

## Charlie Leadbeater on Japanese microelectronics Karaoke Culture

We can listen to crystal-clear classical music on a train thanks to their portable compact disc players. We can curl up on our settees to watch Hollywood films whenever we like, thanks to their video recorders. We can instantly record and replay vital moments in our family histories thanks to their lightweight video camcorders.

More and more of our experience of the world, what we hear and see, how and when, is increasingly being delivered by Japanese microelectronics. The products of Japanese consumer electronics companies have spread around the world by giving us increasingly cheap and compact ways to control and choose what sounds and images we perceive.

These products will not be much in evidence in this month's London cultural extravaganza celebrating Japanese culture. It is an attempt to provide a cultural underpinning to the increasingly close economic and industrial relationship between Britain and Japan. Yet the tea dances, kimonoes and traditional music on display around the country will have little lasting significance to most consumers compared to the way they already depend on Japanese electronics for much of their cultural life. Most British living rooms probably revolve around some Japanese technology. For some people evenings would be unimaginable without it.

At first sight it seems quite possible that Japanese electronics is, after all, largely a delivery mechanism for Western music and films.

But there are several reasons why Japan is particularly well placed to exploit electronics, and why in the process Japanese values may be spreading, even if we use their products to see and listen to Western culture.

With space at a premium, products have to be slim and compact. The fastidious sense of detail and neatness which Japanese managers display in the design of miniaturised products is in part management philosophy, in part the product of an everyday pattern of behaviour.

The Japanese have a different attitude towards consumption, according to Masatoshi Naito,

head of design at Matsushita, the electronics group. This attitude makes Japan particularly well suited to the fast moving world of electronics with new products rolling off production lines in quick succession. Naito says of the televisions and hi-fis his group makes, 'You in the West think of these products as consumer *durables*, things which last. For you consumption is an act which you undertake in bursts periodically. Japanese consumption is a continuous cycle of new products replacing old products; everything is in a process of change, nothing endures. We do not seek permanence.'

Japanese product designers show no interest in creating monuments to ideologies, unlike, say, the architect Le Corbusier, who had an ambitious vision of a modern world, fit for modern people to live in.

Kenji Ekuan, president of GK Industrial Designs and widely regarded as the father of Japanese industrial design, says: 'In the West you have designers as crusaders, moral heroes who attempt to impose their values through their designs. Here we want to make tools which people can use. We start from how people live now, rather than from a vision of how they should live.'

Japanese electronics is not simply a viaduct for consumer culture, but is constantly changing the parameters of the world we live in because it blurs the line between physical and electronic reality.

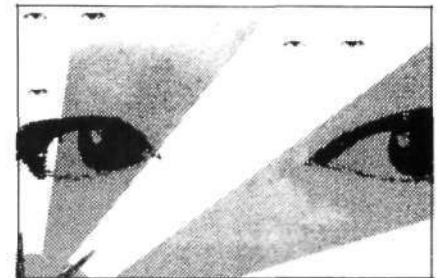
The most recent example is the worldwide rise of the lightweight, hand held camcorder. As a result, real world experiences, weddings, birthdays and holidays, can be recorded and replayed virtually at will.

The Japanese seem more willing to step over or simply disregard this line between the real world and the electronic world. It is arguable that the spread of electronics has changed the way we experience our world, more fundamentally than all the great temples of architectural modernism.

From these themes it is possible to chart an alternative vision of Japan's cultural impact on the West the real Japan festival. Electronics is becoming more pervasive: having applied technology to places

such as living rooms the Japanese are increasingly applying technology to people. Microelectronics is going mobile, with portable compact disc players, mobile telephones, pagers, laptop computers and soon.

The line between the real and the electronic will probably blur even further to the extent that it may not be fully rec-



ognisable. Karaoke, the bar-room singing craze which is spreading around the world, works on this principle. People sing into microphones as backing music from popular songs plays around them.

The 'karaoke principle' is that people like using electronics to become what they are not - pop stars and film stars. We become transported into a different world, we become different people.

The logical extension of karaoke is virtual reality. This technology will create comprehensive, all-embracing electronic realities for people to relax within.

Virtual reality machines are like flight simulators for training aircraft pilots using a combination of computers and graphics generators.

So rather than coming home to watch a video recording of a western on your television, you can come home actually to be a cowboy, strut through the dusty streets of a cowboy town, walk into a saloon and order a whisky. The images you see respond to your real world commands.

This will be the greatest contribution the Japanese will make to the way we see and understand the world. The products they make will completely transform it by, in significant areas, simply abolishing the line which separates human from machine, the physical from the virtual, the real from the electronic.\*