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The *Made in Abyss* Controversy: Transnational Participatory Cultures as Cultural Interpreters of Japanese Texts

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Participatory cultures as a concept and cultural reality in Russia

It is very common for manga/anime studies and fan studies to use the words "fan" or "otaku" when describing readers' or viewers' activities outside Japan. "Otaku" signals strong involvement in manga and/or anime fan communities by people who are usually also quite interested in Japan itself, especially in cultural activities and lifestyles of Japanese youth. It has also been noticed many times (for example, Hills 2002, Ito et al. 2012), that outside Japan "otaku" is usually employed without negative connotations, at least by fan communities themselves. In Russia, as well as in the US and UK, they use the term mostly to highlight their positive transcultural identification with Japanese fan practices.[1]

"Fans," together with fan communities, fan practices, and fan cultures, are even more widespread. Nowadays it circulates mostly as a general name for any kind of passionate user, reader and viewer within the realm of popular culture or elsewhere (see fans of theater, baroque music, figure skating, etc.). Fan studies, a thriving field of research, puts a lot of effort into differentiating our understanding of fans. Researchers insist that we should study not only fan communities but also individual, less visible and less online-active fans.[2] One of the most influential fan studies scholars, Matt Hills, re-frames the whole situation suggesting that we upgrade our research on fan communities and cultures to the more

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[1] For the otaku discourse in Japan see Galbraith et al. (2015).

[2] Sandvoss and Kearns (2014) propose the notion of "ordinary fandom."

timely notion of "fan worlds" (Hills, 2017a).

In my research on manga reception in Russia I don't mind referring to fan worlds, transcultural fandom[3] and even otaku (if my informants apply this notion to themselves), but I still find the concept of "participatory cultures" very useful, especially when it comes to the distribution and reception of manga and anime outside Japan and beyond the English-speaking world. Media scholar Henry Jenkins first introduced this concept to the field in his groundbreaking book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992). He has also been developing it over the years,[4] adjusting it to the new Internet realities and clarifying its meaning in a world where "participation" is often manipulated and appropriated by market or political forces. Today, Jenkins sees participatory culture[5] as a set of ideas and practices closely connected to fandoms, geek cultures, and subcultural identities, but manifesting itself anywhere; on the Internet and beyond. Participatory culture develops

> "in opposition to the dominant structures of institutionalized power. In the 1980s, it was about fans resisting and appropriating forms of commercial media. Today, it is about people finding voice, agency, and collective intelligence within the corporate-maintained structures of Web 2.0 platforms" (Jenkins, Ito and boyd, 2016, 184).

Jenkins highlights the communal character of activities within the realm of participatory culture: "People participate through and within communities: participatory culture requires us to move beyond a focus on individualized personal expression" (Jenkins, Ito and boyd, 2016, 181). Here, the reception and creation of knowledge, practices and texts happens within interpretive communities, be it fandoms, activist groups or street art admirers. Today, participatory cultures exceed fandoms: even when they are based on fandoms and fan activities (which is not always the case), they usually create many publicly accessible spaces where they share knowledge, encourage productivity and discussions, defend or question values, and do not shy away from problematic issues, as I am going to

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[3] See Chin and Morimoto (2013); Annett (2014); Morimoto (2018).

[4] See Jenkins (2008); Couldry and Jenkins (2014); Jenkins, Shresthova et al. (2016); Jenkins, Ito and boyd (2016).

[5] To him it is a general concept, analogous to mass culture and folk culture. I prefer the plural form "participatory cultures," in order to underline the multiplicity and transcultural diversity of communities and practices of this type of cultural communication.

demonstrate below.

Many things have also been said about the relations between participatory cultures and commercial practices. In his early work, Jenkins prioritized affective practices of free labor and gift sharing. Recently, Hills and others, have focused on how fandom gift economy turns into other forms of cultural production while studying transnational activities of anime/manga fans in the context of contemporary neoliberal economies. He shows how small fan-produced distribution companies of anime fansubbers and other initiatives based on fan knowledge, subcultural capital, and principles of participation, create not only new spaces between cultures, but also new liminal microeconomic spaces where informal and formal activities intersect (Hills, 2017b) This type of participatory economy plays an especially important role in the development of the transcultural fields of manga and anime-related knowledge in countries such as Russia, where the more traditional distribution and reception of these media face significant barriers.

Participatory cultures and fan communities around the world have helped manga to become a medium acknowledged in countries it had previously been absent from. In Russia, participatory cultures still remain nearly the sole driving force behind the introduction of manga to local readers. Russia is not part of the official industries which publish Japanese manga in English translation. The general Russian reader does not turn to English-language editions anyway. But the official Russian manga market which rests on licenses from Japan is still pocket-sized: it consists of about six comparatively small publishing houses, most of which fall perfectly well into Hills' category of fan-generated liminal economies. Among such "fan-produced" publishing houses there is, for example, Istari Comics which even has its own secret "focus group" of devoted manga readers (5400 participants) on the Russian social network Vkontakte. This group votes several times a year in special polls for the titles it is ready to buy, thus helping the publishers to choose promising manga, while bringing into action a "direct fandom democracy," as Evgeniy Kolchugin, one of the owners of Istary Comics, told me in 2017.[6] Together with Alt Graph, Asbuka, Comics Factory and a couple of other publishing houses, they work passionately not only on legal manga translations,

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[6] Despite growing literally "from below," over the course of ten years, Istari Comics has gained a proper reputation among Japanese manga publishers. They publish such successful manga as *A Silent Voice*, *Spice and Wolf*, *Foreign Girl*, *Sword Art Online*, and *Mushishi*.

but on changing the whole climate surrounding manga in Russia.

This, however, is not easy at all. There is a significant tension between traditional "official" cultural institutions that have authority and power, and younger, mostly online-based participatory cultures in Russia. There is also a tension between the "new" culture of comics and the "old" exclusively literature-oriented culture supported by the educational system and "highbrow" public opinion represented in the press. This makes the reading of manga a kind of a battlefield of generations, tastes, hierarchies, and cultural practices. The situation changes slowly, as younger generations grow, but still, Russian people who are older than 30-35 years do not read anything in the form of comics, and they are not happy when their children do. Russian readers are always discouraged by the official cultural institutions from reading comics and manga. Nevertheless, the interest in manga grows. This interest is gradually spreading, especially among Russian school children. So, manga fans, or otaku, are far from being the only people involved in the reading of manga in Russia in 2018.

At the same time, fan communities are the ones who establish transnational and transcultural communication around manga, and who introduce Russian readers to practices of reading, discussing and appreciating manga online. Russian manga fans often read in English, and sometimes they also read in Japanese, and their interest in manga nearly always pushes them in the direction of learning more languages, communicating globally with other fans, searching for new materials across languages and borders, etc. For years, scanlations (unofficial manga translations by groups of fans) and other translations of manga-related materials have become in many ways the only opportunity for Russian readers to make an acquaintance with the diversity of manga titles and the specificity of the Japanese manga industry (fig. 1).
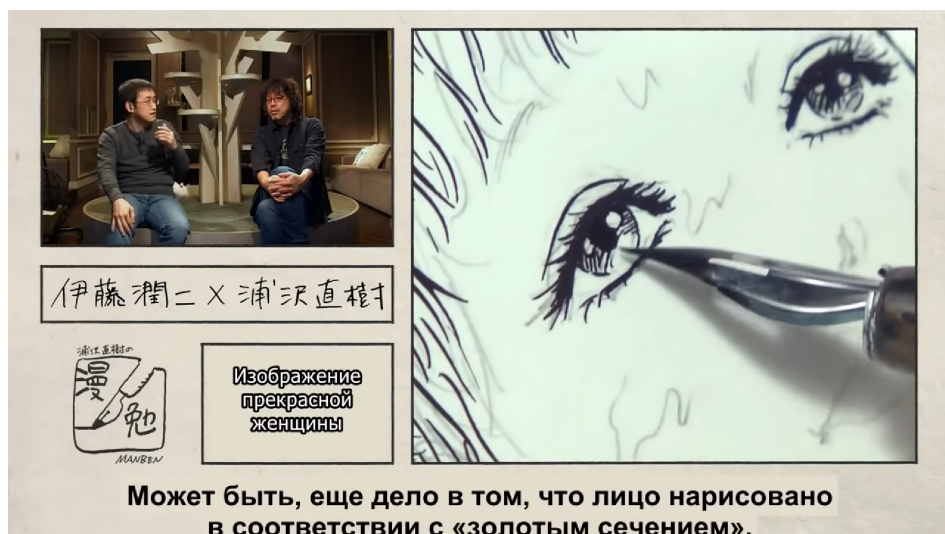
Figure 1: A frame from a pirated Russian translation of *Urasawa Naoki no Manben* (Naoki Urasawa's Manga Exertions), a Japanese TV documentary series about famous creators of manga. Despite its quality and cultural significance, this series has never been licensed for Russian TV.

In such countries as Russia, participatory cultures are not recognized as cultural agents; they have the lowest cultural capital in the eyes of the general public, and many of their actions are illegal from the point of view of copyright law. But they have become powerful cultural agents for the manga medium and great helpers for those who are interested in it. As my preliminary research in the field demonstrates, contemporary Russian manga readers come across manga in many different ways; be it classmates sharing manga at school, or somebody being curious about an unusual book on the shelf in a bookshop, or some specific titles being mentioned online. But when they need more knowledge about manga, or advice about reading, or more manga texts, and if they want to discuss something, or ask something about manga – they always go into participatory communities and get information from more experienced participants.

It is obvious that participatory cultures and fan communities are better at some things than others. Their activities are not only supported wholeheartedly but today also critically discussed by researchers from fan studies and other relevant areas of academic discourse. Their affectionate practices generate new strategies of reading (see Samutina, 2017), in some contexts liberating and refreshing, and in other contexts substituting critical thinking with adoration. Cherished-fan effects also produce flame

wars. Sometimes, overheated communication verges on the brink of what fandoms themselves in the aftermath indicate as being "toxic" (see Proctor and Kies, 2018; Spacey, 2018). Male-dominated superhero comics cultures stigmatize fellow women collectors and readers (see Orme, 2016), and even in such countries as Russia, equally new to both comics and manga, the latter is already "feminized" and the former is "masculinized" within fan cultures. Fandoms are generally nonchalant about their own history and bad at archiving, even though the situation changes a bit for fan fiction with the creation of such independent participatory archiving platforms as AO3 (see Lothian, 2013). They are not always happy to pay for the things that once were illegal and free, although the ethics and rhetoric of "rewarding the Japanese manga industry" and "financially supporting favorite manga authors" is very strong, even among Russian manga fans used to scanlations.

But still, looking through the lens of the Russian example, I would like to stress the productive transformative potential of participatory cultures as cultural agents, their ability to cross national and cultural borders[7] on their own terms and to influence the development of global phenomena, such as Japanese manga's transcultural flows, within local contexts, even when national cultural industries, including the mass market, are not capable for some reasons to fulfil this task properly. Manga as a medium that exists nowadays at the "cultural crossroads" (Berndt and Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2013) of the whole world has not bypassed Russia, no matter what cultural elites say, no matter what censorship says, and no matter what the economic, legal and even political restrictions are (fig. 2).

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[7] In the case of Russia, participatory cultures cross also many less visible inner borders between urban centers and periphery. Sometimes reading manga online for free or discovering it online via participatory communities is the only choice for young people from small towns that lack decent bookshops and normal mail connections.
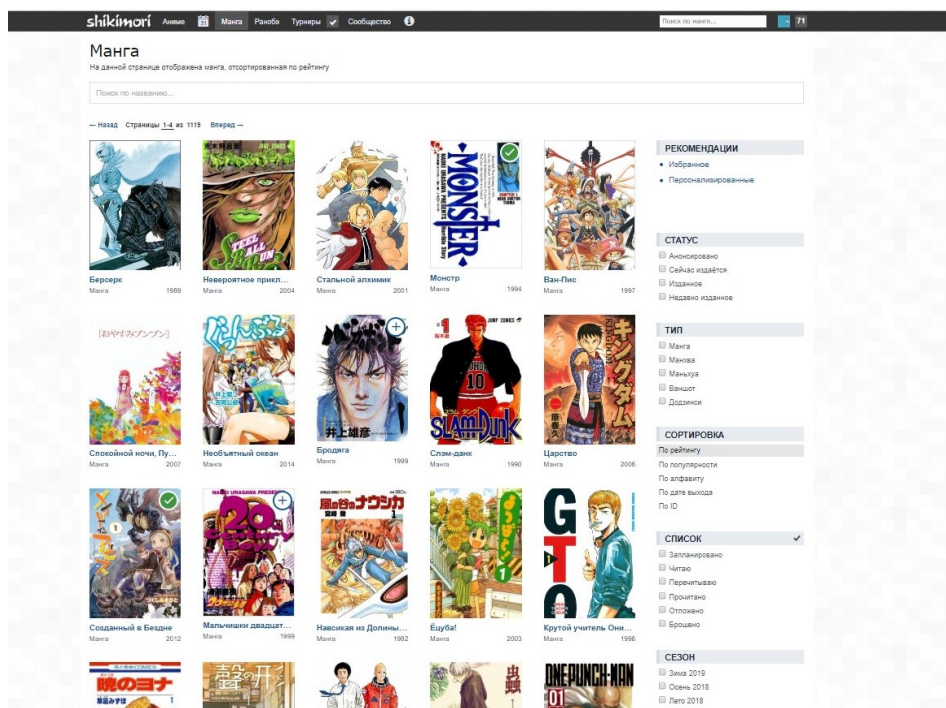
Figure 2: Shikimori.org (446 700 registered users in November 2018) is a Russian anime and manga fan-produced encyclopedia and a site for communication about anything manga- and anime-related, analogous to MyAnimeList.net. Manga is sorted by ranking at this site and the results are very similar to those by the English-speaking MAL community.

The example of manga distribution and reception in Russia clearly indicates how many important things participatory cultures actually do. Apart from translations and scanlations of all sorts and kinds, participatory cultures create:

> their own independent uncensored spaces and places for discussion of everything manga-related, from general knowledge to problematic issues; general readers or newbies can visit these places acquiring texts and knowledge;

> different arguments and opinions together with rules of communication among different types of participants;
> rules of interpretation;

> educational opportunities with and through manga as a medium;

their own temporalities that correspond to media time (for example, the time of new releases) but are still more broad and versatile and allow people to enter manga worlds at their own pace;

awareness of cultural differences and transcultural fields of reference.

This article and its main example are concerned with the ability of participatory cultures to create places and discourses that; (1) sometimes are quite oppositional to concurrent developments in their local culture, such as isolationism or the tightening of censorship, and; (2) are knowledgeable, sensitive and interpretational when it comes to "cultural crossroads," that is, to meanings emerging from different contexts. Often formed around popular pleasures and entertainment, participatory cultures are frequently dismissed as insignificant and "lightweight" by "highbrow" local discourses, especially when, like in the Russian case, they are connected to media of a "lower" status (manga/anime versus literature). But when we look at their discourses and practices, we discover that they are often less conservative than the cultural layers that surround them, and of course they are significant. Besides many other things, they are able to create spaces for problematic questions their local cultures are not ready to face open-mindedly. I suggest seeing participatory cultures as valuable allies to intellectuals and academics when we face problems that traditional authorities and more conservative cultural discourses avoid discussing, let alone solving.

"Is Made in Abyss really that disgusting?" Participatory cultures discuss difficult questions

In recent years, with the growing spread of manga and anime cultures among Western audiences, manga readers and anime viewers in countries outside Japan, as well as publishing houses and even researchers, face restrictions, censorship and moral panic concerning Japan-originated materials marked as "disturbing." This problem has been intensively discussed during recent years by a number of academics working professionally with the transcultural reception of some types of Japanese manga, particularly in English-speaking countries. Due to the professional courage of manga and Japanese popular culture researcher Patrick Galbraith (Galbraith, 2011; 2017) together with the truthfulness and straightforwardness of his colleague, sociologist Mark McLelland, and others (McLelland 2017), the extent of the problem has become visible to many

researchers who work with manga-related materials. At issue are several types of materials, but above all, the erotic ones such as *lolicon* manga; with a playful erotization of cute girls in fictional narratives.[8] Although in Russia the most notorious case of moral panic happened in 2012, not in relation to lolicon[9] but *Death Note*, a famous detective fantasy manga; it was connected to the suicide of a schoolgirl in Novosibirsk which her devastated parents believed it was caused by. The case, well-known among Russian manga enthusiasts as "The Big Manga Drop," led to the publishing house Eksmo withdrawing this manga from bookshops and at the same time dropping all their manga licenses altogether, including *Naruto* and *One Piece*. Legally the case didn't lead to any consequences, and *Death Note* was successfully reissued in Russia in 2017-2018 by Asbuka publishing house. But many stereotypes about manga and anime continue to circulate in the Russian press and especially among school teachers and parents.

As both McLelland and Galbraith have rightfully stressed, in the contemporary social climate we are witnessing a specific combination of stereotypes, rooted in what Foucault described as discourses of fear and security. First, there are a bunch of journalistic clichés about Japan as a sexually liberal country, "the empire of pornography," and even more, "child pornography." Second, there is a general sense of anxiety and insecurity that encourages the public to project all uncertainties and fears into demonic images of hidden paedophiles and child pornographers. This combination has created an atmosphere of suppression and ulterior cen-sorship in several manga- and anime-related fields. Even academic free-dom and research neutrality do not help anymore, or do not help as much as they could if we had been talking instead about a book on the history of pornography in the West (there are many of them), or an exhibition on prostitution in France during the second half of the 19th century.[10] The combination of fear and ignorance in public discourses sur-rounding "erotic manga" and "images of sexualized children" leads to the

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[8] The indirect, complicated symbolic character of this practice is well-researched in Japan itself and in some works of non-Japanese authors as well. See, for example, Kinsella (2006); Galbraith (2011).

[9] "Virtual child pornography" that is easily associated with some manga and anime genres is forbidden by Russian law. But definitions of what can be considered as such are vague, and criminal cases that involve pornography do not (yet) revolve around manga.

[10] *Splendor and Misery: Pictures of Prostitution, 1850 -1910*, exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, 2015-2016.

suppression of all subject-related materials and the absence of a qualified debate of these issues outside Japan, although such public debate could become a proper tool for fighting fear and ignorance, for making the history of manga and the contexts of reception of different images visible in order to distinguish between realms of imagination and real crimes.

While the moral panic around "virtual child pornography" closes many spaces where this debate could potentially take place, participatory cultures remain, in a way, a rare space resistant to censorship and open to different types of controversial materials and opinions. Forming the independent "digital underground," participatory cultures fight for their agency, for their right to know things and to judge them by themselves. Controversial subjects such as, for example, certain slash narratives and tropes,[11] legal issues, and ethics of anonymous online communication, have always been at the centre of participatory cultures' activities. They have always created their own rules through discussions and, quite often, conflicts. So, it is not surprising that today participatory cultures connected to manga and anime stand their ground not only in the discussions of "controversial subjects" but also as a global platform for these discussions as such.

I am going to demonstrate this very briefly in one recent example of a manga with the ambiguous status of a "controversial object from Japan." *Made in Abyss* is an ongoing fantasy manga series by Akihito Tsukushi that has been digitally published in *Web Comic Gamma* magazine[12] since 2012; 7 book volumes in Japanese and 4 translated volumes in English are available up to this moment. In Russia, this manga has not been officially published yet. But it has been carefully scanlated and has become quite well-known among online manga readers: it is ranked 11 of all manga on shikimori.org. *Made in Abyss* has also been adapted into an anime by Kinema Citrus studio. The adaptation was very successful worldwide and even got a "Best anime" award on Crunchyroll.com in 2017. Both manga and anime have an enthusiastic international audience, but it was the anime adaptation's undeniable quality that shifted Tsukushi's online manga from a niche following into the centre of international attention, unwillingly contributing to "the controversy."

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[11] For one of the most consistent arguments for the symbolic meanings of slash as a fictional narrative see Gwenllian-Jones (2002). I discuss specific examples of fan fiction readers' clashes over frequent slash tropes, such as, for instance, "forced marriage", in Samutina (2013).

[12] http://mangalifewin.takeshobo.co.jp/gamma/

If we google *Made in Abyss* and "controversy" together, we'll see a flow of results with characteristic phrases: "Is *Made in Abyss* really that disgusting?", "Why I love *Made in Abyss* but can't recommend it to most people," "*Made in Abyss*: How it makes you feel uncomfortable," etc. *Made in Abyss* is widely discussed on many different Internet platforms. I have collected hundreds of comments in discussions about *Made in Abyss* in Russian and English. This collection includes elaborated reviews and lengthy person-to-person conversations, as well as short comments of support or emotional reactions. *Made in Abyss* is not only appreciated by its readers for the original worldbuilding, unique character design and mesmerizingly detailed drawings by Tsukushi. It is also widely discussed in the context of the "lolicon question," "disturbing body horror" and contemporary reading and viewing strategies, such as, for example, the discourse of "fan service"[13] in manga and anime texts.

Two main reasons for this specific twist of international reception are provided by the text itself. First, in his manga, Tsukushi skillfully uses the contrast between childish *chibi* style[14] of depicting the main characters, Riko, Reg and Nanachi, and the cruelty of the extraneous world called Abyss which the characters explore. The mysterious nature of the Abyss is manifested in numerous dangers that threaten or actually attack the young characters physically. Judging from the comments, the cruelty of what is done to children's bodies in *Made in Abyss* far exceeds the expectation of an average contemporary reader or viewer, even if she/he is familiar with different manga genres. Second, from time to time the author uses narrative and visual elements that reference the lolicon tradition, such as the leading character's half-nudity and playful awkwardness of erotic references or situations with adolescent participants (in the anime these elements have been somewhat downplayed). Some of these elements simply indicate clumsy young love, but others remind experienced manga readers of lolicon and "fan service."

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[13] When some elements of manga or anime give viewers the impression that they are intentionally added to please fans, these elements become marked as "fan service" in fan discourse. "Fan service" mostly refers to erotic imagery ("panty shot," a brief glimpse of a woman's underwear, is the most renowned example), or violent fight scenes.

[14] *Chibi* is the Japanese, but also internationally accepted term for a drawing of manga and anime characters in super-deformed manner, as small cute beings with big heads and eyes. This style instantaneously connotes innocuous content directed at children, a combination of cuteness and humor.

While it is not possible to analyze these discussions in details here, I would like to stress some common traits. First, participatory cultures never censor the sources: even when some readers are genuinely discontent with a text, it remains available on all possible platforms as long as nobody more powerful interferes. Second, in discussions on sensitive topics, all imaginable positions are usually presented and are developed in threads of comments. In the case of the *Made in Abyss* controversy the range of positions is really wide: from "it is obvious: this mangaka is a paedophile" to detailed discussions of the reception of lolicon as a fictional frame by different groups of readers.

A good example of the wide range of presented opinions can be found in the comment section of the YouTube video by a user with the characteristic name Explanation Point.[15] Explanation Point states in the description of his video that "anime has a serious problem with child sexualization, and that fact has caused many people to throw undeserved criticism at *Made in Abyss*." Then he provides a comparative analysis of two concurrently aired anime series, *Made in Abyss* and *Eromanga Sensei* (based on light novels by Tsukasa Fushimi). He analyzes the functions of nudity, highlighting the naturalness of sexual curiosity by the children presented in *Made in Abyss*; he compares the design of the characters; he scrutinizes camera angles and even the construction of the viewer's gaze in relation to the diegetic elements – all in favor of *Made in Abyss* (fig. 3).

Figure 3. A frame from the YouTube video *Made in Abyss, Eromanga Sensei, and the Biggest Problem in Anime*, with an analysis of different viewer positions.

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[15] *Made in Abyss, Eromanga Sensei, and the Biggest Problem in Anime*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z58thY3Lf1E [last accessed November 18, 2018].

He finds narrative reasons for the disturbing elements and happily concludes that nothing is wrong with *Made in Abyss*, as distinct from *Eromanga Sensei* which epitomizes fan service and lolicon imagery.

In more than 4000 comments under this video, some people simply praise the logic and arguments of Explanation Point. But others attack his position from different perspectives, actively discussing the nuances of the texts in question. For example, Anime Ammy develops the argument that although she/he does not personally like lolicon anime, she/he at the same time cannot agree "with the idea that someone who does enjoy seeing underage cartoon characters naked is a paedophile." She/he defends *Eromanga Sensei* and similar shows as works of fiction important for some viewers, and stands for the right of these viewers to exercise their imagination. What is especially notable is that Explanation Point lifts this comment to the top of the discussion, adding that "I just always make it a point to pin a well-spoken and reasonable comment that disagrees with me." By doing so, he encourages the discussion even more. In international communities all over the world, people discuss problematic questions and learn to listen to each other, at least to some degree.

In these voluminous discussions, participatory online communities demonstrate their cultural capital and interpretive abilities. In the case of *Made in Abyss*, the range of texts applied for comparisons begins with manga and anime, from *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* to *Berserk* and *Blame*, and it ends with more general examples, such as *The Grimm's Fairy Tales*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Lovecraft's stories and *Stalker* (the book by the Strugatsky brothers as well as the film by Andrey Tarkovsky, both very well-known in Russia and therefore particularly popular among Russian reviewers). The excessive violence of *Made in Abyss* is often culturally contextualized and explained by these comparisons as an artistic device for the delivery of the deep philosophical meaning of the manga. Another common field of reference involves Japanese culture, both as contemporary reality and artistic tradition. Users share their experiences in Japan, their knowledge of Japanese everyday culture and Japanese legislation with each other. They boast of their knowledge of the manga industry, its genres and styles, its highs and lows.

But they also bring to the table their own presuppositions about many problematic questions, such as the regulation of sexual content in different countries. In participatory communities it is not possible to get away with journalistic stereotypes of Japan; sooner or later someone will come after you with an unmasking comment. It is neither possible to remain isolated and closed-minded if manga interests you – on the inter-

national platforms of transcultural participatory communities you will talk to the whole world via Japan, and you will learn something about yourself. It is quite indicative, for example, in Russian fan discussions of *Made in Abyss* how the point of debates often shifts from the normativity of lolicon and "fan service" to censorship. Thus, I consider the *Made in Abyss* controversy to be a perfect example of the intense and sophisticated transcultural dialogue that develops in places provided by participatory cultures; active and fruitful cultural agents that not only interpret texts but influence people's knowledge and thinking.

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