 2014: 37). Even though an image or a computer has agency and shapes our bodily movements, our ways of interacting and thereby our very existence, it cannot act consciously. The boundary between the human body and other matter is, however, not a clear one. Daniel Black argues that there is no natural original body isolated from the environment, but that we are always shaped by objects around us. He sees the differing potentials of various kinds of artefacts as gathered into a body schema, where perception and experience are central to the relationship between the human being and the artefacts (Black 2014). This calls for further research of the relationship between different actors. Further research is also needed in relation to the concept hyperreality. We still need to know more about when and how this concept becomes a relevant point of departure for analysis of cultural products.

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Notes

[1] Cosplay, compounded of the words costume and play, is a Japanese form of performance or masquerade where you dress up as a specific figure or an idea. Crossplay is when you perform the 'opposite' sex (Levi 2010; Okabe 2012; Tsai 2016).

[2] See Sara Ahmed's discussion of this; Ahmed 2008.

[3] BL/Yaoi also portray men as hypermasculine, violent and dominant – even as rapists. This is not discussed in this article.

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