Experience Your (Virtual) Ideal Relationship: Utilization Of Binaural Recording Technology In Japanese Audio Drama As Escapism

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Abstract

This article aims to understand how Japanese audio dramas that utilize binaural recording technology become escapism for their fans. This study uses the reference of Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacrum and hyperreality to approach the problem, with the basic assumption that the use of binaural recordings in CD dramas can increase the listener's sensation of hyperreality and therefore serve as their escape from reality. Data were collected through a literature review method on literature related to the topic as well as observations on the CD drama fan community on the internet to be analyzed qualitatively. It was found that hyperreality is displayed in the storyline, characters, and setting of the drama CD which resembles an ideal reality. Binaural recording technology in CD drama is able to provide an immersive experience for fans complete with fantasy elements that are certainly more interesting than their reality. The characters offered as co-stars also have varied appearances and personalities so fans can choose a partner according to the criteria they desire. In the end, the elements that make up this CD drama also cloud their perception of a true romantic relationship and trap them in a continuous simulation.

Keywords: Audio Dramas; Binaural Recordings; Escapism; Hyperreality; Simulacrum


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INTRODUCTION

Japan emerged as one of the countries with the strongest soft power in the world, especially in the field of popular culture. This is marked by the Cool Japan phenomenon, namely the commercialization of the Japanese cultural industry by the Japanese government itself, with various forms ranging from games or anime and manga to traditional Japanese food and artwork (Cabinet Office of Japan, 2020). The rapid development of technology has also contributed to the spread of Japanese popular culture which can cover all corners of the world, especially with the birth of digital spaces such as forums or blogging sites on the internet (Wee, 2016). The widespread emergence of Japanese media fandom on the global internet also makes it easier for their consumers who previously had difficulty accessing their favorite media, for example with fansubbers or fan translators as digital workers for free (Baruch, 2020).

One of the innovations of popular culture popularized by Japan, among others, is audio drama. Previously, audio drama was known as radio drama in the United States, which is a radio program resembling dramas like those that appear on television with actors exchanging dialogues, but in practice only relying on sound to help listeners visualize the scene being played (Hand & Traynor, 2011). Like dramas in other mass media in general, the genre of audio drama is not only limited to one genre. One of the most popular radio dramas of its time was The War of The Worlds made by H. G. Wells which was in the science fiction genre, then there were horror, romance, and thriller or mystery genres (Crook, 2020).

The use of binaural recording technology to give listeners a more immersive experience. This technology uses two microphones so that the sound produced in the recording makes it seem as if the listener is in the scene in the audio drama. The shape of the microphone used generally resembles a human head, so it is often referred to as dummy head recording. Actors involved in the production of audio dramas can say or whisper a sentence near the ear of the dummy head microphone, and listeners will hear the actor’s voice from his ear, so that the virtual reality presented will feel more real. Plus the application of the foley technique which is usually used by films or tv series in general to create sound effects that add to the real feeling of the atmosphere presented (Geronazzo et al., 2019).

The use of binaural recording technology in Japanese audio dramas is usually used by romantic audio dramas as an additional selling point. In Japan, audio dramas are not only limited to radio, but also appear in physical form or are called CD dramas. The storylines of the audio dramas are not all original and can serve as side stories from a pre-existing media such as anime or manga. In contrast to radio dramas in other countries, the popularity of audio dramas that have not declined despite the birth of television technology in Japan is largely due to the loyalty of fans from voice actors, or what in Japanese is called seiyuu. In Japan, the popularity of the seiyuu can be said to be equal to or even surpassing television or film actors in general, so many fans are willing to consume a medium just to hear the voice of the seiyuu (Poitras, 2001; Gunarti, 2015).

This is in accordance with the findings of a previous study conducted by Kantitarina in 2015. The study entitled “CD Drama and the Need for Love: A Case Study of CD Drama Listeners in Indonesia” found that CD drama fans may like CD dramas because they want to listen to CD dramas. seiyuu acting in it. In addition, the drama CD is used as a fantasy fulfillment for its fans, the majority of whom are women, because the sensation of listening to a drama CD makes them feel like they are actually talking to a lover who loves and cherishes them in the virtual reality created by the drama CD, especially when using the drama CD. dummy head microphone technology. The storyline, character visuals, and genre of the CD drama are also determining factors in choosing the CD drama you want to listen to.

Regarding the reasons for fans to like drama CDs found by Kantitarina, the writer also identifies a tendency for drama CD fans to use this media as escapism—or a medium to escape from their reality to a fantasy world where they can enjoy the sensation of having a lover and live a romantic relationship that they consider ideal. The additional use of dummy head microphone technology here can also make the virtual reality presented by the CD drama feel more real. This phenomenon is in line with what Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco refer to as one of the symptoms of postmodernism, where technology allows humans to experience
far more interesting experiences than their boring reality.

In addition, the author also finds that there are very few studies discussing both audio dramas and Japanese CD dramas, even though the popularity of CD dramas is not inferior to other popular Japanese media such as anime and manga. The author is also interested in filling this void, as well as complementing the knowledge that has not been found by previous studies. Therefore, this paper aims to explain how Japanese drama audio that utilizes binaural recording technology can function as a means of escapism. As a unit of analysis as well as to narrow the realm of research, the author will examine two audio drama series that meet the aforementioned conditions, namely the audio drama series Wasurenagusa and Seventh Heaven made by the Rejet company.

With the lack of research that discusses Japanese drama audio specifically, the author will use a study entitled "From Boyfriend to Boy's Love: South Korean Male ASMRtists' Performances of Digital Care" by Sorim Lee in 2021 to support the author's hypothesis that the use of binaural technology recording can be a means for listeners to escape from reality for a moment, as well as lull them to remain in the hyperreality created by the media. In this study, Lee explained that ASMR actors in South Korea participate in a role play by playing certain characters to provide a digital treatment for listeners who need a break from their reality. In practice, these ASMR actors also use binaural recording technology that makes it seem as if they are actually in the same room as their listeners, and also portray ideal versions of the characters they play. From this, a parallel can be drawn with Japanese audio dramas where the seiyuu take the position of ASMR actors to give drama CD listeners a digital treatment to leave their reality for a moment, and the help of binaural recording technology to strengthen the hyperreality experienced by the listeners.

This paper will begin with an introduction which contains a brief description of the topic to be discussed. Then the theoretical framework section will discuss the concepts that are used as the basis of this research, namely the use of binaural recording technology in CD dramas to strengthen hyperreality, as well as simulacrum and hyperreality as a means of escapism. This research will use the literature review method which will be explained in more depth in the methodology section. After that, this paper will get to the core part of this research, namely the results and discussions that will answer the formulation of the problems that have been presented previously. Finally, the researcher concludes the results of this study briefly.

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The last stage of simulation refers to hyperrealism. If the previous simulations represent real objects, hyperrealism represents something that is not real—in other words,
imaginary. It is in a hyperrealistic condition where reality and falsehood, past and present, all blend into a single entity that has no clear boundaries. Here Baudrillard expresses his concern that with the rapid development of technology, the public as consumers are often treated to simulacrums without being given time to process them, causing fiction to collapse into reality to the point that it can no longer be distinguished. Examples of hyperreality can be in the form of science fiction, fantasy, or virtual reality technology that can simulate and replace one’s reality into something more ideal (Baudrillard, 1929; Baudrillard, 1981; Kane, 2020).

This paper also intends to bring up binaural recording technology as a technology that supports hyperrealistic conditions in this postmodern era. As explained in the previous background, binaural recording refers to a method of recording sound using a microphone in the shape of a human head to simulate the sounds in the recording in three-dimensional form. If virtual reality offers a visual simulation of an object, then binaural recording offers an audio simulation, so that it is able to simulate certain sensations that usually only appear when the audience experiences a real copy of that reality (Kullmann, 2014).

Research conducted by Wissmann & Zimmermann (2015) analyzes the application of binaural recording technology in audio drama and audio tours to simulate the reality that the recording is trying to show. In reviewing the audio drama The Three Investigators, Wissmann and Zimmermann found that the dynamics between the dialogue delivered by the voice actors, the background music, and the sound effects of the place in the scene played using binaural recording technology were able to stimulate the listener’s emotions to match their emotions, which the audio producer of the drama wants to stir up, so that it seems as if it simulates the reality of the listener only through sound. Then in its application in the field of audio tours with the example of the Austin Walking Tour, binaural recording is able to create sound effects from urban Texas so that listeners are also immersed in the atmosphere that is simulated by the recording.

In addition to using technology to trap consumers in hyperreality, Eco and Baudrillard also see that simulacrums can also be commodified by the consumer’s desire to “escape” from their reality. Eco observes that people’s obsession with simulacrums and hyperreality is driven by their ability to create a reality that is better than the reality people experience. He also uses the example of the Disneyland theme park as an example of this phenomenon, where the interior of Disneyland consists of depictions of fantasy worlds such as royal palaces. But at the same time Disneyland is also able to simulate the “ideal” nature by inviting visitors to ride a boat and see crocodiles in the swamps, so that when these visitors visit real swamps, they will be disappointed because there are no crocodiles or animals. that appear in simulacra at Disneyland (Eco, 1986; Farrell & Furman, 2019).

From the explanation above, this research tries to place the simulacrum and hyperreality that appears in the CD drama as a means for the audience to “escape” from reality—that is, what is known as escapism. Escapism can be defined as the human need to escape from their boring reality. In general, this need is met by consuming media that can trigger their imagination, such as through films, books, and other forms of fiction. This concept can be traced to the thoughts of Sigmund Freud, who argued that in essence, humans cannot get pleasure only from the reality they face, but also requires imaginary constructions of the reality that they consider ideal. This is also in line with the simulacra and hyperreality functions which are not only able to describe reality, but also polish it so that it looks ideal and more attractive than the original (Longeway, 1990; Jones, Cronin & Piacentini, 2018).

**RESEARCH METHOD**

This study will use a qualitative approach, in accordance with the paradigm reflected in the topic discussed in this paper, namely the critical paradigm. Data was collected by using literature review and observation methods. The primary data to be analyzed is the storyline, characters, and setting of the audio drama series that utilize dummyhead recording technology uploaded on the official Youtube channel of the Rejet Archive, namely Wasurenagusa and Seventh Heaven. While secondary data comes from relevant literature with topics discussed, such as books or scientific journals, news information published.
by mass media, and others. The researcher himself has been involved in the audio drama fan community since 2011. Observations will be made virtually on audio drama audiences in digital spaces such as on Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr and other blogging sites.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Simulacrum Forms and Hyperreality in Drama CD

Wassurenagusa is a CD drama series published by the company Rejet in 2012. The series consists of four series, to be exact two sequels namely Shinsengumi Mokuhiroku Wasurenagusa and Shinsengumi Kekkonroku Wasurenagusa, one prequel, Shinsengumi Gyoufuuroku Wasurenagusa, and an edition that tells of an alternative ending from the previous sequel, Shinsengumi Hiyokuroku Wasurenagusa. Each edition has a different number of volumes, depending on the number of characters that appear in that edition. Broadly speaking, this CD drama series is speculative historical fiction genre because it tells about the life of a police organization belonging to the shogunate in Kyoto before the Meiji era, namely the Shinsengumi. The characters that appear are all famous historical figures in Japan, such as Toshizou Hijikata or Katsura Kogoro. The listener acts as a female protagonist who will later establish a relationship with the main characters, thus influencing their decisions and changing the storyline so that it does not necessarily match the history recorded in reality.

First, in the aspect of the storyline, Wassurenagusa tends to adjust their plot to the timeline of recorded history. One example is the chronology of the death of one of the characters, namely Souji Okita. According to officially recorded history, Souji Okita died on July 19, 1868, and Souji’s character narrates his death complete with that date in the drama CD. However, in the extra tracks in the Shinsengumi Kekkonroku Wasurenagusa edition and all the volumes in the Shinsengumi Hiyokuroku Wasurenagusa edition, these characters are told to have different endings from their lives in recorded history, although they may be depicted marrying someone other than the protagonist or dying tragically in battle. The voids left by official history are also used as plot tools to provide opportunities for the characters to interact with the protagonist. The protagonist himself is actually a completely fictional character and is purely made as an extension of the listener because according to historical records, no woman is allowed to live or work at the Shinsengumi headquarters.

Second, in the character aspect, it is clear that the characterizations of each character do not match their depiction in history. An example is the portrayal of Keisuke Sannan’s character, which historically has been described as friendly and calm, but in Wassurenagusa, Keisuke’s character is portrayed as cold and perfectionist. The author also sees a pattern where the characterizations of these characters are based on stock characters or prints of the types of male characters favored by female fans towards Japanese media in general, such as the depiction of Isami Kondou as an older male stock character, and nurturing, Heisuke Toudou as an energetic stock character, and others. Their appearance is also not historically accurate, where at that time men generally had top knot hairstyles, while the characters here had hairstyles that tended to be modern or impractical for the sake of visual aesthetics.

The third is the depiction of the background of the place where scene by scene takes place. In the narrative, this series includes locations that exist in the real world and are indeed relevant in the history of the Shinsengumi. Examples are the Nishi Honganji temple which is the headquarters of the Shinsengumi, then the Shiei dojo where the aspiring members of the Shinsengumi used to practice Kendo, etc. The atmosphere depicted by certain scenes is also perfectly simulated, such as the sound of crowds during the summer festival, the sound of footsteps and the slashing of swords during an ambush in a restaurant, including the sound effects of blood splashing on wooden floors or brick walls that are so vivid.

From the explanation above, it can be drawn several forms of simulacrum from this CD drama series. The first is how they reproduce historical events to resemble the original, but also “repair” the history by giving the characters who appear happier endings. The second is the depiction of the personalities of the characters where although some depictions are indeed inspired by the original history, there are still elements that are polished to make them more ideal—in this case more attractive to the listeners. The third is
sound effects that are created to build the atmosphere of a scene, where the sound of the sword slashing produced is made as loud as possible so that it can be heard clearly and can be easily identified by listeners, but instead "replaces" the sound of the actual sword slashing which is slower, and not very audible.

Meanwhile, hyperreality appears in the drama CD Seventh Heaven. Unlike Wasurenagusa, Seventh Heaven only consists of one edition published in 2013 and is a fantasy genre, even though they are made by the same company, Rejet. The storyline of this drama CD takes place in a mansion in an unspecified location where a group of angels of death reside. The listeners return to the role of the female protagonist who died by suicide, where the death angel characters are tasked with transporting her soul to the afterlife. But for some reason, the protagonist had to wait for over a month for his soul to continue to the afterlife. The ending of each volume is roughly the same, namely that the angel of death who falls in love with the protagonist must send the protagonist to the afterlife, although their responses vary.

The most obvious hyperreality is the reduplication and reproduction of the depiction of the angel of death. In general, the grim reaper is identical to a skull-shaped figure who wears a black robe and carries a large scythe, but in this drama CD, the grim reaper looks like a butler although their hairstyles and uniforms vary with modifications that suit their character traits. Then they are described as ordinary humans who have feelings and desires, only they cannot die and have supernatural powers. In addition, this drama CD depicts that the angels of death can only send souls to the afterlife through their singing.

**Japanese Audio Drama with Binaural Recording Technology as a Means of Escapism**

This research has raised simulacrum and hyperreality elements in CD drama. Then previous research conducted by Kantitarina also found that CD drama fans like this media to fulfill their need for affection, even through imaginary digital simulations. For this reason, the author will draw a common thread that connects these two findings in greater depth, namely how CD drama with binaural recording technology can be used by their fans as a means for escapism.

First, the two drama CDs that have been studied both have varied characters, both in terms of personality and appearance. Some of them are also played by seiyuu with the largest fanbase in the industry, with different voice characters as well. This implies that listeners are given "freedom" to choose which character they like according to the factors that influence that choice, such as their favorite seiyuu or personality of each character. Listeners can also choose the character that best fits their ideal type to enjoy. Even so, listeners are not completely "free" to choose and are only given the illusion because basically their tastes are limited by the quantity of variety offered by the drama CD producers.

Second, the placement of a female protagonist who will later establish a relationship with the characters as an extension of the listener’s self. In both of these CD dramas, the protagonists both never speak, and if they do speak, their dialogue will be repeated by the character they are talking to. Information about the protagonist also tends to be unclear compared to the main characters where every detail of their characterization such as height and favorite food is included. The "emptiness" of the protagonist also provides space for listeners to put themselves in the protagonist’s place, or create protagonists who are idealized versions of themselves.

Third, the storylines offered by both drama CDs tend to be close to fantasy or contain elements that fans can perceive as more interesting than their reality. In Wasurenagusa, the protagonist is depicted as a woman who lost her parents in a battle between the Shinsengumi and their enemy, so the protagonist is offered to stay at the base as a servant. In his daily life, the protagonist is often fought over by the characters or experiences extraordinary events that are very unlikely to happen in the real world. Drama CD Seventh Heaven actually puts the protagonist in a situation that is impossible in the real world. Compared to their boring reality, it’s only natural that fans would choose to immerse themselves in the simulacrum and hyperreality that CD dramas have to offer.

Fourth, related to the first and third points, each character has a different "route", where their character also affects their
interaction with the protagonist. The writer observes that the dynamics between characters and protagonists generally follow certain patterns, which are based on the taste of CD drama fans in Japan for the relationship they perceive as ideal. This point cannot be applied absolutely to all drama CD fans in the world, but in essence the dynamics offered are trying to simulate the relationship that is considered ideal by fans who are their target audience. From this it is also natural that fans use CD dramas as a reference for their ideal romantic relationship, and reality rarely can meet these ideal standards so that fans will eventually return to enjoying the virtual reality that CD dramas have to offer.

Finally, in addition to the elements mentioned above, the use of binaural recording technology strengthens the simulacra and hyperreality offered by CD drama. Listeners can feel the sensation when their favorite character whispers something in their ear, or imagine the atmosphere and scene when the protagonist and character stroll along the river just by hearing the sound of their footsteps on the ground or the ripples of water. Unlike virtual reality which requires glasses or special machines, drama CD only requires a set of headphones or earphones to make fans more immersed in the simulation presented. Instead of being under the covers in a room alone, listeners can feel that they are in an inn or mansion and making out with their favorite characters.

CONCLUSION
Technology can strengthen the simulacrum or hyperreality offered by CD drama, and that simulacrum or hyperreality can be used as a medium for consumers to fulfill their escapism needs. The elements that make up a CD drama can obscure the fans’ reality of a real romantic relationship or couple, and how this binaural recording technology can trap them in a continuous simulation.

REFERENCE


