



## Prolegomena: *good luck*

### *matteo bittanti*

**Mascot:** a person, animal, or object adopted by a group as a symbolic figure especially to bring them good luck

**“Mascot” has a French soul.** The term comes from the Provençal *“mascoto”*, which means “magic artifact, charm, talisman”. Moreover, *“mascoto”* is the diminutive of *masco*, which can be roughly translated as “witch”. In other words, the intimate relationship between the mascot and the uncanny is clear even at the etymological level. If we need a further proof, *masco* comes from Medieval Latin *masca*, “phantom” or “ghost”.

No wonder, then, that specters are haunting the world: mascots, puppets, dolls, and avatars materialize on our computer screens, televisions and cellular phone displays. No surprises here: Sconce (2000) proved that ghosts and ectoplasms literally possess our media, old and new. Internet, in particular, seems to be the most powerful generator and diffuser of phantasmatic creatures. One does not need to Kurosawa’s (Kyoshi, not Akira) disturbing *Kairo* (2001) to convince himself.

**Mascots are liminal creatures.** They oscillate between the material and the supernatural worlds, between the tangible and the ethereal. They represent the point of intersection between the mundane and the divine. The mascot’s liminal quality is both a performance and a perturbation. According to some historians, the term’s popularity is intimately connected with Edmond Audran’s (1842–1901) play, “La Mascotte” (1880). Although it was first used in the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, the word *“mascotte”* became common only after Audran’s operetta about a young girl, who, if she remains a virgin will bring good luck and fortune to whom she comes in contact.

**This leads us to the third attribute of the mascot:** purity and innocence. These two elements belong to the symbolic imagery of childhood. No wonder, then its aesthetic frame of reference is that of *kawaii*. A style that, according to Gomasca (2001), *kawaii* “was born when *shojo bunka* (the teenager culture) met the Euro-American culture of ‘cuteness’, the infantile, playful aesthetics that Japan imported from the West” (p. 68) Shimamura adds that *kawaii*’s essential traits are “smallness, innocence, tenderness, and roundness” (quoted in Gomasca, 2001, p. 61). These elements inform the iconography of the vast majority of the mascots that appear on these pages (The antithesis of *kawaii*, *kowai*, the frightening element can only be found in Paco Aguios’ creatures, and the only exception to the otherwise pervasive roundness is found in the works of Ian Stokes and Jean-Marie Angle). This iconography is replete with tentacles and weird appendixes, huge heads, placid smiles, plump and soft shapes, and dreamy eyes. A syrupy style that borrows elements from videogames, fables, and *manga*. Often derided, this aesthetic has never been fully understood, let alone appreciated for what it represents.

**If France is the home country of the mascot – at least on an etymological level – Japan is its promised land.** Nippon designers have been using the new electronic medium to reshape old myths for quite a while now. After all, mascots are an



integral part of their culture. Their precursors are the *daruma* and the *fushimi ningyo* dolls (Gerbert, 2001). A *daruma* is toy-talisman, believed to act as a charm to avert evil and bring good fortune. Painted red, the favorite color of the smallpox demon, these legless and armless tumbler dolls represented the legendary Buddhist saint, Bodhidharma. They were set by the pillows of children serving as propitiatory talismans to curry favor with and ward off the demons. The *fushimi ningyo* doll was thought to possess prophylactic powers and was used to ward off disease and misfortune. Sold to pilgrims at the Fushimi Inari Shrine in Kyoto that they might share the shrine deity's blessings with those who stayed at home, it became a staple. In addition, a flotilla of lucky charm cats used by Japanese merchants transported good luck from one place to another, to attract customers and to insure success in business. In other words, *Hello Kitty* did not really invent anything new.

**Mascots are icons.** The term comes from Greek *eikōn*, from *eikēnai*, "to resemble". An icon is a pictorial representation, typically, a religious image painted on a small wooden panel and used in the devotions of Eastern Christians. The term has a negative connotation: often it is used to define objects of uncritical devotion. Icons are also graphic symbols on a computer display screen which suggests the purpose of an available function. The mascot comprises all these meanings: it's both esoteric and functional, ancient and ultra-modern. Behind its apparent nonsense, the mascot condenses a plurality of meanings. Just like the religious icon, the mascot evokes

an "Outer" dimension that does not own. The mascot is simultaneously sacred and profane.

**Mascots are idols.** The term comes from Greek *eidolon* which stands for 'image', 'ghost' (again!) but also "ideal". An idol is a representation or symbol of an object of worship. It is not hard to notice the negative connotation: idols are often regarded as false gods. And yet, they are objects of extreme devotion. It is a pure appearance that seeks for substance. In the "gadget-lover" chapter of *Understanding media*, McLuhan (1964) recalls the 115th Psalm: "Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not: They have ears, but they hear not; Noses have they, but they smell not: They have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat. They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them." To contemplate idols – which, in McLuhan's terminology equals to "using technology" – makes humans similar to idols. There is no way out.

**Mascots are fetishes.** Material objects believed to have magical power to protect or aid its owner. Their mystic aura demands respect. The fetish is a sign of the overwhelming and seductive power of the object-image and the image-object. The fetish resists functionality. Its existence is paradoxical. When we ask ourselves "what is it? What is it for?" the mascot just looks at us, smiling and laughing. Laughing out loud.

**Cinematic intermission.** In Japanese mythology, the doll is a soul bearer. It is linked to the dream world: it can both reassure and scare us. The second fragment of Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams* (*Yume*, 1990) has a little boy who is lured into an orchard, where he is confronted by the spirits of the trees, which have taken the form of fifteen giant living ceramic dolls. We encounter more dolls in Takeshi Kitano's masterpiece, *Dolls* (2002) which opens in media res with the traditional Japanese puppetry of Bunraku. Here the puppets – and puppified human beings – are the protagonists. Unlike Kurosawa's, these mascots bring despair and anguish rather than joy and luck. Cyborgs – the latest incarnation of the doll – appear in Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* (*Kōkaku kidōtai*, 1995), as a metaphor for the extinction of free will in the information society. The movie deals with an evil "Puppet master" who pulls the strings as he pleases. In all these examples, the doll embodies the perverse exchange between the living and the artificial, the human and the simulation. It subjugates man and traps him into the realm of the fantastic. The doll disguised as fetish, as Marx and Freud realized many years ago, is the manifestation of a pathology.

**Mascots are monsters that can't scare us.** The creatures of *Monsters Inc.* (2001) try their best to terrify us. Instead, they make us laugh. Fact is: we live in a gigantic Monstropolis: the separation between the mundane and the supernatural is no longer valid. We are our enemies. We are our own monsters. Rather than a moral parable, *Monsters Inc.* is an aesthetics lesson: the "cute" design of its characters crushed the photorealistic ambitions of *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001). It shares the *kawaii* imperative can also be found in the Pokémon monsters and in the creatures that inhabit Miyazaki's enchanted city (see *Spirited Away*, *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*, 2001). The mascot combines the exoticism of the "other" with the reassuring familiarity of the anthropomorphic, nullifying violence and eroticism. The mascots – cinematographic and virtual – embody the man's ludic dimension. On that Lacanian mirror that is the computer screen, they reflect our aspirations to levity in an era of bacteriological warfare, terrorism and pre-emptive strikes. Instead of dismissing this phenomenon as "regressive", "unsettling" or simply "stupid", we understand the mascot fad (movement?) as an aesthetic answer to a nihilistic ethics.



**Literary intermission.** Dolls are a recurrent motif in Japanese narrative. It is also one of Junic'hiro Tanizaki's obsessions. In his stories, the doll often represents a love surrogate. The protagonist in the bizarre love story, "the Secret" ("Himitsu", 1911) becomes entangled with a plastic doll that resembles a popular actress. A similar theme can be found in "Some prefer nettles" (*Tade kuu mushi*, 1928-29). Here, a man called Kaname falls in love with a doll-like woman, Ohisa (literally, "eternal"). Little by little, his world implodes and turns into a dollhouse (a madhouse?). Even outside Japan, the doll dominates the most heterogeneous forms of narrative. Barbie, in particular, pops up in Philip K. Dick's stories (under the nom de plum of 'Perky Pat') and A.M. Homes' (see, for instance, "A real doll", one of the most absurd short stories in "The Safety of Objects"). According to Kitti Carriker (1998), the doll synthesises man's fragmented identities and thus, it becomes a vehicle for nostalgia for a pre-modern past that "did not exist if not as a form of fantasy" (p. 27). In other words, man idolizes the mascot, the doll and the fetish, because he aspires to become one.

**Mascots are, by definition, tiny.** As we pointed out at the beginning, "mascoto" is a diminutive of "masco". Now, a diminutive is just another word for "miniature". As Stewart (1993) noted, "The toy world presents a projection of the world of everyday life; this real world is miniaturized or giganticized in such a way as to test the relation between materiality and meaning" (p. 57) Mascot are little creatures that inhabit our computers. They are Lilliputian beings that move on the surface of the screen. They are easily manipulated. The exalt man's aspiration for omnipotence but, at the same time, let us know that they could betray us any second. They are like the Fornits, the mysterious creatures that we first met in Stephen King's "The Ballad of the Flexible

Bullet" (1985).

**Mascots are popular culture icons.** Both in Japan and in the Western world. It is both the cause and the outcome of the globalization processes imposed by an increasingly homogeneous visual culture. A culture that lies at the intersection of fairy tales and fabled commodities. Although the mascot is generated by the subconscious, it dominates the world of the "ego". It was born out of a plague. And it is highly contagious itself. It floats in a sea of videogames, *graphic design* e comic books, *virtual pets* and robot toys. Its logic is inclusive, not exclusive.

**The invasion of the mascot-snatchers.** The mascot generates a plethora of gadgets. To live its world require impulse buying and useless gizmos: the (imaginary) pocket calculator design by ken Hoshino, clay bags by Mamiko Hasebe, t-shirts and cell phone holders by Meomi Design, paper dolls made by Boris Hoppek, comic book spectacles by Tinoland... The gadget-mascot is like a deadly virus. Both Baudelaire and Benjamin (Benjamin) talked about the "phantasmagoria of objects". In recent times, Gomasca & Valtorta (1996), wrote that "*kawaii* is, above all, a market. A series of items produced by the industry of the "cute": gadgets, dolls, mascots, backpacks, notebooks, posters, t-shirts, food [...] Items that seem to belong to a plump and mellifluous world, a world on infantilism that, for some reasons, has a powerful appeal on Japanese teenagers and even grown-ups" (p. 71). One is left wondering if after Murakami and his "superflat" movement the distinction between art and gadget is still meaningful.

**So far, so close.** Just like Pokémon and Tamagotchi, the mascot is a catalyst of affection. Mascot fans gather in tribes that idolize the image-object. Their behaviour is both collective and ritual. Mascots are a cultural artefact but also a cult phenomenon. They lie at the intersection between process of hybridization between Western and Eastern cultures. They are bizarre, weird yet strangely familiar. Their visual language is both comforting and arcane. Far from being loved by a niche, the mascots have an enormous fan base. They occupy our times and spaces: think about Meomi Design's cute calendars... Think about Genevieve Gauckler's puppets that reinvented the zodiac but also the urban and suburban spaces.... Think about Boris Hoppek's surreal





graffiti... The mascot does not belong to the tradition of the *fantasy*: they are not elves or hobbits. They do not leave in parallel, alternative or marginal worlds. Rather, they share our own dimensions, the real and the amniotic liquid of the virtual (hence the leitmotiv of the fish-mascot). As Gergert (2001) suggests, "Such a belief in the power of the doll to transport love and good fortune may underlie the traditional Japanese custom of women taking along their ceremonial dolls when they left their natal homes to travel to the unfamiliar territory of their new homes" (p. 56). The mascots now accompany us in our virtual journeys.

**A conclusion, a provocation:** If Frankenstein is the outcome of the Industrial Revolution, created at the beginning of the machine age after Mary Shelley had seen a Swiss collection of remarkable androids owned by Jaquet-Droz, the mascot is the final outcome of the digital age.

**Bottom line:** resistance is futile.

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