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The Vapors, “Turning Japanese” (1980)

Abigail Gardner

Five white men dressed in Panda suits rampage around Tokyo’s Shibuya district at night time. They skateboard down streets, crash into bins, tear through shops. It’s *Jackass— The Movie* (2002). As they rip through central Tokyo, “Turning Japanese” by the British band The Vapors soundtracks their antics. Released in 1980 on United Artists, it reached Number 3 in the UK charts, 36 in the US, and 1 in Australia. “Vapors” is the American spelling of “vapours”; the band are not from the United States. And pandas are not Japanese.

The song perpetuates what Anthony Sheppard has termed “extreme exoticism,”¹ that is, where sonic stereotypes act as a quick indication of “Otherness.” In the early 1980s, the Vapors were one of a number of UK new wave, punk and pop bands flirting with this form of exoticism, and this chapter places their one hit into a broader popular cultural imaginary. For the past thirty-eight years, The Vapors’ version of “Japanese-ness” that appears in the song and its surrounding metatext has dominated their marketing and remains prevalent in their social media. Looking at these posts and images along with the original video and artwork for the single, I consider the song’s “exotic” signature and argue that “Turning Japanese” mines a seam of audiovisual “extreme exoticism” that fetishizes the very idea of “Japan” while confusing it and denying it any agency. In short, “Turning Japanese” is an Orientalist track.

The Vapors are from Guildford, Surrey, in the UK. Formed in 1978, they were spotted by The Jam’s bass player, Bruce Foxton, who offered them a support slot on the 1979 “Setting Suns” tour and went on to jointly manage them with John Weller. With just the change of one vowel, the band were due to go out on a fortieth-year anniversary revival of that tour, now titled “Setting Sons.” The original line-up was Dave Fenton (vocals and Rhythm guitar), Edward Bazalgette (lead guitar), Howard Smith (Drums), and Steve Smith (bass). They had started off with a “u” in their name but dropped it to appeal to the American market. They released two albums, *New Clear Days* (1980) and then *Magnets* (1981), following which they disbanded. Fenton pursued a legal career, Bazalgette went into television (and has produced episodes of the British series *Dr Who* in 2015 and 2016, and *The Last Kingdom* in 2019), Howard Smith ran a record shop in Guildford, and Steve Smith carried on playing in bands. After an informal get-together in 2016, the band reformed with a different drummer and have since released a new album called *Together* (2020). Their recent music, the single “Wonderland” from the album, has got to Number 1 in United DJs Top 30 charts, a “global station with world-class DJs” and the “That Was Then, This is Now” Heritage Charts and online television show.²

They have an active Facebook site with just over 6,000 followers, which hosts “behind the scenes” YouTube links about life on the road, life under the Covid lockdown, and news about current releases and chart successes. Commemoration practices are in evidence too on their own official website, with references to the fortieth-year anniversary of their hit single and tour:

40 years ago, this week, in mid-August 1980, the band headed to the Antipodes to play a 13 gig tour of Australia. They were their first shows outside the UK and followed on from the chart success of Turning Japanese in the territory. With a packed itinerary, the band also appeared on various TV shows which helped to propel TJ to number 1 in. . . . They were even presented with gold discs on the trip! With input from the band & crew, we will be commemorating the trip, and their subsequent trip to another Vapor-hungry territory, the USA, with an in-depth article soon.³

It is this 1980 single whose aesthetic continues to dominate the site and much of their contemporary marketing material. The red-and-white profile image for the Facebook site is the band’s name against a Japanese setting sun/fan logo, with “Turning Japanese” written on top of the sun. This logo and the single anchor the page, act as an identifier, an assurance if you like.

When asked on email via a contact at the official Facebook site why he chose to sing about “Turning Japanese,” Fenton replied that he was looking for a rhyme: “It could have been Portuguese or Lebanese or anything that fitted with that phrase, it’s nothing to do with the Japanese. It’s actually a love song about someone who had lost their girlfriend and was going crazy over it.”⁴ Even though it might have had “nothing to do” with Japan, the song and its role as a career-defining “wonder” owe much to the deployment of Japan as a cipher for exoticism. The song tells of lost (or spurned) love. Fenton sings of having only a picture of his lover left and that not seeing her means he is “Turning Japanese.” Lyrics about wanting doctors to take photos of her insides so he can look at her “from inside” suggest obsession. He can’t have her and so he feels alone and lives in a world with no sex or drugs or fun or wine. No one understands him. Adrift in a world he is alienated and in mourning.

Underpinning the title and its repeated chorus, “Turning Japanese” starts with an “Oriental (or ‘Asian’) Riff” of nine notes, four on the G, two on the F, two a third down on D, and back to the F. Sheppard’s work on the relationship between Japanese music and the American imagination offers a rich source of information on the history and function of this motif, a “melodic cliché” consisting of a standard rhythmic pattern with parallel fourth harmony.⁵ He notes that it is a “fool’s errand” to find its origin, yet traces out a series of compositions from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century that use it. Crucial to his argument is that the motif makes sense as part of a broader cultural mapping of the “exotic,”

and this recognizable musical motif acted as a sonic shorthand to signify the “exotic” “Far East” or Asia. He writes how

Musical exoticism has most often been achieved through the reuse of sonic stereotypes that work efficiently to signify otherness to the audience. Musical details such as parallel fourths or pentatonicism do not function in isolation in exoticism but instead are dependent on the immediate context and on previous representational usage.⁶

The sonic stereotype we hear in “Turning Japanese,” twice at the beginning before the vocals come in, and then twice to introduce the second and third verses, works to signify this otherness that Shepherd refers to. The parallel fourths are echoed in the lead guitar later in the song and further stereotypes that herald “the Far East,” such as gong-like chimes, feature in the latter half of the song. And as Shepherd remarks, this signifier only makes sense to an audience through context and use. Surfacing in American popular song and musicals from 1880 onward, the riff was used in songs about geisha, Tokyo, mulberries, and Chinatown. From early on in its history, Japan and China were conflated within this riff.⁷ In his work on nineteenth-century British music and Orientalism, Scott argues that “Musical Orientalism has never been overly concerned with establishing distinctions between Eastern cultures and that interchangeability of exotic signifiers proved to be commonplace rather than astonishing.”⁸ The ability to continue to blur distinctions relies on a lack of knowledge of differences and the continuing existence within a cultural landscape of “Oriental” and “Asian” as markers of unspecified Otherness.

Mid-twentieth-century examples of this interchangeable use of the exotic sonic signature can be found in Helmut Zacharid’s “Tokyo Melody,” penned for the 1964 Olympics, and Bobby Goldsboro’s “Me Japanese Boy” (Bert Bacharach and Hal David, 1964), which both include short musical phrases based on the Oriental riff, as does Carl Douglas’s “Kung Fu Fighting” (1974), all used to herald an idea of “The Orient.” The “Orient” is, of course, somewhere that only exists from the point of view of “the West,” based on a Western consciousness which includes a “battery of desires, repressions, investments and projections.”⁹

The Orient is contingent, contextual, and historical, as well as a “familiar trope in the Western imagination.”¹⁰ It is a colonial concoction, housing a diverse range of countries, cultures, and histories. It is both present and absent. The Orient for Said was both real, “adjacent to Europe,” “an integral part of European material civilization and culture,” and “imaginative.”¹¹ The Orient was a place that made sense in relation to where “the Occident” might be and what colonial relationships were at stake between them. Minear notes that where Europe’s Orient was the Middle East, America’s was the Far East.¹² Its place was in opposition to the known, part of a colonial matrix.

I should know how persuasive it is as a place. In 1986, largely on the back of having watched David Bowie and Ryuichi Sakamoto’s performances in *Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence* (dir. Oshima, 1983), I took a degree in “Oriental Studies” and then went to an institution of “African and Oriental Studies.” This information doesn’t tell you that I studied Japanese, because Japan is erased within the term “Orient.” Under that umbrella term, you could study Chinese, Japanese, and Arabic. The defining line was everywhere east of Istanbul. And this is clearly in line with Said’s views on Orientalism. In his piece on Japanese cinema, Gary Needham refers to this control whereby Orientalism involved

the exercise of power operating through a body of knowledge (everyday, common sense and academic) that results to the legitimacy of “the West” to govern, speak for and to shape the meaning of the “Orient”. The Orient refers both to a geographical entity, most often Asia, and an imaginary construction, which has historically enabled the justification of colonial conquest and imperial mentalities to foster imagined spaces, representations and identities of the other.¹³

Turning Japanese is one of those “imagined spaces” and its emergence was part of a broader consumption of Japan.

Post-Punk Orientalism

With Japan’s newly prominent economic presence came cultural visibility. This was in part due to the expansion of a Japanese domestic film and anime industry, whereby Studio Ghibli was set up in 1985 and films such as *Akira* (1988) were released into UK and US cinemas, along with films such as *Ran* (dir. Kurosawa, 1985) and *The Ballad of Narayama* (dir. Imamura, 1983). As in 1858, when Japan emerged from a 200-year self-imposed period of isolation known as “Sakkoku,” this wave of Japanese cultural artifacts appearing in the UK might be considered as a more recent instance of the French 19th *Japonisme*, whereby Japanese motifs, styles, and trends appeared in European art works and Japanese culture was fashionably collectible.

This collectability was apparent in UK punk and post-punk bands’ embrace of the audiovisual fantasies of the Orient. Japan, the UK four-piece led by David Sylvian, released *Quiet Life* in 1979, collaborating with Giorgio Moroder on the track “Life in Tokyo.” In 1981 they released *Tin Drum*, whose album cover had Sylvian eating rice from a bowl with chopsticks in front of a picture of Chairman Mao. The year 1978 had seen the release of Siouxsie and The Banshees’ “Hong Kong Garden,” with lyrics that referred to “slanted eyes” and “small bodies.” In 1983 David Bowie appeared

alongside Ryuchi Sakamoto from The Yellow Magic Orchestra in *Merry Xmas Mr Lawrence*. That same year Bowie released “China Girl” from *Let’s Dance*. Bowie, of course, had long experimented with Japanese art forms, having explored Kabuki via his work in the 1970s with choreographer Lindsey Kemp, and worked with fashion designer Kansai Yamamoto. Part of the allure of the prevalence of Japan appearing as sonic and visual tropes was a punk aesthetic determined by bricolage,¹⁴ whereby images and sounds were decontextualized, ripping apart any agreed meaning. Hebdige’s work in this area has been much critiqued, not least for its methodology, but this part of his observations on the stylistic plundering that punk was involved in remains a useful lens through which to view the aesthetic practices that were part of this “ripping up and starting again.”¹⁵ The Vapors were plundering a musical library of sounds of Asia by using the Oriental riff, which itself was a simulacrum used by Western musicians to conjure up their idea of the Orient. To this they added the use of (written) characters and symbols that suggested Japan, but either were factually incorrect or historically problematic.

Throughout the band’s working life, in the early 1980s and more recently, one image dominates their merchandise. It is the Rising Sun Flag, a red circle with sixteen red rays on a white background. It is associated with the Japanese military, who used it between 1870 and the end of the Second World War in 1945, and has more recently been used by the Japan Self Defence Force (with eight rays as opposed to sixteen). Different from the flag of Japan, which is a red circle on a white background, it signifies, to some, Japan’s imperial past in China, Taiwan, and especially South Korea, where as recently as 2018 diplomatic arguments ensued over its use.¹⁶ The Vapors’ Facebook site’s icon is a Rising Sun Flag, with “Turning Japanese” in the circle (sun) and the band name below. A post on December 7, 2020, advertises “Turning Japanese bandanas/Scarves as modeled here by Dave Fenton and Ziggy Fenton. Use them as face coverings, head coverings, neckerchiefs, belt ties. Tie them to your bags, guitar cases, wear them on your motorbike/scooters etc.”¹⁷ Dave wears his over his mouth and nose as a Covid-19 mask; Ziggy (a dog) sports his as a neckerchief. The Vapors are not alone in having used this image. Vivienne Westwood used it as part of her Seditious collection, and it surfaced in The Clash’s merchandise in the form of a “kamikaze t-shirt.” Siouxsie and The Banshees used it in 1984 in a poster for their June 24th gig at Hammersmith Palais in London.

The “Turning Japanese” official video uses settings and props to underpin the “Japanese-ness” of the song. The band perform in what looks to be a Japanese house, clearly a set. There are tatami mats and shoji screens, the Japanese traditional straw mat flooring, and paper sliding doors. A geisha appears to serve them, and toward the end, we see a man practicing kendo. As a supportive promotional video, it works well to establish the Orientalism of the song, which continues in the UK single cover art (Figure 13.1).



Figure 13.1 © Benjamin Wardle 2020.

The title of the song is written vertically, as is Japanese, and there is a “Japanese” woman on the right. Although she is not Japanese. This garment is a Chinese one, as is her hairstyle. The traditional Japanese dress, the kimono, would be more patterned, have an “obi” belt tight under the breasts and the feet would be shod in “geta,” platformed wooden sandals.

On the back of the single is an image of a Japanese samurai wielding a “katana,” his sword. They are “stock” images of a Japan that reside in a Western Orientalist vision: inaccurate, extinct, and yet with continuing mythic currency (Figure



Figure 13.2 © Benjamin Wardle 2020.

The common interchangeability of Japan with China continues in a monochromatic marketing poster for the band's 1980 Australian tour, posted on their Facebook site on August 19, 2020, in commemoration of its fortieth anniversary.¹⁸ "Ace presents The Vapors Turning Japanese" is the headline, above a bamboo slatted mat on which there is a bamboo leaf fan and a meat pie in a bowl on which a pair of chopsticks rest. Two Chinese characters (known as *kanji* in Japanese) are placed above and below the fan. The top character is 議 (*gi*), which means discussion, deliberation, thought, or opinion, and the bottom one appears to be an old version of 会 (*kai*), which means meeting or coming together. Together (議會) they mean "parliament" in both Chinese ("Yi Hui") and in Japanese ("gikai"). Read the other way around (會議 *kaigi*), it would mean meeting. On the poster, this second character is the wrong way around. Similar to the Japanese trend of using random Anglo-American words on T-shirts, a consumption of "the West" that historically signified "coolness" or "delinquency,"¹⁹ this image relies on an idea of "the East." The chopsticks are Chinese because they are blunt at the end, not tapered.

On the Discogs audio recording database, The Vapors are described as "relatively short-lived,"²⁰ but their "infamous and cartoonish one hit wonder" has enjoyed longevity and given them the ability to reform and tap into an Anglo-American heritage market.²¹ And even though "The Japanese music scene still welcomes a lot of heritage English Punk and New Wave bands, [the band] were unable to make any progress with any of the promoters out there, mainly due to the language barrier."²² "Turning Japanese," it seems was, and is, unlikely to be "big in Japan." However, if you want to learn how to play the "Turning Japanese" intro, you can turn to "ultimate guitar tab" and learn the "teriyaki flavoured riff."²³ Teriyaki is a sugary, soy-glazed dish more popular outside of Japan than within it. It is part of the Japan of the Occidental contemporary popular imagination, which, far from being outdated, is an "integral part of modern consciousness."²⁴ The Asian Riff, the wrong chopsticks, the upside-down kanji. The geisha, samurai, and shoji are all ingredients in that consciousness, and listening to "Turning Japanese" is an encounter with 1980s' pop-punk's Orientalism.

Notes

¹ Anthony Sheppard, *Extreme Exoticism: Japan in the American Musical Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

² See www.uniteddj.com and www.thisisnow.tv.

³ Comment posted August 19, 2020 on www.thevapors.co.uk/2020/08/19/down-under-40-years-ago/.

⁴ Query posted to www.facebook.com/TheVaporsOfficial, September 28, 2020.

⁵ Sheppard, *Extreme Exoticism*, 70.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁸ Derek Scott, *From the Erotic to the Demonic: On Critical Musicology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 76.

⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1993), 90.

- ¹⁰ Ken McLeod, "Afro-Samurai: Techno-Orientalism and Contemporary Hip Hop," *Popular Music* 32, no. 2 (2003): 259–75.
- ¹¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 1.
- ¹² See Richard H. Minear, "Orientalism and the Study of Japan," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 39, no. 3 (1980): 507–17 (p. 508).
- ¹³ Gary Needham, "Japanese Cinema and Orientalism," in *Asian Cinemas: A Reader and Guide*, ed. Dimitris Eleftheriotis and Gary Needham (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 8.
- ¹⁴ See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen & Co., 1979).
- ¹⁵ Orange Juice, "Rip It Up" (Polydor, 1983), also leant its name to Simon Reynolds' history of post-punk, *Rip It Up and Start Again* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006).
- ¹⁶ See Alexis Dudden, "Japan's Rising Sun Flag Has a History of Horror. It Must Be Banned at the Tokyo Olympics," *The Guardian*, November 1, 2019 and Ohtaka Masato, "Japan's Rising Sun Flag Is Not a Symbol of Militarism," *The Guardian*, November 12, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/nov/01/japan-rising-sun-flag-history-olympic-ban-south-korea> (accessed December 14, 2020).
- ¹⁷ See www.facebook.com/TheVaporsOfficial.
- ¹⁸ www.thevapors.co.uk/2020/08/19/down-under-40-years-ago/.
- ¹⁹ See Lois Barnett, "The Modern Boy and the Screen: Media Representation of Young Urban Men Wearing Western Style Clothing in 1920s and 1930s Japan," in *Japan Beyond Its Borders: Transnational Approaches to Film and Media*, ed. Martin Centeno, Marcos Pablo and N. Morita (Seibunsha: Birkbeck Institutional Research Online, 2020). <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/40885>.
- ²⁰ www.discogs.com/artist/227256-The-Vapors.
- ²¹ McLeod, "Afro-Samurai," 263.
- ²² www.facebook.com/TheVaporsOfficial, September 28, 2020.
- ²³ See tabs.ultimate-guitar.com/tab/the-vapors/turning-japanese-tabs-87848.
- ²⁴ Steven L. Rosen, "Japan as Other: Orientalism and Cultural Conflict," *Intercultural Communication* 4 (November 2000): <http://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr4/rosen.htm>.

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