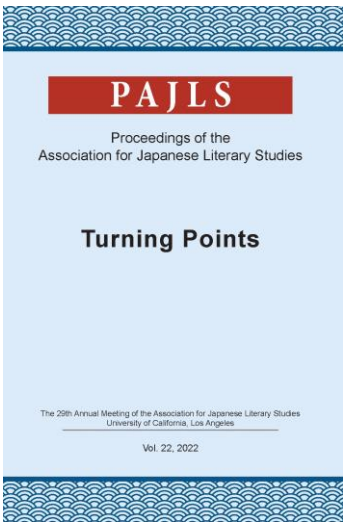
“In Memoriam of Sari Kawana: Miyabe Miyuki’s New Media Theory”

Jonathan E. Abel

Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 22 (2022): 123–134.



PAJLS 22:
Turning Points.
Editor: Torquil Duthie
Managing Editor: Matthew Fraleigh

IN MEMORIAM OF SARI KAWANA: MIYABE MIYUKI'S NEW MEDIA THEORY

Jonathan E. Abel[1]
Pennsylvania State University

This article is a lightly edited version of a talk presented at the 2022 annual meeting of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies (AJLS). The context was a panel honoring the memory of Japanese literature scholar Sari Kawana, who had tragically passed away the previous year. It is reproduced here in order to create a more lasting commemoration of the debt our field owes to her work.

One challenge of studying new media is that they tend to be manifest in practice before they have been well theorized. New media tend not to be developed to remedy a perceived lack in communication networks discovered after deep consideration, but rather, more often than not, simply the result of incremental modification of pre-existing technologies that occasionally, retrospectively can be seen as radically new or reforming communication and, therefore, society. And so, arriving as they do, often un-theorized, new media enter the world often challenging our abilities to comprehend their importance. And this is why their marketing can bamboozle us. If we want to find historically concomitant theorizations of new media, I propose that we should look elsewhere—neither to theory or criticism nor to design proposals or advertisements per se, but to older cultural products, those outside of or beyond the realms of new media. By looking at the way various older media reacted to the presence of new media in the wider mediascape, this article tracks a nascent theory of social media. Remediation (the recasting of content from one medium to another) and particularly hypermediacy (the casting of one form of media in another) offer remarkably clear evidence about the representation of social attitudes (a core interest of media theory) towards a particular new medium often *avant la théorie*.[2]

Inspired by Sari Kawana's brilliant and counterintuitive readings that discovered a nascent detective fiction in Sōseki's work,[3] I suggest that

[1] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9062-6861
[2] For more on remediation and hypermediation see Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).
[3] Sari Kawana, *Murder Most Modern: Detective Fiction and Japanese Culture* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2008); "A Narrative Game of Cat and Mouse:

media theory can be found in detective fiction and crime procedurals. At least since Sherlock Holmes's explanation of fingerprints, detective fiction, with its attention to technologies of detection and deception, has performed as a prolonged thought experiment concerning the use of technologies. In this article (essentially a transcription of my 2022 AJLS presentation), I aim to honor Sari's memory by performing a Kawana-style reading, examining how Miyabe Miyuki's work, published during the rise in popular participation on the internet, considered the medium's potential uses, promises, and risks. I will conclude with some brief thoughts on what a "found media theory" might mean, especially for the study of non-dominant (non-European, non-western, non-white, non-male) media cultures.

I call this a "Kawana-style reading" in acknowledgment of the profound influence that my brilliant colleague and friend Sari had on the basic idea here. I presented on a similar topic, focused on a different Miyabe novel, at a previous AJLS Conference, at Oberlin in 2018.[4] At the time, I failed to emphasize Sari's impact on my thinking, assuming I would be able to take the time to explain that in a future publication—which never came to fruition. So, on this occasion, I would like to finish that task and fill in the blank of what I left unsaid during that earlier presentation by highlighting the marks that Sari's thinking has left on my work, as one example of her lasting impact on the field.

Before reading Sari's creative work, I was only tangentially aware of the actively creative form of literary criticism known as "interventionist criticism" or "novelistic criticism."[5] I think at the time my thinking was that such work was the exclusive privilege of famous critics or the white

---

Parody, Deception and Fictional Whodunit in Natsume Sōseki's *Wagahai wa neko dearu*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 33, no. 4 (2010): 1–20; *The Uses of Literature in Modern Japan: Histories and Cultures of the Book* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018).

[4] "True Crime / Copycat Crime: The Mediations of Representation and Reverse Mimesis," *Copycat Violence and the Media/Reality Continuum*, Association for Japanese Literary Studies (AJLS), Oberlin College, February 2018.

[5] For examples of novelistic criticism see Pierre Bayard, *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?: The Mystery Behind the Agatha Christie Mystery* (New York: New Press, 2001); *Sherlock Holmes Was Wrong: Reopening the Case of The Hound of the Baskervilles*, (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008); *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010); *How to Talk About Places You've Never Been: On the Importance of Armchair Travel* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016). On interventionist critique see Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

French guys like Pierre Bayard who enabled this sort of intentionally ahistorical reading. But these were the mistaken conclusions one draws from hearing about an idea of a method before actually reading its examples and trying it out for oneself.

So when I first encountered Sari's reading of Sōseki's *Kokoro* I was blown away, amazed not only that anyone would do this, but more so that they could pull it off so successfully. I should not have been surprised, since Sari's skillful and innovative methods were already clear in her first book, *Murder Most Modern*.[6] Actually, she had made a deep impression on me even before that. I met Sari when we were both in grad school, I think at the Mid-Atlantic Regional Association of Asian Studies Conference at the University of Pennsylvania in October 2004. Over the years, that meeting has receded into the cobwebbed recesses of my memory, but I recall that Sari offered advice about the job market based on her initial experiences. She had recently been on some serious interviews, and I was about to head out for my first. This was before the time of social media, so we had to learn about these kinds of important practical aspects of our field in face-to-face discussions. Her generosity of spirit was invaluable. Over the years, we would meet occasionally (once or twice a year) at one conference or another. We would be sure to make time for coffee in Kanda if we were both in Tokyo over the summer. Our conversations, infrequent as they were, were always meaningful and deep. They would start with research (what are you working on, have you read this and that?) and move onto the workplace (how does your institution deal with such-and-such?), but we also talked about family (with children around the same age, that was a topic of many conversations), travel, and so much else. Sari's spirit for intellectual and scholarly pursuit was infectious: she convinced me to publish my wackiest paper, on underwear in Japanese film and invited me to present it at University of Massachusetts, Boston, using her undergraduate students as a test audience for my ideas.[7]

Sari's broad interests and capacious knowledge meant that she was an invaluable source of not only ideas and inspiration, but also concrete

---

[6] See my review in Jonathan Abel, "*Purloined Letters: Cultural Borrowing and Japanese Crime Literature 1868–1937*. By Mark Silver. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008. *Murder Most Modern: Detective Fiction and Japanese Culture*. By Sari Kawana. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008." *International Journal of Asian Studies* 2010, 7 (1): 101–5.

[7] "Packaging Desires: The Unmentionables of Japanese Film," *Perversion and Modern Japan: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Culture* edited by Keith Vincent and Nina Cornyetz (New York: Routledge, 2009) 272–307.

suggestions. During one of our Kanda coffees, I mentioned my interest in copyright issues. Her recommendation that I learn about Wilhelm Plage became half of a chapter of my book *The New Real*. I had heard of the copyright hound Plage before, but until Sari pushed me to look further, I had not thought to make him a focal point of my research.

Of course, this kind of help is always duly acknowledged in print. However, Sari's recent passing made me see the importance of weaving acknowledgments into oral presentations, as well. I'm not talking about citations and publications, because that is well covered in best practices on citation and style guides. What is less clear to me is both how to properly acknowledge the profound intellectual generosity, kindness, and creativity with which our colleagues can spur us on and keep us going; and how we, in turn, might possibly return the favor and provide such help for others. In so many ways, Sari was an inspiration for my thoughts on Miyabe Miyuki. I hope that as you read the following, you will see how her thinking resonates within my ideas.

In Miyabe Miyuki's *RPG* (published in August of 2001 by Shūeisha bunko, and translated as *Shadow Family* by Juliet Winters Carpenter for Kōdansha in September of 2004), new media itself becomes a character in the novel. The story is a murder mystery in which victims and suspects are connected through their online social interaction within "a family" of avatars with names like "Mom," "Dad," and so on. That is to say, the novel allegorically relates the virtuality of social interaction on the web to the imaginative worlds inhabited by players in role playing games, as well as to real familial roles. This has two effects. First, it frames social interactivity on the web as a game. And, indeed, the novel capitalizes on this. The fact that the virtual reality (what Azuma Hiroki calls game-like reality)[8] of online social interactions, which are supposed to be contained by cyberspace, spill over into the real world with lethal consequences, gives the novel a haunting quality. Second, it raises questions about the benefits and limits of games especially around their potential impact on the world. Here, just as the game world takes on real work consequences, the real world takes on a game-like quality with violent results.

In the novel, Takegami Etsurō (a grunt worker at a police station and mainstay of other Miyabe novels) becomes a lead investigator. Though typically a lowly desk man, he takes a more active role in this case, because the main detective who usually solves crimes is in the hospital recovering

[8] Azuma Hiroki, *Gēmu-teki riarizumu no tanjō: Dōbutsu-ka suru posuto modan 2* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2007).

from a heart attack. Takegami overcomes his lack of experience by playing the role, miming the motions of his hospitalized friend.

As a deskman, Takegami's work is intimately tied to media:

> The desk manager is, so to speak, a "document man." The main job is to produce all the official documents required by the investigative headquarters, but he also prepares all the volume reports, photographs, maps, and other files. He also creates the files for the shipping manifests, photographs, maps, and manages the information recorded on audio and video media. As a logistics support unit, one post is always established in each investigation headquarters, and although it is a behind-the-scenes role, it is not a light one.[9]

Of all media he is responsible for organizing and archiving, Takegami is associated mostly with paper. Indeed, the relation of his character to media is almost complete in his nickname *Gami-san* ガミさん with a sound similarity for a colloquialism for "kami-san," a proprietor or boss (which might be translated as "boss man" or "Mr. Boss"), as well as the word paper (or "Mr. Paper"). So, as a "paper" man, Takegami—like several of the older characters (for instance, the murder victim and his wife) and, indeed, like the novel's implied reader—is new to computers and the internet.[10] At one point, suspect Kitajo Minoru asks Takegami:

> "Do you even go online, Detective!?!?"
> "Well, I do have an e-mail address. But I don't know much about the world of the internet."[11]

This relative lack of experience with or knowledge about the internet beyond email is not unusual for the time. The internet was still a relatively

---

[9] Miyabe Miyuki, *R.P.G.* (Tokyo: Shūeisha bunko, 2001) 21. All translations from (or slightly modified from) Miyabe Miyuki, *Shadow Family*, trans. Julia Carpenter (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2004) 18. Hereafter "bunko" and "trans".

[10] Takegami is not exactly a luddite towards all technology. He embraces the installation of a hi-resolution scanner at headquarters, seeing its benefits for labor efficiency and work reduction. Bunko, 22. Trans,19. Among those not interested in computers (and not being interested is a clue towards innocence in this novel) is also the younger Naoko Imai: "There seems to have been no e-mail correspondence with Naoko Imai, who does not appear here either. According to her friends, 'She was not interested in computers, but relied exclusively on her cell phone! She relied on her cell phone!'"

[11] Bunko, 124. Trans, 87.

new medium in 2001, with most Japanese users gaining first connection in the mid-1990s, when smart phones and the social media sites most associated with web 2.0 (Facebook, Twitter, Line) were still in the future. In that context, the novel is part of a trend in entertainment at the time, as such scenes of new media *en abyme* served to introduce the internet and its implications to a broad audience.[12] But more than simply being a neophyte, Takegami is something of a luddite; one person of interest in the case recognizes this and states directly to him: "Detective, you seem to have a prejudice against the Internet."[13]

DOUBLE WORK

Beyond the title, there are some overt references to internet culture, a few of which explain it directly to the reader. For instance, the book's epigraph is addressed to an implied reader who might not know about role playing.

> Role Playing
> A learning method in which students are asked to play various roles in real-life situations to learn how to solve problems. Role demonstration method.[14]

The epigraph leaves unstated the new media innovation or twist on traditional analogue role playing: its game-ification. Unlike face to face role playing as a problem solving or therapy technique, role-playing videogames (after role-playing analogue adventure games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*) began to explore the new possibilities afforded by the internet for such play, anonymity being chief among the functions that enabled a more intense form of role play, one that could involve tricking other players about one's own true identity.[15] Although, as its afterword claims, there is no role-playing game proper depicted in the novel, it is not the case that the novel *RPG* is a complete bait and switch. Rather, social media (in web 1.0 forms, such as chat rooms and email) is

---

[12] Similar scenes intended to introduce audiences to the technology can be seen in the films of the period such as *Haru* (Morita Yoshimitsu, 1996), *Perfect Blue* (Kon Satoshi, 1997), and *All About Lily Chou Chou* (Iwai Shunji, 2001).
[13] Bunko, 250–1. Trans, 163.
[14] Bunko, 5. Trans, 4.
[15] For questions of anonymous identity and cyberspace see the discussion of dogs by Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2017), ix.

revealed to itself be a kind of role-playing game, where the users are players inhabiting roles in a family game (*kazoku gokko*) which does not share a one-to-one correspondence with the identity roles the characters/users play in real life.

Beyond the epigraph, which performs a single function for the reader alone, much dialogue that is dedicated to media in the novel performs a kind of double labor, explaining the internet to the older characters in the story, as well as to its implied readers who may be more paperbound than some of the more tech savvy netizen characters. There are several scenes when Takegami is perplexed by internet lingo, and suspects must explain it to him. Consider the following passage explaining lurking:

> "…Of course, to begin with, any time I logged onto a bulletin board or entered a chat room, all I did was lurk."
> "Lurk?"
> Minoru explained disdainfully, "That means reading what other people post, without posting any messages yourself."
> "I see. In that case it *would* be like reading a magazine, wouldn't it?" Takegami nodded.[16]

In addition to proffering a comparison of new and old media (electronic bulletin boards and magazines), Takegami himself reveals his ignorance, allowing for readers positioned with similar ignorance to come into the fold.

It is in these moments of explanation to Takegami that the novel does some truly theoretical speculation around the new medium—for instance, when one character asserts that chatroom behavior makes it clear what cannot be trusted:

> Maybe it's hard for you to clearly understand, detective, but on the net it is common sense that most people who say "I'm the real one that they are talking about" are lying.[17]

The veracity of claims about self-identity are precisely the ones that cannot be trusted. This is not only enabled by the anonymity of pre-Web 2.0 social media, but also potentially caused by it. But the novel provides a balanced sense of some truths that can be found in internet communities. As

[16] Bunko, 133. Trans, 92–93.
[17] Bunko, 146. Trans, 99.

performative, overblown, and fictional as anonymous utterances may be, cyberspace provides an outlet for connection (the novel acknowledges).

> What if Kazumi Tokoroda had stepped out on-line? Takegami wondered about this empty thought. What if Kazumi had ever shown her face, ever let her voice be heard, safely hidden behind a handle, and had taken the opportunity to tell someone what was on her mind? What if Kazumi had been able to tell someone about her feelings and tell them in words, hiding her eyes darkened with anger and her mouth twisted stubbornly with heartbreak?[18]

The implication here is that if Kazumi had ever had this kind of online truthful conversation then she may have found community and avoided violence.

And here the novel comes closest to viewing the internet's anonymity as a fecund place for cultivating the therapy model of role playing as a useful outlet. As one character explains, "But on the internet, by confiding in each other, I can get people to understand what I'm going through."[19] We even get a view of the medium that echoes some of the cyber-utopianism of Silicon Valley: "We enjoyed role playing with each other. What's so bad about that?"[20] This more positive view of the medium acts as a balance to the novel's initial luddite suspicion of the medium.

In the end, Miyabe's story presents a relatively even-handed view of social media interactions; the new interactions are neither entirely to blame for the crimes at the novel's center nor wholly absolved of responsibility for enabling such crimes. Rather, new media are a setting in which new kinds of crimes may appear, but, once we come to understand them, the new crimes are not so different from the old ones, just as the classic noir settings of a bar or speakeasy are neither neutral nor solely responsible for the crimes that will happen there. The entire book is set up to educate, making us both wary of new media even as we are meant to see how it might have a therapeutic role for the same characters who are drawn into odd virtual social and real social relations.

By the end, Takegami sees anonymous social media as fundamentally no different than analogue relations and makes broad statements about the efficacy of mediated social relations writ large:

---

[18] Bunko, 290. Trans, 185–6.
[19] Bunko, 160. Trans, 108.
[20] Bunko, 246–247. Trans, 161.

> But I do know that when there is a medium, relationships are created there. Just as there is a mixture of truth and lies in the real world, I can at least understand that there is a mixture of lies and truth in the Internet society as well.[21]

Here Takegami has come almost full circle from social media neophyte needing explanation of terms and behaviors to someone who can evaluate online relationships and finds them comparable to those of real life.

WE DO WHAT WE CAN: ON FOUND CONCEPTS AND GIVEN MATERIALS

So what is the significance of finding new media prognostications and early theories propounded within older media? Ultimately, the novel shows how online role play enables a kind of laying bare of the real-world fiction of an "ideal family" (indeed, towards the end, one character admits that what is referred to as family make-believe throughout the novel has been a performance of an "ideal family."[22] It is a constitutive speech act, a participatory fiction that (as if by magic) brings into being the very thing it asserts and performs. And yet in the end we recognize that the "ideal family" is not as ideal as one might have hoped. The mediation of this performance of family is the ground or stage enabling it. Of course, in addition to exposing the social concept of an "ideal family," the novel also deconstructs the dream or desire that online behaviors would not seep into real life. In a sense, the book is able to radicalize the concept of "ideal family" by following it to its logical end, showing that the internet is both a great space for such performances and potentially a dangerous one.

This notion of found concepts generated not from the top down (from philosophical texts or critical theory) but from the grassroots up (from cultural material) has a long history. It is at base a difference between a deductive and an inductive approach. But the distinction between the two methods is something of a myth. It is not the case that in a deductive mode we simply apply a theory without regard to the evidence before our eyes.

---

[21] Bunko, 253. Trans, 164. At this point, Takegami seems to have internalized a point made by one of his interviewees, Mita Yoshie, only pages before. She claims: "The human relationships that develop in cyberspace have just as much value and warmth as those in the real world. They are not full of lies and falsehoods. There are honest feelings that can be shared because we are not face-to-face, because we are not limited by our appearance or position, and because of the affection that can be fostered there." Bunko, 250–1. Trans, 163.

[22] Bunko, 246. Trans, 161.

Nor, in the inductive mode, do we simply shut off all our prior knowledge and come to the materials with a blank slate and allow them to speak to us directly in an unmediated way. And yet, during times when extra weight is given to deductive reasoning or critical theory, innovative thoughts might come from inductive reasoning from the materials at hand.

Indeed, this is the argument Allan Stoekl makes regarding Maurice Blanchot who, he says, "is concerned not with establishing new master concepts, but with radicalizing concepts already there—'found' concepts, we might call them—and pushing them to, and beyond, their logical and alogical limits."[23] In a field in which we know all too often that western theory is applied to non-western materials thus repeating the extractive logics of colonialism and imperialism, I want to argue that this method of finding theory can be integral to moving beyond the notion that concepts or thought must be rooted in something that looks like western philosophy. Opening up to other possibilities may not only reveal theory (or something like it) everywhere, but also provide a better sense of what it means to experience and understand new media historically.

More recently Brian Massumi has gone further, suggesting that reliance on found concepts is the only way that thought progresses socially. Just before the concept of virality and the genre of internet memes were well defined, Massumi described a system for developing new and innovative theories developed from concepts found, elaborated upon, and handed off:

> The important thing, once again, is that these found concepts not simply be applied. This can be done by extracting them from their usual connections to other concepts in their home system and confronting them with the example or a detail from it. The activity of the example will transmit to the concept, more or less violently. The concept will start to deviate under the force. Let it. Then reconnect it to other concepts, drawn from other systems, until a whole new system of connection starts to form. Then, take another example. See what happens. Follow the new growth. You end up with many buds. Incipient systems. Leave them that way. You have made a system like composition prolonging the active power of the example. You have left your readers with a very special gift: a headache. By which I mean a problem: what in the world to do with it all. That's their problem. That's where their

[23] Allan Stoekl, "*The Gaze of Orpheus*, and: *The Writing of the Disaster*," *Minnesota Review*, no. 29 (Fall 1987), 140.

> experimentation begins. Then the openness of the system will spread. If they have found what they have read compelling. Creative contagion.[24]

But it is in recent feminist work that the efficacy of this "found concept" for me really becomes clear. Lamenting the lack of feminist discourse that resembles theory (too often considered from the start through masculinist examples), Cian Dennan articulates just such a method for finding an entire archive of feminist thought in "unlikely" places (unlikely being in scare quotes because it is only unlikely if we consider the philosophy and critical theory texts to be the only likely places to find such theory). Dennan opens the possibilities outward:

> Perhaps, then, feminism is found theory. The found is often the silent; rendered unintelligible (feminine) as it is masked under the intelligible/audible (masculine) voices which dominate the literary canon. Therefore, found feminist theory enacts the experimental feminine and produces a found feminine aesthetic.[25]

Applying Sari Kawana's bold technique of intentional reading to Dennan's work, I want to use Dennan's insight on feminist theory to rethink how we might also find new media theory. To this end I want to rewrite Dennan for new media as follows: Because by the time new media is theorized it is already old media, new media theory must be found theory. The found is often the silent; rendered unintelligible (new) as it is masked under the intelligible/audible (old media) voices which dominate the literary canon. Therefore, found new media theory enacts the experimental new and produces a found new media aesthetic.

If Sari Kawana's work provocatively found the popular cultural genre of detective fiction within Sōseki's canonical bildungsroman (effectively showing how "high culture" is informed by and imbricated through and through with "low culture"), this paper has taken inspiration from that work, inverting the method and trying to find critical theory in popular culture, trying to show how everyday popular culture generates new ideas

---

[24] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Raleigh: Duke University Press, 2002) 18–19.
[25] Cian Dennan, "Found feminine aesthetics and writing across waves: A poetic experiment," *Women's Studies Journal* 33, no. 1/2 (Dec. 2019): 71–83.

and critical theory on its own without the intervention of a critic or philosopher.