Course Title
Debating Otaku in Contemporary Japan: A Labelling Approach

Instructor's affiliation, department, job title and name
Björn-Ole KAMM, Program Specific Senior Lecturer
Center for the Promotion of Interdisciplinary Education and Research (CPIER)

Academic semester that the course is offered
Spring 2017

Outline and purpose of the course
With the spread of manga and anime around the world, many have adopted the Japanese term ‘otaku’ to identify fans of such media. The connection to manga and anime may seem straightforward, but, when taken for granted, often serves to obscure the debates within and around media fandom in Japan. This course questions the naturalization and trivialization of ‘otaku’ by examining the historical contingency of the term to identify and contain problematic youth, consumers and fan cultures in Japan. It explores key moments in the evolving discourse of ‘otaku’ in Japan. Rather than presenting a smooth, triumphant narrative of the transition of a subculture to the mainstream, the course repositions ‘otaku’ in specific historical, social and economic contexts, providing new insights into the significance of the ‘otaku’ phenomenon in Japan and the world and offering a new perspective in form of theories of labelling.

Course goals
By going back to original Japanese documents and translated key contributions by Japanese scholars and seeking sustained analysis of these documents and scholars, the course provides students with alternative histories of and approaches to ‘otaku’. Regarding contemporary Japan and the history of Japanese fan and consumer cultures, this course will be a foundation for understanding how ‘otaku’, at different places and times and to different people, is meaningful. As a new perspective for ‘otaku studies,’ students will learn the theoretical foundations and methodological application of a modified labelling approach.

Course schedule and contents
The course will be offered in accordance with the following general structure. A detailed plan for each class will be determined depending on the number of and the feedback from the participants, and will be announced in class.

(1) Introduction [2 weeks]
After questioning students on their understanding of ‘otaku,’ they will learn about past and present approaches to the research of ‘otaku.’ Students will further be provided with guidelines for class preparation and exercises.

(2) Section 1: The 1980s [3 weeks]
The first section deals with the origin stories of the ‘otaku,’ such as an anxiety about failed men, a column in the niche magazine Manga Burikko, and the Miyazaki Incident of 1989.

(3) Section 2: The 1990s [2 weeks]
Focusing on subjectivity and fantasy, this section centres on the tensions in Otaku no Video and the publications by the ‘otaku-king,’ Okada Toshio, who sought to remedy a negative ‘otaku’ image.
(4) Section 3: The 2000s [4 weeks]
The new millennium is often framed as the mainstreaming of ‘otaku,’ through, for example, the TV drama Densha Otoko, or Akihabara as a new place-brand. In this decade, the ‘otaku’ are at same time declared dead, however.

(5) Section 4: The Future [2 weeks]
The last section offers new approaches to the study of ‘otaku’, such as labelling, and focuses on the debate about the possibilities for ‘otaku studies.’

(6) Review and Feedback [2 weeks]

Prerequisites
3rd year and above.

Evaluation
Readings and presentation (40%), essays and final report (40%), participation (20%).

Studies to be done outside of class
The participants are expected to attend every class and spend a certain amount of time outside of this class for this course. Regular homework (readings, comprehension essays) as well as in-class presentations and discussions will play an important role in this course, so preparation and review out of the class requires at least about an hour.

Textbooks

Further readings
The course materials as well as lecture slides will be made available via the course webpage. https://www.cats.bun.kyoto-u.ac.jp/ (see KULASIS for details and the enrolment key)

Others
Consultation (office hours) by appointment. The course webpage will be available to download the course material. Please contact Björn-Ole Kamm <kamm@cats.bun.kyoto-u.ac.jp> for any questions regarding this course syllabus.

Picture1: Miyazaki Tsutomu’s room, depicted in SPA!, 1989.

About the instructor
Björn-Ole KAMM
Ph.D. in Japanese Studies, Heidelberg University
M.A. in Japanese Studies and Communication & Media Studies, Leipzig University
Areas of Specialization: Practice theory, transculturality, uses and gratifications of Japanese popular media, role-playing theory and practice.