

## A Message of Gratitude and the State of JAMS in 2021

### **Billy Tringali**

It is no small feat to launch an academic journal, and no smaller feat to ensure its continuation past the initial excitement for a new project. Luckily, though my name is the one most prominent on this project, JAMS is not the product of this author alone – and that is how we have this second issue.

For this journal to exist, hundreds of hours of labor were required from scholars all around the world. From authors in Japan and the United Arab Emirates, to peer reviewers in Canada and Scotland, so many have dedicated their time and expertise to breathing life into JAMS' mission of exploring anime as an art form and bringing visibility to the deeper meanings, understandings, and cultural significance of anime, manga, cosplay, and their fandoms. For this outpouring of support for not only JAMS as a journal, but anime studies as a field, I have so much gratitude to give.

The *Journal of Anime and Manga Studies* is run entirely by volunteers. I give my enormous thanks to JAMS Editorial Board members, Maria Bonn, Kay K. Clopton, Mark Gellis, Andrea Horbinski, Frenchy Lunning, and Elizabeth Wickes, whose advice on and support of this publication is a mainstay in its success. My deepest gratitude must also go out to JAMS' many peer reviewers whose comments and suggestions strengthened the pieces present in our second volume, and those that may be resubmitted for future volumes. Thank you as well to the authors published in this issue, as well as all those who submitted their pieces and those who are considering publishing with JAMS in the future. JAMS would not be the project it is without all of you.

In my last ‘Letter from the Editor,’ I noted that I hoped JAMS “can exist as a space that publishes high-quality scholarship about anime, manga, cosplay, and their fandoms.” I am thrilled to see that this dream has come to pass in our second volume. At close to 300 pages, JAMS’ second volume is more than 100 pages longer than our first issue, and received double the number of submissions. I’m also over the moon to report that our first volume, one year from its initial publication, has received over 8,000 abstract and file views. For a small journal in a still-niche area of study, I consider this number to be staggering.

Such a strong response to - and such a powerful engagement with - JAMS seems to be a testament to not only the ever-expanding interest in anime and manga all around the world, but to the increasing enthusiasm for anime and manga studies as a discipline. This response has meant so much to me, especially during the nightmarish year that has been 2021. Being able to speak to so many people in so many different nations during the course of managing this volume, being able to read such fascinating work, and being able to see the *Journal of Anime and Manga Studies* referenced, spoken about, and shared on social media has filled me with so much excitement. I hope the papers you read in this volume will imbue you with the same feeling.

Thank you for reading the second volume of the *Journal of Anime and Manga Studies*.

With warmth,

Billy Tringali

Editor-In-Chief

## Dedication

### **Billy Tringali**

I would like to dedicate the second volume of the *Journal of Anime and Manga Studies* to two individuals who have supported JAMS' since its inception.

*Jessica Parent*      and      *Maria Alberto*

Beyond serving as JAMS' copy editors, your advice, support, collegiality, and most importantly, friendship, has been of unfathomable assistance throughout the building of JAMS' second volume. I hope that this dedication can express just how grateful I am for you, and not embarrass you too much.

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## The Spectacular Mundane in the Films of Studio Ghibli

**Zoe Crombie**

Volume 2, Pages 1-26

**Abstract:** This article examines how Studio Ghibli constructs the mundane activities shown in their films as spectacular. Looking at the history of the ways in which domestic and routine events are depicted in Japanese animation, I will use various methodologies, beginning with formalism and phenomenology before moving on to feminism and Marxism to critically analyse several Ghibli films as case studies – *My Neighbors The Yamadas* (1999, *Hōhokekyo Tonari no Yamada kun*), *Only Yesterday* (1991, *Omoide Poro Poro*), and *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004, *Hauru no Ugoku Shiro*). Using these methodologies, the films are placed into a broader cinematic context, and the filmic legacy of their treatment of the mundane is explored.

**Keywords:** Ghibli, mundane, anime, spectacle, domesticity

**Author Bio:** Zoe Crombie is a researcher in film and anime studies at Lancaster University, UK. She is currently investigating Studio Ghibli's European adaptations in the context of transcultural exchange, and can be found watching *Howl's Moving Castle* on repeat.

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## Introduction:

To begin, I would like to clarify my usage of the words ‘spectacular’ and ‘mundane’, upon which this article depends. Rather than implications of boredom implied by some definitions, I am using the term ‘mundane’ to mean ‘characterised by the practical, transitory, and ordinary’<sup>1</sup> – domestic chores and other everyday occurrences, for example. Similarly, while spectacle is often associated with excitement, I intend to use the definition of the term that I believe relates most closely to its use in film scholarship: ‘something exhibited to view as unusual, notable, or entertaining’<sup>2</sup>. Whilst existing research on mundane and domestic activities within Japanese cinema certainly exists--most notably David Bordwell’s investigation of the films of Ozu Yasujiro<sup>3</sup>, which heavily centre around domestic situations--there is little currently that specifically focuses on anime. This is especially fascinating as, outside of academia, this is an attractive element of anime for many viewers, to the extent that the popular website TV Tropes describes the concept ‘Mundane Made Awesome’<sup>4</sup> that features often in slice of life anime TV shows. However, elements that I will refer to as ‘fantasy’ are still a significant aspect of Ghibli works, so I will define this term here as ‘a creation of the imaginative faculty’<sup>5</sup>, in contrast to what is possible and plausible in reality. Ultimately, my goal is therefore to bring an exploration of the mundane as spectacular into animation scholarship, especially as it pertains to the works of Studio Ghibli, who often utilise the spectacular mundane within their broader narratives.

## Domestic Situations in Anime

To understand the domestic scenes in anime that place a significant value on the mundane, we must first examine the ancient Japanese religion of Shintoism that began in the Yayoi Period (400 BCE–300 CE)<sup>6</sup> and that one could argue has strongly

influenced this tendency. The ‘essence’ of Shintoism is put forward by scholar and practitioner of Shinto, Yamakage Motohisa, as ‘our relationship and interdependence with Kami’ defined as ‘the powers of the spiritual dimension’<sup>7</sup>. Rather than remaining in a separate spiritual realm inaccessible by living humans, as is the case in religions such as Christianity, the interaction with Kami through mundane activities is a key element of celebrating and honouring the Gods. For instance, ‘charm cards’, or omamori dedicated to specific Kami, are given to people like drivers and students for luck, removed from any sacred context<sup>8</sup>. Though the importance of various Kami is considered hierarchical (with the sun goddess Amaterasu at the top of this chain), according to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Japanese scholar Norinaga Motôri they can still be found within ‘all other awe inspiring things’<sup>9</sup>, even inanimate objects such as mountains<sup>10</sup>. This suggests that a spectacular reading of the mundane has been present in Japanese culture for centuries, as ‘virtually any thing’<sup>11</sup> could be considered Kami.

Unsurprisingly, references to Shinto shrines and Kami have appeared explicitly in a number of films by Studio Ghibli, particularly those set in rural, early 20<sup>th</sup> century Japan like *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988, *Tonari no Totoro*)<sup>12</sup>. When the family arrives at their new home at the start of the film, the youngest daughter Mei notices the disappearance and reappearance of ‘soot sprites’, sentient pieces of dust that have taken up residence in the home. These creatures are not described as Kami, but the divine powers they possess are heavily implied by how they appear out of thin air in flurries, inanimate objects - albeit with anthropomorphised faces – that somehow contain life. Eventually, these creatures leave the house when the family ritualistically laugh while bathing together, evoking ‘cleansings’ within ‘flowing water’<sup>13</sup> that occur frequently within Shintoism. These nods to practices within Kami worship, when

combined with the awe and excitement of the children at seeing an object as simple as a dust bunny, suggest that much of the spectacle in Studio Ghibli films may be steeped in and influenced by these religious practices.

Mundane actions of the everyday have a particularly privileged position in the world of early cinema, with simple actualities like *The Arrival of a Train*<sup>14</sup> often being referred to as some of the first cinematographic works ever made. This extends to the first anime ever created, *Katsudo Shashin*<sup>15</sup>. The film is three seconds long, depicting a boy in red, black, and white as he writes the characters ‘活動写真’ (romanised as ‘katsudo shashin’, meaning ‘moving picture’) on the background. He then turns to the spectator to remove his hat and bow down – a simple series of gestures that exists only to display the spectacle of this new medium. In another significant development in the history of anime, the first Japanese animation to have synchronised sound was a small-scale romantic comedy focused on a small scale, domestic issue. The film, *Chikara to Onna no Yo no Naka* (1933, *Within the World of Power and Women*)<sup>16</sup>, centres around a husband and his overbearing wife, whose nagging leads him to have an affair with his typist. This misogynist plot may be a far cry from the feminist readings of Ghibli which will be discussed later in this article, but the fixation on simple human interactions within a familiar domestic sphere remains.

Prior projects by Studio Ghibli’s two founding directors, Takahata Isao and Miyazaki Hayao, also abound in a celebration of the simple everyday. As what is arguably Takahata’s most well-known pre-Ghibli work, the series *Heidi, Girl of the Alps* (1974, *Arupusu no Shôjo Haiji*)<sup>17</sup> has a focus on the simple pastoral life of its titular protagonist, a young orphan girl taken in by her extended family. Within the first episode of the show, Heidi undertakes activities like hiking and goat herding, all

rendered in a softly coloured, minimalist aesthetic. While the plot itself involves elements as sensationalist as murder, the visuals of the show provide an outlook that maintains the calm tone of Heidi's everyday life. By choosing to 'emphasize quotidian actions and emotion rather than fantasy or adventure'<sup>18</sup>, an inherent value is placed on Heidi being able to interact with her home environment at her own pace. A similar value is put onto the everyday in Miyazaki and Takahata's earlier and similar short *Panda! Go Panda!* (1972, *Pando Kopanda*)<sup>19</sup>. Although it features the fantastical idea of being raised by a large, anthropomorphic panda, this novelty primarily exists to show the orphaned protagonist able to engage with simple domestic practices, such as making dinner for her new family.

Takahata's *My Neighbors The Yamadas* (1999, *Hōhokekyo Tonari no Yamada kun*)<sup>20</sup> departs from the usual Ghibli house style by utilising a simplistic comic book aesthetic, often rendered solely through thin black lines with a watercolour finish, that was achieved through digital animation. The film is one of the earliest examples of a feature animated film that was made entirely digitally rather than traditional methods such as cell animation used in prior Ghibli works. This allows for a clean aesthetic reminiscent of the simplistic 'emakimono' style of drawing in Japan which 'freed' artists from 'over illustrative details' in depicting people<sup>21</sup>. This was markedly different from the complex use of CGI and 3D animation films by Pixar emerging at the same time - *Toy Story 2*<sup>22</sup> the same year, for instance. The plot of the film features few fantasy elements, instead fixating on the goings on of an average Japanese family. As somewhat of a visual outlier in the Ghibli filmography, I believe it both aesthetically and thematically intensifies and abstracts the notion of domesticity in the Studio's films to its purest form. Rather than weaving a focus on the mundane throughout a

wider narrative, the mundane is the bulk of the narrative. Here, the Ghibli preoccupation with everyday activities reached its peak, as domestic Japanese customs and familial relationships are given room to exist only for themselves, rather than to forward a more eventful plot. Rather than a linear cause and effect narrative, Takahata utilises a more episodic structure. Each short segment has a grandiose, tongue in cheek title such as ‘A Family Torn Apart’ or ‘Patriarchal Supremacy Restored’ – these humorously contrast with the mundane content of the shorts.

The way in which the mundane is given spectacular treatment by Takahata in the film is exemplified in a later sequence of the vignette ‘Marriage Yamada Style’, where a domestic situation plays out into a performance that other characters in the scene comment upon. Takashi, the father, and Matsuko, the mother, are fighting for control of the TV, the former to watch sports and the latter to watch a film. Unlike the strangely proportioned and exaggerated designs of the Yamadas, the sports stars shown on the TV screen have been animated through the rotoscope technique, in which actual photographic footage is traced over to create a realist appearance of movement. The fact that this screen is framed centrally also helps in the treatment of the broadcast as spectacular, until the hypothetical camera eventually pulls out to reveal that this is only a minor focus in a larger scene, and that Takashi’s gaze is fixated on a newspaper, implying that these small spectacles can be found throughout the household. When the argument breaks out between Takashi and Matsuko, the former attempts to block the TV remote’s sensor with his paper, and the ensuing fight resembles a ballet in its fluidity of movement. The punchline that ends the sequence is shown via the camera once again pulling back from the TV, to reveal Shige (the grandmother) and Nonoko (the daughter) watching their family members for

entertainment and exchanging the following lines: ‘now no one can watch TV’, ‘this is much more interesting’. As well as layering the gazes of the characters for comedic effect, the scene also uses the idea of spectatorship to convey the main thesis of the film. Through this sequence, *My Neighbors the Yamadas* posits that the everyday goings on of a family can often be more exciting and compelling than what is typically constructed as spectacle, e.g. a sports game or mainstream movie.

### **Experiencing the Mundane Anew**

In order to effectively analyse how domesticity and the mundane in Studio Ghibli films is depicted as desirable and enjoyable, I will employ multiple methodologies. Besides the ideological approaches such as feminism and Marxism which we will get to later in this article, I will first explore the formal elements of film through the lens of defamiliarization and phenomenology. The first method belongs to the school of formalism, which posits that everything needed to understand a text can be found within it. Conversely, the latter is concerned with the relationship between the human subject and film object, and the subjective experience that can come from viewing any kind of art. By using these theories in conjunction, I hope to uncover first how Ghibli defamiliarizes the domestic to be seen anew, and then to understand how this aids the sensual, subjective joy that is generated when watching these mundane scenes.

Defamiliarization, a concept established by the Russian formalist movement, specifically Viktor Shklovsky, is a useful tool in examining how the films of the studio reframe mundane scenarios. Ghibli often encourages their audience to re-examine events in their day to day lives with a perspective removed from their usual repetition and familiarity. In his essay ‘Art as Technique’<sup>23</sup>, Shklovsky identifies that ‘as

perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic'<sup>24</sup>, giving the example of 'speaking in a foreign language for the first time'<sup>25</sup> compared to when it eventually becomes second nature. Therefore, his idea of 'defamiliarization' in art (poetry as the given example in his essay) is about recreating the original experience of interacting with an object. I argue that this idea is imperative in studying depictions of the mundane onscreen, as representations of familiar actions can be reintroduced to audiences in a way that allows them to appreciate them anew – letting them 'make the stone stony'<sup>26</sup> again.

As an art form reliant entirely on pictorial representation in motion, I argue that two-dimensional animation is a key medium in terms of its ability to defamiliarize. By abstracting a familiar image into a collection of colours and lines, the viewer is unconsciously forced to analyse the frame and determine what exactly is being depicted. This then challenges them to newly recognise an image that has previously been second nature, in a way that direct photographic representation may not. This is exemplified in Eisenstein's notion of 'plasticity', defined by Pasi Valiaho as the ability of animated forms to 'at any moment [be] susceptible to stretching, bending and rebounding, if not to total shape-shifting'<sup>27</sup>. The shapes of animation are dynamic and undefined by nature – automatically defamiliarized by their own instability, even when not in motion.

Though defamiliarization is helpful and relevant to this article as a standalone method of filmic analysis, I will be utilising it in conjunction with a method from another framework in order to effectively study why domestic moments in Ghibli films are both freshly presented and sensually appealing. Phenomenology is a framework concerned with subjective, sensual interpretations that is defined by theorist Robert

Sokolowski as ‘the study of human experience’<sup>28</sup>. Rather than studying the formal mechanisms of a film in isolation, phenomenology is interested in how individual viewers respond to a work of art. This is exemplified in Edmund Husserl’s process of phenomenological production, which involves two parts: performing the ‘epoche’ and reduction proper. The first is defined by casting aside preconceptions about an object or situation in order to ‘examine them in a new light, namely in their appearance’<sup>29</sup>. The second step is to investigate your newly uncovered reactions, observations, and sensory experiences of the object: ‘our thematization of the correlation between subjectivity and world’<sup>30</sup>. Much like defamiliarization, the result is a fresh feeling towards an object that has become everyday. But while defamiliarization takes place solely as part of the film text, phenomenological reduction via performing the epoche is about the relationship between subject and object.

As a film focused on the commonplace yet highly sensuous memories of its protagonist, *Only Yesterday* (1991, *Omoide Poro Poro*)<sup>31</sup> is an excellent candidate for analysis through both formalist and phenomenological lenses. With a narrative that takes place over two time periods, that of the protagonist Taeko as both a young girl and a grown woman, the film is concerned with the everyday experiences that have shaped her worldview, from early discussions of puberty to the excitement in trying her first pineapple. However, these experiences seem to have been selected by Takahata less for their significance as standard milestones (first words, graduation, etc.) and more for how their emotional and sensual power has forced Taeko to etch them into her mind as the most important, formative moments in her early life. This narrative structure alone reinforces the privilege of the mundane afforded to many

Ghibli productions, allowing the simple, understated moments that have made up the life of a young woman to constitute the entire runtime of a film. This is highlighted effectively in the Japanese title of the film, Romanised as ‘Omoide Poro Poro’, which translates to ‘Memories Come Tumbling Down’. In this sense, *Only Yesterday* fits Gilles Deleuze’s notion of the ‘time image’<sup>32</sup>, in which a film focuses on identification with the protagonist’s subjective experience of time – a mode that further emphasises the importance of the personal, and therefore often the ordinary.

The most evident scene for analysis in the film is the moment in which Taeko remembers eating a pineapple with her family for the first time, her sensory recall being the primary purpose of the scene. The subjective nature of memory is signalled throughout the film by the faded, pale quality of the flashback sequences. Rather than utilising black and white, a conventional choice for this type of scene, Takahata makes these scenarios seem distant and muddled via a more sepia toned palette. However, in making these scenes less accessible to the audience, Takahata invokes a sense of subjectivity in Taeko that we are privy to, paradoxically making the scene more intimate by constructing it more broadly. By aligning us with Taeko with this technique, as well as consistent spatio-temporal alignment throughout the entire runtime, we are inclined to think sensually of the aroma of pineapples when she breathes in, taking in the smell of the fruit. As this mundane object is unfamiliar and unusual to young Taeko as a Japanese girl in the 1960s, it is defamiliarized by both the narrative and by the ‘camera’ lingering upon her family’s interaction with it. For instance, the closeup of the pineapple being cut while her family are speaking places it at the top of the visual hierarchy, beyond even the communication between characters. As she takes a bite, we are also invited to imagine what this slice of pineapple might

taste like, the sensory evocation in the scene lending even greater importance to a simple moment of novel domesticity. Her disappointment at the unripe pineapple is eventually revealed to be at the heart of this formative moment, and we can feel this frustration as viewers, especially if we have already recalled the taste along with her, and the bathos of the scene solidifies the impact of seemingly unimportant moments.

Moving away from depictions of food, the way in which the farming routine is depicted is also very sensually evocative, encouraging the viewer to emphatically relate to the physical sensations of the characters. Takahata uses Taeko's voiceover to describe what she understands of the safflower farming process, allowing us to enter into her subjective experience. As well as explaining the process, the narration creates a connection between Taeko and the village girls who had done this before her, mentioning the pain they felt in picking the flowers without gloves. As well as providing an interesting perspective on the pain in women's labour, this ultimately superfluous detail encourages sensory alignment in Taeko when she reacts to the feeling of being pricked by the thorns. When performing the *epoche* on this particular scene, I was drawn to the extensive use of foley sound (picking the flowers, squishing them into containers, etc.) that gives an effect akin to synaesthesia. In hearing the sound of her pressing the flowers, viewers understand how they would feel to the touch, and are further immersed in the sensual elements of the process. The use of similes in the script – 'like liquid gold' – also seems to encourage phenomenological thought, allowing the viewer to also make subjective connections between the safflowers and what they have personally experienced. Defamiliarisation, much like in the pineapple scene, is brought forth through closeups and long takes, in this case of the safflowers themselves. By markedly observing the shape, colour and texture of the

plant, we are placing a new significance on the nature depicted in the film, Taeko's description of their importance to the local economy granting them even greater value.

### **Ideological Readings of Domesticity**

'Many of my movies have strong female leads - brave, self-sufficient girls that don't think twice about fighting for what they believe with all their heart. They'll need a friend, or a supporter, but never a saviour. Any woman is just as capable of being a hero as any man.'<sup>33</sup>

This quote originates from an interview with Miyazaki for The Guardian from 2013, but has been shared across the internet by thousands as direct evidence of Studio Ghibli's feminist ideology as a studio. The concept of a 'strong female lead' is defined by Miyazaki not through physical strength, but by their compassion and a willingness to act on what they believe is morally right, suggesting that this form of strength is not entirely incompatible with conceptions of femininity. It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that the mundane situations I have been analysing carry primarily feminine associations, occurring in the home or more broadly in the realm of the domestic.

Of course, it is important to ensure that any feminist perspective imposed onto the films of Ghibli relates specifically to Japanese forms of the movement. In the 1970s and 1980s, when Miyazaki and Takahata's careers were beginning, the discussion around women's 'desire for control over their own reproductive capacity'<sup>34</sup> was a key feminist issue. Simultaneously, there was a growing sense of resentment over the 'domestic labour'<sup>35</sup> that they were forced to undertake in the home. With this in mind, the choice of the Ghibli directors to primarily portray prepubescent girls or young women becomes particularly interesting – in their formative years, these protagonists

almost never express a desire to procreate, and their character arcs often leave their futures open. However, this does not equate to a wholesale rejection of femininity; though some protagonists, like San from *Princess Mononoke* (1997, *Mononoke Hime*)<sup>36</sup>, are shown to reject elements of traditional femininity like politeness and an aversion to violence, I'd argue that most actually conform to these ideals. For example, Marnie from *When Marnie Was There* (2014, *Omoide no Mānī*)<sup>37</sup> and Sheeta from *Castle In The Sky* (1986, *Tenku no Shiro Rapyuta*)<sup>38</sup> both have conventionally feminine appearances (long hair, dresses, long eyelashes, etc.) and act within the rules of traditional etiquette. Narratively, *Only Yesterday* presents many of the conventionally feminine experiences of Taeko (periods and arguing with her sisters over new clothes). To be clear, this is not to imply that they are inactive in their own narratives because of their femininity; I argue that one of Ghibli's more recognisable features is its treatment of the feminine as powerful, particularly that of working-class women.

Understandably, the feminist readings mentioned tend towards looking at the heroism of the female characters when removed from a domestic context – for instance, when in battle or plunged into fantastical worlds. However, this context is nonetheless frequently depicted in numerous Ghibli films and suggests a complex relationship between its many female protagonists and their expected roles in society. This both meshes with and complicates the negative connotations of being 'just a housewife'<sup>39</sup> put forward by second wave feminists like Betty Friedan. Although the female characters have agency in the narrative outside of the home, an undeniable joy is taken in mundane, domestic work by characters of all genders. In depicting this work

as potentially fulfilling and enjoyable for anybody, the filmmakers of Ghibli are advocating and romanticising a widely disparaged form of labour – ‘women’s work’.

Intersectionality in feminist theory, in particular its ‘ontological complexity’ is defined by feminist scholar Ange-Marie Hancock as ‘the idea that analytical categories like “race”, “gender”, “class”, and the hegemonic practices associated with them [...] are mutually constitutive, not conceptually distinct’<sup>40</sup>. For instance, women are considered to be oppressed under patriarchy, and the working class are similarly oppressed under capitalism, so working-class women possess a unique set of struggles and experiences. The domestic scenes of Ghibli films are especially interesting from the perspective of the intersection of gender and class, as while labour undertaken in the home is often feminised, the studio frames this positively, empowering the female and working-class characters of its films. This sometimes comes in the form of framing male characters with traditionally feminine attributes in a positive light, rather than presenting female characters with masculine traits as is often lauded as progressive. By portraying the feminine domestic in an ideal light, Ghibli posits that a conventionally feminine outlook on life may be more beneficial than a masculine one. This empowers all kinds of people regardless of background to take joy in their everyday and discredits arbitrary boundaries of gender and class.

As a Studio Ghibli film with a female protagonist that eventually settles down into a family with her significant other, whose name is featured in the very title of the film instead of hers, *Howl’s Moving Castle* (2004, *Hauru no Ugoku*)<sup>41</sup> displays how domesticity can be portrayed positively through an intersectional feminist and Marxist understanding. Much like the other case studies I have provided thus far, this film also includes numerous scenes of domestic labour irrelevant to plot progression. I argue

that this serves to romanticise and idealise these typically feminine processes, making ‘women’s work’ broadly appealing. Even the narrative structure seems to uphold this: rather than maintaining the pace by building towards various spectacular set pieces, it moves slowly, the war existing more as a barrier to domestic joy than as an awe-inspiring event. The purpose of this widespread masculine threat is ultimately to bring forth a valuing of the intimate feminine domestic. Explaining this, Cheng-Ing Wu states that ‘if the poetics of space optimizes the ideal of the universal human yearning for peace and for an integrated family, the most fearful threat to this is war’<sup>42</sup>. Though there are scenes throughout the film (that I will describe below) that effectively exemplify how exactly Miyazaki achieves this, it can be summarised by the way he chooses to end the film. Rather than ending the war through a total victory against an identifiable evil, the conflict subsides through democracy, with the characters not celebrating, but quietly and contently enjoying their new life as a family unit.

In order to later subvert the gender norms established as part of the fantasy world of *Howl’s Moving Castle*, Miyazaki begins by including a scene in which Sophie’s mundane life is threatened by a potentially violent masculinity. On her way to meet her sister at the bakery, she is cornered in an alley by two soldiers, depicted from a low angle, who refer to her as ‘a little mouse’ to imply she is prey to be toyed with. Before this progresses any further (though older audiences may understand the more sinister implications of this moment), a new character arrives behind Sophie, their face partially obscured. While both voice actors for the character (Christian Bale and Takuya Kimura) utilise a low, confident register, indicating masculinity, their slender frame and long, elegant clothes suggest androgyny, especially in contrast to the uniforms and facial hair of the soldiers. The character, later revealed to be Howl,

condescends to the soldiers before using magic to force them to frog march away, a parody of their brash masculinity that shifts the tone from threatening to absurd. As the camera pans up to Howl's face, we see that his hair is long and light, and that he is wearing earrings and a necklace. This combination of gender signifiers suggests that Howl is not a slave to performing masculinity – while male, the way he appears removes the threat of masculine violence. The fact that he 'saves' Sophie in this scene could be interpreted as upholding stereotypical gender roles. Even so, I would argue that Howl's position as Sophie's more feminine saviour actually serves to highlight certain values associated with femininity that anyone can embody – namely, pacifism and domestic harmony.

An early scene of domestic harmony comes in Sophie's first interaction with Howl as an old woman, as she attempts to prepare breakfast for the family. Initially, this scene appears to comply with conventional gender roles: Sophie, the only woman in the 'family' and the oldest one there, undertakes the domestic duties, claiming she has her 'work cut out for her'. Although Howl's arrival into the home initially fits within these roles, as he appears to be weary from some unknown work, the situation is subverted when he insists on taking over the cooking, much to Sophie's apparent confusion. His expression changes to be visibly brighter, implying that a kind of regenerative effect can be produced from domestic work beyond the physical. This is emphasised by the visual treatment of the food being cooked – much like scenes from the previous case studies, the detailed foley sound and vibrant tones, as well as the closeup shots, invite you to consume the image sensuously. Howl's willingness to undertake this typically feminised domestic labour, as well as his natural talent at doing so, removes the stigma of performing labour beyond the confines of your gender,

providing a foundation on which Miyazaki makes ‘women’s work’ appealing to all. This subsequently implies that cleaning up the remainder of the house will bring him closer to contentment; indeed, this is true at the end of the film, in which the castle is in its best shape, and Howl is at peace.

### **Responses to Ghibli’s Depictions of Domesticity**

One way in which the impact of Ghibli’s treatment of the mundane can be measured is through an analysis of the ways in which fans of the studio are able to interact with their creations. Beyond the critical acclaim and international popularity the studio has received, one breakout feature of the films in particular has received an amount of fan attention disproportionate to the onscreen time it receives: food. As discussed earlier, scenes involving food as the subject matter are often given a defamiliarizing and highly sensual treatment, which has led to enormous online popularity (for example, viral Tweets that have amassed over 300,000 likes<sup>43</sup>). Interestingly, this includes various recipe blogs that attempt to recreate the food depicted in Ghibli films, most notably En93Kitchen<sup>44</sup> who gained over one hundred thousand followers posting images of Ghibli dishes she made in real life. To an extent, this confirms that the films have a phenomenological impact, leading people to want to experience the sensations they achieve through watching the films more directly and physically. Simultaneously, the production of yet more images of food based on Ghibli’s creations suggests a desire to see mundane objects as spectacular, evident in the popularity of food blogs and videos with which Ghibli may hold an aesthetic and thematic similarity.

Despite an ongoing distribution deal with Disney, a company known for its merchandising and vertical integration, Studio Ghibli has maintained an image

disconnected from consumerism, and yet still heavily associated with the everyday. Though the studio itself has produced some merchandise, the vast majority of Ghibli products available online are unofficial and unlicensed, using iconography like Totoro and the soot sprites in an attempt to appeal to fans of the films and children more broadly. This suggests a desire from viewers to integrate imagery from the studio into their domestic lives – a product like a non-licensed Totoro tea towel, for instance, seems to harken back to relevant images of cleaning common to many of their films. This brand image beyond the films is also cultivated by the Ghibli museum – once again, an interesting comparison with Disney, whose attraction is the largest theme park in the world. This museum is of a modest size, attracting only 650,000 visitors a year<sup>45</sup> in comparison to Disneyworld's 52 million annual attendees<sup>46</sup>, further highlighting Ghibli's connection with the small scale and personal. This also stretches to the content inside of the museum; rather than traditionally spectacular rides, short films and exhibitions make up most of the attractions.

Unsurprisingly, the powerful legacy of Studio Ghibli looms large over anime films from other studios that have been released in recent years, resulting in homage via aesthetics and subject matter, including portraying the mundane as spectacular. For instance, as the initial choice to direct *Howl's Moving Castle*<sup>47</sup>, director Hosoda Mamoru holds a noted interest in the Studio emblematic of their revered place in the anime industry. I argue that similarities between the two directors can be found in Hosoda's film *Mirai* (2018, *Mirai no Mirai*)<sup>48</sup> – its nomination for Best Animated Feature at the 2019 Academy Awards suggests a similarly transnational appeal. In this film, Hosoda uses fantasy imagery to explore the importance of family and domesticity from the perspective of a five-year-old boy and his small world. Although Hosoda has

his own creative voice as a director, one can draw a clear line of influence from Miyazaki's common themes to works like *Mirai*, particularly in the use of a child protagonist who allows the audience to experience the domestic world from a fresh perspective.

Most notably, the legacy of Studio Ghibli is partially comprised of Studio Ponoc, which contains a group of animators who previously worked at Ghibli. While the most obvious similarities between the studios are the lush 2D animated aesthetic they share and the children's fantasy stories both frequently depict, I'd argue that Ponoc have also carried forward Ghibli's treatment of the ordinary into their own films. Though this truly comes to fruition in their anthology of short films *Modest Heroes* (2018, *Chīsana Eiyū: Kani to Tamago to Tōmei Ningen*)<sup>49</sup>, their first feature *Mary and the Witch's Flower* (2017, *Meari to Majo no Hana*)<sup>50</sup> foregrounds this with its focus on accessible nature, particularly the sensory aspects of gardening (much like *Only Yesterday*). As well as featuring a young female protagonist, a trope common to Ghibli works, the film is rooted in its pastoral setting, its title coming from the small blue flower that the protagonist Mary comes across while exploring the woods near her grandmother's house. This flower can be seen as an emblem for Ponoc's reinterpretation of Ghibli's spectacular mundane: the unassuming yet powerful phenomena that hide in the corners of our everyday life. Evidently, Ghibli's spectacular treatment of the mundane has resonated with both filmmakers and audiences alike. While their more conventionally spectacular imagery - that of flying castles and fantasy Gods - is still popular, this more unconventional treatment of the everyday has proved surprisingly evocative. As a result, there is a well-documented audience desire to recreate these

images in their own domestic lives, as well as continued explorations of this theme from subsequent filmmakers who cite Studio Ghibli as their thematic source.

## **Final Thoughts**

To draw any meaningful conclusions from this research, it is first important to explicitly acknowledge that the intended audience for Ghibli films is children. This has an important impact on the way their films are conceived, particularly in terms of their ability to inform and educate. While, as previously stated, there is a large portion of adult viewers (myself included) who enjoy actively integrating this domestic imagery into their lives, I understand this as more of a side effect of their treatment of the mundane than their target audience. The goal of these films has been plainly stated, with Miyazaki Hayao saying in interviews that his intention in making his animations is to tell children that ‘it’s good to be alive’<sup>51</sup>. This implies that the formal techniques used to create this spectacular mundane are intended to reassure the young target audience that contentment can be found in everyday life, not only in the fantastic spectacle that Ghibli depicts as its equal. The formalist and phenomenological readings that I examined from various scenes demonstrate how a viewer is invited to engage with domestic scenes on a deeper, more sensuous level than is usually requested, especially in the context of children’s media. Therefore, I argue that these scenes exist at least partially to encourage a young audience to respond to the mundanity in their own lives with a similar focus and resonance (as is a precedent in Japanese culture through Shinto).

By romanticising domestic and everyday tasks in the majority of their works, Studio Ghibli provide an unusual reverence for the mundane that is simultaneously in line with Japanese tradition while still being symptomatic of more modern ideologies

like feminism and Marxism. In primarily focusing on the lives of young, usually working-class women, Ghibli places an inherent value on their experiences. I argue that the fact that any of these characters received entire dedicated films is enough to suggest feminist intentions of empowerment. Rather than striving to be the most powerful, or to become the most wealthy, these characters seek happiness and contentment in a more low-key way that is drawn from a compassion for their surroundings, whether it comes in the form of saving the forest or enjoying a cup of hot chocolate. As the protagonists of children's media, this therefore gives the young audience an alternative model not just for womanhood but for children of all genders in approaching the seemingly duller elements of life when you are not in an extraordinary position. These scenes of the spectacular mundane exemplify the compassion that can come from domestic life, and the affection that so many people now hold for Studio Ghibli as iconic creators of animated masterpieces.

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## Boy with Machine:

A Deleuzo-Guattarian Critique of *Neon Genesis Evangelion***Betty Stojnic**

Volume 2, Pages 27-56

**Abstract:** In this paper, I provide an analysis of the anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and the feature film *The End of Evangelion* through the theory of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as outlined in their seminal work *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. I tackle the authors' concepts of the oedipal and of absolute deterritorialization in order to provide a philosophical consideration of the series' central plot points and developments. My aim is to employ Charles J. Stivale's concept of academic "animation" to critique *Evangelion's* emphasis on the nuclear family structure and its influence on subject-formation, as well as to demonstrate that a Deleuzo-Guattarian framework is uniquely suited for this task. I conclude that *Evangelion*, through its experimental use of animation as a medium, produces a compelling depiction of absolute deterritorialization in the form of the Human Instrumentality Project. However, the series ultimately remains loyal to its prioritisation of the family unit (rooted in psychoanalysis and the Oedipus complex), with the protagonist Ikari Shinji rejecting Instrumentality and preferring, instead, to live as a unified subject defined by familial relations.

**Keywords:** psychoanalysis, deterritorialization, oedipal, philosophy, *Evangelion*

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## Introduction

The science-fiction anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion*<sup>1</sup> (1995-1996, *Shinseiki Evangerion*) and its feature-length finale *The End of Evangelion*<sup>2</sup> (1997, *Shinseiki Evangerion gekijô-ban*), hereafter jointly referred to as *Evangelion*, are set in Japan between two apocalyptic events of extraterrestrial contact – the Second and Third Impact. They depict the lives and efforts of the child members of NERV, a paramilitary organization dedicated to protecting Tokyo and the world from outer space attacks by alien invaders (Angels), which they thwart with giant, semi-organic mechs. In the last two episodes of the series and in the film, however, the routine clashes with Angels take a back seat to *Evangelion*'s more philosophically charged narrative invention – the Human Instrumentality Project – through which the show explores more abstract themes of identity and subject formation. The objective of this paper is to present a viable philosophical analysis of *Evangelion* and the Human Instrumentality Project by employing the terminology of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, their most far-reaching collaboration, consists of two volumes: *Anti-Oedipus*<sup>3</sup> (first published in 1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus*<sup>4</sup> (1980), the idiosyncratic jargon of which enables the authors to rethink and reshape conventional theoretical, political, and metaphysical principles. Following the lead of scholars such as Charles J. Stivale, I engage in what has been referred to as the *animation* of Deleuze and Guattari's intellectual legacy. In this context, the term “animation” is used to describe the process of enlivening and recontextualizing Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts as a productive methodology of cultural criticism. With this essay, I offer a continuation of such a mode of discourse by applying it to anime, exploring the medium's philosophical potential, and examining *animation* across the word's web of connections and connotations.

The two concepts on which I will focus while discussing *Evangelion* will be *the oedipal* and *absolute deterritorialization*, the former receiving the most consideration from Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* and the latter in *A Thousand Plateaus*. I describe what I believe to be *Evangelion*'s endorsement of an oedipal prescription criticized heavily by the authors, namely in the show's insistence on the familial determination of its central characters. I also argue that the series creates an analogue to absolute deterritorialization with the Human Instrumentality Project, a conspiracy to rid humanity of its embodied and isolated form. Aside from narrativizing the concept through characters and dialogue, *Evangelion* also takes advantage of the visual versatility of animation to produce a poignant artistic contemplation of absolute deterritorialization. In spite of this, the ultimate failure of Instrumentality and the way it is conceived in the series, I argue, is the result of *Evangelion*'s commitment to the oedipal triangle and its extensive philosophical implications with respect to the indispensability of the nuclear family. Beyond simply inserting this terminology into a study of the series, I hope to, as a corollary, demonstrate the utility of examining *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* in relation to its relevance to visual media and storytelling. As a critique, the approach I take in this paper is to question some of the assumptions *Evangelion* appears to make and to, in turn, advance a convincing case for the importance of animation (as an art form and as an academic method) for the discussion and production of philosophical concepts.

## Animations

In the edited volume *Animations (of Deleuze and Guattari)* (2003), Lawrence Grossberg defines the animation of the authors' thought as "a way of bending their work to one's own project, even as one allows one's project to be reoriented by their work."<sup>5</sup> This interactive "taking up" of their philosophy, first proposed by Charles J.

Stivale in *The Two-Fold Thought of Deleuze and Guattari* (1998),<sup>6</sup> is intended to encourage a creative and diverse engagement with their theory. The ambiguous nature of the term, as Grossberg points out, enables one to imagine that both Deleuze and Guattari's ideas and the phenomena to which they are applied are being brought to life in this process.<sup>7</sup> Science fiction cultural products, in particular, seem to have inspired Deleuzo-Guattarian animations of many kinds, such as Stivale's reflections on the genre in his article "Mille/Punks/Cyber/Plateaus" (1991),<sup>8</sup> Jennifer D. Slack's reading of *The Matrix* (2003),<sup>9</sup> and Ronald Bogue's 2011 analysis of the novels of Octavia Butler with respect to Deleuze and Guattari's final joint project, *What Is Philosophy?* (1991).<sup>10</sup>

In spite of this, science fiction manga and anime remain comparatively neglected as a subject of academic animation. Steven T. Brown's discussion of Ôtomo Katsuhiro's manga *Akira* (1984-1993) perhaps resembles most closely Stivale and Grossberg's method. Brown examines *Akira* as an example of a rhizome, a term used by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* to denote non-hierarchical heterogeneities (as opposed to linear and fixed structures), thus calling attention to the manga's multiple interweaving narratives.<sup>11</sup> In a similar fashion, he touches upon Nakamura Ryûtarô's *Serial Experiments Lain* (1998) and its particular ability to depict the philosophers' notion of the abstract machine, a concept to which I will return later.<sup>12</sup> What follows is an attempt to demonstrate similar resonances between *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* and *Evangelion*, particularly as the ambivalence and complexity with which the two works interact may inspire questions about the series' relationship to psychoanalytic orthodoxy.

## ***Evangelion* and the Oedipal**

In *Evangelion*, special attention is paid to character psychology and how the perilous circumstances of the series' diegesis affect it. Ikari Shinji (voiced by Ogata Megumi in Japanese), the show's protagonist and the son of NERV's commander Ikari Gendô (Tachiki Fumihiko), particularly faces a number of personal challenges (of, nonetheless, cosmic significance) as the pilot of the organization's most powerful mech, the Eva Unit-01. As the series approaches its close, Shinji and other lower-ranking NERV members discover that Gendô intends to initiate the Third Impact in collaboration with SEELE (who run NERV's operations as a kind of shadow government). The Third Impact, also referred to by SEELE as the Human Instrumentality Project, would, if successful, reduce all life on Earth to a primordial liquid state, merging human beings into a uniform substance (referred to as LCL) with no physical or psychological barriers.

In spite of the series' eschatological premise, most of the relevant conflict in *Evangelion* occurs on the relatively smaller scale of the characters' internal musings and strained interpersonal relationships. In her analysis of the show, Susan J. Napier notes:

[D]espite the requisite and truly chilling scenes of combat with the Angels, the series also contains a greater number of scenes in which the characters bicker and insult each other or else engage in intense brooding about their angst-ridden childhoods and their equally dysfunctional and disappointing parents.<sup>13</sup>

As Napier observes, the figure of the absent, disinterested, or mentally unstable parent is one of the most prominent character archetypes in *Evangelion*, epitomized by Gendô, who is consistently dismissive and cruel towards Shinji. Yui (Hayashibara Megumi), Shinji's (thought to be) dead mother, represents the maternal, nurturing foil

to this characterization. In her essay on the series, Mariana Ortega cites the motherly, feminine presence in *Evangelion* as one of its most crucial aspects, remarking on the “immutable psychic hold” the mother characters have on the child pilots.<sup>14</sup> This is apparent in the portrayal of the supporting characters as well, such as in the case of Sôryû Asuka Langley (Miyamura Yûko), a mech pilot who appears to be motivated primarily by the repressed memories of her mother, whom she had lost to suicide. That being said, Shinji’s plotline explores this psychic hold especially literally with the revelation that, during an early experimental run of the mech, Yui’s soul had forever been absorbed into the Unit-01, an event to which Ortega refers as her transformation into the “all-mother,” thus emphasizing the nigh godly nature of the maternal role in *Evangelion*.<sup>15</sup>

With its marked focus on family strife and the manner in which parent-child conflict determines the psychological constitution of its characters, *Evangelion* evokes an eclectic array of psychoanalytic themes and concepts. The association is sometimes merely superficial, as in the case of certain technobabble parameters like “libido” and “destrudo,” measurements through which NERV monitor the physical condition of its pilots and Eva Units and which the series borrows from psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud<sup>16</sup> and Edoardo Weiss<sup>17</sup> respectively. In a more pertinent example, Ortega suggests a reading of *Evangelion* from the perspective of the “psychic struggles between ego and unconscious,” an interpretative model she likens to psychoanalyst Carl Jung’s idea of the shadow, the irrational and unknowable undertow of the human psyche.<sup>18</sup> Ortega hints at the clearest expression of *Evangelion*’s psychoanalytic foundation further in her paper, where she describes Shinji’s relationship with Yui as symbolic of “oedipal desire.”<sup>19</sup> Freud explores the notion of the Oedipus complex in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (first published in 1899), submitting it as a typical

experience of the unconscious drive (surfacing in dreams) to have sexual intercourse with one's mother and to kill one's father.<sup>20</sup> He prefaces this investigation of incestuous dreams by highlighting the part one's parents usually play in the development of psychological instability, particularly as it pertains to the "falling in love with one member of the parental couple and hatred of the other."<sup>21</sup> In the same paragraph, Freud warns that this oedipal desire manifests itself only in an exaggerated form amongst neurotics and is otherwise present in a more controlled manner in the minds of most children.<sup>22</sup> This is given further attention in "The Ego and the Id" (1923), where Freud asserts that "the effects of the first identifications made in earliest childhood will be general and lasting" to one's character, with the most important identification being with one's father.<sup>23</sup>

It is this prioritization of the family relation that *Evangelion* mirrors in its psychologically driven narrative, making it a most fitting text with which to animate Deleuze and Guattari's critical commentary on the presuppositions of Freudian psychoanalysis. In *Anti-Oedipus*, the authors seek to contest what they refer to as the "familialism" of the discipline and the oedipal triangle as its core dogma.<sup>24</sup> In Brent Adkins' reading of *Anti-Oedipus*, he summarizes Deleuze and Guattari's main criticism of psychoanalysis as follows:

What Deleuze and Guattari object to in psychoanalysis is its attempt to apply both good sense and common sense to the unconscious. The common sense that they see being applied to the unconscious is the Oedipal drama whereby every component of both psychic and social life is refracted through the Oedipal triangle of 'mommy-daddy-me'.<sup>25</sup>

As Deleuze and Guattari put it, the oedipal triangle represents "the familial constellation in person," suggesting that the nuclear family serves as the central unit that psychoanalysis assumes to govern each individual's subjectivity.<sup>26</sup> They go on to address the generalized, structural interpretation of the oedipal, articulated in the

Lacanian notions of the Imaginary and Symbolic, that they believe turns the familial triangle “into a kind of universal Catholic symbol,” functioning as a referent for all manner of social and ideological phenomena beyond just the unconscious psychosexual development of children.<sup>27</sup> Thus, “Oedipus” as a term in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* refers not only to the Oedipus complex as conceptualized by Freud but also to the broader totalizing effect of the reduction of human psychological activity to a mere representation of the family structure and its various permutations.

In accordance with this oedipal dogma, supporting *Evangelion*’s science fiction mythos is the inextricable connection between the characters and their parents, and, furthermore, the connection between these familial relations and the fate of the whole world, as Shinji must confront his position in the triangle head-on to reverse the effects of the Third Impact. Visually, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* reproduces the daddy-mommy-me formation in suggestive compositions, such as in one shot from the very first episode of the series (Fig. 1).

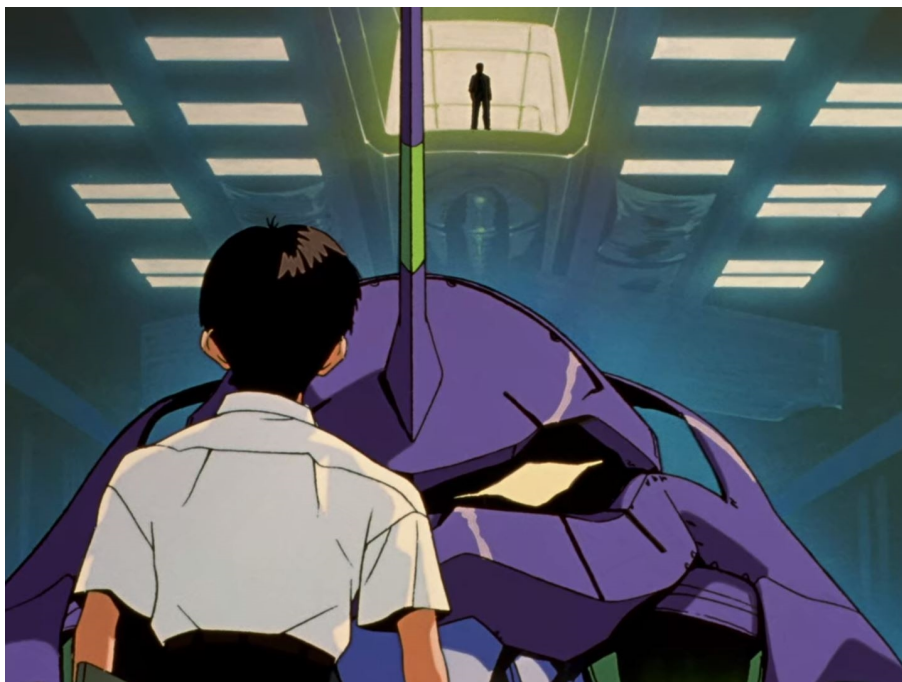


Fig. 1

In this scene, Shinji is brought to NERV's headquarters, where his heretofore estranged father demands of him to pilot the Unit-01, the head of which stands between them. Though Shinji and the viewer are oblivious to Yui's tie to the mech at this point, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* all but opens with a family portrait where the child can only look on impotently at the distant, authoritative silhouette of his father and the larger-than-life representation of his mother. On the level of dialogue, Gendô may be forcing Shinji inside his mother instead of acting as a figure of prohibition for the incestuous drive, as would be the case in most Freudian interpretations of the father-son relation.<sup>28</sup> However, the visual deification of motherhood and the parallel depiction of the father as an image of male dominance makes clear that Shinji's relationship to Yui may only proceed under Gendô's terms, as well as his supervision.

Moreover, Gendô's proactive role in oedipalizing his relationship to his son (by treating Shinji with disproportionate contempt and by knowingly psychologically binding him to Yui) calls to mind Deleuze and Guattari's observations about the father as initiator of the Oedipus complex. Faced with the "chicken or the egg" dilemma of whether Oedipus first arises in the child or the parents, they state that "the fact cannot be hidden that everything begins in the mind of the father: isn't that what you want, to kill me, to sleep with your mother?"<sup>29</sup> In opposition to the notion that an adversarial attitude towards the father emerges internally and spontaneously within the child, Deleuze and Guattari theorize that "Oedipus is first the idea of an adult paranoiac, before it is the childhood feeling of a neurotic."<sup>30</sup> The significance of this is in viewing the oedipal not as an innate manifestation of the structure of the child's unconscious, but as the result of a contingent social circumstance into which the father and child are both immersed and which the father (perhaps unwittingly) recreates.<sup>31</sup> It is through Gendô's own machinations that he becomes alienated from Shinji and the

oedipal drama that plays out thereafter comes to resemble a self-fulfilling prophecy. While this is an interesting vantage point from which to interpret Gendô and Shinji's relationship, after considering the Human Instrumentality Project in more detail, I find that *Evangelion* eventually naturalizes the oedipal triangle and the parent-child dynamic as an essential and primary part of an individual's subject formation, contrary to Deleuze and Guattari's conclusions.

### **The Human Instrumentality Project as Absolute Deterritorialization**

The commencement of the Third Impact and the Human Instrumentality Project represents the culmination of the last two episodes of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and *The End of Evangelion*. SEELE conspires with Gendô to use the Eva Unit-01 in an apocalyptic ritual which would bring about the dissolution of the force field separating human beings from each other on a material and spiritual level, referred to in the series as a person's A.T. field. Once the field disappears, human beings no longer bear the burden of loneliness or social struggle, as they now complement each other entirely as a fully assimilated, formless unity (Fig. 2). Inspired by science fiction author Cordwainer Smith's concept of the Instrumentality of Mankind,<sup>32</sup> the Human Instrumentality Project translates many of the prevailing concerns that the series has with human relationships into more abstract questions about the nature of existence and identity. Alongside the oedipal triangle, Instrumentality may help animate another important term from *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* – deterritorialization – in a demonstration of the anime medium's philosophical value.

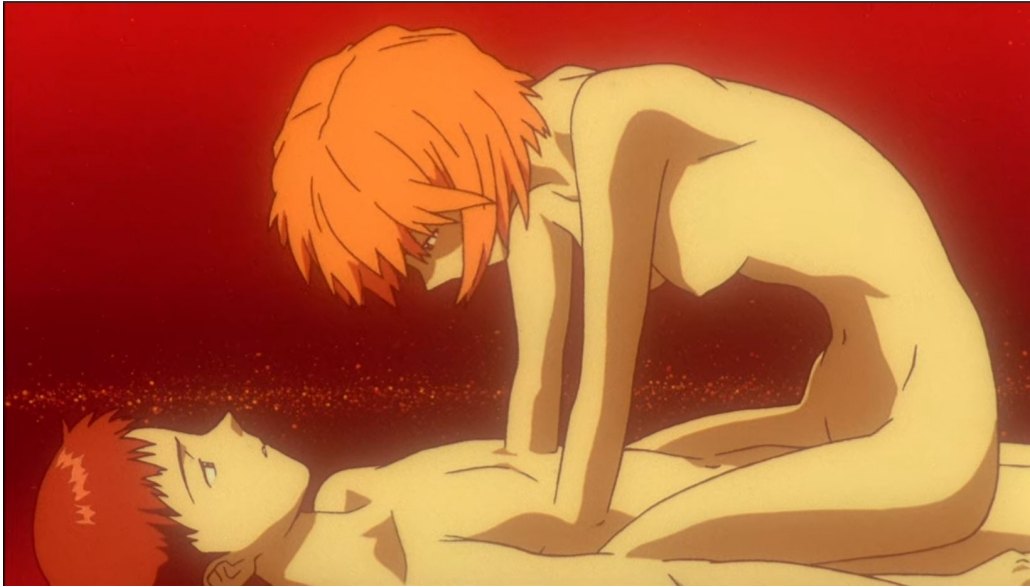


Fig. 2

*The End of Evangelion*: Shinji and Ayanami Rei (Hayashibara Megumi), another child pilot, melded to each other during Instrumentality

For Deleuze and Guattari, a territory forms when life, by way of self-organization, creates a more or less stable and distinct assortment (or assemblage) of connections. In her primer on Deleuze, Claire Colebrook defines this process in biological terms:

Light connects with plants to allow photosynthesis. Everything, from bodies to societies, is a form of territorialisation, or the connection of forces to produce distinct wholes. But alongside every territorialisation there is also the power of *detrterritorialisation*. The light that connects with the plant to allow it to grow also allows for the plant to become other than itself: too much sun will kill the plant, or perhaps transform it into something else [...] <sup>33</sup>

In other words, connections between interlinking entities assemble themselves into temporarily consistent formations up until the point they begin to change into a new, different territory. Deterritorialization denotes this process of disassembly and transformation. Mark Bonta and John Protevi explain that “[i]n plain language, deterritorialization is the process of leaving home, of altering your habits, of learning new tricks,” pointing to, in this definition, the applicability of the term to any instance of temporary destabilization and change.<sup>34</sup> Just as a stable assemblage of connections

is inevitably deterritorialized, however, so must its arrangement reterritorialize into a new stability. In the introductory chapter to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari provide an example, once again from nature:

How could movements of deterritorialization and processes of reterritorialization not be relative, always connected, caught up in one another? The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp reterritorializes on that image.<sup>35</sup>

The orchid becomes deterritorialized because the presence of a wasp alters the connections it had previously established; it must now adapt to a new set of connections with the wasp. Simultaneously, however, these new connections are stabilizing the wasp as a discrete whole that lands on the orchid, reterritorializing it in the process. Colebrook cites a sociological example, as when a tribe dethrones a ruler, deterritorializing their social formation, but returns to the concept of “ruling” itself in the form of self-governance and leadership, reterritorializing the formation into modern individualism.<sup>36</sup> In clinical psychoanalysis, as understood by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*, the creation and dismantling of territories occur in different ways for different disorders, such as in neurosis:

The neurotic is trapped within the residual or artificial territorialities of our society, and reduces all of them to Oedipus as the ultimate territoriality – as reconstructed in the analyst’s office and projected upon the full body of the psychoanalyst (yes, my boss is my father, and so is the Chief of State, and so are you, Doctor).<sup>37</sup>

Here, Deleuze and Guattari appear to suggest that psychoanalysis establishes a territoriality of its own in the oedipal, offering it as a readymade framework into which a troubled subject may reterritorialize themselves as a child in disharmony with their parent. Just as the adult paranoiac, already immersed in this ultimate territoriality, apprehends their relationship to the child in oedipal terms, so does the analysand

come to understand and reconstruct the social world around them as a familialist assemblage.

The only state which could theoretically escape reterritorialization is one of absolute deterritorialization, a phrase Deleuze and Guattari reserve for “a liberation of all connection or organisation,” that is, for the hypothetical transition of life into a condition devoid of separated entities constantly de- and reforming in order to connect with each other.<sup>38</sup> Deleuze and Guattari speak of absolute deterritorialization as “the creation of a new earth,”<sup>39</sup> as well as an abstract state of deindividuation:

I no longer have any secrets, having lost my face, form, and matter [...] One has been saved by and for love, by abandoning love and self. Now one is no more than an abstract line, like an arrow crossing the void. Absolute deterritorialization. One has become like everybody/the whole world (*tout le monde*), but in a way that can become like everybody/the whole world.<sup>40</sup>

In this excerpt from *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari refer to the essay “The Crack-Up” (1936) by F. Scott Fitzgerald, commenting on the author’s description of a deterritorializing “clean break” with a current state of affairs from which one can never return.<sup>41</sup> In Fitzgerald’s case, this clean break entailed a complete reinvention of himself and his attitude toward his life after an extended period of depression and ennui.<sup>42</sup> By likening it to the author’s account of breaking away from a previous (and now irretrievable) state of mind, Deleuze and Guattari imply that absolute deterritorialization cannot be reversed. Elsewhere in *A Thousand Plateaus*, absolute deterritorialization, as the liberation of connections, involves the relativizing of distinctions between entities and a new emphasis on fluidity, the “dissolution of forms,” and the acceptance of continuity, such as the changeability of language and communication.<sup>43</sup>

Following this explanation of absolute deterritorialization, I propose that the concept bears a noteworthy resemblance to *Evangelion's* Human Instrumentality Project. In episode 25 of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, Shinji experiences Instrumentality for the first time as the outline of his body begins to blur. We hear his inner monologue: “What’s this sensation? I think I’ve felt it before. Like the lines of my body are melting away. It feels nice. It’s like I’m getting bigger, spreading out.” Shinji feels himself becoming deterritorialized, the assemblage of his body loosening as he becomes “like everybody/the whole world.” As Brown points out, the Human Instrumentality Project appears to fulfil a desire for disembodiment “in order to create room for the next step up the evolutionary (and spiritual) ladder.”<sup>44</sup> As with absolute deterritorialization, the Human Instrumentality Project creates a new earth. With the eradication of the A.T. field, human beings become coextensive with the planet’s surface, existing not as disparate subjects attempting to connect with each other, but as a self-sufficient flow of consciousnesses. It is important to note that, while Shinji’s cognitive and sensorial experience of Instrumentality is described very vaguely, it appears that he does retain some capacity to think, feel, and reflect, indicating that the sea of LCL may be fluid, but not necessarily entirely homogenous. While commenting on movements towards the absolute deterritorialization of language, Deleuze and Guattari clarify that “[a]bsolute, however, does not mean undifferentiated: differences, now ‘infinitely small’, are constituted in a single matter [...]”<sup>45</sup> While mankind is liquefied into a single matter (LCL), the conceit of the Human Instrumentality Project (of achieving total complementarity among the human species) seems to imply that there must exist forces (or “intensities,” in Deleuzo-Guattarian terminology<sup>46</sup>) to complement other forces or flows. More so than via dialogue, *The End of Evangelion* suggests this visually, as silhouettes of human bodies spiral as a single, but infinitesimally differentiated substance (Fig. 3).

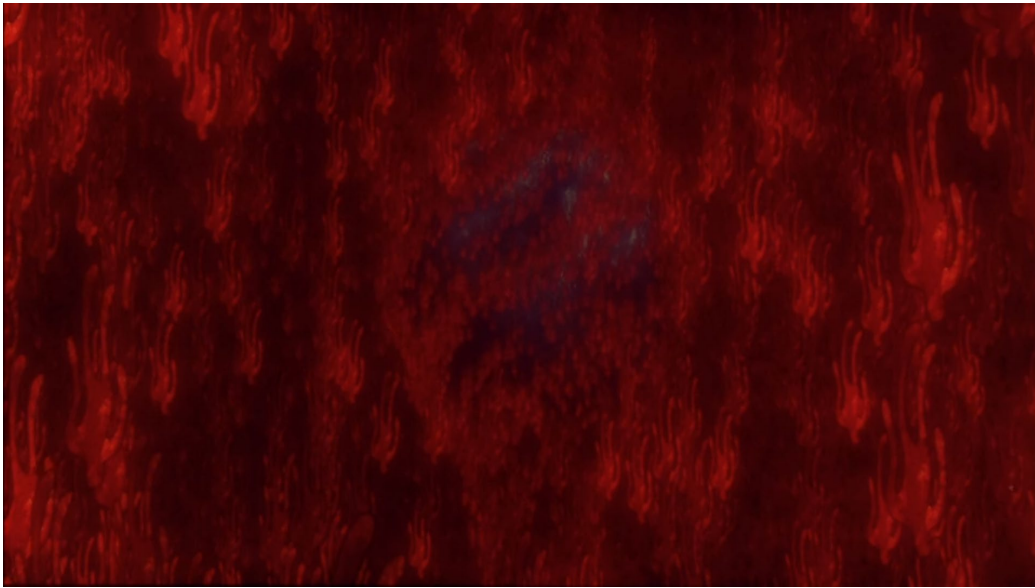


Fig. 3

### Boy with Machine

As opposed to relative deterritorialization and reterritorialization (with specific examples ranging from plant growth and decay to political revolutions), absolute deterritorialization functions more as a thought experiment than anything Deleuze and Guattari seem to observe in the physical world. Colebrook's reading of absolute deterritorialization maintains that it "does not exist in fact, but can only be thought,"<sup>47</sup> while Bonta and Protevi conclude that its success simply "can never be guaranteed."<sup>48</sup> Deleuze and Guattari do not conceive of absolute deterritorialization as a transcendent phenomenon possible only on a different plane of existence and concede that it must necessarily coexist with relative deterritorialization (which is inherently entangled with reterritorialization), thus baking a paradox into the concept.<sup>49</sup> To compare the Human Instrumentality Project to absolute deterritorialization is, therefore, to presuppose its impossibility outside of philosophical or fictional ideation. That said, the importance of animating absolute deterritorialization lies not in its translation into actuality, but in its capacity to help us embrace change and flux. Colebrook, for

instance, thinks of it as less of “a philosophical theory than [...] as a challenge to think the return of the new, over and over again.”<sup>50</sup> Absolute deterritorialization, as a concept, is a crucial part of an affirming philosophy of the transformative properties of life. *Evangelion* utilizes the singular creative capability of animation as a medium to produce movement, connection, and differentiation simultaneously in order to forward this philosophical challenge.

I have already touched upon how the series emphasizes certain narrative developments through visual intervention, such as in the oedipal composition that introduces us to the Ikari family or the complex formation of the ocean of LCL. However, it is the last two episodes of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* that underline the series’ dedication to animation as a philosophically expressive art form. In the final episode, the supporting characters present Shinji and the viewer with the Human Instrumentality Project in a highly abstract style, using conspicuous animation techniques and formal experimentation to visualize the metaphysical repercussions of the sinister plot. Shinji is thrown into a blank space where he floats without direction (Fig. 4) and is told in voice-over by Asuka and Rei that he is in a free, unrestrained, but empty world. Gendô, also appearing in voice-over, tells his son that he will “give [him] a constraint” before a line appears on screen, providing Shinji with a floor on which to stand (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4

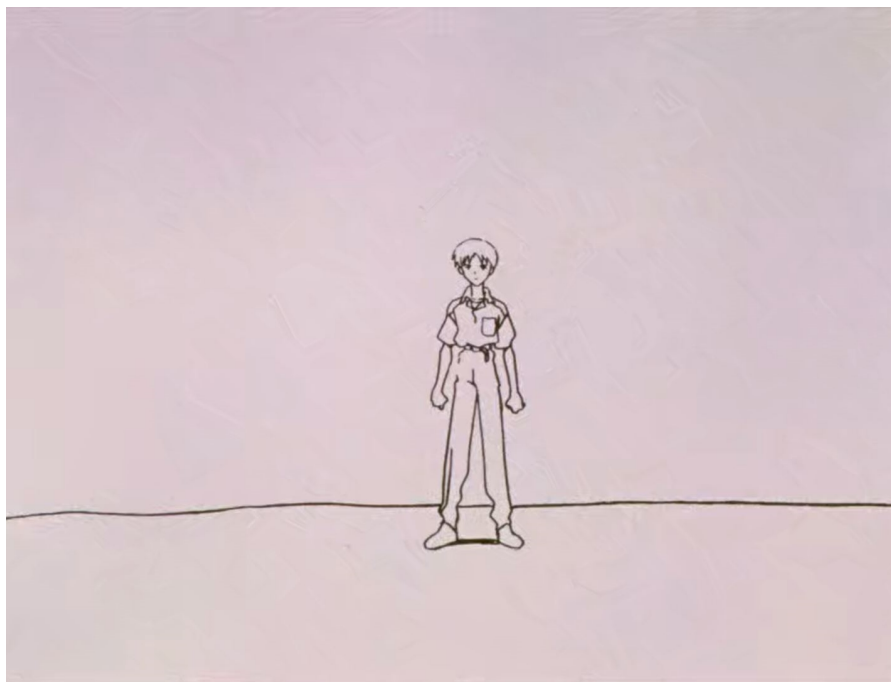


Fig. 5

During this episode, Shinji loses his bodily form several times as the outline of his figure transforms into basic shapes that shift and expand. He feels as though he is

becoming indistinct, stating that “the being that is *me* is fading away.” Asuka and Rei, still off-screen, continue to guide him through the experience, stating that what he believes to be himself is a subject that is determined by the existence of others; it is only by imagining others as individual subjects that one can, in turn, live as an individual subject. Rei adds that “the first ‘other’ is your mother,” suggesting that one’s contact with one’s mother is the first instance of this identity formation. Shinji is rendered as minimalistic line art that cannot stop metamorphosing in order to communicate this very idea – that without a rigid metaphysical division between subjects (which is precisely what Instrumentality deterritorializes), identification becomes impossible and the self is plunged into meaningless chaos.

Napier approaches the topic of animetic metamorphosis and flux as she traces the history of eschatological iconography in Japanese visual media (such as in the *Akira* film), noting how the apocalypse is often depicted as simultaneously fearsome and appealing:

[In anime] the “visual excesses of catastrophe” becomes a kind of aesthetic end in itself. The protean quality of the animation medium, with its emphasis on image, speed, and fluctuation is perfect for depicting this. [...] Freed from the restraints of language and live-action cinema, the abstract visual medium of animation works brilliantly to “convey the unconveyable”.<sup>51</sup>

According to Napier, animation is uniquely adept at producing fictional cataclysmic events, especially when they approach the limit of what the viewer is capable of absorbing through language. While the characters in *Evangelion* do verbally describe what Instrumentality is and how it feels, it is the image of Shinji’s warping body and of the outlining of his world (as though an animator were drawing it in real time) that supplies the events of the Third Impact with their philosophical weight. Napier’s use of the word “protean” is particularly fitting here, as it is important to continually stress

the mutable state of absolute deterritorialization. Similarly, in his discussion of the final episode of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* in *The Anime Machine* (2009), Thomas Lamarre analyses Shinji's fluctuating self-conception as a kind of psychological diagram achievable principally through animation:

The last episode [...], in order to put us inside Ikari Shinji's thoughts and feelings, puts us inside animation. Existential crisis is technical crisis, and vice versa. The animation reminds us that this crisis is not just about a subjective point of view. Rather the animation gives us an exploded view of the psyche.<sup>52</sup>

In an exploded projection of a structure or mechanism, its individual components are arrayed in order of assembly, floating next to each other in a way that enables one to see clearly and systematically how they are to be put back together. Simply put, Shinji's deterritorialization is reduced to its bare visual essentials, and his experience of Instrumentality is explained in a way that necessitates an animetic approach.

Lamarre also emphasizes the flatness of Anno Hideaki's limited animation method, which relies heavily on manipulating and sliding layers of celluloid to create movement, as opposed to creating fluid character motion through increasing the number of character cels displayed per second. This creates the effect of "[pushing] depth and movement to the surface of the image,"<sup>53</sup> as the different planes of the image (e.g. character and background) become destratified and contribute equally in generating motion. Furthermore, the movement thus produced in the last episode of *Evangelion* becomes "inoperative" – that is, the manner in which characters leap between cuts emphasizes states of contemplation or inner crisis. The rapid editing between close-ups, intertitles, and recut scenes from previous episodes in the series, as well as Shinji's transformations, are not techniques that signify purposeful character action, as much as they convey disorientation and disembodiment. Lamarre likens this to the time-image, a concept Deleuze explores in his two-volume work on

film (*Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2* [first published in 1983 and 1985 respectively]).<sup>54</sup> This simultaneous flattening effect of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*'s limited animation and the protean nature of its minimalist rendition of the characters may also be comparable with the plane of consistency, as described in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

Continuum of intensities, combined emission of particles or signs-particles, conjunction of deterritorialized flows: these are the three factors proper to the plane of consistency; they are brought about by the abstract machine and are constitutive of destratification.<sup>55</sup>

The plane of consistency is the fundamental metaphysical concept grounding Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy, as a non-hierarchical, immanent plane towards which absolute deterritorialization ultimately aspires. Its otherwise most counter-intuitive, yet foundational qualities – the simultaneity of destratification and differentiation – are animated by *Evangelion* on both a technical (as Lamarre demonstrates) and thematic level.

While it is the ending of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* that represents the most formally interesting articulation of absolute deterritorialization in the series, it is also the point at which the setup for Shinji's inevitable rejection of it is established. Through Shinji's consternated exchange with the off-screen characters, *Evangelion* returns to its oedipal determinism, proposing to the viewer that subjectivation, the fabrication of a unified, static subject, begins at the familial level. It is, after all, Gendô who draws the line upon which Shinji walks and on which he bases his sense of direction in the world, to say nothing of the mother being the prototypal other according to Rei. In *The End of Evangelion*, the soul of Shinji's mother speaks to him during the Third Impact, bestowing upon him the ability to reverse the effects of the Human Instrumentality Project. In line with the philosophy of identity *Evangelion* seems to adopt, Shinji decides to do so, reasoning that he wants to stay on the Earth

he knew and where he could see his loved ones once more as individual people. In the final scene of the film, he and Asuka return to their embodied form on a post-apocalyptic shore surrounded by residual LCL. In effect, Shinji reterritorializes the world, returning it not to a state identical to pre-Instrumentality, but to a different territoriality comprised, still, of assemblages and connections. Shinji's distress at the Human Instrumentality Project appears to come from his vision of himself and others as fixed subjects, a vision of which he is robbed as the separating agent of the A.T. field vanishes.

Deleuze and Guattari take significant issue with this view of subjectivation, stating that “there is no fixed subject unless there is repression,” thus implying that any efforts to stabilize or define a subject are innately artificial and restrictive.<sup>56</sup> Instead of as subjects or structures, Deleuze and Guattari prefer to think of the active and self-organizing forces in the world as machines. In *Molecular Revolution* (first published in 1977), Guattari offers “machine” as a term meant to aid us in envisioning a system of interactions that bypasses the subject, operating beside, but independently of it, not unlike how a literal machine performs its function automatically, without any input from the worker who mans it.<sup>57</sup> Brown's analysis of *Serial Experiments Lain* addresses this directly:

At its most provocative, cyberpunk anime such as *Serial Experiments Lain* demystify the workings of abstract machines – such as the family, the school, the city, the media, and the Internet – foregrounding their operations so that they are no longer simply taken for granted.<sup>58</sup>

In this reading, *Serial Experiments Lain* and its focus on digital communication exposes the machinic nature of the social world as it is always dominated by dynamic and often uncontrollable webs of technologically-mediated connections.

Though machines, in this sense, do not necessarily relate to technological automata, Deleuze and Guattari themselves also welcome this association in their analysis of a painting and the frontispiece of *Anti-Oedipus*: Richard Lindner's *Boy with Machine* (Fig. 6): "[T]he turgid little boy has already plugged a desiring-machine into a social machine, short-circuiting the parents, who can only intervene as agents of production and antiproduction in one case as in the other."<sup>59</sup>

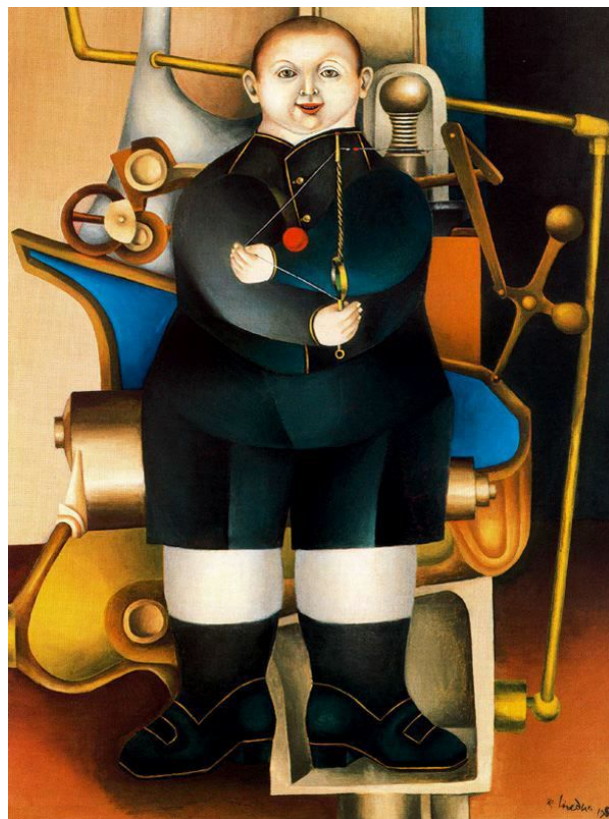


Fig. 6

The authors use *Boy with Machine* to prompt the reader to imagine a child with a technical apparatus (representing his desire to create connections) which he joins to a larger machine (representing the complexities of social life) with no parental mediator. The mother and father may enter the picture only after the fact, not as invariable determinants, but as producers of connections in their own right. By contrast, *Evangelion's* "boy with machine" is permitted to exist solely as a subject delimited at

all sides by his parents. Shinji's machine is not a contraption he handles as a direct link to the world around him and through which he channels his productive desire. Instead, Shinji resides inside of his mother-machine, the Eva Unit-01, and it is only within her, as her pilot, that he is able to do anything of consequence and defend the human race (Fig. 7). As Ortega writes, "[j]ust as the Evas [...] have absorbed the women, they in turn absorb their children back into these mechanical hybrid bodies."<sup>60</sup> When Shinji enters his mech, he re-establishes himself as interminably connected to his mother; he reverts to the ultimate territoriality of the oedipal triangle. Because of the dependence of his (and every other character's) identity on the daddy-mommy-me formation, *Evangelion* denies the possibility of absolute deterritorialization, finding its antinomies not in the inevitability of reterritorialization, but in the Human Instrumentality Project's obliteration of oedipal subjects.



Fig. 7

*The End of Evangelion*: Shinji screaming inside the cockpit of the Unit-01

## Conclusion

*Capitalism and Schizophrenia* introduces a rich and widely practicable philosophical lexicon, as well as an essential critical appraisal of the basic tenets of

psychoanalysis. In an effort to animate this lexicon, as Deleuze and Guattari scholars have done previously with other science fiction media, I have attempted to unite the challenges to familialism from *Anti-Oedipus* and the theory of absolute deterritorialization from *A Thousand Plateaus* to produce a philosophical analysis of *Evangelion*. The series conforms to the oedipal in its construction of characters who rely on their parents and parent figures to make sense of themselves as subjects. Shinji is entirely driven by the anxious relationship he has with his father and by the absence of his mother; he cannot escape his place in the oedipal triangle even while fulfilling his role as a child soldier fending for himself, as the mech that is supposed to be under his command actually houses the psyche of his mother. Like in psychoanalytic theory, this canonization of the oedipal has a deep effect on subjectivation in the series and film, where individuality and separation are preferred to flux, assimilation, and continuity, as represented by Instrumentality.

The intention of correlating the Human Instrumentality Project to the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of absolute deterritorialization is to expand upon the notion of the oedipal as the ultimate territoriality in *Evangelion*. In other words, I proffer that Shinji (and, by extension, *Evangelion* as such) rejects Instrumentality due to its potential to deterritorialize the idea of the fixed subject, without which the series' broader philosophy of identity formation via the oedipal triangle cannot endure. In *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, this happens on the level of animation itself, as Shinji is stripped of the visual landmarks that usually define his character (such as his color palette, the background, or, indeed, the full outline of his figure). In *The End of Evangelion*, the specifics of the Human Instrumentality Project are fleshed out in more detail than in the concluding episodes of the show, but the reasons Shinji renounces it are the same: he wishes to exist in a world with defined, territorialized subjects. In sum,

*Evangelion's* position on familialist subjectivation manifests itself as Shinji's incapability to picture himself as anything but an individual amongst other individuals, all of whom exist as the product of the mother as the first differentiating other. As a result, *Evangelion* provides the viewer with a singular, medium-specific image of absolute deterritorialization, only to eventually eject it from the realm of the thinkable.

As Napier acknowledges, the medium of animation may be able to convey otherwise “unconveyable” scenarios of destruction and apocalyptic spectacle, as well as narrative occurrences irreducible to language. If, however, *Evangelion* is to be judged based on its treatment of the concept of a Deleuzo-Guattarian new earth, the series appears to regard any aspiration towards deterritorialization as tantamount to complete personal annihilation. *Evangelion* chooses to stop at the point at which it is most philosophically and visually challenging, revealing a reluctance to think a truly radically different and deterritorialized future of humankind. Shinji's decision, celebrated in the show as a moment of personal growth, in reality signifies a reconciliation with the oedipal, as well as its cyclical perpetuation, with Shinji and Asuka as the new primeval father and mother. Nonetheless, the series' value in terms of offering a depiction of these sophisticated philosophical ideas persists regardless of whether they are ultimately dismissed. Thus, the role of *Evangelion* in animating the theory of Deleuze and Guattari remains somewhat ambivalent – as simultaneously successful in communicating a radically new conception of humanity, while lacking in any recognition of the merits of such a universe.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Shinseiki Evangerion*, dir. Anno Hideaki (1995-1996); translated as *Neon Genesis Evangelion*; available on Netflix. Accessed 22 April 2020.

<sup>2</sup> *Shinseiki Evangerion gekijô-ban: Air/Magokoro o, kimi ni*, dir. Anno Hideaki and Tsurumaki Kazuya (1997); translated as *The End of Evangelion*; available on Netflix. Accessed 19 June 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: The Athlone Press, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, "Animations, Articulations, and Becomings: An Introduction," in *Animations (of Deleuze and Guattari)*, ed. Jennifer D. Slack (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Charles J. Stivale, *The Two-Fold Thought of Deleuze and Guattari: Intersections and Animations* (New York: The Guildford Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Grossberg, "Animations, Articulations, and Becomings," 3.

<sup>8</sup> Charles J. Stivale, "Mille/Punks/Cyber/Plateaus: Science Fiction and Deleuzo-Guattarian 'Becomings,'" *SubStance* 20, no. 3 (1991): 66-84.

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer D. Slack, "Everyday Matrix: Becoming Adolescence," in *Animations (of Deleuze and Guattari)*, ed. Jennifer D. Slack (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 9-29.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Bogue, "Deleuze and Guattari and the Future of Politics: Science Fiction, Protocols and the People to Come," *Deleuze Studies* 5, supplement (2011): 83-84.

<sup>11</sup> Steven T. Brown, *Tokyo Cyberpunk: Posthumanism in Japanese Visual Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 8-10.

<sup>12</sup> Steven T. Brown, "Screening Anime," in *Cinema Anime: Critical Engagements with Japanese Animation*, ed. Steven T. Brown (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1-19.

<sup>13</sup> Susan J. Napier, *Anime: From Akira to Princess Mononoke* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 211.

<sup>14</sup> Mariana Ortega, "My Father, He Killed Me; My Mother, She Ate Me: Self, Desire, Engendering, and the Mother in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*," *Mechademia* 2 (December 2007): 224.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality: The 1905 Edition* (London and New York: Verso, 2016), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Eric Berne, *A Layman's Guide to Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1947), 90.

<sup>18</sup> Ortega, "My Father," 222.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>20</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913), 224.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 221.

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- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1960), 26.
- <sup>24</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 51.
- <sup>25</sup> Brent Adkins, *Deleuze and Guattari's A Thousand Plateaus: A Critical Introduction and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 9.
- <sup>26</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 51.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 52.
- <sup>28</sup> Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 27.
- <sup>29</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 273.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., 274.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 275.
- <sup>32</sup> Brown, *Tokyo Cyberpunk*, 226.
- <sup>33</sup> Claire Colebrook, *Understanding Deleuze* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2002), xxii.
- <sup>34</sup> Mark Bonta and John Protevi, *Deleuze and Geophilosophy: A Guide and Glossary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 78.
- <sup>35</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 10.
- <sup>36</sup> Colebrook, *Understanding Deleuze*, xxiii.
- <sup>37</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 35.
- <sup>38</sup> Colebrook, *Understanding Deleuze*, xxiii.
- <sup>39</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 510.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 199-200.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The Crack-Up," in *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson (New York: New Directions Books, 1945), 81-82.
- <sup>43</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 109.
- <sup>44</sup> Brown, *Tokyo Cyberpunk*, 226.
- <sup>45</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 109.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., 4.
- <sup>47</sup> Colebrook, *Understanding Deleuze*, 164.
- <sup>48</sup> Bonta and Protevi, *Deleuze and Geophilosophy*, 78-79.
- <sup>49</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 510.

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<sup>50</sup> Colebrook, *Understanding Deleuze*, 184.

<sup>51</sup> Napier, *Anime*, 198.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 182.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 200-201.

<sup>55</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 70.

<sup>56</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 26.

<sup>57</sup> Félix Guattari, *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 112.

<sup>58</sup> Brown, "Screening Anime," 5.

<sup>59</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 358.

<sup>60</sup> Ortega, "My Father," 224.

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## A Survey of the Story Elements of Isekai Manga

**Dr. Paul S. Price**

Volume 2, Pages 57-91

**Abstract:** This paper presents a survey of the story elements in isekai (other world) manga. The large number of available isekai manga series allows the use of a survey to investigate patterns in story elements. These patterns can be used to generate hypotheses about relationships between story elements, authors' intent, and readers' interests. The paper begins with a review of the characteristics of isekai manga stories and places the stories into existing speculative fiction ontologies. A brief history of isekai manga and their relationships to roleplaying computer and tabletop games is provided. Finally, descriptions of the survey framework, instrument and results are presented. The survey includes data on 746 manga series identified as isekai manga by publishers or fans. The series are divided into four types (portal-quest, immersive, intrusion, and liminal). A detailed survey was performed on the 427 series identified as "portal-quest" stories (the most common type of isekai stories). The survey results are captured in a database of story elements that is organized based on plot points dictated by the form of the portal-quest stories. The survey found that the majority of the manga series are inspired by first-person shōnen and otome computer games. The characteristics of the stories vary with the gender and age of the protagonists (here taken as surrogates for the gender and age of the stories' target audiences) and this variation allows the generation of hypotheses on the motivations and interests of the different reader demographics and how they are satisfied by the stories. A database and a data dictionary are provided as ancillary files and could be used to perform additional analyses of isekai manga.

**Keywords:** isekai, portal-quest, manga, database, fantasy

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Dr. Price has had a forty-five-year career as a risk assessor, evaluating hazards posed by exposure to chemicals. He has published more than eighty papers and book chapters on toxicology and exposure assessment. His interest in anime and manga is driven by the ability of these literary forms to explore issues related to society and technology.

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## Introduction

Isekai (other world) stories is a type of manga popular in Japan and the United States. The degree of popularity of isekai manga can be seen in the number of series listed at Anime-Planet, a website that tracks English translations of manga and anime. This site has information on 605 manga series and 102 anime series and movies that it identifies as isekai. The site reports that 385 isekai manga series were published in the years 2017 to 2019, or roughly one new series every three days (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> A similar peak in the number of isekai-based anime occurred over the same period with the broadcast of 39 isekai series or roughly one new series a month.<sup>2</sup>

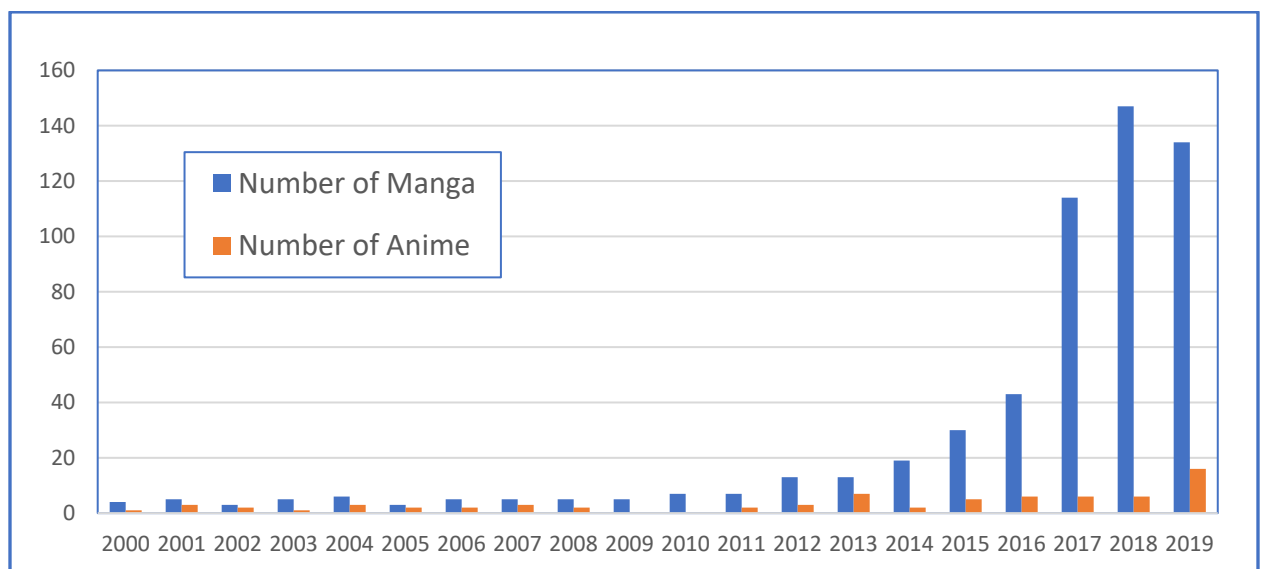


Figure 1: Number of isekai manga and anime series released in the years 2000 to 2019 as reported by the internet site Anime-Planet<sup>3</sup>

This paper presents the results of a survey of isekai manga that attempts to quantify the occurrence of certain story elements in isekai stories. The paper begins with a review of the concept of isekai in literature. This review consists of a discussion of the

role of “other worlds” in literature, an examination of how isekai manga are categorized in existing ontologies of speculative fiction, and a discussion of the impact of role-playing games on isekai manga. The survey instrument, data frame, and results are then presented. The paper uses the results of the survey to explore two issues. First, are isekai stories an example of Azuma’s database narratives?<sup>4</sup> Specifically, can the key elements of the isekai stories be captured in a database that forms the stories’ “grand nonnarrative”? Second, can a survey identify relationships between story elements that provides insights on the interests of readers and how they are serviced by authors and editors? As a demonstration of how the survey could be used to study these relationships, this paper explores the specific question of whether the age and gender of a story’s protagonists prior to entering the isekai are associated with differences in story elements.

### **Other world stories and isekai manga**

“Other world” stories include any story that involves a setting that is outside the “real” or “everyday” world. Other worlds can be defined spatially (a different land or planet), temporally (a past or future age), or as simply being different. As a result, other world stories include historical fiction; travel stories (including stories related to vacations, pilgrimages, or migrations); military stories; and speculative fiction. Japanese classical literature includes examples of stories involving other worlds such as Ryūgū-jō or the island of Hōrai. Many of the classics of Western literature are also other world stories, including *The Odyssey*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Candide*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*. Because other world stories are only defined by setting, they are not limited to any specific topic and can

include stories from diverse genres such as adventure, romance, erotica, horror, mystery, humor, and satire.

Stories set in other worlds play a particularly important role in speculative fiction. Speculative fiction greatly values well-crafted and internally consistent fictional worlds.<sup>5</sup> Western science fiction often has individuals travel to remote places on the earth, outer space, other planets, or locations defined using extra dimensions.<sup>6</sup> Western fantasy stories also occur in other worlds (e.g., Neverland, Oz, Middle Earth, and Narnia) that are not defined spatially or temporally (as in science fiction) but in terms of differences in culture, rules, and inhabitants.

While other world stories can be diverse, manga series identified by publishers, reviewers, and fans as isekai fall into the genre of speculative fiction. While all speculative fiction could be considered to be other world stories, the term isekai is only applied to a subcategory of speculative fiction stories in manga, anime, and light novels. The use of isekai as a subcategory is also relatively recent. The exact date of the initial use of isekai for this purpose is unclear, but trends in the use of terms in Google searches (Figure 2) indicate that such use of isekai as a story type was rare and sporadic before 2013.<sup>7</sup> After 2013 the use of the term rapidly increased. Following the widespread use of the term, certain earlier light novels, manga, and anime were retroactively defined as isekai. To understand what is meant by isekai manga and how isekai stories differ from other types of speculative fiction, it is useful to review how isekai stories fit into existing ontologies of fantasy and to consider the impacts of roleplaying games on the manga at or just before 2013.

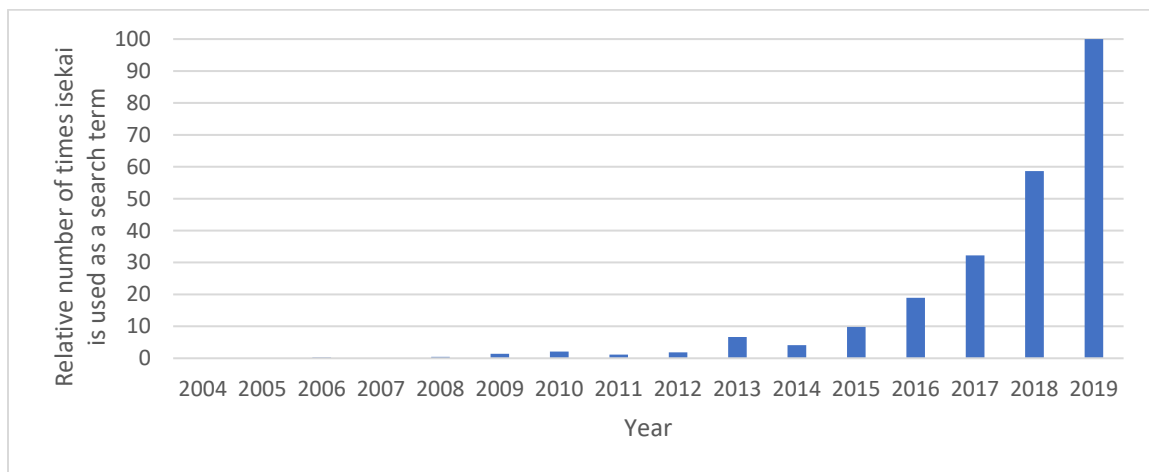


Figure 2. The frequency of the use of isekai as a Google search term for a literary genre in the years 2004 to 2019 normalized to the frequency of use in 2019. The frequency of use in 2019 is arbitrarily set to 100. (Google Trends)<sup>8</sup>

### Isekai and fantasy literature ontologies

There are multiple systems for categorizing fantasy literature. Stories have been divided into “high” and “low” fantasy.<sup>9</sup> Stories set in the real world but have some fantastical element are considered to be low fantasies and stories that occur in worlds that are separate from the real world are considered high fantasies). By definition, isekai manga are categorized as high fantasy since they deal with other worlds. Isekai stories also have characters, events, and processes that greatly differ from the real world. Tzvetan Todorov divides fantasy into three categories: the uncanny, where events may seem supernatural but are found to be due to natural processes; the marvelous, where the events are, in fact, supernatural; and the fantastic, where the nature of the events are not resolved. Isekai stories are assigned to the category of the marvelous.<sup>10</sup> From the point in the story where the protagonist first sees a goblin in a forest or sees house servants in a noblewoman’s seventeenth-century sitting room, there is no doubt in the reader’s mind

that the protagonist is experiencing something different from the real world of modern Japan.

Farah Mendlesohn's framework for organizing fantasy is particularly useful for studying isekai stories.<sup>11</sup> She proposes dividing fantasy stories into four types (portal-quest, immersive, intrusion, and liminal) that are defined in terms of a portal that both separates and connects the marvelous other world and the real world (Figure 3). The following text illustrates the four types using examples from fantasy anime and isekai manga. In portal-quest stories, the protagonist encounters the marvelous in an isekai that is entered by passing through a portal. The protagonist may or may not cross back through the portal, but the marvelous does not enter the real world. The anime movie *Spirited Away* (2001, *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*) is a portal quest story, as are the isekai manga series *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody* (2014, *Desu mächhi kara hajimaru isekai kyōsōkyoku*) and *In Another World with My Smartphone* (2017, *Isekai wa sumātofon to tomo ni*). In immersive stories, there is no portal between the marvelous and the real world, and all events occur in a marvelous world. *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989, *Majo no Takkyūbin*) is an immersive fantasy, as are the isekai fantasy franchises *Record of the Lodoss War* (1988 - present, *Rōdosu-tō senki*), and *Slayers* (1989-2012, *Sureiyāzu*). In intrusion stories, the marvelous enters the real world from the isekai resulting in changes that must be negotiated. *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* (2013, *Kaguya-hime no monogatari*) and the isekai manga series *The Devil Is a Part-Timer!* (2012, *Hataraku maousama!*) are intrusion stories. In liminal stories, the portal becomes a liminal space where reality and the marvelous isekai mix. Such stories can also fall into Todorov's category of the fantastic.<sup>12</sup> *My Neighbor Totoro*, (1988, *Tonari no totoro*)

presents a rural home and nearby forest as a liminal space where the marvelous is interwoven with the real world. Isekai manga in this category include the series *Alternate world bar "Nobu"* (2012, *Isekai Izakaya "Nobu"*) and *Restaurant to another world* (2012, *Isekai Shokudou*) where restaurants form liminal spaces in which characters from the real world and isekai interact.

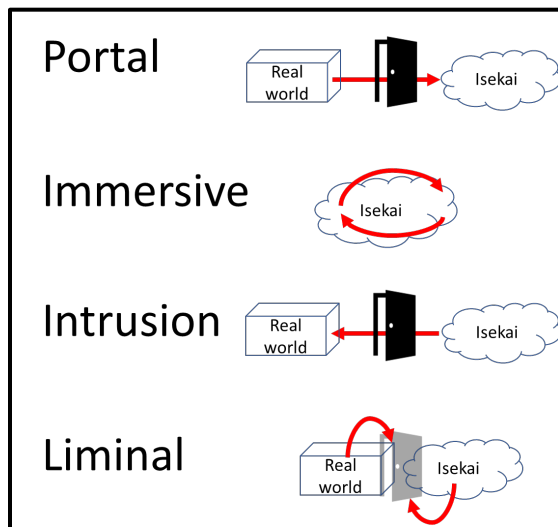


Figure 3. Mendlesohn's types of fantasy applied to isekai<sup>13</sup>

### Isekai manga, roleplaying games, and standard gamic worlds

The recent growth in the number of isekai manga is linked to the advent of computer roleplaying games and the “standard” worlds they create. Stories prior to 2010 that have been retroactively identified as isekai tend to have the protagonist enter the isekai and fulfill a quest that meets the needs of the characters in the isekai (e.g., *Inuyasha: A Feudal Fairy Tale*, (1996, *Inuyasha: sengoku otogi kassen*) and *Magic Knight Rayearth*, (1993, *Majikku naito reiāsu*)) or allows the protagonist and their companions to return to the real world (e.g., *El-Hazard*, (1995, *Shinpi no sekai eru*

*hazādo*)), or both (e.g., *The Vision of Escaflowne* (1994, *Tenkū no Esukafurōne*)). But most of these earlier stories do not include elements from roleplaying games. The few manga that do reference games tend to be literary expressions of the storylines of the computer games (*The Legend of Zelda - Ocarina of Time*, (2000, *Zelda no densetsu - toki no ocarina*), and *MuvLuv* (2003)). These manga series were created as part of gamic media mixes, a process of publishing manga and anime versions of game plots that began in the 1980s.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the majority of isekai manga after 2010 are set in worlds based on different types of roleplaying games (shōnen action games, otome romance games, dating sims, and battle royales). The most important of these are the shōnen action games and otome romance games.

### ***Shōnen roleplaying games***

In the years 2010 to 2012, three portal-quest isekai manga series began publication; *Sword Art Online* (2010, *Sōdo āto onrain*), *Log Horizons* (2012, *Rogu horaizun*), and *This world is a game, but only I know* (2012, *Kono Sekai ga Game dato Ore dake ga Shitte Iru*)<sup>15</sup>. In each of these series a young male protagonist enters a roleplaying game that they regularly play. But instead of carrying out the role of a player of the game, the protagonists initiate and participate in new stories that differ from the plots of the games. These three series are the beginning of a wave of gamic shōnen isekai manga that has come to dominate isekai manga. The rise of isekai as a search term for a literary genre that occurred at this time suggests that these series, along with the large number of light novels with similar game-related plots, established what was initially meant by isekai manga.

The shōnen roleplaying games developed from tabletop games such as Dungeons and Dragons<sup>16</sup>. These games in turn drew on elements in numerous works of Western speculative fiction, religion, and myth<sup>17</sup>. The standard shōnen world consists of humans (knights, adventurers, priests, and wizards), humanoids (elves, dwarves, and fairies), monsters (goblins, dragons, and werewolves), and certain environments (walled cities, forests, castles, and dungeons). In the shōnen world magic exists alongside limited technology. Visually the world appears to be a vaguely European late medieval culture (Figure 4), a style with a long history in anime and manga<sup>18</sup>. The goal of the player in these games is to carry out tasks (small quests) that allow the player to grow and acquire new skills. The game ends when the player completes a large and difficult final quest.

The real-world protagonists' ability in the isekai manga to act outside of this rigidly defined role (fight, win, grow, and repeat) occurs because they understand that the isekai is a game whose rules they can choose to either follow or not follow. This ability results in novel alternatives to the standard plots of the gamic manga. The protagonist can choose any number of goals from altruism, to seeking a restful quiet life, to a life of vengeance and antisocial behavior. In games, a sharp distinction is made between player and nonplayer characters since non-player characters are limited to responding to player's cues. In the manga, non-player characters can be active agents in the story taking roles of teachers, students, team members, servants, lovers, and family. The stories also include activities outside of those required by the game. These additions include mundane activities and attending settings such as eating (restaurants, kitchens, taverns, and markets), sleeping (inns, hotels, and homes), bathing (bathrooms and onsen), shopping (stores, bazaars, and fairs), and farming (fields, barns, and stables). The net result of these

changes is an enrichment of the gamic world providing new objects, individuals, plots, and tropes.



Figure 4. Cityscape in a standard shōnen gamic world from *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody* (2014)

### **Otome games**

In 2015, the first of an entirely different type of gamic isekai story was published, *Accomplishments of a Duke's Daughter* (*Koushaku Reijo No Konomi*). These manga are based on first person shōjo or josei otome games. In these games, a player guides a female protagonist in the exploration of romantic relationships with male love interests. The games use visual novel or dating simulation formats that rely on text to provide information to the player and to advance game play. The goal of the games is for the player to make choices for the protagonist that allow the protagonist to capture the love of a male target. A single game may have multiple romantic targets. Such games must be played multiple times to allow the protagonist to conquer each target. In these games, players

are opposed by noncharacter players who compete for the targets. Characters, both player and nonplayers, have back stories that are often more extensive and emotionally rich than in the shōnen isekai stories. Otome games are set in the upper levels of a society that places value on class, rank, and manners. Like the shōnen worlds, the visual designs of the otome worlds are European. However, the period presented is later than the medieval setting of the shōnen world, and the visual depiction is a pastiche of technology, architecture, and dress that occurred anywhere from the 1600s through the 1850s (Figure 5). Like the protagonists in the shōnen worlds, the real-world protagonists of the Otome gamic worlds can choose to follow the plot dictated by the game or choose an alternative plot that better meets their needs and desires.



Figure 5. Iris from *The Accomplishments of the Duke's Daughter*

### ***Gamic worlds***

Stories set in the shōnen and otome worlds enjoy a rich intertextuality. The use of key tropes and visual cues in the beginning of a manga series conveys to the reader that the story is set in a “standard” gamic world. This allows the authors to freely use the various elements of the standard worlds with the expectation that they will be understood without explanation by the reader. In isekai manga, these worlds can be linked to actual games the protagonist (or the reader) is aware of or they can be generic “standard” game worlds. Elements of the games that routinely occur in these standard worlds include:

- Menus describing individual’s characteristics (e.g., health points (HP), magic points (MP), specific skills, and levels);
- Adventure guilds (that manage small and large quests);
- Flags (pivotal events in the story that signal subsequent events);
- Opponents (monsters or evil individuals that must be defeated or out competed);
- Bosses (stronger than average opponents that mark transition points in a game);
- Targets (attractive men with hearts to be captured);
- Magical powers that are often linked to MP;
- Magic items (swords, armor, jewelry, etc.) that confer capabilities to the user;
- Spells;
- Familiars;
- Magical healing; and
- Storage bags that allow the player to carry any amount of weapons, food, water, money, or valuables.

The concept of the “cheats” in isekai stories is borrowed from the mechanics of the coding of computer games. Normally roleplaying games require the player to spend considerable time completing tasks to grow and obtain necessary abilities. A cheat is a piece of code that allows the informed player to bypass this time and effort. With the cheat the player can more easily defeat opponents and advance in gameplay. The concept of a cheat is a redefinition of the idea of gifts or blessings awarded to characters based on grace or merit to advantages obtained by luck or craft and are, on some level, unfair.

The standard shōnen and otome worlds are pastoral in nature and are a sharp contrast to the modern technological society of Japan. Information in modern societies largely resides outside of people (organizational knowledge, manuals, books, internet, etc.) and each individual typically understands only a part of the processes that go on around them. This leads to the disempowering of the individual. In contrast, the shōnen and otome isekai operate on a human scale. Knowledge is held by people in the community. If it is not common knowledge, then it is known by a specialist (craftsperson, farmer, trader, or baker) who is a person in the community. Rare information is known by the king, priest, or mage who can be found in the kingdom’s central town. The net result is that individuals, including the protagonist, are empowered in the isekai in a way that they are not in modern Japan or in any modern country.

### ***Mendlesohn’s four story types and the gamic worlds***

All four of Mendlesohn’s story types can be set in gamic worlds. Many of the stories are portal-quest stories including the four cited above for the shōnen and otome gamic worlds. Surprisingly, computer roleplaying games in themselves are not portal-quest

stories. They are immersive stories. The player as part of the initial steps of setting up the game resigns their humanity and becomes a player, who is perhaps inexperienced, but is a native of the isekai with no connection to the real world or to the player's life in the real world. Fictionalized versions of roleplaying games, therefore, tend to be immersive (e.g., *Record of the Lodoss War*) as well. More recently, stories have been created that: are set in gamic worlds, have a native protagonist, have a plot that differs from game play, and have no portal to the real world. These immersive stories are tagged as isekai. Such stories allow plots where the protagonist can have a richer backstory than in portal quests.

Invasive and liminal stories have also been developed using gamic worlds. Invasive stories have been created as extensions of the portal-quest plots. For example, a mangaka could create stories about what would happen if the summoned hero was sent back to the real world with his skills, powers, and cheats intact (*The Hero Who Returned Remains the Strongest in the Modern World* (2019, *Isekaigaeri no Yuusha ga Gendai Saikyou!*)), or what would happen if two summoners entered this world and compete to find and take the protagonist to the isekai (*I am Both the Hero and the Demon King* (2019, *Boku ga Yuusha de Maou mo Boku de*)). Liminal stories occur when the mangaka explores what would happen if the gamic isekai and real world overlapped to create spaces where humans and residents of the isekai interact (*My Room Is a Dungeon Rest Stop* (2017, *Boku no Heya ga Dungeon no Kyuukeijo ni Natteshimatta Ken*)).

In summary, isekai as a term referring to a literary genre of manga, anime, and light novels appears to have begun around 2013. Initially it was associated with portal-quest stories that involve a gamic world<sup>19</sup>. Since that time, the isekai genre has been extended

to include 1) all portal-quest fantasies created at any time, and 2) all immersive, invasion, and liminal stories that involve a gamic world<sup>20</sup>.

### **Database narratives**

In 1989, Ôtsuka Eiji published a description of a media behavior he termed narrative consumption<sup>21</sup>. Narrative consumption is the act of reading small narratives not only for direct enjoyment but also as a way of accessing a grand narrative. A grand narrative is an overarching story that provides the framework for smaller stories and is only accessed by the consumption of the small narratives. The strategy of grand and multiple small narratives can be intentional when an author chooses to present a larger story in the form of a series of tales. Examples of this in literature include Yanagita Kunio's *Tales of Tôno* (1912, *Tôno Monogatari*<sup>22</sup>) and in Western speculative fiction Robert Silverberg's *Majipoor* series<sup>23</sup> and Keith Roberts' *Pavane*<sup>24</sup>. Grand narratives can also occur because an author's initial creation implies a larger narrative which is sufficiently attractive that it draws the original author<sup>25</sup> and other authors back to tell other stories within that narrative. Examples of such grand narratives include *Gundum* and *Slayers* and the Western speculative media franchises of *Marvel Universe*, *Star Wars*, and *Star Trek*.

This model of reading multiple small narratives was extended by Azuma Hiroki<sup>26</sup> to instances where there are numerous small narratives with common character types, settings, and plots but where there is no grand narrative. Instead, the stories consist of collections of elements taken from a canonical pool recognizable by the reader. Azuma refers to this pool as the "grand nonnarrative" for the stories. These stories have no higher

meaning other than that they are created with the elements and characteristics that come from the grand nonnarrative. Azuma further asserts that such grand nonnarratives consist of common plot elements that can be mixed and matched. The elements specify sets of common characters, and the characters can be in turn defined in terms of sets of common design elements (e.g., cat ears, blue hair, eye patches, and maid outfits). The result is that a small narrative can be considered to be a set of selections from a multitiered database.

Isekai manga appear to be an example of a collection of small narratives created from a grand nonnarrative. There is no grand narrative to isekai stories. Instead, the hundreds of individual stories follow a common set of plot points (e.g., life prior to entering the isekai, entering the isekai, the nature of the isekai, transformations of the protagonist, and motivations in the isekai) and only differ in the specifics of how the elements occur. The specifics are either taken from earlier isekai stories or are variants of earlier works. As a result, the reader of isekai stories has the expectation that plots, tropes, characters, and character designs will be drawn from a common tradition.

In this paper, we propose that a survey of the hundreds of portal-quest isekai manga series can identify the structure of plot elements, specific types of characters, and characteristics of these characters that make up the grand nonnarrative for isekai stories. This is done based on the basic plot structure of the portal-quest story, the empirical identification of regularly occurring elements, and the organization of the characteristics of the elements using a multitiered database. The individual manga series would then appear as a specific set of selections from the database.

## **Surveying English translations of isekai manga**

The appendix to this paper describes a survey that was performed on English-translated isekai manga. The majority of the manga series are only partially available in English. This occurs for several reasons. Many manga series are either never completed due for flagging interest or are still ongoing. In addition, there is a lag in translation so that more recent chapters may not have been translated. Finally, translating groups may drop a series because of a lack of interest or resources. As a result, many series only have a few episodes available. Because of this bias in the available data, the survey could not investigate elements related to the outcome of the stories (e.g., did the protagonist return to the real world, or did they achieve their goals in the isekai). The scope of the survey, therefore, focuses on events and elements in the early portion of the stories.

The process of creating the survey is described in the appendix of this paper. A total of 1010 series from Japan, Korea, and China were identified by internet sites as “isekai stories”. These series were briefly reviewed based on primary and secondary data. The manga series that had sufficient information were divided into the four categories of portal-quest, immersive, intrusion, and liminal. A second more detailed survey was performed on the 427 manga series identified as portal-quest isekai stories and where there were sufficient translated chapters to allow the survey to be performed. Focusing on portal-quest stories allowed the survey to assess the largest single block of stories with a relatively consistent plot.

The survey instrument was developed by reading isekai manga and identifying story elements that occur in most of the stories and that have characteristics that vary across stories in a regular way. The questions in this survey fall into the following areas:

- Demographics and characteristics of the protagonist prior to entering the isekai;
- Method of entering the isekai;
- Characteristics of the isekai;
- Characteristics of the protagonist in the isekai (both physical, psychological, and social); and
- Interpersonal relationships in the isekai.

This survey focuses on the characteristics of the protagonist, however, data on other characters are also collected. These characters include the summoner (if summoned), others entering the isekai with the protagonist, divine agents, members of the opposite gender, and certain background characters in the isekai.

Once the survey design was finalized, the portal-quest manga were reread, and the survey was performed. Where possible, the answers to the questions were grouped into categories. For example, the age of the protagonist is defined using the categories of pre-high school, high school, college-age, adult, and elderly. The mechanisms for entering the isekai are organized into summoning, reincarnation, divine error, etc. A description of the survey instrument (questions and categories of responses) is given in a data dictionary provided as an ancillary file for this paper.

## Findings from the survey

The following are a partial set of findings from the survey. The complete results of the survey are available for download in the form of an Excel™ workbook and as two comma delineated files. The survey found that portal-quest isekai manga can be organized in terms of a small number of elements and a limited number of ways the elements occur (categories of characteristics).

The chronology of events (but not necessarily the order of telling in a story) in portal-quest stories begins in the real world. As a result, the protagonists have various physical, psychological, and social characteristics prior to entering the isekai. The survey found that protagonists include women and men from junior high age to the elderly, but the largest group are adult males (41 percent). The ratio of male to female protagonists is 2.4 to 1 and the ratio of adult to teenage protagonists is 1.4 to 1. Most of the protagonists have one or more negative elements in their lives (e.g., playing games to the detriment of schoolwork or a job, being bullied in school, being overworked at a job, suffering from mental or physical abuse at work or home, or being an invalid). Only eight percent are presented as either having a life characterized by positive elements or as being successful in their careers. Adult protagonists are sometimes identified in terms of their profession (doctor, scientist, lawyer, chef, pharmacist, etc.). These identifications typically become important for the subsequent events in the isekai.

The mechanisms for entering the isekai in the stories fall into six categories; “reincarnation,” “divine act,” “summoning,” “specific tool,” “pulled into game,” and “no explanation”. Reincarnation takes advantage of the fact that individuals living different

lives in different worlds can have the same soul. As a result, the protagonist is a character in the isekai who simply remembers their past life in modern-day Japan. This is the gentlest method of entering the isekai and has the advantage of giving the protagonist a knowledge of the isekai, a family, personal connections, and a role in isekai society. A divine act occurs when a god, or god-like agent, causes the protagonist to enter the isekai. This method allows the protagonist to receive a blessing, or curse, that sets them apart from others. Summoning occurs when a character in the isekai pulls the protagonist into the isekai. Such acts establish a relationship between the summoner and the protagonist as the initial event in the isekai. Specific tools that transfer the protagonist to the isekai include magical items such as stones or jewels, doors, books, scrolls, or mirrors. They also can be religious shrines or technological devices such as spaceships, machines, or computers. The tools make the protagonist a victim and focus the plot on the tool and often the quest to return home. Being pulled into a game is a method that takes advantage of the ease of visualizing moving from playing a specific game to actually being in that game. These stories establish the protagonist as being knowable about the isekai and converts their success in gaming into a resource for life in the isekai. The method also satisfies the fantasy of never having to leave the game and returning to the real world. The final category is “no explanation”. When there is no explanation for how the protagonist enters the isekai, the entering becomes part of the isekai and is a marvelous act. Such transitions provide the least explanation of the isekai (including how to return) and impose the least number of limitations on the actions of the protagonist. These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive. A goddess may act to reincarnate a person in the

isekai as an infant with their memories intact or a god may intervene in a malicious summoning.

The methods of entering the isekai differ in frequency and vary with the demographics of the protagonist. The characteristics ranked by frequency of occurrence from most to least common are summoning (28 percent), no explanation (23 percent), reincarnation (21 percent), divine act (20 percent), specific tool (8 percent), and pulled into game (8 percent). Stories with a teenage protagonist favor summoning but stories with adult protagonists do not. Reincarnation or no explanation are favored in stories with an adult female and divine act for stories with an adult male protagonist. Certain mechanisms require the protagonist to die (reincarnation and divine act) while others do not (summoning, pulled into game, and magic item). Adults (college age or older) of both genders have a higher probability of dying as part of entering the isekai than teenagers (high school age or younger).

In certain stories where the protagonist enters a shōnen world via a divine act or by being summoned, the process of entering the isekai occurs in two steps. First, the protagonist leaves the real world and enters a liminal space (in the presence of the god or in a space where a summoning takes place). Key events occur in this space such as the awarding or revealing of gifts and the negotiation of the role of the protagonist in the isekai. Following these events, the protagonist truly enters the isekai and begins their journey.

About one in five stories has the protagonist enter the world as one of a group of individuals. Entering the world as a group is problematic. Unless the group had strong

bonds prior to entering the isekai (close friends, a couple, a family, or a respected team) the protagonist almost always separates from the group shortly after entering the isekai. Summoning is also often a negative event. Of the 117 manga series where summoning occurs, about two thirds are either malicious (the summoner intends a bad outcome for the protagonist) or unintended (the protagonist is unwanted). Even when the summoning is positive, the protagonist typically rejects the purpose that they are summoned to perform. As a result, in only 6 percent of the summoning stories do the protagonists perform the tasks for which they were summoned.

The nature of the isekai in the vast majority (88 percent) of the surveyed manga series is based on specific roleplaying games or includes many of the game elements listed above. The largest fraction of the stories, 68 percent, are set in the standard shōnen isekai, 15 percent in the standard otome isekai, and an additional five percent in isekais that differ from the two standard worlds but still include many of the game elements listed above. The remaining 12 percent of stories are split among isekai based on other types of computer games (e.g., dating sims or battle royals), non-gaming fantasy worlds, other planets, time travel, and entering dreams. As would be expected, 84 percent of protagonists entering the standard otome isekai are female and 83 percent entering the shōnen isekai are male.

In the majority of stories (80 percent) the protagonist's body is changed. Protagonists take nonhuman forms in 15 percent of the stories. These include humanoids (e.g., orc, vampire, or elf), monsters (e.g., dragon or slime), animal (e.g., cat, dog, or bear), or objects (e.g., a wand, sword, or onsen). In 65 percent of the stories the protagonist remains human but is changed. These changes may be minimal (granting a magical power

or making the individual a bit younger, thinner, or more athletic) or dramatic (changing gender or becoming an infant). Gender change occurs in seven percent of stories. When gender change occurs it is always involuntary, it occurs at similar rates for adults and teenagers, and 80 percent of the changes are from male to female.

The protagonist receives gifts/cheats upon arrival in the isekai in two thirds of the manga series. Beyond these gifts/cheats, protagonists have the advantage of the knowledge from a life in modern Japan in an isekai that is usually pre-industrial. In 14 percent of the stories, the protagonist enters a game known to the protagonist. In such cases, the protagonist has specific knowledge of the isekai's characteristics and in some cases future events in the isekai.

Once in the isekai, the protagonist's behavior is subject to external forces (finding food and shelter, avoiding threats, and negotiating life with isekai inhabitants). A small number of stories, seven percent, simply focus on survival; however, in the remainder of the stories the protagonist makes choices on how to live. In the computer games motivations are sometimes defined in terms of a quest, and in 20 percent of the isekai manga the protagonist adopts a quest. The more common motivation, however, is to fulfill personal desires that the protagonists bring with them from their lives in the real world. These include living an easy life (a life without stress, farm life, rural village life, or living in luxury) or achieving a personal goal (becoming the strongest magician, finding personal security, or creating a harem). These occur in 53 percent of the stories, and protagonists who were adults in the real world are motivated by personal desires more often than those who were teenagers. In five percent of the stories, the protagonists choose simply to help people. Three percent follow antisocial motivations such as

becoming a sexual predator or enacting violent revenge. A larger fraction of male teenagers falls into this last category than adults or female teenagers.

As discussed above, the great majority of protagonists enter the isekai alone, or if they enter with a group, they quickly separate. Once in the isekai, however, protagonists tend to form groups where they are the central individual. These groups are built by purchasing slaves, saving damsels, creating harems, and obtaining followers and teammates. Marriage is rare and when it occurs it is often polygamous. Food plays a prominent role in 18 percent of the stories. The protagonist may receive magic powers from eating certain foods, may have the power to create foods valued in the isekai, or may need to lose weight.

The protagonists are consistently heterosexual, and their views of the opposite gender are highly objectified. Male protagonists viewed females either as objects to be obtained (valued only in terms of physical desirability) or as coplayers (valued only for their skills) in 78 percent of the stories. Female protagonists viewed males as objects or coplayers in 56 percent of the stories. The fraction of the stories where the first member of the other gender encountered in the isekai is sexually attractive is 81 percent for male protagonists and 64 percent for female protagonists. The other common views of the opposite gender are as nonromantic relationships (parent and child, leader and follower, friend, or sibling). Romantic views of the other gender occurred in one percent of male protagonist stories and ten percent of the female protagonist stories.

## Discussion

This project was able to identify a 1010 isekai series. Using the concepts of the portal-quest category, 427 manga series are identified that have similar storylines in which consistent elements could be readily identified. In recent years isekai manga have been dominated by two distinct types of gamic stories (shōnen and otome). These types of stories are based on two types of computer role playing games, a dungeons-and-dragons-based shōnen adventure games and a dating-simulation-based otome romance games. The large numbers of these stories allowed the creation of a survey instrument that collected information on the frequency of common approaches to story elements such as plot points, characters, and the characteristics of the characters. The results of the survey form a multitiered database that appears to be an example of Azuma's grand nonnarrative.

The success of this exercise does not imply that an actual database exists or that such a database was used to generate the isekai manga included in the survey. Rather, it points to the existence of social and economic forces in the writing and publishing of manga that create such a pattern.<sup>27, 28</sup> The plot of portal-quest isekai manga is narrowly defined and forces stories to contain the same elements. The mangaka and their editors must master the conflicting needs for continuity and novelty in each new publication. A successful manga begets imitations, but over the long run imitation without novelty is unlikely to maintain large numbers of readers. Hence one story about players being trapped in an isekai focuses on the quest to escape, *Sword Art Online*, and a second story of players trapped in a game, *Log Horizon*, on the movement of individuals from characters in a game to members in an actual society. If stories of a doctor's or pharmacist's next life in an isekai prove popular, then stories where the protagonist is a

lawyer or veterinarian are created. This leads to the identification of story elements where variation leads to novelty and desirable affects, but which do not violate the readers' expectations for an isekai story. Once these points are identified, authors can mine the variables for the generation of any number of new stories. The result, to paraphrase Lamarre,<sup>29</sup> is a "field of possible isekai stories" each created by the selection of the various elements of the story from approaches used in earlier stories or logical extensions of such approaches.

The resulting patterns of the elements in such stores behave as if they are a product of a mechanical sampling of a database (the grand nonnarrative) and which retroactively can be captured in an actual database. This ability to maintain a common formula but vary superficial aspects of the story also leads to the hallmarks of isekai manga that the stories are the same, the characters are stock, and the affects of the story are identical.

While computer games have a tremendous influence on isekai stories, the stories usually subvert traditional games' storylines rather than simply repeating them. Instead of entering a game as a wish fulfillment, the act of entering is a deadly trap (*Sword Art Online*). Instead of a kingdom desperately needing to be saved from a horrible fate, you have deceitful and untrustworthy summoners demanding that you risk your life in a very uncertain endeavor (*The Golden Word Master - the Four Heroes and the Innocent Bystander with the Unique Cheat*, (2014), *Konjiki no Moji Tsukai - Yuusha Yonin ni Makikomareta Unique Cheat*). Instead of taking the role of the beautiful but underdog protagonist of an otome game, you are reincarnated as the villainess of the story (*My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom!* (2017), *Otome gēmu no hametsu furagu shika nai akuyaku reijō ni tensei shite shimatta...*), a toady in the villainess's entourage

(*I'm Thinking of Quitting the Villainess' Entourage* (2019), *Akuyaku reijō no torimaki yameyou to omoimasu*), or a relative of a villain (*I Am Troubled That My Fiancé Is a Villain* (2018), *Fianse ga akuyaku de komattemasu*).

In addition to subverting plots, the stories subvert the basic assumptions of the standard game worlds. What if the humans led by the hero are violent racists intent on the extermination of innocent members of other races and species? What if neither magic nor martial arts are the way to success, but rather the skills of the salaryman (political acumen, organizational skills, and ability to tactfully negotiate)? What if the prince of a kingdom is likely to be a poor husband?

The preference for personal goals over being the “hero” in the shōnen world and becoming the villainess rather than the heroine in the otome world are a rejection of the definitions of success established by the roleplaying games. In both cases, the protagonists receive lives that allow more freedom from the expectations of isekai society. These roles require that the protagonist be more responsible for themselves but also allow the protagonist to personally reap the benefits of their efforts. In addition, the protagonists in certain stories negotiate their roles with the divine agent or summoner instead of passively accepting them. In these stories the goal of the protagonist is to assure that life in the isekai will meet their needs and will be better than their lives in the real world.

As a demonstration of how the survey results could be used in the study of isekai stories, data collected in the survey are used to determine if the age and gender of the protagonist in the real world predict differences in story characteristics. Such findings

may have value in predicting the interests and perspectives of consumers of isekai manga if it is assumed that the demographics of the protagonist are a rough indicator for the demographics of the target market of isekai stories.

This assumption is not meant to imply that protagonist demographics fully determine reader demographics for all manga or even all isekai manga. However, reader identification with the protagonist suggests that authors intending to target a specific demographic would both choose a protagonist similar to that of the target audience and select story elements known, or suspected to be, of interest to the target audience. Thus, protagonist demographics could serve as a marker for story elements chosen to attract specific demographics.

As discussed above, the survey results clearly show that protagonist demographics are correlated with the type of world in a manga (otome vs. shōnen), how the world is entered, and the motivation of the protagonist in the isekai. Female readers are more likely to be attracted to stories set in otome worlds, and male readers to shōnen worlds. Adults are more likely to see death as the only way to leave the real world and are more likely than teenagers to desire a life of ease. Teenagers expect to be summoned but are suspicious of the summoners. These patterns suggest that adults are more pessimistic and modest in their desires than teenagers, and that fans of all ages see themselves as being oppressed by the real world. For the fans of isekai stories the goal in entering the isekai is to achieve redemption, or liberation, from life in the real world. Few of the isekai protagonists show much interest in returning home.

These findings are not implausible predictions of the readers' interests and views of the world. However, such conclusions should be tempered by the recognition that associations are not proof of causation. The characterization of the protagonists as having negative experiences in the real world can also simply be a tool of the mangaka to remove the protagonist's reluctance to fully embrace their new lives in the isekai.

## Conclusion

The findings presented in this paper are an initial attempt to mine the large number of isekai manga series that are either legally available or are available as fan scanlations for quantitative findings on the genre's characteristics. The effort shows that it is possible to extract and organize such data and to use the data to generate hypotheses about the audience of the stories and their interests. The paper demonstrated that the manga are highly influenced by role-playing games and show patterns of responses that appear to reflect the views and concerns of different demographics of readers. The survey results include many findings that are not included in this paper. The interested reader is encouraged to download and further analyze the database developed in this project. Finally, the approaches used here could be extended to look at other sets of manga. The survey instrument used here could be modified and applied to the other types of isekai manga (intrusion, immersive, and liminal) or could be applied to the isekai manhwa and manhua to investigate differences across countries.

## Acknowledgements

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## Appendix: Design of the survey of isekai manga

The survey of isekai manga was performed on data collected from internet sources between January 2019 to June 2020. The survey used information collected from five internet sites. Four of these sites provided access to existing databases that contained data on individual manga series (Baka-Updates – Manga Division (<https://www.mangaupdates.com/index.html>), Anime-Planet (<https://www.anime-planet.com/>), Anime News Network -Encyclopedia (<https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/>), and Manga Rock (<https://mangarock.com/>). The remaining site, Kissmanga, was a scanlation aggregator site which provided access to the actual scanlations. This site was shut down in late 2020 but the scanlations remain available from other aggregator sites. Each of the five sites contained lists of manga series that were identified by the site as isekai stories. These series came from Korea and China as well as Japan. Two of the sites, Baka-updates and Anime-Planet, included information on manga series that have not been translated to English.

The set of manga series that were surveyed was developed using the following process. An initial set of series identified as isekai in one or more of the five internet sites were collected. The list of works identified as isekai is not consistent from site to site. As a result, while each site listed between 400 and 600 series, a total of 1010 unique series were identified from the sites. Each of the series was investigated to confirm the national origin of the work, the availability of the text, and where possible the category of the work as defined by Mendlesohn<sup>30</sup> (portal-quest, immersive, intrusion, or liminal).

The purpose of the survey is to investigate isekai manga. As a result, works from China and Korea are excluded (264 series). Of the remaining 746 manga series, 560 had sufficient portions translated so that the survey could be performed. Manga series that consist of “one-shots” (i.e., single independent stories) are not included in the survey since they do not provide sufficient information to perform the survey. In addition, certain manga series are spinoffs or sequels of existing manga and have a common protagonist and setting. When this occurs, only the initial manga series is included in the survey. Of the 560 series, 427 are portal-quests, 55 were immersive, 48 were intrusion, and 30 were liminal. As a result, the 427 manga represent the single largest block of manga that can be described by a relatively consistent plot. These manga formed the data frame for the study.

The data set for the survey is defined by the availability of translated manga. The largest possible data set for this effort would be the set of all published isekai manga series. Such a data set would reflect the interests and backgrounds of Japanese isekai manga readers. This study did not have access to such data. Instead, the five sites provide potentially biased samples of the published manga series. These data are potentially biased by what manga series are available to scanlation teams and which manga series the teams chose to translate. As discussed above, Baka-Updates – Manga Division and Anime-Planet include data on series that have not been translated. Based on data from these two sites, it appears that about three-fourths of the isekai stores (as identified by the sites) have at least one translated chapter. A comparison of the untranslated manga to the translated manga was performed based on the English summaries of the manga. Untranslated manga were 97 percent portal-quest stories and

three percent immersive. Translated manga were 76 percent portal-quest, ten percent immersive, five percent liminal, and nine percent intrusion. This finding suggests the untranslated manga are also dominated by portal-quest stories.

Because of the use of data from multiple sites, the 427 manga series are believed to be a reasonably complete census of the available English-translated portal-quest isekai manga series as of June 2020. As a result, uncertainties in the findings due to sampling error are not investigated.

The stories listed by the five sites included in this survey have various levels of erotic content but do not include hentai manga (manga that prioritize explicit sexual content). Hentai isekai manga are typically limited to a single issue and do not include information on the elements included in the survey. As a result, while the survey does include manga series with erotic content it does not include hentai manga series.

The use of scanlated material in this study is not desirable since the author is reluctant to give attention to materials that violate the copyrights of the owners. In addition, the uneven quality of the translations from scanlators is likely to introduce uncertainty in the answers to survey questions. However, a review of the manga legally available in English found that fewer than 80 isekai series are currently available.<sup>31</sup> Limiting this survey to those manga series would greatly reduce the quality and power of the survey.

Electronic copies of a data dictionary for the survey, an Excel<sup>TH</sup> workbook (.xlsx) and two comma separated values files (.csv) containing the raw survey data are available for download from JAMS.

## Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> Anime planet (<https://www.anime-planet.com/>) Accessed April 2020.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Azuma, Hiroki. *Dôbutsu-ka suru posuto modan: Otaku kara mita Nihon shakai 2001*. Translated by Jonathan E Able and Shion Kono as *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (U of Minnesota Press, 2009.) 30-35
- <sup>5</sup> Csicsery-Ronay, Istvan. *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan University Press, 2012.
- 13
- <sup>6</sup> Csicsery-Ronay, Istvan. *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. 82
- <sup>7</sup> <https://trends.google.com/trends/?geo=US> Accessed June 15, 2021
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Alexander, Lloyd. "High Fantasy and Heroic Romance." *The Horn Book Magazine* 47 (1971): 577-584.
- <sup>10</sup> Todorov, Tzvetan, and TSvetan Todorov. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Cornell University Press, 1975. 41-57
- <sup>11</sup> Mendlesohn, Farah. *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Wesleyan University Press, 2014. xviii - xxiv
- <sup>12</sup> Todorov. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. and Jackson, Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. London and New, 1998.
- <sup>13</sup> Mendlesohn, Rhetorics of Fantasy. xviii - xxiv
- <sup>14</sup> Steinberg, Marc. "8-Bit Manga: Kadokawa's Madara, or, The Gameic Media Mix" *Kinephanos: Journal of Media Studies and Popular Culture* 5 (2015): 44.
- <sup>15</sup> Sword Art Online and Log Horizon both began as light novels before appearing as manga. Isekai stores frequently occur as light novels before becoming manga and it has been argued that the isekai genre is predominately a category of light novels rather than anime or manga.
- <sup>16</sup> Ewalt, David. *Of dice and men: The story of Dungeons & Dragons and the people who play it*. Simon and Schuster, 2013.
- <sup>17</sup> Barton, Matt, and Shane Stacks. *Dungeons and Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games 2e*. CRC Press, 2019.
- <sup>18</sup> Aranda, Oscar García. "Representations of Europe in Japanese anime: An overview of case studies and theoretical frameworks." *Mutual Images Journal* 8 (2020): 47-84.
- <sup>19</sup> Example definitions of isekai are given at the following sites. All sites were accessed June 15, 2020.  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isekai>  
<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=isekai>  
<https://www.definitions.net/definition/isekai>  
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## Rethinking 3.11's Mediascape through Japan Sinks 2020

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**Abstract:** This paper examines Science SARU's Netflix show, *Japan Sinks 2020*, notably its departure from the general apocalyptic ideology of previous primary Japan Sinks texts. By reframing it through the disaster lens of 3.11, *Japan Sinks 2020* sheds light on significant inequalities between global and regional images. As the first internationally aired *Japan Sinks* media, *Japan Sinks 2020* leverages contemporary streaming practices to propose ongoing counter-narratives of the Japanese state, its actors, and the urban-rural divides which have preceded – and continue – in the face of 3.11. Drawing upon Komatsu's last words on the international status of the 3.11 disaster, *Japan Sinks 2020* is a post-3.11 text addressing aspects of Japanese disaster fiction mainly ignored by previous Japan Sinks texts and simultaneously reignites less-discussed challenges associated with the 3.11 mediascape.

**Keywords:** 3.11, *Japan Sinks*, Disaster fiction

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## Intro

Science SARU's 2020 Netflix series *Japan Sinks 2020* ends with the Japanese returning to a re-emerging Japan. The soundtrack is uplifting. Ayumu, one of the survivors, narrates the hopefulness of her country. This narration is juxtaposed with images of submerged buildings – a stadium, Tokyo tower, the Tokyo Skytree – and then it pans up above the waves to reveal a clean, modern Japan, floating on rafts. At the center is a new Tokyo tower, indistinguishable from the old. In this very brief sequence, *Japan Sinks 2020* not only reminds its viewers of the life, land, and relics lost, but also the paradoxical position of Japanese disasters: the consistency in which they occur, but also the readiness in which they are seemingly forgotten.

An interpretation of disaster recovery after 3.11, *Japan Sinks 2020*, recalling Sakyo Komatsu's final words on country's international image during the disaster, problematises ongoing narratives in the 3.11 mediascape. In a dramatic departure from previous Japan Sinks texts, the show's depiction of rural decay, as well as its emphasis on violence and long-term disaster care, suggests that there are still lessons from Tohoku remaining to be learned. The lessons, given the show's broadcasting during the postponed Tokyo Olympics, suggest a rethinking of the narratives around 3.11, particularly in the face of waning national and international interest as well as a spotlight on unseen instances of violence after the disaster.

In this sense, *Japan Sinks 2020* serves as a reminder of the plight of 3.11. However, as a Netflix special, broadcast internationally for the world to see, who is it reminding? It is Japan – and Japan only – that sinks and re-emerges. Why is it, therefore, broadcast on a global platform? *What* is it broadcasting? As a Netflix Original, shows developed and broadcasted specifically for Netflix's catalogue, *Japan Sinks 2020*'s initial release was not

limited to a specifically Japanese audience, but a global audience. At the same time, the show carries political antecedents specific to 3.11 Japan. In other words, *Japan Sinks 2020* acts as both a snapshot to the Japanese response to 3.11. Yet by focusing on lesser-discussed aspects of 3.11, it also emphasizes the recovery logic of the disaster. It accomplishes this through an interlocked focus between body and nation, generating a form of counternarrative to the Tokyo-based, conservative, *gambare* messages that emerged in Japanese media.

## Context

Originally published as a novel in 1973 by highly influential science fiction writer Sakyo Komatsu, the original *Japan Sinks* on a pair of scientists who must develop a solution to save the islands. Like *Japan Sinks 2020*, the islands sink. A film by director Shiro Moritani was released the same year with a similar plot. Both Komatsu (and subsequently Moritani) were grappling with a post-war Japanese identity, specifically in the wake of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics<sup>1</sup> and the 1973 Oil Crisis.<sup>2</sup> Both the novels and films would stress a concurrent fixation with a national and international Japanese identity, a concern which *Japan Sinks 2020* takes advantage thanks to its unique characteristic as an internationally broadcasted *Japan Sinks* property.

The role of *Japan Sinks 2020* as a form of broadcast becomes even more relevant considering that, shortly before he passed away, Komatsu Sakyo's last written work directly discussed the very broadcasting of 3.11. On March 11, 2011, an earthquake measuring 9.0 on the Richter scale struck off Sendai's coast. It sent tsunamis up to 120 ft<sup>3</sup> high deep into the Tohoku (northeast) area of Japan. Due to the disaster and a series of safety management failures, three out of the four reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi plant

underwent a meltdown, spilling radiation into the surrounding countryside. The Tohoku Triple Disaster, more generally known as 3.11, resulted in 18,500 casualties, half a million displaced peoples, and \$210 billion in damages.<sup>4</sup> 3.11 remains the costliest natural disaster in human history, and the subsequent radiation spillage and cleanup is an ongoing expenditure for the Japanese government.<sup>5</sup> In an anthology titled *3.11 no Mirai* ("The Future of 3.11"), Komatsu notes that while previous significant disasters in Japan were publicly and internationally known, the Tohoku triple disaster dwarfed everything preceding it. The international and incessant broadcasting of 3.11 caused lasting consequences on Japanese national identity to a degree never seen before – what is the world seeing?<sup>6</sup> How is it responding to this disaster? Most importantly, what kind of Japan is being shown?

After 3.11, a particular set of Tokyo-based, ethnonationalist narratives emerged, partly out of a need to press a unified national identity as part of the country's reconstruction. Tamaki Mihic notes that a nationalist rhetoric emerged out of the Tohoku triple disaster, leading to a resurgent sentimentality of Japaneseness through an aggressive use of the word *kizuna*.<sup>7</sup> However, what amplified the sense of a unified Japanese response was an international perception of Japan as a calm, collected, and united people.<sup>8</sup> The nationalist image, in effect, folded in on itself; not only was there a massive internal push by the Japanese government to come together, but there was also an international image which pushed the Japanese to conform to a particular disaster nationalist identity. Yuko Nishimura, a Tohokuite who worked with local recovery efforts around Rikuzentakata, mentioned a similar embarrassment. She notes that the international sympathy was a point of self-consciousness to many Japanese,<sup>9</sup> especially considering that the hardest hit area was Tohoku, which was historically a peripheral

zone.<sup>10</sup> Both Mihic and Nishimura are tackling similar problematics in much of the mainstream post-3.11 rhetoric: there was a need by certain political actors for a resurgent, homogenous Japan in the face of both widespread devastation as well as mounting international expectations on the Japanese struggle. However, such desires and expectations effectively hide regional dynamics as well as marginalize critical actors in the wake of 3.11's reconstruction.

*Japan Sinks 2020* effectively broadcasts an alternative narrative against the reconstructive logic of 3.11. It accomplishes this through a depiction of alternative subjects. In doing so, Science SARU is pushing back against the image of a holistic Japanese identity. More specifically, the show accomplishes this not only through a direct foregrounding of Japanese racial relations, but also stresses existing tensions between core-periphery imaginations, especially urban-rural divisions.

### Rejecting Visible Collapses

Much of this foregrounding occurs thanks to the show's position as a text within a global technocultural flow, what Arjun Appadurai calls a mediascape.<sup>11</sup> *Japan Sinks: 2020* heavily fixates on narratives mediated by screens – screens of smartphones, tablets, and game consoles dominate the show, reaffirming the highly technological relationship between 3.11 and its international audience. For instance, one of the survivors shows footage, by a Youtuber named Kite, of Okinawa's sinking. The Japanese are getting video footage of Okinawa sinking, not from the government or a Japanese outlet, but Kite, an Estonian YouTuber. They are already linked into a global mediascape, though because the footage is too harrowing to grapple with, they reject it as an attack on their own national identity. And yet, at the same time, they cannot disconnect themselves from that feed.

Characters are watching the footage, not negotiated through the lens of a Japanese content creator, but from a foreign content creator, and nevertheless craft their own narratives. In this scene, the assumed viewer is not just people watching the show, but also, more generally, any audience member who witnessed the disaster of 3.11, both directly or allegorically (through *Japan Sinks 2020*). In other words, survivors watching the sinking of Okinawa are not that distant from both the Japanese and international audiences watching the floods on any video and broadcasting platform (including Youtube), and even more closely, drawing their own conclusions on the disaster.

In this sense, the show's subject – and the subject of these screens – are not just conventional disaster narratives that generally populated previous *Japan Sinks*. These seemingly perennial subjects of Japan Sinks - urban imaginations, technocratic responses, and disaster macropolitics – play much more limited roles in *Japan Sinks 2020*. Part of the move away from urban imaginations of 3.11 may stem from creative decisions. Director Masaaki Yuasa has mentioned that he largely remembers 3.11 from Tokyo, outside of the disaster zone.<sup>12</sup> Since Tohoku is one of the least populated areas with some of the lowest average incomes in Japan,<sup>13</sup> a depiction of 3.11 through disaster means focusing much less on urban regions and shedding more light on rural areas, specifically rural disasters.

The move away from urban imaginations towards rural ones is recollective of what both urban planner Aoi Akihito and disaster journalist Watanabe Minoru refer to as visible and invisible collapses. The former refers to visible destruction – images of rubble, bodies, and destruction. *Japan Sinks 2020*'s opening episodes grapple with bombastic, visible destruction. At the end of episode 2, people are seen falling from the streets from some unknown force, which is revealed to be a rampant fire whirl. The crashing

helicopter, downed plane, and collapsing stadium during the initial quake are reminiscent of the previous Japan Sinks films, of which both the 1973 and 2006 versions bear prolonged scenes of buildings collapsing, people stuck in rubble, and long lines of scattered civilians. The depiction of invisible collapses is particularly salient since previous Japan Sinks visual media have largely opted to tackle visible collapses; both Moritani and Higuchi's 1973 and 2006 films (respectively) opt for showing widespread destruction and chaos. Fire and rubble are ongoing visual cues of visible collapses in previous films, since audience members can directly and easily associate disasters with these signs. However, given the peripheral location of Tohoku (relative to Tokyo) and the ongoing problems with radioactivity, the visual imagery of *Japan Sinks 2020* is much more subdued. Given that the initial episodes begin with a strong visual emphasis on fire and rubble, recollective of Higuchi's 2006 opening, the Mutous' trek into the countryside suggests a stark visual rejection of what can be considered an urban imagination of disaster. The show takes advantage of what Lamarre refers to as animetic movement – the sliding of cell layers as a form of technical motion<sup>14</sup> – landslides and water dominate the show's disaster imagery, and the destruction of the massive kintsugi Jomon statue splits along layers as it slides into the fissures of the ground. In this sense, Science SARU adopts a decidedly rural visual turn; the rejection of the urban imagination is inter-implicated with a rejection of the cinematic imagination which has dominated previous Japan Sinks films.

As the Mutous move into the countryside, the show's adoption of increasingly invisible collapses become clearer, beginning the counter-narrative broadcast of 3.11's recovery logic. For instance, though the disaster begins in urban environments, the effects and consequences of that destruction are shown in rural areas. A later scene suggests

that such rural decay was an ignored problem , an issue which preceded the sinking of Japan. When the old proprietor of the department store takes him to a cemetery, the graves are depicted as worn out. The suggestion is that there were very few people left to maintain it. The old man presents a different response vector: instead of the Mutous, who have evacuated in the face of disaster, he refused to leave his home and the remnants of his family. His life was upturned by the sinking of Japan, but the sinking merely served as the final nail in the coffin of a long string of problems. A victim of a disaster long before the actual events (whether it is the declining rural countryside or another, separate earthquake), his presence in the show presents the disasters in *Japan Sinks: 2020* not as a series of discrete scenarios puncturing a moment's peace, but instead as a seamless fabric of inter-implicated problems. Compared to previous Japan Sinks films, Science SARU's Japan is one whose pristine condition never existed. Though the first episode's events revolve around the Mutous getting out of the city, their exodus is not presented as a pilgrimage towards safety, but a de-privileging of an urban imagination as it faces an ongoing rural one. In this sense, the show adopts a somewhat surreal, atemporal depiction of disaster; by offloading the consequences of disaster to rural areas, the show makes it exceedingly difficult to know what is and is not caused by the literal sinking of Japan. Much of the countryside is presented as post-disaster, empty and languishing, with few survivors.

A similar post-disaster imagery was mentioned by Yuko Nishimura as she recounted her relief efforts in Tohoku. By emphasizing the rural disaster, *Japan Sinks 2020* strives to more accurately depict new and ongoing problems that arose out of 3.11 and sheds light on regional inequalities within the country itself. In a retrospective on reconstruction efforts in the Tohoku area, Nishimura notes that while many Japanese

welcomed the initial outpouring of sympathy, it also inadvertently effaced real regional identities. She states that, "many Japanese may have felt self-conscious, embarrassed or even ashamed by the international outpouring of sympathy since it was mostly the Tohokuites of three prefectures in the north who were the victims, and not the Japanese as a whole."<sup>15</sup> In fact, despite being a native of Tohoku herself, Nishimura was unable to hide her surprise upon arrival at Rikuzentakata, noting that she "felt [she] was in a nightmare, a surreal story in which the entire planet had been destroyed by the atom bomb."<sup>16</sup> To Nishimura, such images were mediated through an urbanized lens, that the situation is less one of ongoing regional exploitation and subservience towards a Tokyo-based core and instead an immediate, singular disaster that must be rectified immediately. *Japan Sinks: 2020* problematizes the spectacle of catastrophe - rural Japan, it suggests, was not dying because of the disaster; it was *already* dying.

### Invisible Collapses and Unseen Victims

The move towards rurality in *Japan Sinks: 2020* shifts away from discourses around large, macro destruction towards more micro and long-lasting destruction. It operates as a counter-narrative through a depiction of subjects and spaces often ignored in previous *Japan Sinks* texts, primarily issues of rural disasters, sexual violence, and radiation.

For instance, in one episode, the Mutous catch a wild boar. The scene is played in a heartwarming fashion with an uplifting beat by Kensuke Ushio. It depicts city folks who ultimately triumph in the face of adversity. However, while the boar scene is relatively lighthearted, it signifies Japan's ongoing rural plight. The emigration from certain parts of Tohoku (due to the radiation) has resulted in an explosion of the wild boar population.<sup>17</sup>

Yet more distressingly, the wild boars were not caused by the events of 3.11 – they were already endemic to rural Japan. As Japan's youth move towards the cities, the average age of Japan's towns skews much older, and as a consequence, such towns are becoming overrun by wild boars.<sup>18</sup> Here, the boar scene behaves similarly to the initial urban destruction of Tokyo, though it presents an admittedly different side of the surrealist imagination. As the song swells, the scene takes on an adventurous, light-hearted tone. As the father, Koichiro, hangs on to the boar, the family tries to help him. The scene then cuts to the boar cooking on a grill, with few additional details. The sequence, in effect, takes on a dreamlike quality, distilling any distinct sense of time and space into a sequence without a clear beginning and end. What led the boar there? Was it the sinking of Japan? Or was it always there? The show makes no effort to clarify it, though it draws upon this real issue to address some of its concerns.

While the boar scene serves as a short signifier for Japan's rural decay and the urban imagination's inability to grapple with it, *Japan Sinks 2020* tackles with subjects of sexual assault and radioactivity as central components of invisible collapses. Journalist Watanabe Minoru, who has spent much of his time on invisible collapses in the context of the 1995 Awaji-Hanshin quake, describes it as a situation where the rules of society begin to crumble<sup>19</sup> and where self-justification of criminal actions emerges.<sup>20</sup> Since many invisible collapses are long-lasting and unseen, they are much more difficult to depict in media. Furthermore, because invisible collapses are ongoing problems, providing solutions to them is incredibly difficult and costly. The Tohoku triple disaster magnifies the long-lasting issues associated with invisible collapses for three general reasons. One, because the event was, as Komatsu notes, broadcast internationally, there is a real political incentive for Japanese media to depict the survivors as calm and collected.

Second, because the disasters struck some of Japan's most impoverished areas, these media are dealing with a departure from the disaster imaginations gestated in the urban cores. Third, due to the radioactivity resulting from the Fukushima-Daiichi meltdown, the scope of the disaster's damage is not just massive and immediate; there is a long-term socioeconomic discombobulation and displacement that occurs. *Japan Sinks 2020*, in a departure from the Moritani and Higuchi offerings, devotes significantly more time to the latter.

The invisible collapse does not mean that the images of calm and collected Japanese are necessarily false. As Nishimura points out, the Japanese's international image during the 3.11 disaster was, truthfully, one of a calm, collected, coordinated effort by everyone involved.<sup>21</sup> Tamaki Mihic makes a similar observation, noting a dramatic self-perception emerged as "images of the cool, calm and collected response of the Japanese to the 3.11 disaster impressed the world."<sup>22</sup>

However, just as how the rural imagination can be seen as a counter-narrative against the prevailing urban imagination, the depiction of the Japanese as neither calm, cool, nor collected positions *Japan Sinks: 2020* as an important broadcast of another counter-narrative. In fact, the show rejects the notion that disasters have an ontological limit, that they can be 'over'. The show accomplishes this rejection through two notable examples of invisible collapses: sexual assault in the midst of a disaster and radiation.

In *Japan Sinks: 2020*, there are two instances of attempted sexual assault, though the first instance is particularly relevant because it also outlines the ideological context in which perpetrators commit these acts. In episode three, the Mutous (along with a few friends) hitch a ride from a trucker, who is drinking. One of the friends chastises the trucker for drinking while driving, after which he argues:

There are no cops anymore...because of you guys, I'm a little over carrying capacity, so who cares about those silly little laws? Let's do all the things we couldn't do before. You're losing out if you're not having fun!<sup>23</sup>

The show employs a conventional approach to signal the driver's ill-intent; it adopts the driver's first-person perspective and tilts the camera bottom to top, fixated on the body of Nanami, family friend of the Mutous. Viewers cannot stop him nor get involved, even as they are aware of his intentions. In the next scene, they park at an abandoned gas station, at which point he forces himself upon her. Mari and Ayumu stop him, take his truck, and leave him stranded. If we consider sexual violence during (and after) disasters as fomented sites of invisible collapses, the witnessing of Nanami's attempted sexual assault becomes not only a grave reminder that victims do face considerable unreported and undocumented violence in the wake of these disaster, but also that it was thanks to the concerted effort by Ayumu and Mari – other survivors and potential victims – that she was able to avoid this fate.

In that sense, the sexual assault sequence reflects the sentiment of scholar Meiko Yoshihama, who notes that one of the major problems that arise out of disaster is "a wide range of abuse and exploitation, including quid pro quo sexual assault, where threats were used to force compliance in exchange for shelter, food, and other life-sustaining resources,"<sup>24</sup> which is particularly important considering that this transactional exploitation happens outside of the view of mainstream media and governmental response. Reporter Rob Gilhooly similarly notes that after the initial disasters of 3.11, Japanese women become victims of an ongoing slew of sexual abuse, harassment, and rape.<sup>25</sup> Both Gilhooly and Yoshihama's accounts are in stark contrast to the narratives

mentioned by Yasuda et al, who note that the National Police Agency concluded that while such incidents did occur, most of them were deemed groundless.<sup>26</sup> The problem, the NPA reasoned, is that such claims could exacerbate problems and cause panic. Yoshihama notes that such insinuations may be an attempt to control the disaster narrative.<sup>27</sup>

Between these two competing claims about the prevalence of sexual violence after disasters (especially 3.11), *Japan Sinks 2020*'s decision to show attempted sexual violence *twice* reaffirms its status as a counter-narrative. The first scene not only suggests that it is primarily survivors who must undergo the role of physical and emotional support, but it also acts as a move away from the technocratic imaginations of the Japanese government. The existence of a second scene, where Ayumu is the victim, delegitimizes any claims that such cases are anomalous. Both sexual violence cases in *Japan Sinks 2020* are not resolved by the government, but other victims of the disaster. The show's depiction of sexual violence acts as a direct counterpoint to some of the ongoing narratives after 3.11, particularly some of the political interests in focusing less on sexual violence and instead depicting the Japanese as calm and collected.

## Recovery Logic

In addition to sexual violence, *Japan Sinks 2020* also briefly touches upon another aspect of invisible collapses: radiation. Compared to previous post-war disasters, 3.11 is unique to Japan precisely because of the Fukushima-Daiichi meltdown. The effect of the radioactive spill is that many victims may be unable to return to their former lives. As a result, an identity of displacement emerges from many of 3.11's disaster victims, who must seriously consider whether they can "move on" and settle somewhere else or whether they must come to a plan as to how to return. Akihito describes this mentality as *hinan shakai*,

or evacuation society, where people are stuck in stages of temporary housing, forced anonymity, and long-term precarity.<sup>28</sup> To some, losing everything and living out the rest of your life in a hostile environment can prove too much: Hamako Watanabe, who committed self-immolation after the loss of her home, is one such consequence.<sup>29</sup> What underlies all of this is a concern with recovery – where to recover, recovering with whom, and what one considers recovery. Anne Allison has touched upon similar concerns in *Precarious Japan*, noting that the precariousness facing all Japanese were not just in the immediate dangers, but persisting dangers which can extend even to those outside of the immediate disaster zone.<sup>30</sup> In this sense, the concept of evacuation and recovery is not just simply a sense of recuperation, but also to adorn a new identity of susceptibility: susceptibility to harm, disease, and death.<sup>31</sup>

This adoption of harm in the face of uncertainty and precarity can be seen when the Mutous enter the Shan City compound. A religious organization run by criminals, Shan City is described as a mix between "an alien civilization and a new religion."<sup>32</sup> It is at Shan City that Ayumu comes across Toshio Onodera, a scientist and recurring Japan Sinks character, who is now mute and paraplegic. It is revealed that much of Shan City funds itself through the illicit cultivation of marijuana. Its matriarch, however, doubles as a priestess, who acts as a conduit for her mute son. Here, refugees and members of Shan City can perform séances and communicate with their dead. Still, despite the organization's shadiness, the compound does not discriminate, and most of the people the Mutous interact with seem pleasant and well-meaning. It is also in the Shan City compound that Mari and Ayumu reconcile their relationship, which has become frayed with the death of Koichiro. After a series of earthquakes levels the compound and kills most of its members, the Mutous are forced to leave.

There are two purposes for the Mutous to end up here. On one, it recalls Komatsu's 1973 novel. Yusuke Tadokoro, Onodera's boss and mentor, drew most of his funding from a new religious movement:

"Well, where does he get the money?" asked Onodera.

"The Church of the Seven Seas," answered Yukinaga cryptically. "It's a new religion. Its headquarters is in Greece."<sup>33</sup>

As a new religious organization, Shan City acts as a roundabout diegetic reason as to why Onodera is at the compound. On another level, just like the urban-rural and the visible-invisible divides, Shan City problematizes questions of recovery. In Shan City, the atemporal depiction of rural decay is mapped directly onto the body of its members. At the compound, Go meets a former sumo wrestler (*rikishi*), whose association with Shan City predates the events of *Japan Sinks 2020*. In this sense, Shan City is not only an evacuation site, but also doubles as a meeting site for people evacuating more than the disaster. This evacuation imagery is even more important considering that *Japan Sinks 2020* seeks to grapple with the depiction of private actors, especially private religious actors.

Just as how international broadcasting unveils questions of urban versus rural imaginations, the role of new religious organizations problematize concerns with regards to both physical and spiritual recovery. According to scholar Inoue Nobutaka, new religions have a somewhat uneasy relationship with the overall Japanese population. Even in the age of new media and the internet, mainstream Japanese opinions of new religions have been mainly critical.<sup>34</sup> However, despite the concerns, religious movements - and new religious movements particularly - have played a central part, for better or for

worse, in recuperative operations after disasters in Japan. Scholar Levi McLaughlin notes that due to paralyzed governmental responses and media depiction, private religious responses during the 1995 Hanshin-Awaji earthquake and the Tokyo Subway sarin gas attack drastically maligned new religious involvement.<sup>35</sup>

However, the private religious organizations saw a dramatic shift after 3.11. McLaughlin noted that religious organizations - especially new religions - learned critical public relations lessons from 1995 to lessen the animosity gap between them and the public.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, during the initial stages of the disaster, religious organization Soka Gakkai, like many other new religious centers, played crucial roles in taking in refugees while simultaneously suspending proselytization.<sup>37</sup> Within minutes, places like the Soka Gakkai Cultural Center in Sendai became a refugee hub and mobilized an army of rapid response volunteers.<sup>38</sup> Thus, on the one hand, Shan City serves as a reminder of new religious organizations' role, specifically how they played a critical role in disaster relief. Yet on the other, Shan City also touches upon the tasks of comfort care, of which many religious organizations have more than willing to provide:

The Japanese public has begun looking beyond the traumas of 3.11, and news reports about the many thousands of Tohoku residents who still live with the pains and deprivations of the disasters are growing increasingly less frequent. Religious organizations are some of the few groups that maintained active aid efforts long after international aid agencies and government emergency crews left the area, and they are now working to raise awareness about their activities and to solicit volunteers in the face of dwindling national concern.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, these ongoing efforts are working. In the wake of 3.11, positive media coverage of new religious movements saw a qualitative uptick despite the lack of a quantitative one.<sup>40</sup> Part of this uptick is also due to the ongoing care - both spiritual and physical - that

many religious organizations offer. Similar to Aoi and Watanabe's definitions of invisible collapse as unseen or unregistered destruction, so too are there neglected or unrecorded recovery efforts. The role of the religious movement, in this case, can be seen as what McLaughlin notes as *kokoro no kea*, or therapy of the soul.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, it is no surprise that Ayumu's character undergoes its most dramatic shift in this arc. Not only does she mend her relationship with her mother, but in wondering why Kite remains, she reveals the class dimensions underlying disaster recovery:

Ayumu: How come you didn't leave Japan right away? All the other rich people have left.<sup>42</sup>

Though not exclusive to new religious movements, much of this therapy is within these new religious movements' interest to maintain. These religious organizations, therefore, fall into the previous mediascape patterns - like many of the unspoken or under-represented elements of the 3.11 mediascape, new religious movements played an indelible role in recovery (and continue to). However, for historical reasons, their coverage has been relatively scant compared to the scale of their involvement. At the same time, Ayumu's question reminds the viewer of these survivors' condition - like members of the *hinan shakai*, many refugees are those who have lost everything or cannot afford to leave. These religious organizations, in this sense, can be all they have left.

The inclusion of Shan City serves as a performance between the mainstream media and new religions. The show neither outwardly criticizes nor endorses the actions of new religious organizations. Shan City is shown as ominous, though never necessarily dangerous. Even after one of the quakes ripples throughout the compound and places everyone in danger, the central statue at Shan City is flanked by the open gate, reminiscent

of a figure locked behind closed doors. One of the scientists who attempts to escape with some of Shan City's wealth stops at the gate, unable to move further. There is, in effect, a separation between an imagined community in Shan City, an "Us" that, while the Mutous are not a part of, can nevertheless be witness to their struggles. In this sense, the fact that the Mutous – as a urbanised, Tokyo analogue – can watch the downfall of Shan City reaffirms that recovery efforts, even if doomed, are incredibly vital for its actants. The vastly different experiences of the Mutou children demonstrate the general vitality of these new religions, at least in the context of post-3.11 recovery. It is therefore unsurprising that when the compound begins to collapse, its members choose to stay behind. The scene's emotional gravitas is played straight: the rubble falls in slow motion, the matriarch's narration superimposed as everyone plummets to their deaths:

In this world, no one is useless. Let's build it together!<sup>43</sup>

On a spiritual and social level, Shan City - as a stand-in for religious organizations - is all they have left.

In this sense, the counter-narrative presented in the Shan City arc is not just to stress the central role of new religious organizations, but also shed light on actors outside of the civilian-government distinction.

### **Disaster as Recuperation; Body and Mobility**

*Japan Sinks 2020* similarly touches upon bodies as sites of political conflict. These fold back onto questions of what it means to be Japanese. In doing so, *Japan Sinks 2020* critiques the sense of 'nation' which emerged after 3.11, problematizing what being "Japanese" truly means. For instance, the show takes advantage of the Mutous' character

design as a source of commentary. Later in the series, the Mutous attempt to board a raft, which is helmed by a far-right ethnonationalist. However, the ferryman does not realise that Mari and Go – both with character designs noticeably darker than most of the characters – are not fully Japanese. It is only at Go's English phraseology that the ferryman becomes suspicious. In this sense, the character design of the Mutous are played to mark the arbitrary nature of ethnonationalist rhetoric, that what constitutes as a pure Japanese citizen is incredibly unclear. This depiction effectively defangs nationalist sentiments, that even the more stringent of Japanese nationalists are unable to differentiate between who is and is not Japanese.

However, the show's body and state relation is at its most striking during discussions of the Olympics, both as a test of the Japanese body and as a test of the Japanese state. The show ends the same way it begins: the Olympics. On the one hand, ending the Olympics is a spectral pall cast over Japan's disasters. Because the Tokyo Olympics were postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, to show the lost Japanese returning to a resurging (literally) Japan is emblematic of what Mark Fisher calls a lost future, an object that engages with something bearing a "tantalising ache of a future just out of reach."<sup>44</sup> On the other, more striking hand, ending *Japan Sinks 2020* on the Olympics recalls the international image that Komatsu was grappling with by examining the technological politics of the anime genre-medium. It is no coincidence that the first internationally broadcast *Japan Sinks* media not only comes out in the shadow of a postponed Olympics, but also aggressively depicts Japan and its citizens as anything but calm and collected, a far cry from the ongoing 3.11 media narrative it draws upon. In doing so, Science SARU problematizes the idea that Japan has 'recovered' from 3.11.

The intertwining of Japan Sinks with disaster and disaster representation in a global context has been an unshakeable element of the media mix. Marc Steinberg notes that two events drove home televisions' sales: the broadcasting of (then) Crown Prince Akihito and the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, we can recall that Komatsu himself began writing the original *Japan Sinks* novel as a response to the Tokyo Olympics.<sup>46</sup> The role of television and recovery is thus interlocked; the postwar Japan images were primarily through the Olympics, broadcast on television. On a literal basis, what is reflected in those Olympics was a Japan that has recovered and rebuilt itself from the war. On a more general basis, the Olympics in Japanese media combine both questions of nation and body together; the Olympics are a test of physical and mental prowess, an encapsulation of people of a nation or state, and thus their success is an affirmation of that state's own success.

As a Netflix show, Science SARU's *Japan Sinks 2020* initially mimics that Olympic scene, though quickly problematizes that imagery. Ayumu, a competitor, takes off her jacket, revealing a prosthesis. Her wound is permanent. Here, the raucous and joyous imagery of a resurging Japan symbolizes a turn of phrase by pastor Tomoshi Okuda, who notes that bonds (*kizuna*) contain wounds.<sup>47</sup> To recall Mihic, Japan experienced a resurgent sentimentality through the rhetoric of *kizuna*. However, despite these recovery efforts, Okuda warns us that such bonds emerge from genuine human suffering.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, the permanence in Ayumu's prosthesis is a visible marker of her status as a survivor of disaster, reminding viewers that such disasters leave permanent wounds. The show folds back previous discussions about national-international and visible-invisible images on itself as a critique. Damage and destruction become sites where national and international (who is watching versus who is recovering) and visible versus invisible (what

is fixed versus what is lost) intertwine. Ayumu is not only a Japanese subject being watched by an international audience, but a stand-in for Japan; she moves on from the sexual assault, violence, gruesomeness, the loss of friends and family, to emerge triumphant at the new Olympics. However, despite her triumph, the loss of her leg is an irreparable marker of her status as one who ultimately loses: she loses friends, family members, and home. The disaster, even after Ayumu has “recovered,” has shaped her. Thus *Japan Sinks 2020* serves as a reminder that such disasters are not temporary disruptions of time and space but permanently mark the bodies - literal and political - caught within them. This lens marginalizes the glorification of recovery, stressing that rebuilding is not something subjects acquire but mould.

Ayumu’s wound as the hijacking of nationalist sentimentality is not unique to *Japan Sinks 2020*. Beginning before the postwar period, the discussion of the political state of affairs is often conducted on the state of the Japanese body. To Yoshikuni Igarashi, “the discursively constructed body becomes the central site for the reconfiguration of Japan’s nationalist discourse,”<sup>49</sup> and while 3.11 is not a war, there was a surge of nationalist discourse during reconstruction.<sup>50</sup> In this light, the frequent depiction of bodies – running, wounded, crushed, destroyed, and recovering – serves as a marker for the ongoing political state. Ayumu’s prosthesis is not the only time she runs, nor is she the only runner: her upperclassman Haruo Koga was a former runner, with the show depicting his sprint to his death. Likewise, when the initial quake destroys her training facility and kills her friends, Ayumu runs home.

Running as a motif is not unique to *Japan Sinks 2020*. Science SARU’s previous Netflix broadcast, *Devilman Crybaby*, also heavily features characters and their bodies in states of motion. However, what makes the running in *Japan Sinks 2020* especially

important is that one of the few characters endemic to the *Japan Sinks* franchise – Onodera – is completely immobile. Onodera’s immobility can be seen as a symbol of the Japanese government; a technocrat incapable of acting on his own, with access to confidential information on the future of the country, and yet is always reliant on younger, newer bodies to implement his plans. While Onodera knows of the location of Tadokoro’s server, it was ultimately Kite who found the data, and it was ultimately Koga who saved it after it was nearly washed out to shore, at the cost of his own life. Concurrently, all runners ultimately perish, save for Ayumu.

In showing Ayumu’s prosthesis and the permanence of her wound, *Japan Sinks: 2020* reminds the audience of the disaster’s impact. Regardless of the mirth, the event cannot ever be over since it has already shaped the victims within it. In this light, *Japan Sinks: 2020* brings forward something to the international mediascape: disaster itself, a consistent and insistent reminder of the cost such events impute upon those caught within it. At the same time, if the body can be seen as an extension of the national political order, then Ayumu’s wound reflects the same imagery of old, spectral Japan. Ayumu’s loss of her foot is not just a consequence of the disaster, but one in the same; the show intercuts between a jovial Olympic ceremony existing between two striking images of inescapable tragedy. One on hand, a promising young girl who has lost not only a limb, but also much of her family. On the other, an entire nation and political body sunk beneath the waves. The supposed “recovery” can be seen as a sort of symbolic act,<sup>51</sup> where insurmountable contradictions are resolved aesthetically, a form of suturing which prevails the pre-existing ideological order. Given that *Japan Sinks 2020* was originally meant to broadcast alongside the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, the ending imagery serves as a sort of counternarrative to any presuppositions that Japan has sufficiently recovered from the

events of 3.11. The resurgent Olympics of *Japan Sinks 2020* is hosted, in effect, on the remains of a sunken Japan with participants who were the victims of such sinking. Much like the real-life Tokyo Olympics, there is arguably no clear resolution yet – some, many, have moved on, yet the show demonstrates that such resolutions are merely masks for ongoing concerns in Japan today.

In this sense, each element of *Japan Sinks; 2020* reshapes an aspect of disaster rhetoric in its own way: the regional-national, urban-rural divisions remind viewers that disasters need not be explosive cataclysms to be destructive. The sexual violence and radiation indicate invisible disasters, ongoing and long-lasting devastations that immediate patchwork solutions cannot easily solve. The new religious compounds problematize the idea that disaster events can have limits, contesting the idea that once the homes are rebuilt, that everything is over. In reality, long-lasting recovery is itself a political process. Finally, Ayumu serves as a pointed question as to whether subjects can truly overcome disasters.

## Conclusion

Every Japan Sinks text critically engages with what Japan means when a Japanese ontology is examined. When the country goes under, several fundamental questions are asked: who is to be saved, how do we save them, who are our allies, and where do we go from here? These questions and answers are partly drawn from the real disasters that have shaped Japan. For the 1973 novel and 1974 film, it was the postwar recovery and Oil shock. For the 2006 novels and film, it was a post 9/11 security precarity. For Science SARU's *Japan Sinks 2020*, it was 3.11. These concerns about defining and witnessing are especially important given that just as the eyes of the world were on Japan once more, there was another disaster - COVID-19 and the postponement of the Tokyo Olympics.

*Japan Sinks 2020* acts as a stark reminder of the challenges of recovery and survival and how others perceive that recovery and survival. And what is it showing? It turns out, there is no real “recovered” Japan, but rather a post-disaster Japan, waiting for another event to discombobulate the country once again. In this sense, the counter-narrative broadcasted by *Japan Sinks 2020* portrays neither a calm, cool, nor collected Japan, but rather one already straddling uncertainty, rural decay, and ultimately invisible problems.

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**Notes:**

- <sup>1</sup> Brett Homenick, "Sakyo Komatsu on Science Fiction! Japan's Arthur C. Clarke Discusses His Filmmaking Foray!" Vantage Point Interviews, accessed February 6, 2021, <https://vantagepointinterviews.com/2017/04/27/sakyo-komatsu-on-science-fiction-japans-arthur-c-clarke-discusses-his-filmmaking-foray/>.
- <sup>2</sup> Rebecca Suter, "Disaster and National Identity: The Textual Transformations of Japan Sinks," in *When the Tsunami Came to Shore*, ed. Roy Starrs (Brill 2015), 215.
- <sup>3</sup> Richard Lloyd Perry, *Ghosts of the Tsunami: Death and Life in Japan's Disaster Zone* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017), 12.
- <sup>4</sup> Perry, "Ghosts of the Tsunami," 12.
- <sup>5</sup> "Outline of Decommissioning and Contaminated Water Management," Secretariat of the Team for Countermeasures for Decommissioning and Contaminated Water Treatment, accessed February 9, 2021, <https://www.meti.go.jp/english/earthquake/nuclear/decommissioning/pdf/mp202012.pdf>.
- <sup>6</sup> Suter, "Disaster and National Identity," 214.
- <sup>7</sup> Mihic, Tamaki. *Re-imagining Japan after Fukushima*, Australian National University Press (Sydney, 2020): 12.
- <sup>8</sup> Mihic 14.
- <sup>9</sup> Yuko Nishimura, "A Tohoku Utopia? Alternative Paths After March 11, 2011," Global Ethnographic, last accessed February 9, 2021, <https://globeethnographic.com/index.php/a-tohoku-utopia-alternative-paths-after-march-11-2011-2/>.
- <sup>10</sup> Nishimura, "A Tohoku Utopia?"
- <sup>11</sup> Appadurai, Arjun, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Public Culture*, no. 2 (1990): 9.
- <sup>12</sup> "Nihon chinbotsu 2020" kazoku no shiten kara kaku riaru na genjitsu," Nikkei Entame, last accessed February 6, 2021, <https://style.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO62515040R10C20A80000000/>.
- <sup>13</sup> "Prefectures with the highest level of income according to Japanese residents as of November 2019," Statista, last accessed February 15, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1087537/japan-prefectures-high-income-level/>.
- <sup>14</sup> Lamarre, Thomas. *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis (2009): 18.
- <sup>15</sup> Yuko Nishimura, "A Tohoku Utopia? Alternative Paths After March 11, 2011," Global Ethnographic, last accessed February 9, 2021, <https://globeethnographic.com/index.php/a-tohoku-utopia-alternative-paths-after-march-11-2011-2/>.
- <sup>16</sup> Nishimura, "A Tohoku Utopia?"
- <sup>17</sup> Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, "Radioactive Boars in Fukushima Thwart Residents' Plans to Return Home," The New York Times, last modified March 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/world/asia/radioactive-boars-in-fukushima-thwart-residents-plans-to-return-home.html>.
- <sup>18</sup> Julian Ryall, "Ageing Japanese towns overrun by wild boars," The Telegraph, last modified March 10, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/03/10/ageing-japanese-towns-overrun-wild-boars/>.
- <sup>19</sup> Usamaru Furuya, *Kanojo wo Mamoru 51 no houhou 3* (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 2007) pg 159.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid 158.
- <sup>21</sup> Nishimura, "A Tohoku Utopia?"
- <sup>22</sup> Tamaki Mihic, *Re-imagining Japan after Fukushima* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2020), 139.
- <sup>23</sup> *Japan Sinks: 2020* episode 3

<sup>24</sup> “Gender-based Violence Following the 2011 Great East Japan Disasters: Making the Invisible Visible through Research,” Michigan Social Work, last modified August 4, 2017, <https://ssw.umich.edu/stories/53271-gender-based-violence-following-the-2011-great-east-japan-disasters-making-the-invisible-visible-through-research>.

<sup>25</sup> Rob Gilhooly, “Subtle aid for women facing abuse in disaster-hit areas,” The Japan Times, last modified October 1, 2011, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2011/10/01/general/subtle-aid-for-women-faRcing-abuse-in-disaster-hit-areas/>.

<sup>26</sup> Takahiko Yasuda, Yusuke Takayama, and Katsuhiko Soma, “Activities of Japanese police in the Great East Japan Earthquake,” *Journal of International Criminal Justice Research* 1 (2014): 6.

<sup>27</sup> “Gender-based Violence Following the 2011 Great East Japan Disasters.”

<sup>28</sup> Akihito Aoi, “Mienai houkai to ha - watashitachi no chikudukuri no kihonteki na kaehou,” *Medium*, last accessed February 20, 2021, <https://medium.com/見えない災害-の風景/02-見えない災害とは-2264e48233e3>.

<sup>29</sup> Saito, Mari. Fukushima farmer takes on Tepco over wife’s suicide, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/07/10/national/fukushima-farmer-takes-tepco-wifes-suicide/>

<sup>30</sup> Allison, Anne. *Precarious Japan*, Durham (Duke University Press, 2013): 66.

<sup>31</sup> Allison, 66.

<sup>32</sup> Toshio Yoshitaka, *Nihon Chinbotsu 2020* (Bungeishunju, 2020), 51. The exact kanji used was 新興宗教.

<sup>33</sup> Sakyō Komatsu, *Japan Sinks*, translated by Michael Gallagher (New York: Dover Doomsday Classics, 2016), 44.

<sup>34</sup> Inoue Nobutaka, “Media and New Religious Movements in Japan,” *Journal of Religion in Japan* 1, no. 2 (January 2012): 139.

<sup>35</sup> Levi McLaughlin, “Hard Lessons Learned: Tracking Changes in Media Presentations of Religion and Religious Aid Mobilization after the 1995 and 2011 Disasters in Japan,” *Asian Ethnology* 75, No. 1 (2016): 107.

<sup>36</sup> McLaughlin, “Hard Lessons Learned,” 108.

<sup>37</sup> Levi McLaughlin, “What Have Religious Groups Done After 3.11? Part 1: A Brief Survey of Religious Mobilization after the Great East Japan Earthquake Disasters,” *Religion Compass* 7, no.8 (2013): 302-303.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Levi McLaughlin, “What Have Religious Groups Done After 3.11? Part 2: From Religious Mobilization to ‘Spiritual Care’,” *Religion Compass* 7, no.8 (2013): 319.

<sup>40</sup> McLaughlin, “Hard Lessons Learned,” 125.

<sup>41</sup> McLaughlin, “Hard Lessons Learned,” 127.

<sup>42</sup> *Japan Sinks 2020*, Episode 5

<sup>43</sup> *Japan Sinks 2020*, episode 5

<sup>44</sup> Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my life: Writings on depression, hauntology and lost futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014): 98.

<sup>45</sup> Steinberg, *Anime’s Media Mix*, 10.

<sup>46</sup> Ide Kazuko, “Japan Sinking? Sequel to 1970s Novel finds Japan Sunk and the Japanese Scattered,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 4, no. 4 (2006).

<sup>47</sup> “Kodoku wa seifude wa kaisho dekinai” NPO riji-cho ga kataru shien no arikata,” AERA, last accessed February 18, 2021, <https://dot.asahi.com/aera/2018083000061.html?page=1>. The exact phrasing is 絆は傷を含む (kizuna ha kizu wo fukumu). Okuda is playing with the pronunciation of kizuna (きずな) to mean both bonds, which was the kanji of the year in 2011, and a wound.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>49</sup> Yoshikuni Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1946-1970* (Princeton University Press, 2000): 13.

<sup>50</sup> Mihic 13.

<sup>51</sup> Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (New York: Cornell University Press): 77.

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“In the name(s) of the moon!”: ‘Japaneseness’ & Reader Identity in Two  
Translations of *Sailor Moon*

**Morgan Sleeper, Daphne Iskos**

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**Abstract:** Manga has become increasingly popular in the United States since the 1990s, and over time, the strategies employed in translating these texts for English-speaking audiences have shifted. As translation practices have changed, so too has the status of the sociocultural construct of ‘Japaneseness’ – a commodified branding of Japanese elements – in translated manga. A striking example of this shift can be seen in two English translations of Naoko Takeuchi’s 1991 manga *Bishôjo Senshi Sêrâ Mûn* (Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon) for the U.S. market, released 13 years apart: the 1998 Mixx/TokyoPop translation and the 2011 Kodansha translation. In this paper, we examine the use of four linguistic features – loanwords, honorifics, onomatopoeia, and iconicity – in both translations, and find that each version broadly employs a different strategy to either erase (in the case of the earlier translation) or amplify and actively create (in the case of the later translation) ‘Japaneseness’ within the text. These strategies in turn afford two different ways for readers to engage with *Sailor Moon*, so following our analysis of the texts themselves, we then examine fan discourse to show how readers construct distinct identities by drawing on salient linguistic features of each translation. The shift from a preference for domesticated reading experiences to a desire for translations to retain as much Japanese character as possible reveals the construct of ‘Japaneseness’ as central not only to the story of *Sailor Moon* in America, but also to the commodification of Japanese language and culture in both manga publishing and Anglophone fandom more broadly.

**Keywords:** Sailor Moon, manga, translation, linguistics, language, identity, sociocultural constructs

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## Introduction

The story of manga in the United States is one of translation. As an art form, manga has developed a different style than comic traditions in other parts of the world,<sup>1</sup> with a unique visual language and semiotic structure that make its translation into other languages particularly challenging.<sup>2</sup> Given these characteristics, the strategies employed in localizing or translating these distinctive texts for Western audiences, particularly in the U.S., have shifted over time.<sup>3</sup>

Manga and Western comics alike are multimodal texts that draw on many different semiotic systems, from maximally iconic (i.e., drawings) and symbolic (i.e., language) systems to signs situated in between the two, including sound effects, font choices, and panel design.<sup>4</sup> Umberto Eco and Siri Nergaard famously discuss translation as a process involving texts, rather than languages – “passing from a text 'a', elaborated according to a semiotic system 'A', into a text 'b', elaborated according to a semiotic system 'B'”<sup>5</sup> – and the complicating factor of comics' multimodal nature is readily apparent, since multiple semiotic systems elaborate on the text from each side.

While translation practices for comics vary immensely, two approaches from translation theory are particularly important in characterizing the transcultural translation of comics: Eugene Nida's framework of formal vs. dynamic equivalence<sup>6</sup> and Lawrence Venuti's domesticating vs. foreignizing strategies.<sup>7</sup> Nida explains the difference between formal and dynamic equivalence in translation as follows:

Formal equivalence focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content ... [This permits] the reader to identify [themselves] as fully as possible with a person in the source-language context, and to understand as much as [they] can of the customs, manner of thought, and means of expression.

... Dynamic equivalence aims at complete naturalness of expression, and tries to relate the receptor to modes of behavior relevant within the context of [their] own culture; it does not insist that [they] understand the cultural patterns of the source-language context in order to comprehend the message.<sup>8</sup>

Venuti draws a similar contrast between 'domesticating' and 'foreignizing' translation, where domestication represents “an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target language

cultural values”<sup>9</sup> while foreignization is “a process that allows the original work to resist integration and to maintain its features.”<sup>10</sup>

Since much of the considerable amount of manga consumed by American readers today originated in Japanese, these axes of transcultural translation have been central to the story of manga in the United States. As translation practices have shifted over time, though, so too has the status of the sociocultural construct<sup>11</sup> of 'Japaneseness' – a commodified branding of Japanese elements that readers draw on in order to craft their identities as manga fans<sup>12</sup> – in these translated texts.

Well into the 1990s, Japanese cultural products like manga routinely underwent complete localization – that is, cultural as well as linguistic translation – in order to appeal to American audiences.<sup>13</sup> Around the turn of the millennium, however, the “Cool Japan” phenomenon saw elements of Japanese pop culture become highly marketable in international contexts, with *Pokémon*, *Hello Kitty*, anime, and manga all helping to cement Japan's status as a cultural power positioning itself for global – and especially Western – consumption.<sup>14</sup> Since the rise of Cool Japan, an expanding Western manga readership has begun to express a demand for translations that retain as much of the original Japanese format and culture as possible, leading to the active construction of consumable 'Japaneseness' in more recent manga translations.<sup>15</sup>

A striking example of this shift can be seen in the case of Naoko Takeuchi's seminal 1991 magical girl manga *Bishôjo Senshi Sêrâ Mûn* (translated as *Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon*). Focusing on the adventures of Tokyo schoolgirls with the power to transform into Sailor Guardians, *Sailor Moon* has become one of the most popular Japanese media properties of all time, both in Japan and internationally, and has spun off into multiple anime series and

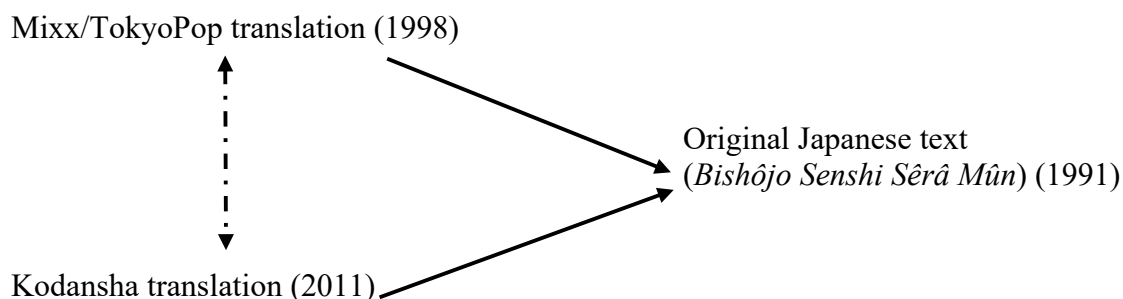
movies, videogames, toy lines, and more.<sup>16</sup> The manga has also seen translation into many languages, including several English adaptations, with the first two for the U.S. market released 13 years apart: first a 1998 Mixx/TokyoPop translation, and later a 2011 Kodansha Comics translation.<sup>17</sup>

This paper examines the presence and use of four linguistic features – loanwords, honorifics, onomatopoeia, and iconicity – in these two translations, and finds that each version broadly employs a different translation strategy to either erase or actively create the sociocultural construct of 'Japaneseness' within the text. These strategies in turn afford two very different ways for English-speaking readers to engage with *Sailor Moon*, and so following our analysis of the texts themselves, we then briefly examine fan discourse around both translations, in order to show how readers construct their fan identities in terms of the unique set of affordances<sup>18</sup> created by each translation. Readers draw on these affordances – here, salient linguistic features of each translated text, from the presence or absence of loanwords and honorifics to onomatopoeia and iconicity<sup>19</sup> – as they read and comment on *Sailor Moon*, and this creates two distinct fan group identities: 'Moonies' and 'Cool Japan Fans.' Finally, we consider how these two translations – and the reader identities each one licenses – reflect the shifting attitudes, preferences, and priorities of manga fans and publishers in the United States.

## Translational Stance

In order to examine the differences in translation strategies employed by each translated text in framing the sociocultural construct of 'Japaneseness,' this paper uses the framework of the stance triangle from sociocultural linguistics.<sup>20</sup> When utilizing this

framework, each of these two translations, plus the translation strategies they employ, constitutes a 'stance' on the original Japanese text – the 'shared stance object' – as illustrated in the diagram below:



The textual examples that highlight the relationship between the original text and each of these two stances are presented in the form of diagraphs – in other words, diagrammatic structures that reflect “the mapping of resonance relations between counterpart structures across parallel utterances.”<sup>21</sup> While diagraphs are usually employed within the framework of dialogic syntax<sup>22</sup> for examining dialogic interactions in spoken or written language, here they serve to highlight resonance(s)<sup>23</sup> between texts instead of utterances. Diagraphs are particularly helpful for examining multiple translations of a single text, as they allow for simultaneous juxtaposition of each translation with both the original text and alternative translated stances. This juxtaposition allows for the comparison of inter- and intra-textual resonance within and across texts, while also highlighting the addition and removal of material from each translation. The horizontal dimension of the diagraphs used here indicates the iconic sequential alignment of language in each text, while vertical alignment indicates resonance between two or more texts, whether through formal or dynamic equivalence.<sup>24</sup>

## Linguistic resources

In both the Mixx and the Kodansha translations, the sociocultural concept of ‘Japaneseness’ is negotiated across four linguistic dimensions: loanwords, honorifics, onomatopoeia, and iconicity. In the sections below, we focus on specific textual examples of each respective element and compare them across both translations – an approach that demonstrates how the varying treatment of these linguistic dimensions in translation can serve to either create or erase the construct of ‘Japaneseness’ in *Sailor Moon*.

### Loanwords

One of the most immediately obvious ways in which language is used to constitute and emphasize ‘Japaneseness’ in the Kodansha translation is through the use of untranslated Japanese loanwords, as well as the cultural affordances<sup>25</sup> that they both activate and require. The example below occurs early on in the text, when the main character of the manga – named Bunny in the Mixx translation and Usagi Tsukino in the Kodansha translation, and who fights evil under the name Sailor Moon in both versions<sup>26</sup> – introduces one of her classmates. (In this and all following examples, ‘OG’ represents the original Japanese text, ‘MX’ the 1998 Mixx translation, and ‘KS’ the 2011 Kodansha translation. A romanization and morpheme-by-morpheme gloss appear below the Japanese tier, and a full list of abbreviations used is provided in Appendix A.)

(K11 <sup>27</sup> )			
OG;	コイツは	オタクの	海野
	koitsu-wa	otaku-no	Umino
	this.guy-TOP	nerd-ADJ	Umino
MX;		class nerd,	Melvin.
KS;	This guy's	{an otaku} <sup>28</sup>	Umino, <sup>29</sup>

While the Mixx translation renders the Japanese “otaku” as “class nerd,” the Kodansha translation leaves the word in Japanese, romanized but unglossed. The most obvious consequence of retaining an untranslated Japanese loanword like “otaku” in the text is that it foreignizes the text; that is, it presents a formally equivalent (in sound if not in visual representation) rendition that indexes “a kind of exoticism.”<sup>30</sup> Equally significant is the fact that there is no explanatory footnote or gloss, meaning that in order to understand the text, a reader must necessarily be familiar with both this Japanese vocabulary item and its cultural context. Here, beyond the dictionary definition, a reader would need to be aware of the word’s context and connotations in order to access the cultural affordances of “otaku”, including its relatively recent metalinguistic coinage stemming from the hypercorrect misuse of the homophonous honorific second-person pronoun by social outcasts, as well as the subcultures of obsessive, hyper-knowledgeable enthusiasts to which it refers today and its generally pejorative use in mainstream Japan,<sup>31</sup> as opposed to the neutral or even positive usage of the English borrowing “otaku” as a self-designation by Western anime and manga fans.<sup>32</sup>

Another instance of untranslated Japanese in the Kodansha translation can be seen in the following example, where Usagi/Bunny has just met the keeper of a shrine:

(K94a)		
OG;		巫女 miko shrine.maiden
MX; How cool...		a priestess
KS; So she's		a miko?

Similar to the case of “otaku” in the first example, here the Mixx translation renders the Japanese as “priestess,” whereas the Kodansha translation leaves “miko” – a term that refers specifically to Shinto shrine maidens – in romanized Japanese without translation or a

supplemental gloss. The fact that “miko” is left untranslated here emphasizes the foreignness (‘Japaneseness’) of the Shinto temple and the shrine maiden, and means that again readers must be familiar with the Japanese term and its cultural affordances in order to access both the basic meaning of the text and its wider implications, such as the temple's status as a Shinto – as opposed to a Buddhist or Judeo-Christian – place of worship.

One interesting potential reversal of the Mixx translation’s tendency to domesticate Japanese in the text can be seen in the example below, where the miko/priestess mentioned above casts a spell on Usagi/Bunny, thinking her to be an evil spirit:

(K93)		
OG;	悪霊	たいさーんつ
	akuryô	taisân
	evil.spirit	disperse
MX;	AKURYO	TAISAN!!* <i>*This is a Japanese phrase used to exorcise demons</i>
KS;	Evil spirit,	be exorcised!

The Mixx translation retains the original Japanese – romanized but untranslated – while the Kodansha translates the incantation.<sup>33</sup> Taken on its own, this seems to show a positive construction of Japanese and Japaneseness in the Mixx translation, against its general trend towards Americanization. However, unlike the “otaku” and “miko” examples from the Kodansha translation above, the Mixx translation here also includes a footnote explaining the words' meaning: “*\*This is a Japanese phrase used to exorcise demons.*” This explanatory footnote is an example of the addition of “linguistic or pictorial material which was not there in the original”<sup>34</sup> as a foreignizing translation practice; a strategy that Heike Jüngst points out is employed in manga primarily “if Japanese words are merely transferred in order to stress the ‘Japaneseness’ of the story.”<sup>35</sup>

At face value, then, the above example appears to be a translation strategy more in line

with the Kodansha stance than the Mixx one, as it amplifies the ‘Japaneseness’ of the text. However, the next page provides further context that reveals the full indexical function of the untranslated Japanese and explanatory footnote. After the miko/priestess apologizes, Usagi/Bunny thinks to herself:

(K94b)

OG;

キレイ

kirei

pretty

MX; She's so exotic and

pretty...

KS; When it's a

pretty girl...

By adding the word “exotic” (which was not present in the original Japanese) to this description of the miko/priestess, the Mixx translation takes the stance that her Japaneseness – as evidenced by her use of the Japanese phrase on the previous page – is equivalent to foreignness. That is, the use of “exotic” here serves to otherize the miko/priestess on the basis of her speaking Japanese – implying that this is “exotic” both to Usagi/Bunny personally, and also in comparison to the rest of the story’s setting. By extension, this also implies that the other characters Usagi/Bunny interacts with do not speak Japanese, and that the story does not take place in Japan. In using the untranslated Japanese alongside the word “exotic” to emphasize the foreignness of this single character, then, the Mixx translation portrays the rest of the story’s world as non-foreign – i.e., ‘non-Japanese’ – by comparison.

## Honorifics

Another way in which the two translations take different stances on *Sailor Moon* is in their treatment of the honorific suffixes used in the original Japanese text. As a language, Japanese features a rich and deeply indexical system of honorific address terms, including the

honorific suffixes often employed by characters in *Sailor Moon*. This system of address suffixes indexes and enacts social relationships between speakers, addressees, and third persons, and are selected on the bases of age, gender, hierarchical/social standing, and interpersonal intimacy, among other factors.<sup>36</sup> In the following examples, four different characters address Usagi/Bunny in four different ways, as indexed in the original Japanese and the Kodansha translation by honorific suffixes (or the lack thereof):

(K11a – Teacher addressing student)

OG; 月野さん  
Tsukino-san  
Tsukino-HON

MX; **Bunny!**  
KS; **Tsukino-san!**

(K11b – Male student addressing female student deferentially)

OG; うさぎさん テスト どうでした?  
Usagi-san tesuto dô deshita  
Usagi-HON test how COP.PST

MX; Hey **Bunny** How'd you do on the quiz?  
KS; **Usagi-san** {How did you do on the test?}<sup>37</sup>

(K11c – Female student addressing female student on equal footing)

OG; うさぎ-ったら 信じらんないわ 早弁 なんて  
Usagi-ttara shinji-ran-nai hayaben nante  
Usagi-EXCLAM believe-be.able.to-NEG eat.before.lunch EXCLAM

MX; **Bunny** {I can't believe how much you pork out}<sup>38</sup>  
KS; **Usagi!** {I can't believe you,} Eating like a glutton!<sup>39</sup>

(K19 – Male friend addressing younger female friend affectionately)

OG; うさぎちゃん また制服で  
 Usagi-chan mata seifuku-de  
 Usagi-FHON again uniform-in

MX; **Bunny!**  
 KS; **Usagi-chan!** {You're still in uniform,}<sup>40</sup>

By including the untranslated Japanese address suffixes in its English text, the Kodansha translation allows for the indexation of these four specific relationships between characters in the above examples.

The inclusion of these honorifics in English is significant because, in the text as in spoken discourse, they constitute – rather than simply reflect – the above relationships. Honorific suffixes are an example of a linguistic unit with “indexical creativity,” creating the different categories of participation in the represented speech event. Michael Silverstein writes that indexically creative forms like honorifics are “the very medium through which the relevant aspect of the context is made to 'exist'.”<sup>41</sup> Crucially, the relationships indexed by these honorifics are specifically Japanese; not only do the untranslated honorifics create a linguistic barrier of entry that necessitates familiarity with Japanese in order to access the nature of these relationships, they also create particular relationships among the characters, which would be foreign from an English-speaking American perspective.

In addition to contributing to the construction of ‘Japaneseness’ in the Kodansha translation by the relationships that they index, the presence of Japanese honorific suffixes in the otherwise English text is significant in that they introduce elements of Japanese grammar into English discourse. The result is similar to the effect of travel writers using non-native English forms to indicate that a person is in fact speaking a foreign language,<sup>42</sup> and also to the concept of a ‘mock’ or ‘pseudo’ language, such as Mock Spanish as described by Jane Hill.<sup>43</sup>

Just as the *-o* and *-a* endings of Spanish morphology form a part of the 'sound' of Mock Spanish, Japanese honorific suffixes sound recognizably Japanese to non-speakers in the United States, having been associated with Japanese in the popular consciousness through film.<sup>44</sup> And just as the use of Mock Spanish by the white Americans in Hill's study indexes a cosmopolitan identity, the usage and comprehension of Japanese honorifics in the English text indexes its readers' command of the variety of psuedo-Japanese that modern American manga readers have come to both appreciate and desire.<sup>45</sup>

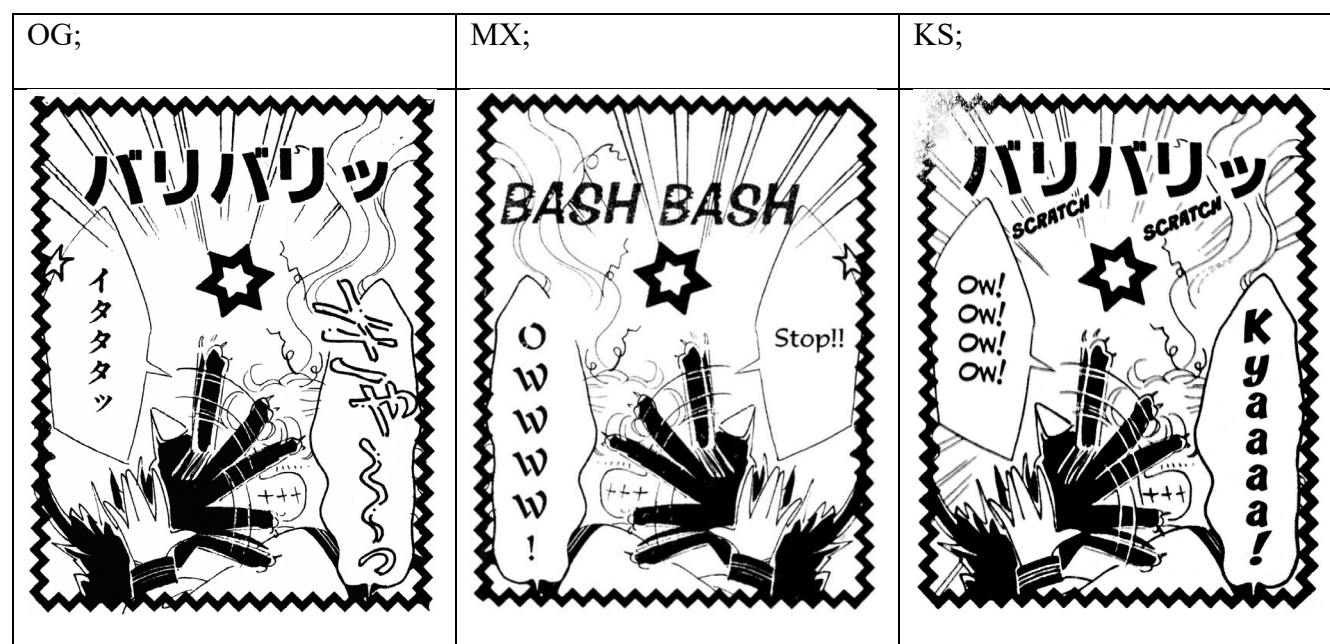
In contrast to the Kodansha translation's attempt at formal equivalence, the Mixx translation takes a domesticating approach to honorifics by removing them entirely. In the four examples above, for instance, all of Usagi/Bunny's distinct appellations in the Japanese original are leveled to the single "Bunny," and the reader is left with no means of accessing the Japanese relationships created by the honorifics in the original text. Instead, the Japanese speaker-addressee relationships indexed by the honorifics are erased entirely, leaving the reader to assume unmarked American equivalents.

## Onomatopoeia

The translation practices surrounding onomatopoeic language in comics are rich and varied, and this is especially true in manga translated from Japanese, a language rich in sound symbolism.<sup>46</sup> In the original Japanese text of *Sailor Moon*, onomatopoeia is almost always rendered in katakana, one of Japanese's two syllabic scripts, commonly used for emphasis, loanwords, and sound symbolism. In contrast with the calligraphic curves of hiragana – the other Japanese syllabic script used throughout the original text – katakana is understood to index an "edgier" look through its sharp angles and straight lines.<sup>47</sup> The indexical value of

these writing systems is important in translation because, as Federico Zanettin points out, words in comic books are not interpreted as words alone, but also have “graphic substance, forms, colours, or layouts which make them ‘part of the picture,’” and this applies to different writing systems as much as to different typefaces.<sup>48</sup> The translation strategies employed for onomatopoeia by the Mixx and Kodansha translations reflect and reinforce their treatments of ‘Japaneseness’ in each text, as in the following example:

(K8)



The original Japanese panel features the onomatopoeia バリバリ (bari bari, indicating tearing, ripping, or scratching). The Mixx translation applies a domesticating strategy, translating the expression into an (near-)equivalent for American audiences with “BASH BASH.” By domesticating the onomatopoeia, the original Japanese is erased from two separate semiotic systems in the Mixx translation: language (where “BASH BASH” is an English onomatopoeic expression, and “bari bari” is not) and the iconic significance of the

katakana syllabary, here replaced by the Roman alphabet. In the Kodansha translation, however, the katakana is maintained as an iconic reference to the ‘Japaneseness’ of the original text, alongside an additional English translation (“SCRATCH SCRATCH”). This ‘hybrid’ solution provides a dual foreignizing function: the addition of an English equivalent allows readers to infer that there is important, perhaps ‘untranslatable’ Japanese onomatopoeia in the source material, and also – as with the “exotic” affordances added to the miko above – serves to reinforce the ‘Japaneseness’ of the text, while the (untransliterated) katakana retains the formal equivalence of the Japanese, providing a direct index of the foreign writing system from the original text.<sup>49</sup> By leaving Japanese onomatopoeia in katakana instead of presenting it in a romanized form, the Kodansha translation imbues them with a visual, rather than verbal function, highlighting the source’s Japanese origins rather than carrying any semantic meaning for English-speaking readers.<sup>50</sup>

Another example of the two translations’ different approaches to onomatopoeia and the construction of foreignness can be seen in the following line of dialogue, in which an unnamed woman is praying for her missing daughter’s return at a Shinto shrine:

(K95)

OG;

ウチの みいが 帰ってきますように パンパン

Uchi-no Mii-ga kaette-kimasu-yôni  
1S-POSS Mii-SUB return-ASP-wish.for

panpan  
(clap)

MX; Lord, please bring Mimi home to us...  
KS; Please, guide my daughter Mii back to me!

amen  
パンKLAP  
パンKLAP

In the Japanese original, the woman’s prayer is accompanied by the onomatopoeia パンパン

(panpan, representing a clapping sound). Clapping twice and bowing after a prayer is part of Shinto shrine etiquette. The Mixx translation replaces this onomatopoeia entirely with the

dynamically equivalent exclamation “amen,” indicating a Judeo-Christian prayer, and prefaces the woman's request with “Lord,” an addition that essentially turns the (foreign) Shinto shrine into a (non-foreign) temple or church.

By contrast, the Kodansha translation leaves the Japanese katakana intact along with an additional gloss (“KLAP KLAP”) – a semi-dynamically equivalent translation representing the English onomatopoeia for clapping, but one that still represents an affordance that requires familiarity with Shinto ritual to understand. In comparison with “SCRATCH SCRATCH” above, however, this gloss is notable for its non-standard spelling in English – a feature that serves to further emphasize the foreignness (‘Japaneseness’) of this affordance. Importantly, while this spelling indexes ‘foreignness’ in its use of <k> instead of <c> in “clap”, the sequence <kl> does not actually appear in natively romanized Japanese. One possibility for its usage here is that <k> could be meant to evoke the initial ク <ku> kana of a Japanese transliteration of the English word ‘clap’: クラップ (kurappu). Another possibility is that the <kl> is simply serving as a sort of “eye dialect”<sup>51</sup> – a non-standard spelling meant to foreignize the text without specific recourse to the Japanese source, which would be an example of translation strategy going beyond even formal equivalency in an attempt to appear “more Japanese” to English-speaking readers than a standard spelling of the translation would allow. In either case, this non-standard spelling represents an addition in which ‘Japaneseness’ is not only highlighted, but also actively constructed in the translation process, thus pointing toward its importance in the aesthetic value of the translated text.

## Iconicity

As noted previously, comics are multimodal texts, with meaning expressed through multiple sets of semiotic systems, including the visual representation of words and pictures on the page. In addition to these words and pictures, the actual, iconic arrangement of the pages themselves represents another way in which language is used to highlight or erase ‘Japaneseness’ in these two translations.

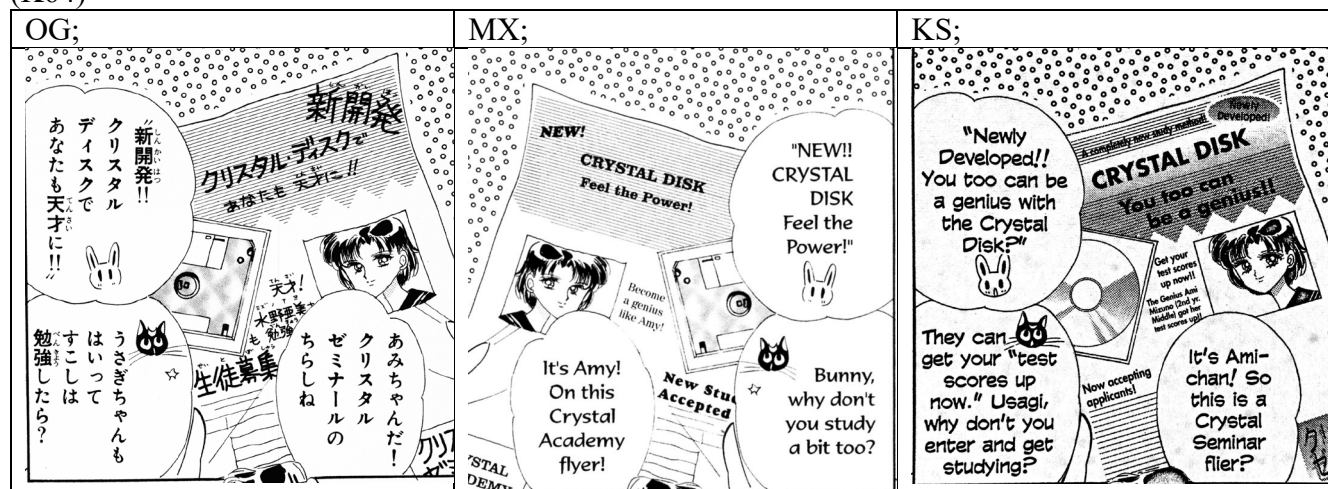
The original Japanese text of *Sailor Moon*, like most Japanese manga and literature in general, reads from right to left. The right-to-left page order acts as an iconic representation of the Japanese writing system, which traditionally is oriented vertically and read from top to bottom, right to left. The Mixx translation is presented in mirror image, with the artwork flipped, so that pages, panels, and dialogue are all read from left to right, as in Western comic books. The Kodansha translation, however – as is common in modern manga translations – retains the original page and panel format of the Japanese text, with the artwork unaltered, so that pages and panels are scanned from right to left, even as the English text in speech bubbles within those panels is read from left to right. (For a visual representation of the different reading conventions discussed here, see Appendix B.)

These two distinct approaches to the iconic representation of text in translation represent two stances on the original Japanese work. In the Mixx translation, the right-to-left iconicity that recalls the Japanese orthography is reversed completely, minimizing any non-native aspects of the reading experience. In the Kodansha translation, however, the right-to-left page orientation takes on a wholly iconic significance. By organizing individual speech bubbles of left-to-right text in panels and pages read from right to left, the Kodansha translation adds the iconic representation of the Japanese writing system to the unaltered, left-to-right direction of the English text. Frederik Schodt has reasoned that this system

allows readers to feel as if they are consuming the manga in “as 'original' a format as possible (without, of course, having to learn Japanese).”<sup>52</sup> Even though the result is a reading experience entirely different from both Japanese and traditional English reading processes, the presumed ‘Japaneseness’ of the right-to-left iconicity is actively marketed as “authentic” to American manga readers today, as proclaimed on the back of the Kodansha translation: “Authentic manga is read the traditional Japanese way – from right to left, exactly the opposite of how American books are read.”<sup>53</sup> This particular reading practice – where pages are scanned from right to left, while text is read from left to right – is a practice unique to the community of Western manga fans.<sup>54</sup> Just as with the 'pseudo-Japanese' hybrid created by the addition of honorific suffixes to English text, the hybrid, mixed-direction reading experience indexes ‘Japaneseness’ in the text specifically from (and for) the English-language reader’s point of view, and is appreciated by fans who consider this new reading mode to be central to the “authentic” act of reading manga.<sup>55</sup>

Finally, iconicity intersects with another issue of translation practice – proper names – in a feature of language specific to manga: dialogue markers. These small, stylized portraits of different characters are intratextually cohesive visual representations used to identify the speaker for a certain line of dialogue when that speaker does not appear in the panel – when they are “off stage,” so to speak. These are iconic representations of the character, so that, for instance, when Luna (a talking cat) speaks in a panel in which she is not depicted, a small picture of a cat face accompanies the text. These dialogue markers are present in the Japanese original as well as in both the Mixx and the Kodansha translations, as shown in the examples below, in which Luna and Usagi/Bunny both speak:

(K64)



In the Mixx translation, the secondary iconicity of the main character's dialogue marker is readily apparent precisely because of the domesticating translation stance that preserves the meaning of her name but not the form – i.e., her name is Bunny (from the Japanese “usagi,” or “rabbit”), and a picture of a rabbit represents her speech. The Kodansha translation, however, employs a foreignizing translation strategy for most names, so that the main character’s name is romanized but otherwise left untranslated as Usagi. This preserves the form but not the meaning of the name, so that accessing the secondarily iconic meaning of her dialog marker (icon of a rabbit → rabbit → usagi → Usagi) requires a certain degree of Japanese linguistic ability. It is important to note that even without knowing the meaning of usagi, an association between the main character and the rabbit dialogue marker remains intact in the Kodansha translation – that is, readers could infer the connection from the marker's presence in Usagi's introduction – but the nature of that relationship changes as a result. Unless readers are familiar enough with Japanese to know that “Usagi” means “rabbit,” the link between the character and the specific pictorial representation of a rabbit in this dialogue marker becomes an arbitrary one, which could easily be replaced by a star or a heart

– in other words, it becomes symbolic, rather than (secondarily) iconic.<sup>56</sup> Thus, a recourse to Japanese vocabulary is necessary in order to understand the full significance of this dialogue marker.

## Reader identity

The shift in translation practices and stances between these two representations of *Sailor Moon* – from the Mixx translation's domesticating approach, which obscures or erases Japanese elements of the original, to the foreignizing strategies employed in Kodansha translation that serve to highlight and even add to the 'Japaneseness' of the text – is particularly important in that it represents a shift in the affordances available for manga fans to draw on as they engage with *Sailor Moon* as an aesthetic object, and from there, constitute their community of practice. In other words, this shift in translation practices can also be considered indicative of a significant shift in what it means to be a manga reader.

Before the rise of Cool Japan in the early 2000s, manga readers in the United States were primarily comic book readers looking for something outside the superhero mainstream most readily available to them.<sup>57</sup> Manga like *Sailor Moon* have a distinct visual language, with a greater focus on subject-to-subject and aspect-to-aspect panel transitions that sets them apart from American comics,<sup>58</sup> and in addition, Takeuchi's art style and the aesthetic qualities of *Sailor Moon* stand out even further from mainstream American fantasy and comic book art. Further, Sailor Moon herself embodies traits of both traditionally masculine and feminine heroes in a way that was then unheard of in Western comics.<sup>59</sup> In this context then, at the time of the Mixx translation's publication, readers engaged with *Sailor Moon* as a text that was already drastically different from American comics, even when translated with the

domesticating strategies outlined earlier in this paper. For these readers, then, the appeal of engaging with *Sailor Moon* stemmed from its unique aesthetics and storytelling, rather than any particularly conspicuous 'Japaneseness' present in the original text. As a result, this group of readers can be seen first and foremost as *Sailor Moon* fans, and form part of the international fan community of self-identified 'Moonies.'<sup>60</sup>

By the time the Kodansha translation was released in 2011, however, American readers' engagement with manga had shifted. Today, rather than being viewed primarily as a subset of comics with distinctive art styles and stories, manga is marketed and consumed as a mainstream category of graphic texts in its own right,<sup>61</sup> indexically distinct from both 'comic books' as well as the readership that label implies. Readers of manga are also increasingly engaging specifically with the Japaneseness of these texts, with many modern manga fans constituting their community identity through in-group practices such as learning and using basic Japanese, including honorific suffixes and katakana, and familiarizing themselves with certain aspects and affordances of Japanese culture.<sup>62</sup> Some modern manga fans may even self-identify as 'otaku' – an indexically distinct Western use of the term discussed earlier in this paper, without the negative connotations of the original Japanese designation<sup>63</sup> – or in extreme cases, may be labeled 'weeaboos' or 'weebs'<sup>64</sup> – a derogatory Western coinage for anime and manga fans who are "obsessive in their fandom to the point of distancing themselves from all other forms of media."<sup>65</sup> These contemporary readers' engagement with *Sailor Moon*, then, draws specifically on the affordances created by the foreignizing strategies of the Kodansha translation as well as the consumption of the 'Japaneseness' it highlights within the text, and so they can be referred to as 'Cool Japan Fans': that is, fans not only (or even primarily) of specific properties like *Sailor Moon*, but also of Japanese culture and

media more broadly – i.e., the exports of ‘Cool Japan.’

One place in which we can see these two reader identities play out contemporaneously is in Amazon.com reader reviews for the 2011 Kodansha translation. In this public forum, multiple readers from each group evaluate the two translations directly, and in these evaluations, the domesticating and foreignizing strategies discussed above play into how they construct their identities as either Moonies or Cool Japan Fans. Below, we briefly examine a selection of these reviews to demonstrate how this discursive identity work is performed.

One of the most illuminating examples can be found in a review from “Brad,” titled “A+ for presentation, C- for Adaptation.” A self-identified Moonie, Brad expresses concern about the Japanese words present in the Kodansha translation, stating:

Makoto addresses her teacher as “Sensei” even though “Sir” could have been used or sensei removed completely without affecting the meaning of what she said (which was actually done in the original TokyoPop[/Mixx] adaptation), [and] the characters refer to each other with Japanese honorifics even when it sounds completely unnatural in English.<sup>66</sup>

Here Brad states that *Sailor Moon* fans like themselves prefer the domesticating translation strategies used in “the original TokyoPop[/Mixx] adaptation,” and that the Japanese honorifics and loanwords present in the Kodansha translation are undesirable additions, sounding “unnatural” in English. It is important to note that this reviewer in fact displays significant linguistic knowledge about Japanese when discussing individual translation decisions throughout the review, as in the following excerpt:

When [Usagi] sees Tuxedo Mask ... instead of whispering something along the lines of (from the Japanese "Suteki!") "He's so handsome!" we get a simple "How wonderful...!" and when she's kicked out of class due to being late, the original Japanese "Mo....." which is basically the equivalent of "Oh man!" or "This sucks!" gets interpreted as "Oh, honestly!"<sup>67</sup>

Thus, rather than stemming from an unfamiliarity with linguistic devices like honorifics, Brad’s negative evaluation of the Kodansha translation comes instead from a specific

preference for the domesticating strategies of the Mixx translation, which highlight ‘*Sailor Moon*-ness’ instead of ‘Japaneseness’ within the text.

A contrasting example can be found in a review from “Amanda,” titled “Amazing and about time!” Amanda writes:

“I love the literal translation! It sounds weird to Americans but I would rather it be translated exactly how it was written [than] translated for people who are not really into manga itself, just *Sailor Moon*.”<sup>68</sup>

Here, Amanda makes a distinction between ordinary ‘Americans’ on the one hand, and manga fans like themselves on the other, who presumably possess the familiarity with Japanese cultural affordances and linguistic vocabulary necessary to consume this ‘literal translation’ ‘exactly how it was written’ – in other words, including untranslated Japanese, honorifics, katakana, and a right-to-left reading direction. Importantly, in addition to casting their enjoyment of this translation in opposition to the tastes of mainstream ‘Americans,’ this reviewer also specifically contrasts their ideal of a manga translation (the foreignizing strategies of this Kodansha version) against a translation meant for people who are ‘into *Sailor Moon*’ but not ‘into manga itself.’ In doing so, Amanda constructs a reader identity not as a Moonie, but as a Cool Japan Fan: someone interested in the ‘Japaneseness’ of ‘manga itself.’

It is also worth noting that within the specific subculture of modern American manga fans, the translation strategies that have been referred to as “foreignizing” here and in other studies of comics in translation may in fact be fulfilling a function closer to Venuti’s definition of domestication, or the “ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target language cultural values.”<sup>69</sup> Certainly if the target audience for these translations is the mainstream English-speaking American reading public, then practices such as untranslated Japanese words

(otaku, miko), unexplained honorific suffixes, un-transliterated katakana, and unfamiliar reading conventions all create barriers to entry that fit the prototypical definitions of foreignizing translation strategies and formal equivalence. If, however, the readership of the Kodansha translation is primarily composed of dedicated American manga fans like Amanda – “ultra-otaku,” in the American sense of “anime and manga fan” – as Schodt has suggested,<sup>70</sup> then familiarity with Japanese loanwords, honorifics, katakana, and a hybrid right-to-left reading direction are all in line with the cultural values of this community, and these strategies could actually be considered as 'domesticating' the text for consumption in this particular community of practice.

## Conclusion

This analysis of two English translations of *Sailor Moon* shows how loanwords, honorifics, onomatopoeia, and iconicity are all mobilized in service of diverse goals in these two translations, which represent not only two different approaches to translating manga (characterized broadly as domesticating and foreignizing), but also two different stances on the original Japanese text. In brief, the earlier Mixx translation takes the evaluative stance that the Japanese elements of the original text are undesirable for its English-speaking audience, and thus something to be erased in translation, while the later Kodansha translation takes the evaluative stance that ‘Japaneseness’ is a desirable component of the original text that when preserved, accentuated, and even added to in translation, contributes positively to the aesthetic value and experience of the translated text for readers. To that end, while the Mixx translation uses certain linguistic resources to Americanize the setting, culture, and characters in the story, the Kodansha translation instead uses these same resources to

emphasize and reinforce the 'Japaneseness' of each of these elements, creating a reading experience that presupposes familiarity with Japanese linguistic and cultural affordances.

Crucially, neither of these approaches is representative of a 'more accurate' or 'better' method of translating manga. But, as we have demonstrated here, each translation allows for readers to construct different identities by drawing on the unique affordances created by its particular linguistic features, and this in turn means that these approaches invite very different value judgements (i.e., "how it was written," "unnatural") from fans and industry stakeholders alike. And while both translations – and both styles of translation – have their fans and detractors, it is also important to consider the value of these works within the contexts of their original releases.

For instance, in the United States at the time of the Mixx translation, the prevailing publisher sentiment was that Japanese properties needed to be heavily 'Americanized' in order to succeed in (and as) translation; and, whether true or not, this idea was responsible for what would become American cultural touchstones like the *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers* – a hybrid television production that spliced together clips from the Japanese sentai show *Go Ranger* with newly-recorded live-action sequences featuring American actors in order to re-set the show in a Californian junior high school.<sup>71</sup> From a publisher perspective, then, the domesticating strategies used in the Mixx translation would have represented a 'safer' marketing bet in 1998. By the time the Kodansha translation was released in 2011, however, both *Sailor Moon* and manga in general already enjoyed established American fanbases, who – thanks at least in part to the post-millennium popularity of properties like *Pokémon*, *Naruto*, and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* – would have been more familiar with Japanese media, and accordingly (from a publisher perspective) required less 'Americanization' in the texts they

consumed. So while some particularly conspicuous examples of Americanization have since been canonized as sources of mocking humor in modern manga and anime fandoms – such as the “jelly-filled donuts” (originally onigiri) of *Pokémon* becoming internet shorthand for excessive localization<sup>72</sup> – it is perhaps directly thanks to the success of these earlier domesticating translations that later audiences are able to enjoy manga with words like ‘otaku’ and ‘miko’ present in the English text.

This shift in strategies and in the overall stance taken towards ‘Japaneseness’ between the two versions of *Sailor Moon* examined here, then, is indicative of more than simple idiosyncratic differences between translators or publishers. In fact, it represents a change in the way manga readers in the United States consume and engage with these translated texts, shifting from a preference for a culturally-adapted, domesticated reading experience focused on the story itself, to a desire for more formal equivalence, wherein translated manga retain as much of their ‘Japaneseness’ as possible.

## Appendix A: List of Abbreviations

1	first person
PL	plural
ADJ	adjectivizing suffix
ASP	aspect marking construction
HON	honorific
FHON	familiar honorific
COP	copula
EXCLAM	exclamation
NEG	negation
POSS	possessive
PST	past
SUB	subject marker
TOP	topic marker

## Appendix B: Reading Direction

In the following diagrams, the larger red arrow represents the direction in which pages are read, the smaller yellow arrow represents the direction in which panels on a page are read, and the smallest blue arrows represent the direction in which the text itself is read, while the numbers next to the blue arrows indicate the order in which speech bubbles are read within a panel.

Original text (*Bishôjo Senshi Sêrâ Mûn*):



The page is a manga spread from 'Nixx Pocket Manga'. It features several panels with characters and dialogue. A red arrow points from the top left to the top right, and a yellow arrow points from the middle left to the middle right. The panels are numbered 1, 2, and 3.

**Panel 1 (Top Left):** A character with blonde hair and a sailor-style collar is running. A speech bubble says "You're late again!". Above them is a sign that says "2-1". A large white speech bubble with the word "BUNNY!" is next to them.

**Panel 2 (Top Right):** A character with blonde hair and a sailor-style collar is running. A speech bubble says "Bunny!". Another speech bubble says "What are you up to?!".

**Panel 3 (Top Right):** A character with blonde hair and a sailor-style collar is running. A speech bubble says "See! If you were more serious about school, you wouldn't get such lousy grades!".

**Panel 4 (Middle Left):** A character with blonde hair and a sailor-style collar is running. A speech bubble says "I'm sorry. See, there was this poor old kitty in the street...".

**Panel 5 (Middle Left):** A character with blonde hair and a sailor-style collar is running. A speech bubble says "Food...". Another speech bubble says "I need food...".

**Panel 6 (Middle Right):** A character with blonde hair and a sailor-style collar is running. A speech bubble says "A-H!". Another speech bubble says "This is my homeroom teacher, Miss Patricia Haruna...". A third speech bubble says "Everyone just calls her 'Miss H.'".

**Panel 7 (Bottom Left):** A character with blonde hair and a sailor-style collar is running. A speech bubble says "Hee hee...". Another speech bubble says "...can't go without it...".

**Panel 8 (Bottom Left):** A character with blonde hair and a sailor-style collar is running. A speech bubble says "Breakfast...".

**Panel 9 (Bottom Right):** A character with blonde hair and a sailor-style collar is running. A speech bubble says "I can't believe how much you pork out, Bunny...". Another speech bubble says "☆ You're like a guy!".

**Panel 10 (Bottom Right):** A character with blonde hair and a sailor-style collar is running. A speech bubble says "This is my best friend, Mely...".

**Panel 11 (Bottom Right):** A character with blonde hair and a sailor-style collar is running. A speech bubble says "A breeze?!".

**Panel 12 (Bottom Right):** A character with blonde hair and a sailor-style collar is running. A speech bubble says "Oooh, you are obnoxious, Mely!".

**Panel 13 (Bottom Right):** A character with blonde hair and a sailor-style collar is running. A speech bubble says "I don't really study on this one...". Another speech bubble says "but this quiz was a breeze...".

**Panel 14 (Bottom Right):** A character with blonde hair and a sailor-style collar is running. A speech bubble says "95%".

**Page Number:** 7

**Page Title:** NIXX POCKET MANGA

16

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1

- 1 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 44.
- 2 Heike Jüngst, "Japanese comics in Germany," *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 12, no. 2 (2004): 85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2004.9961493>.
- 3 Heike Jüngst, "Translating Manga," in *Comics in translation*, edited by Federico Zanettin (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2008), 51.
- 4 McCloud; Charles Peirce, "On the algebra of logic: A contribution to the philosophy of notation," *American journal of mathematics* 7, no. 2 (1885): 180-196, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2369451>.
- 5 Umberto Eco and Siri Nergaard, "Semiotic approaches," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, edited by Mona Baker (London: Routledge, 1998), 221.
- 6 Eugene Nida, *Toward a Science of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1964).
- 7 Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1995).
- 8 Nida, *Toward a Science of Translation*, 159.
- 9 Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*, 20.
- 10 Valerio Rota, "Aspects of Adaptation: The Translation of Comics Formats," in *Comics in translation*, edited by Federico Zanettin (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2008), 84.
- 11 Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986); Alessandro Duranti, "Sociocultural dimensions of discourse," in *Handbook of discourse analysis* 1 (1985): 193-230; James P. Lantolf and Steven L. Thorne, "Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning," in *Theories in Second Language Acquisition*, edited by Bill van Patten and Jessica Williams (Mahwah, New Jersey: Erlbaum, 2007), 201-224.
- 12 For more on the commodification of language, see Monica Heller, "The commodification of language," *Annual review of Anthropology* 39 (2010): 101-114, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.012809.104951>, a review article that explores language commodification in translation, tourism, art, and education, among other spheres.
- 13 Anne Allison, "Sailor Moon: Japanese superheroes for global girls," in *Japan Pop! Inside the World of Japanese Pop Culture*, edited by Timothy Craig (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2000), 259-278; Wendy Siuyi Wong, "Globalizing manga: from Japan to Hong Kong and beyond," *Mechademia* 1, no. 1 (2006): 23-45, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mec.0.0060>.
- 14 Douglas McGray, "Japan's gross national cool," *Foreign policy* 130, no. 1 (2002): 44-54.
- 15 Frederik Schodt, *Dreamland Japan: writings on modern manga* (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2011).
- 16 Allison, "Sailor Moon"; Schodt, *Dreamland Japan*.
- 17 Naoko Takeuchi, *Bishôjo senshi Sêrâ Mûn* (Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon), 18 vols (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1991-1997); Naoko Takeuchi, *Sailor Moon*, vol 1, translated by Anita Sengupta, (Los Angeles: Mixx, 1998); Naoko Takeuchi, *Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon*, vol 1, translated by William Flanagan, (New York: Kodansha USA, 2011). A third English translation for the U.S. market was also released in 2018, and although this analysis focuses on comparison between the first two (best-selling) translations, future work could investigate these same linguistic factors in the newest translation.
- 18 James Gibson, *The ecological approach to visual perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979); Alan Costall, "Socializing affordances," *Theory and Psychology*, 5 (1995): 467-481, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354395054001>.
- 19 The concept of 'affordance' comes out of environmental psychology, where James Gibson coined the term to describe "what [the environment] offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill" (Gibson, 127). The concept has since been taken up and expanded in many fields, including sociocultural linguistics, where it is used (as here) to refer to any aspect or property of our social world or objects in it (including language) which provide the possibility of social action (Costall, "Socializing affordances").
- 20 John Du Bois, "The stance triangle," in *Stancetaking in discourse: Subjectivity, evaluation, interaction*, edited by Robert Englebreston (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2007), 139-182.
- 21 John Du Bois, "Towards a dialogic syntax," *Cognitive Linguistics* 25, no. 3 (2014): 359-410, <https://doi.org/10.1515/cog-2014-0024>.
- 22 Du Bois, "Towards a dialogic syntax", 362.
- 23 Ibid., 372.
- 24 For a full discussion of diagraph conventions, see Du Bois, "Towards a dialogic syntax."

- 25 Gibson; Costall; Laurence Kaufmann and Fabrice Clément, "How culture comes to mind: From social affordances to cultural analogies," *Intellectica* 46 (2007): 221-250, <https://doi.org/10.3406/intel.2007.1286>.
- 26 It is worth mentioning that the decision to translate the 'sêrâ' in *Sêrâ Mûn* as simply "sailor" in both versions is intriguing in itself. The English word calls to mind images of the navy or individuals sailing a boat; and while the Japanese sêrâ *can* refer to someone working aboard a ship, the word is equally evocative of the uniform worn by junior and senior high school girls in Japan (Allison, 269). Thus, while the original Japanese plays on both definitions of sêrâ – Bunny/Usagi is essentially a schoolgirl by day and a superhero (adjacent to a soldier, such as a naval sailor) by night – this dual nuance is less accessible in the English rendering for readers unfamiliar with the word's associations with schoolgirl uniforms.
- 27 Example numbers refer to the page number on which they appear in the Kodansha translation.
- 28 The use of braces (i.e. '{word}') indicates that the enclosed word or phrase has been moved from its original sequential position within the text in order to highlight resonance within the limitations of the diagraph notation, following Du Bois. In these cases, the original text is given in endnotes.
- 29 Original: "This guy's Umino, an otaku."
- 30 Jüngst, "Translating Manga", 68.
- 31 Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, translated by Jonathan Abel and Shion Kono (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
- 32 Jüngst, "Japanese comics in Germany", 99.
- 33 A reviewer points out that this same character – later revealed to be Sailor Mars – uses this untranslated Japanese incantation in the otherwise heavily Americanized 1995 dub of the *Sailor Moon* anime. Though beyond the scope of this paper, examining parallels in the translation strategies seen in the manga and across the many English-language versions of the *Sailor Moon* anime – which include the 1995 dub, a 2014 dub, and various subtitled releases between 2003 and 2016 – would be an excellent focus for future research.
- 34 Klaus Kaindl, "Thump, whizz, poom: A framework for the study of comics under translation," *Target. International Journal of Translation Studies* 11, no. 2 (1999): 278, <https://doi.org/10.1075/target.11.2.05kai>.
- 35 Jüngst, "Japanese comics in Germany", 96.
- 36 Leo Loveday, *Explorations in Japanese sociolinguistics* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986), 7.
- 37 Original: "How'd you do on the test, Usagi-san?"
- 38 Original: "I can't believe how much you pork out, Bunny."
- 39 Original: "I can't believe you, Usagi! Eating like a glutton!"
- 40 Original: "You're still in uniform, Usagi-chan!"
- 41 Michael Silverstein, "Shifters, Linguistic Categories, and Cultural Description," in *Meaning in Anthropology*, edited by Keith Basso and Henry Selby (Albuquerque: School of American Research, 1976), 34.
- 42 Michael Cronin, *Across the Lines: Travel, Language, Translation* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), 42.
- 43 Jane Hill, "Language, race, and white public space," *American anthropologist* 100, no. 3 (1998): 680-689, <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1998.100.3.680>.
- 44 Jüngst, "Translating Manga", 68.
- 45 Ibid., 60.
- 46 Hiroko Fukuda, *Flip, slither, & bang: Japanese sound and action words* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1993), 7.
- 47 Jüngst, "Translating Manga," 61.
- 48 Federico Zanettin, Federico, "Comics in Translation: An Overview," in *Comics in translation*, edited by Federico Zanettin (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2008). 13.
- 49 See for instance Carmen Valero Garcés, "Onomatopoeia and Unarticulated Language in the Translation of Comic Books: The Case of Comics in Spanish," in *Comics in translation*, edited by Federico Zanettin (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2008), 239.
- 50 Cf. Nadine Celotti, "The Translator of Comics as a Semiotic Investigator," in *Comics in translation*, edited by Federico Zanettin (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2008), 41.
- 51 George Philip Krapp, "The psychology of dialect writing," in *A Various Language: Perspectives on American Dialects*, edited by Juanita V. Williamson and Virginia M. Burke (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971) 22-29.
- 52 Schodt, *Dreamland Japan*, 358.
- 53 Takeuchi, "Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon."
- 54 Jüngst, "Translating Manga," 59.

- 55 Adele D'Arcangelo, "Slime Hero from the Swamp": The Italian Editions of Alan Moore's Horror Saga *The Swamp Thing*," in *Comics in translation*, edited by Federico Zanettin (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2008), 144.
- 56 Peirce, "On the algebra of logic."
- 57 Schodt, *Dreamland Japan*, 313.
- 58 McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 78.
- 59 Allison, "Sailor Moon", 273.
- 60 Not to be confused with the term "Moonies" as used colloquially to describe members of the Unification Church (also The Family Federation for World Peace and Unification), as founded by Sun Myung Moon.
- 61 Casey E. Brienza, "Books, Not Comics: Publishing Fields, Globalization, and Japanese Manga in the United States," *Publishing Research Quarterly* 25 (2009): 101-117.
- 62 Schodt; Jüngst, "Translating Manga."
- 63 Jüngst, "Japanese comics in Germany," 99.
- 64 Originating from a Perry Bible Fellowship comic strip (<https://pbfbcomics.com/comics/weeaboo/>) completely unrelated to Japan, the term 'weeaboo' and its shortened form 'weeb' have come to refer to anime and manga fans so obsessed with Japanese media that they fetishize Japanese people and culture and "take their love for the medium too far" (Michael Yergin, *Shared Enthusiasm: Social Cohesion within Anime Fandom* (MA Thesis, Northern Illinois University, 2017), 35). In many ways, the Western use of the term 'weeb' parallels the Japanese use of the term 'otaku,' encompassing the negative connotations of excessively nerdy, out-of-touch fans that the latter term has lost in English but still retains in Japanese.
- 65 Yergin, *Shared Enthusiasm*, 46.
- 66 Brad, "A+ for presentation, C- for Adaption," (September 13, 2011), <https://www.amazon.com/review/R1EE17DLW8H4F5>.
- 67 Ibid.
- 68 Amanda, "Amazing and about time!" (October 8, 2011), <https://www.amazon.com/review/R3MRIPKRNQ09AL>.
- 69 Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*, 20.
- 70 Schodt, *Dreamland Japan*, 358.
- 71 Allison, "Sailor Moon", 263-265.
- 72 "Brock's Jelly Doughnuts," <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/brocks-jelly-doughnuts>

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## Existentialism and Death Education in Anime:

A Micro and Macro Analysis of *Cells at Work!*

Irene Iwasaki

Volume 2, Pages 155-184

**Abstract:** As the 2020 global pandemic has demonstrated with new force, we continue to struggle with managing primal, existential fear, even during the ongoing struggle to understand and combat a deadly infectious disease. As this paper reveals, multimedia popular culture texts can provide us with tools, knowledge, and avenues to help us better express, empathize, and educate one another during trying times. In particular, this paper aims to form part of a larger discussion on how we can better face the task of looking at death during a moment of human history where doom may seem ubiquitous. Although it is not possible to separate ourselves from our dependence on information that links us as individuals to the outside world, we can engage with media that provides knowledge in a more palatable or entertaining way and in so doing, support the development of better coping skills for apprehension about an unknown tomorrow. This paper analyzes the 2018 *Cells at Work!* as an example of anime that is both educational and entertaining, and discusses its implications for terror management and the promotion of well-being.

**Keywords:** Educational anime, existentialism, pandemic, terror management, *Cells at Work!*

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## Introduction

With the current capacities of digital technology, today we can easily scoff at earlier historical moments where it could take years to deliver information, messages, or stories across distances, whether countries or continents. Still, however quickly we may pass along our ideas and information with new media today, the overall condition of humans and their environments leads to an ongoing question: do we actually feel safer and happier than our predecessors did, thanks to the amount and speed of information we now have access to, or do we live with as much or even more angst and anxiety about the future than before? Most readers will have their own thoughts and even experiences regarding such a broad, anecdotal start, but in short: existential fear is part of being human. We cannot avoid it, but we can manage it so that it does not dominate our lives, and one way of doing this is to discuss death and our feelings about it openly.

The following paper will elaborate on these ideas through an analysis of the anime *Cells at Work!*, a particular popular culture text that uses an entertaining approach to exemplify the complexities of a living organism that is constantly being threatened with ailments that may lead towards inevitable death, either slowly or quickly. As this paper demonstrates, *Cells at Work!* and its premise, characters, and story can help springboard productive thoughts and discussion not only of sickness and health, but also about death itself. Moreover, this anime does so in terms that can encourage reflection on the choices we make that define our morality and mortality.

### ***Cells at Work!:* Premise and Plots**

When Akane Shimizu was in college studying to become a manga artist, her younger sister, a junior high school student, needed help understanding her biology homework. Shimizu attempted to explain the terminology and concepts to her sister with illustrations, even developing them into characters and scenarios. While doing so, Shimizu realized that she had a great idea for her graduation project, which indeed ended up winning an award and an offer for publication that later became the manga *Cells at Work!*<sup>1</sup> Then after the manga became a success, it was adapted into an anime series for Japanese TV and translated on Netflix for international audiences in 2018.

The premise of *Cells at Work!* is to show how the human body functions, particularly how cells fight or succumb to a variety of conditions or illnesses. In depicting this, the show is both entertainment but also educational. At its core exists a version of the classic existential story: good (here, human cells) vs. bad (here, organisms such as germs and viruses), a clash that in this show leads to suffering and life-threatening scenarios. The denouement of each episode is marked with momentary celebration, but there is also the impending doom to be continued in the next episode, creating a pattern that mimics human behavior or biological cycles as well. The repeated occurrences of sickness that humans must deal with, along with the threat or at least thoughts of death, is not unique to *Cells at Work!*, but instead “Death is an inherent part of many anime plots. Depending on the nature of the character, it can be interpreted in different ways: as a main theme, as inevitable as fear, as a loss as the result of a lifetime as a mere moment. Each new character treats its own way, bringing in the anime its own unique philosophy.”<sup>2</sup> Death in anime, then, is meant to be a

reflection of this fundamental reality in viewers' own lives, even if just depicted or labelled as being fantasy and fiction in particular shows.

In international categorizations of animation, Japanese anime may be labelled as a single genre. Within anime, though, there are multiple genres and sub-genres, which means that some anime such as *Cells at Work!* fit or cross over into more than one genre, sometimes in terms of the desired viewers' age group or gender as well as content and style. In this particular case, *Cells at Work!* is primarily a visual fantasy, but in parts those visuals are layered over with non-fictional narration that explain science, medicine, and the human body factually. This anime could also be considered science fiction or dystopian because of its post-apocalyptic (i.e., post-infection) imagery. Likewise, it is also a thrilling drama that sometimes plays out as a mystery to be solved (or cured) and is full of action with its many fight or flight scenes. Its suspenseful content is juxtaposed with comic-relief too, so that it could also be categorized as comedy or even as a romantic comedy because of the relationship that grows between main characters Red Blood Cell and White Blood Cell.

This genre-blending makes *Cells at Work!* appealing for many different audiences, but even beyond that, perhaps there is always wide appeal when the content concerns life and death, and more than in just the context of patriarchal samurai suicides, war, war games or war crimes. Instead, a broader, more general conception of death is a topic that is of interest to viewers regardless of age, gender, race/ethnicity, socio-political status, health, and other axes of identity and experience. For example, Miyazaki's *Ponyo*, with its child-protagonist (Sosuke) and child-creature-protagonist (Ponyo), depicts its young characters surrounded by threats of death on land and sea,

yet this story is intended for an audience that includes both young and old alike. In another example, *Japan Sinks 2020* also presents an existential story set on a threatened and threatening land and sea, with the addition of comparatively diverse characters such as the Filipina protagonist Mari and her children, the transgender Kite, the physically disabled scientist Onodera, and the displaced Daniel who lost his family in the former Yugoslavia, among others meant to represent minority groups and their struggles for survival. There is also *Demon Slayer* (which by the end of 2020 had grossed more than any other film in Japanese history<sup>3</sup>), which follows more than just the story of slaying demons (here, former humans now devoid of humanity) and instead also parallels realities that will be more familiar to readers by depicting the challenges of caring for family in desperate times, the hunt for a cure for a virus/curse, and a setting where power comes from the ability to breathe. Put differently, life and death stories naturally concern a wide range of audiences, and anime as a genre is not averse to portraying death, even graphically. This approach is “not to cover one's eyes from the reality of death, but to enjoy the world as it is presented to us in all its aspects. This procedure is alien to mainstream European philosophy and psychology... (but) at various stages of Japanese history it was felt necessary to educate people in confronting the inevitability of corporeal death.”<sup>4</sup>

This paper builds from these considerations of genre and subject matter to reflect on the fact that we are currently living during a time when the world could benefit from looking at death through a similar lens to the one(s) that have been developed in anime.

## Cells and Self

The entire story of *Cells at Work!* takes place inside a human body where each cell looks and acts like a human being, each with a style and personality that matches the particular cell's job. The human body itself does not become a character, but instead serves as the show's setting. The main characters are a single red blood cell and a single white blood cell, and the anime follows them confronting a different ailment/antagonist each episode. Introduction or exposition sets the stage for each episode's upcoming battle, followed by rising action as the story progresses and then climaxes in the ultimate theme of defeat and/or survival of various cells. Throughout, scientific or medical information is explained factually and either narrated by characters or visually imposed over the main animation with written definitions or graphs sharing the *mise-en-scene*.

The characters in *Cells at Work!* both are and are not human; that is, each cell character looks, acts and speaks like a human with all associated thought processes and fallibilities, but technically are just representing individual cells that make up a single, "real" human (who himself never actually becomes a developed character in the show). Although some of the cell characters are quite complex, they do not have "real" names, and are instead called by their medical terms. The main character here is Red Blood Cell and her partner is White Blood Cell. Red Blood Cell has a job as a delivery person who carries boxes filled with oxygen to her customers, who are all called Mr. or Ms. Cell. When the anime begins, Red Blood Cell is a rookie and sometimes has trouble finding the right direction to go or finds trouble along the way, such as germs, bacteria, viruses, or other cells in distress. Over the course of the show, her personality develops and her

experience grows until eventually she becomes a mentor to other red blood cells. White Blood Cell, sometimes along with background characters such as the B-cells or the army of Killer-T cells, appears in each episode to help Red Blood Cell fight against various antagonists or figure out what the existing health problems are and how to cure them.

In many ways, then, *Cells at Work!* is premised on and depicts never-ending existential dread. There are always new threats that make Red Blood Cell anxious and push her to make life-altering decisions, but as the show demonstrates, this is all part of the cells' jobs to provide aid and keep their shared living environment safe and peaceful together.

One reason why *Cells at Work!* is so diverting is because the cell characters are manifestations of the realities and vulnerabilities of our own human bodies as well as the greater environments that our bodies exist in. The characters and storylines in this anime encourage viewers to improve their health and well-being while also highlighting the importance of working together for the best possible outcome for the places in which we live. This is another common characteristic of the larger genre of anime, as “Kyara (Japanese anime characters) exist as playful objects for consumption not only of aesthetic and other associated functions, but of the specific messages their producers promote.”<sup>5</sup> On a micro level within this show, the characters in *Cells at Work!* are representations of the billions of cells that are alive (and even some of those that are dead) within viewers' own human bodies. On a macro level, these anthropomorphized cells represent characters in greater society, even functioning as they do on a national or global level with incoming “threats” to the domestic body. The good cells are social agents of change, responding to emergency situations where backgrounds and props sometimes mirror socio-political,

economic, or physical catastrophes recognizable to viewers. In various episodes, the body as a setting often looks defeated or decimated, as the show's viewers will recognize from footage or depictions of real-world sites in the aftermath of war, natural disaster, or other catastrophes. However, through its recognizably anime art style and its empathy-inducing approach, *Cells at Work!* pleads with us as viewers to be aware of our health and the choices we make in exposing ourselves, others, and our environments to potential danger, whether through action or inaction.

As *Cells at Work!* is set within a human body that houses the entire story, all of the action is contained within this body/world, and existential fear comes into play when the cells within are not immediately able to defend themselves from threats, such as foreign organisms. An exception to this is in an episode about auto-immunity, where the body attacks itself (similar to civil war or a nation-state that is over-policing or even makes threats to deploy its military against its own people). The setting might be just a work of the imagination as communicated to viewers using computer graphics, but our “real” physical bodies and political bodies do run in comparable ways. Thus, these storylines serve as a reminder to take care of ourselves and think about how the choices we make affect the communities and societies that we are connected to.

In this show, another significant message is that others can be affected by our actions positively or negatively even if those individuals are physically at a distance from the site of the choice. This is the way that the cell characters work: they may be analyzed individually, but they function best with other cells in ongoing mutual relationships: “in *Cells at Work!*, a body is an equitable, hard-working country, with a strong conception of unity and community.”<sup>6</sup> Whether on an individual micro level or a

wider macro level, this encourages viewers to think about the necessity of cooperation for the greater good.

### **Imagery and Metaphors**

In this anime the viewer, with sudden microscopic vision, can see and experience an individual human body as an entire functioning world, as “*Cells at Work!*” gives viewers a look inside the daily lives of the cells inside us, reimagining the tiniest units of life as heroes and villains and the human body they inhabit as a sprawling urban environment. At this level, even the smallest scratch to the skin's surface can cause catastrophe down below.”<sup>7</sup> The cause-and-effect destruction of cells and tissue is magnified because it is shown as the death of individual characters that viewers become attached to, or even identify with, while watching. As each cell is anthropomorphized to look and act like a whole individual human on its own, the emotions of the viewer become much more involved than if analyzing live, or dead, “real” cells through a microscope. This is an example of a hyper-animated reality, but also mirrors the way complex organisms think, feel or function. For instance, the dehydration of cells is shown as happening when the Mr. and Ms. Cells start dying of thirst, and lack of nutrition is represented as the failed delivery of picnic baskets filled with food. When animated and depicted using colorful characters, these become amusing scenarios, but they are also reflective of the fact that many people around the world do become dependent on comparable essential and emergency services during events such as the ongoing pandemic. In particular, these scenarios from *Cells at Work!* also demonstrate how failing to take care of vulnerable sectors can become detrimental

to the well-being of the whole.

The fact that death already exists within the human body is also a constant in *Cells at Work!*, as shown through a constant conquering array of germs, diseases, bacteria, and viruses. Some of these antagonists are shown as greenish zombie-like creatures who are both on the brink of death as well as contagious. They are at once enemies but also an integral part of the biosphere, thus reflecting the idea that: “we become zombies because we are zombies.”<sup>8</sup> Learning to accept that we are all at least partially infected could help promote empathy and responsibility to care accordingly for our fellow organisms who may be more or differently affected. Whether portrayed as comedic or horrific in different media, these scenarios depict the truth that as organic creatures, we are vulnerable to sudden or untimely death, especially when – like in *Cells at Work!* – we cannot see what is happening within our physical bodies. That is, we are surrounded by death on the inside as well as the outside of our bodies, but as humans who strive for youth, beauty, health, and vibrancy in cultures obsessed with these things, oftentimes we are not able to face this truth easily. Here is where “The zombie functions as a critical circuit-breaker. Publicly, the zombie’s circuit-breaking force might be detected in zombie-cinema, which has effectively produced new interventions for thinking how people identify with media images.”<sup>9</sup> In zombie/monster/virus cinema, the distinctions between micro and macro can be considered blurred, or possibly absurd, but in *Cells at Work!*, the show communicates that the size of the organism is not as relevant so much as the fact that the micro and the macro are equally vulnerable. Here, when a single cell dies, a character dies. In the viewers’ own world, when cells in the body are affected by a virus that has come into their territory, the body becomes ill;

when social actors both individual and institutional/political do not work together to limit viral spread, then the illness of individual bodies can quickly become a pandemic.

In this way, death is not just something that we reach or mark at the end of our life, but instead, is always already a part of us: “germs, and death, will always be with us. There is no ritual that eliminates them or even ensures that we have any space between us and them.”<sup>10</sup> By acknowledging this, we could learn to be sensitive to others’ vulnerability and fragility or even see beauty in the temporariness of life, whether big or small, local or global. In this way, *Cells at Work!* offers an effective visual reminder that the stages of life and death are continuously playing out within our very bodies, and if that fact can be internalized, then facing existential challenges in the outside world might be done with more confidence as well as compassion.

The body is much more than a temple (or a shrine), and in this anime in particular, “the industrial nature of the backgrounds in *Cells at Work!* is a unique take on humans’ internal physiology. Scenery is primarily hallways, tunnels, large mall-like open areas (sans stores), roads, and rooms. Resources like oxygen are labeled as boxes, and nutrients carried by red blood cells are baskets of fruit and bread... signs are placed everywhere to tell the audience that they are looking at the lungs, the kidneys, or the lymphatic vessel.”<sup>11</sup> That is, while *Cells at Work!* is a visual and educational delight, it also shows viewers quite literally that we are all in need and dependent on constant nutrition, oxygen, circulation, and that without them, fundamental systems like our cells and cell walls can quickly break down. *Cells at Work!* also offers a frank, colorful look at some of the human body’s own less-than-desirable functions and fluids, which functions as a fun but effective way of taking down glamorous idealizations of the

human body by showing that on the inside, all are equally beautiful and/or ugly.

Bengtson reflects on the need for students in particular to be exposed to this reality:

“We might refer to this learning as the moments of ‘little deaths’ in education, which can be brought forward by an experience of, or reflection on, what it means to be oneself or a distinct self. The moments of little deaths, highlight the vulnerability of the learning subject.”<sup>12</sup> These “little deaths” should not only rise as the occasional teachable moment, but also, instead, be incorporated into the curriculum so that these ideas become as familiar and accessible as alphabets or counting systems (which, unlike death, are only man-made or artificial systems anyway). Learning about death naturally should be a part of curricula because bodily functions, failings, and even death are natural and unavoidable phenomena. In this way, *Cells at Work!* can easily function as an example of death edutainment, since it merges visual fantasy with the hardcore reality of death while being a medium that allows viewers to zoom in and thus learn the intricacies of the human body.

### **Implications for Education**

Most viewers today will be bombarded with cultural and media messages in which youthfulness and surface-level beauty are valued while aging and sickness are feared. But hiding, covering up, or trying to avoid our natural processes of aging and sickness is only covering up our existential fear. *Cells at Work!* is prime edutainment that brings the inner workings of our bodies to the spotlight and displays graphically that, at our cores, we are all susceptible to the same ailments that threaten the human mind and body alike. Seeing “the fluids in our bodies remind(s) us of our status as creatures, and if we can overcome our denial of death and our associated creatureliness, we might

engage in a different ethics.”<sup>13</sup> That is, if we can accept the fact that illness has always and will always live with us and within us, perhaps we could more easily move forward in our management of existential fear and the conditions or fallacies (i.e., anxiety, depression, blame, conflict, and more) that accompany it.

Educators can work with media to communicate this to students in a less harrowing way, and anime itself is a prime candidate because it “is at once a uniquely Japanese art form and a valuable classroom tool. Students are often already invested in or excited about the genre, having encountered it in their everyday lives... Even for those students who have not previously encountered anime, the perceived accessibility of animated films and the exciting technology used for creating animations can serve to invest students in the material.”<sup>14</sup> Because anime is a fun and visually pleasing medium, even its depiction of the grotesque can be positively engrossing, and therefore, can offer an easier pathway into learning about the challenging topic of death. *Cells at Work!* is an anime created for both enjoyment and learning, as corroborated by various reviews: “there is not a moment in this anime left untouched by an educational sign,”<sup>15</sup> it is “scientifically accurate,”<sup>16</sup> and “the progression of the episodes is actually very reminiscent of how you teach biology/physiology/immunology.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, *Cells at Work!* could serve as a fun supplementary material in science class or be assigned as pleasurable homework, since it covers topics related to the human body, sickness, and healing as well as death. It can also introduce or act as an effective review of terminology, and the series does build upon ideas and terminology similar to how educational curricula is planned. Since it explains the structure and functions of our anatomy visually, these colorful anime-style images may also help boost memorization

or recall of core concepts.

The added layer of vulnerability to these cell characters helps give a deeper education about the complex emotions surrounding suffering and death. Beyond the courses outlined above, then, this means *Cells at Work!* could also be suitable for a humanities class where discussions of war and inhumanity are constant. In subjects where there is content regarding death, especially untimely or tragic, but where victimized individuals and their bodies may not be addressed as much more than with general death counts, social-emotional development may be missing. To counter this sadly-common shortcoming, stories such as those in anime could be used to supplement hard topics in the humanities, a field whose very goal is to make our world a better place through awareness and management (of our emotions, thoughts, and actions, as well as of our technology) for the sake of the greater good. *Cells at Work!* shows what happens when we lose that management, since “by presenting the smallest areas of the human body as massive cities, every single problem becomes an apocalyptic-level catastrophe.”<sup>18</sup> Social, political, and/or economic chaos can mirror biological chaos, and it takes constant effort from all levels and parts to maintain calm, order, and prosperity for the whole. Educators can use edutainment like *Cells at Work!* to show in a fun and accessible way that “in order to maintain overall health, it’s imperative that order is maintained... rather than profit, the goal is health and wellbeing for the body itself [which is] the parallel upon which *Cells at Work!* situates itself.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, discussions of the show’s episodes or scenarios can be relevant to help springboard discussions in science, the social sciences, and the humanities alike, where issues and topics such as the Covid-19 pandemic have worked their way into the curricula.

*Iyashikei*, which means healing, is a category or sub-genre of anime that attempts to heal or emotionally soothe the viewer. *Iyashikei* anime usually has more mundane plots, flatter characters, and a more sombre mood than *Cells at Work!*, but because the main character Red Blood Cell goes through the motions of her repetitive job (delivering oxygen), she can be considered, both literally and figuratively, a healing character. This is particularly relevant now as “so many of us feel worried and lethargic, completing even the most basic of tasks can be a challenge. Watching a fictional character do chores seems boring in theory, but *iyashikei* sparks the human need for completion and, right now, serves as one of the best forms of comfort.”<sup>20</sup> Although the plot of *Cells at Work!* often illustrates chaos when there is a sudden attack of a new ailment, it could still be considered *iyashikei* because there is also resolve (i.e., physical healing) to each episode, which means that the viewer can leave afterward with a sense of calmness. Healing anime can be a good supplement for students, especially during the pandemic when young people may feel particularly isolated or disillusioned about the future. *Cells at Work!* can also offer a sense of normalcy in an unprecedented time, when lives at school have been interrupted suddenly; viewers may be comforted seeing that this is paralleled in the cells’ lives as well.

This need seems clear, as the demand for anime through streaming services jumped 50% in 2020 and the rate of new anime viewers grew by 30%.<sup>21</sup> Given this, it does not seem far-fetched to posit that the increased consumption of anime during the Covid-19 pandemic is not only filling an increased demand for home entertainment, but also may be helping to fill an emotional void that popular culture such as relevant characters and storylines can offer. On a more meta level as well, the rising popularity of

anime may also be preventing the spread of disease since "anime has an advantage over live-action content because it doesn't require actors and crew to expose themselves to virus contagion."<sup>22</sup> In both cases, anime is a media form that can promote safe work spaces and streaming platforms like Netflix provide viewers with more choice and convenience of what shows can serve as a sort of visual comfort food.

### **Implications for Terror Management**

Building from ideas gestured toward in earlier sections, this section discusses terror management theory and ways in which additional, expanded education can help mitigate terror. To begin with, in relation to death, "terror is the natural and generally adaptive response to the imminent threat of death... This realization threatens to put us in a persistent state of existential fear."<sup>23</sup> However, knowledge and education can be means of mitigating and lessening terror about topics such as death. In particular, the purpose of death education is not to highlight the morbid or to increase dread, but instead, to provide students with practical knowledge as well as coping mechanisms towards this inevitable biological phenomenon.

Whether added as part of in-class content, a selection of extra-curricular content, or as homework, existential and educational anime such as *Cells at Work!* could help to teach this truth gently. Death may be the ultimate fear, but it must be faced directly in order to be managed. After all, "knowing that one is destined to die, coupled with an intense desire to go on living, creates in the human animal an acute potential for existential terror... if humans were to experience this existential fear unmitigated it would interfere with many effective forms of thought and action."<sup>24</sup> To manage

existential terror, educators must present students with truth but also consider the emotional impact(s) of that information. One way of doing this is to approach death in a manner that will not cause a fight or flight reaction.

For instance, facilitating death education with humor and curiosity can soften the topic. Graphic anime in particular can help students “reimagine the body during this time of disaster... [and] *Cells at Work!* does just that, and it may be the perfect balm in an era where coronavirus has made bodies so frightening and unpredictable.”<sup>25</sup>

Entertaining death education may ease fears that young people have of their bodies or society during a pandemic. To manage fear and anxiety of death, educators can help students to accept that death is just the simple end of life and breath; attempting to shield them with lessons that avoid talk of death is to deny or deprive them of the truth about this inevitability, which would be an anti-educational move. Gentle, educational reminders of mortality can increase accessibility to thoughts about death in a positive way.<sup>26</sup> As a result, if students can learn about death head-on, then they may develop more control over many of the negative thoughts and anxieties that accompany death.

Another way of denying death or refusing to face one’s existential fear on the topic is through the action of avoiding a health check – including medical tests or vaccines – and/or the reluctance to seek counselling. Education, however, can help bridge the gaps between patients and medical professionals who may be regarded as harbingers of death news, and “*Cells at Work!* serves as a good introduction to this greater medical world, and those armed even with a little of this knowledge could lead to better communication between physicians and patients.”<sup>27</sup> Promoting the willingness to process death information or education at school and in one’s personal life can increase

one's ability to cope emotionally and mentally with major health events such as illness or a pandemic.

Steele suggests we combat our current existential crises by *mentalizing* our fears. Educators can help to facilitate a “calm and deliberate task of trying to make sense of the mental states, beliefs, desires and fears that animate behavior in the self and others... we need calm discussions of our fears.”<sup>28</sup> The visuals in anime such as *Cells at Work!* can help viewers to perceive and mentalize fears about the body more easily. Because it is amusing entertainment that is visually pleasing, even when made up of images or scenes of horror, it could be a soft way to introduce hard topics to help set the stage for fruitful discussions and inquiries about health and death.

At its core, *Cells at Work!* is about the fragility of our bodies and dying a little at a time. This is an important concept to reinforce since we all too often “neglect the fragility of life... (even as) it is this fragility we must recognize and learn to live with, and to live within.”<sup>29</sup> Death can become a less fearful concept if one can accept first that it is natural, normal, or even expected that we are vulnerable and fragile to the elements, environmental disasters, toxins, other organisms, and even each other. Fortunately, *Cells at Work!* also allows for the building of immunity and regeneration, ensuring that hope is always somewhere in residence. In the show's own story, the child platelets and young generation of rookie cells trying to find their way also give hope through their potential to heal. This hope is an important part of death education as it helps learners to combat existential fear. Ironically, “embracing our mortality can encourage hope.”<sup>30</sup>

Anime may appear as fluff entertainment to some, but at the same time, “anime's storytelling makes it an intellectually challenging and stimulating art form that builds

on high cultural traditions... anime is meant to be taken seriously.”<sup>31</sup> Viewers who are able to see beyond the bright colors, wide eyes, or big breasts that anime is so often associated with will be able to understand that anime can also deliver rich, complex stories and shine a light on pressing social issues, all while assigning life to things big and small.

Although primarily a light-hearted series, the implicit and hopeful message from *Cells at Work!* concerns how we must work together to overcome adversity and how caring for others, even if they have a different appearance or occupation, is a message that cannot be considered immature, low-brow, or unimportant. *Cells at Work!* cleverly teaches that every cell has a job/responsibility to itself and the cells around it, and that the actions we take or don't take eventually circulate back to us. *Cells at Work!* also reinforces the reality that we must work together in order to solve problems, and in particular, “when circumstances create common groups, terror management efforts can guide people to become more inclusive, cooperative, and peaceful.”<sup>32</sup> This is more important than ever to learn during a time of global pandemic. If viewers can see how their inner body is like a complex world on its own, with each section of the body like a state and each cell like an individual, then this may serve as inspiration towards acting on and modelling healthier behaviors on individual (micro) and societal (macro) levels.

### **Implications for Well-being**

On top of being found in a beautiful art form with compelling storylines, anime and anime characters can also have positive psychological effects on viewers: “Peace of

mind, being together with characters relaxes the spirit and can affect healing, first in a list of eight attributes, followed by: protection, escape from reality, regression, self-realization, hope for transformation, health and activity, and mood changing.”<sup>33</sup>

Watching *Cells at Work!* can have uplifting emotional effects on viewers and simultaneously spread a positive message of communal responsibility. The speed at which we can affect each other either positively or negatively is apparent when we are living in the middle of a pandemic where the world is connected more than ever before, both physically and emotionally, because of high-speed transportation systems and high-speed Internet. How we act (or not) and what we say (or not) determines how quickly or slowly we can bring ourselves and each other to death. Edutainment with positive messages like *Cells at Work!* can give reminders that each individual has the power to make a difference in their own lives as well as other people’s, and how being responsible for one’s actions can contribute to the well-being of society.

Similar to how the number of casualties is tracked during world war, being bombarded by growing numbers of daily Covid-19 cases and death counts can chip away at our mortality salience, or awareness of death’s inevitability. But easy-to-watch anime like *Cells at Work!* are capable of highlighting human vulnerability in an amusing and digestible way. By reinforcing and accepting the reality that no single body can ever be promised an average lifespan, perhaps we can start to ease or at least admit to a shared anxiety and dread of living in a “new normal” after almost two years lived with the daily reality of Covid-19. When death hits close to home, avoidance or denial of the topic may worsen or even prevent the ability to come to terms with that death, or else hinder one’s ability to grieve in a healthy manner. Stories that parallel viewers’ own real death stories

could be a tool towards acceptance of loss, since “death in a fiction is an outlet to process one’s own grief.”<sup>34</sup> Building awareness of our mortality could also enable us to better work towards overcoming the pandemic: “The awareness of mortality can motivate people to enhance their physical health and prioritize growth-oriented goals; live up to positive standards and beliefs; build supportive relationships and encourage the development of peaceful, charitable communities; and foster open-minded and growth-oriented behaviors.”<sup>35</sup>

Avoiding the fact that we are going to die will not make death stay away, and conversely, learning about death will not make us die earlier. However, learning about and coming to accept the reality of death someday could help create a better appreciation for life and relationships, and actually help prolong them. There is “potential for death thoughts to motivate healthy behaviors and attitudes... Importantly, conscious death awareness tends to motivate people to engage in these types of healthy behaviors... conscious thoughts of death can motivate efforts to reduce one’s perceived vulnerabilities, potentially motivating behaviors and attitudes that improve one’s physical health.”<sup>36</sup> Therefore, learning and reflecting on death gives reminders to take care of our own health and safety. This might cause a positive effect on one’s peers and could even reverberate through a whole community, through the increasing awareness that everyone’s health and safety are interconnected, much like the cells in *Cells at Work!*, who influence one another’s well-being intimately as they all share the same environment.

## Drawing Conclusions

*Cells at Work!* is a reflection of the reality that death is an inevitable, constant, and ongoing process within the human body, and as a show it offers viewers glimpses into the workings and the dyings within our bodies that our naked eyes cannot see. Because the images and explanations of death in this show are entertaining, they are also easily digestible. They may provide a good avenue for young people to learn to understand and accept death not only in academics, such as when working with cadavers in biology class or when studying war in a humanities class, but also how death may play out in their personal lives. *Cells at Work!* shows that what we feel and do in the moment matters, that there are repercussions, and also that even if one feels like an insignificant cell in a large body, the choices and actions one does or does not make are significant enough to affect the whole. This is a light-hearted but still striking reflection of the fact that “all human beings are one interdependent species sharing the same planet. Recognizing that the coronavirus poses the same existential threat for all of us helps underscore that humanity is a group we all belong to. It’s by working together and not turning on each other that we will be able to recover.”<sup>37</sup> Existential education coupled with a little light-hearted humor could help build the insight and empathy that we as human beings and always-dying creatures need, especially in times when we are easily overcome with fear, confusion, or desperation.

*Cells at Work!* effectively and visually reinforces how a human body is a complex network that must work together in order to survive and thrive, demonstrating how “when someone feels to be a part of a larger whole, the whole gains in significance while he or she, as a part, begins to see himself or herself as drawing significance from

participation in that whole.”<sup>38</sup> Participating for the greater good of a shared body/country/world can help boost the individual participant’s confidence and well-being, as well as their understanding of their own significance, despite their being just a small part of a larger social body. This is the motivating factor for the cells in *Cells at Work!*, but it is also their way of managing terror and normalizing vulnerability together with the message that we need to continually seek help and work together in trying times. *Cells at Work!* does not pit man vs. man, but instead depicts (hu)man vs. ailment, an antagonist that viewers can all share an equal fear of, and something that could potentially put all of mankind on the same team if we could first work together to move forward from our core existential fears.

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## Japanese Anime Fandoms in the UAE: An Exploratory Study on Media

### Accessibility, Habits and Cultural Perceptions

**Urwa Tariq, Sarah Laura Nesti Willard**

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**Abstract:** The satellite TV revolution in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the early 1990s precipitated the proliferation of foreign media broadcasts. Japanese anime dubbed into Arabic became the most-watched content in Emirati households, a trend that continues to date because the Japanese entertainment and digital media industry offers youngsters easy access to and diverse options for anime. This paper provides an overview and analysis of the growing popularity of anime fandoms in the UAE to ascertain the level of commitment, involvement and the moral perceptions of Emirati fans vis-à-vis Japanese pop culture. A focus group discussion was conducted in a leading UAE university among the *otaku* or aficionados of Japanese anime (males and females). The participant responses offered comprehensive insights into the fandom trends of the region and articulated interesting opinions on Japanese pop culture and digital media accessibility. Notably, the findings of this study suggested that the enthusiasm of this fan following is often obstructed rather than celebrated and thus cannot achieve its potential. Therefore, the study finally contemplates how Emirati *otaku* and their practices may be better supported in UAE.

**Keywords:** anime, manga, *otaku*, fandom, Emirati culture.

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## Introduction

In 2019, the anime festival Game-Con and the Middle East Film and Comic Con (MEFCC) attracted immense attention from Dubai residents. Over 50,000 youngsters attended and cosplayed (costume roleplayed) at the three-day pop culture extravaganza<sup>1</sup>. The event represented an explosion of Eastern and Western pop fusion; however, Emirati youngsters evinced greater interest in Japanese cultural productions<sup>2</sup>.

Comic-Cons and anime festivals are cultural exhibitions for aficionados: they bring together fans, cosplayers, actors, content producers, merchandisers, and artists in stimulating settings. They also offer the Emirati a platform to showcase their creativity and talents by selling their own fan art and manga as merchandise<sup>3</sup>.

There is a current escalation in Emirati fandoms relating to anime and manga<sup>4</sup>. The previous generations of Emiratis were more fascinated by Japanese traditions (e.g., language, lifestyle, morals and values, education system) and manufactured goods (e.g., beauty, electronics, automobiles). Conversely, young Emiratis are now more drawn to Japanese pop culture<sup>5</sup>. Globalization has also allowed young enthusiasts to venture into digital media in larger numbers, enabled the creation of online groups, and generated unprecedented public exposure to clubs, events, platforms, and fan communities<sup>6</sup>.

## Literature Review

The global appeal of cosplay, anime, and manga constitutes an important aspect of Japanese pop culture<sup>7</sup>. ‘Manga’ refers to Japanese comics serialized in magazines or books. ‘Anime’ is the Japanese word for animation, and the term is attributed to Japanese-style animated films and television shows adapted from popular manga series. The Japanese term *otaku* refers to fans devoted to manga, anime, and video games<sup>8</sup>. *Otaku* are often characterized as introverted personalities displaying an obsessive and

extreme affiliation to the objects of their attention<sup>9</sup>. Fandom denotes a subculture typified by a feeling of empathy and camaraderie among fans who share a common passion<sup>10</sup> and express it in diverse ways, such as by watching anime, translating or reading manga, creating artwork, networking with fans, and fan dubbing. Cosplay is another means of expressing devotion: fans dress up as fictional characters from anime or manga and join masquerades and act and pose for photographs<sup>11</sup>. In terms of demography, anime fans tend to comprise of youths<sup>12</sup>.

The *otaku* subculture spawned in Japan in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It reached countries such as South Korea, China, Russia and Great Britain, among others, in a very short period, inciting general interest in ordinary people and experts who have since tried to illustrate this phenomenon in multiple ways. Additionally, researchers have highlighted that scattered *otaku* subcultures have grown in different directions, each developing its own characteristics<sup>13</sup>. For instance, Newitz scrutinized the *otaku* in the USA and affirmed that American *otaku* understand and enjoy Japanese pop culture because of its extensive referential connection with the western world. Consequently, Americans can reflect on their own culture as they consume manga and anime, without feeling responsible towards relating to the culture that created the content<sup>14</sup>.

The so-called *otaku* subculture has often been socially stigmatized because of its behavioural patterns<sup>15</sup>. Approximately two decades ago Jenson's observation on fandoms unveiled social hypocrisy that led him to reconsider the role of fandoms within society. Fandoms were initially described as people attracted to the ordinary, popular, cheap and easily attainable entertainment options, and the 'superior' social classes regarded them with disdain. Subsequently, fandoms were re-conceptualized as emergent forces of self-sustained communities that represented sources of joy and

pleasure to their members<sup>16</sup>. Even though the negative connotations of *otaku* have now considerably diminished<sup>17</sup>, the culture of fandoms is still regarded as a niche, layered and polycentric phenomenon<sup>18</sup> symbolizing social fragmentation and a resistance to obeying traditional social codes<sup>19</sup>. In congruence with this theory, a recent study revealed that Portuguese youth were turning into anime fans primarily for para-social and escapist reasons rather than socio-informational or pastime-related motives<sup>20</sup>. Another investigation on Italian *otaku* has revealed that on the internet diverse fan groups tend to assemble to focus simultaneously on one subject, even if briefly. As they use English as a lingua franca to communicate among them, they can be distinguished from other online communities by their shared use of Italianised memes, which are used to discuss Italian pop culture and social habits. Morgandi regarded these groups as “a de-globalized, niched, layered, and polycentric culture”<sup>21</sup>.

The abovementioned studies serve as a foundation that can facilitate the definition and comparison of Emirati *otaku* by illuminating how these enthusiasts project a popular culture onto themselves, how they assimilate within their own society and how their fandom patterns relate to other anime and manga fandom communities.

### **The Roots of Anime in the UAE**

Anime was introduced to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the 1970s when national television channels of the Gulf countries began to broadcast programs originating in non-Arab countries, primarily Japan<sup>22</sup>. Government-operated channels were tasked with filling slots designated for children with inexpensive and quickly produced content. Animated cartoons were considered juvenile; hence, minimal efforts were expended on the establishment of local animation studios. Japanese animation was favoured for children because it required negligible censorship and matched the

strict moral codes and traditions of the UAE<sup>23</sup>. Likewise, most Arab audiences admired Japanese anime series because of their storylines, values, simplicity, and characters<sup>24</sup>. A 2002 study conducted on viewing patterns of children on UAE television channels revealed the immense popularity of imported programs<sup>25</sup>. The study reported that Japanese-origin cartoons were preferred and were the most viewed; they attracted the attention of children, were easy to understand and their characters were more interesting than the personae of local cartoons. Parents also felt that anime storylines imparted positive messages on moral values and aligned with their beliefs<sup>26</sup>.

Japanese anime series were popular because they offered simple narratives about the triumph of good over evil, created a long-lasting impression on their viewers and generated a considerably loyal audience<sup>27</sup>. Since their introduction to the UAE, Japanese cartoons have remained the staple media content for children in every Emirati household<sup>28</sup>. Often Emirati children who grew up watching Japanese cartoons tend to follow their parents' habits.<sup>29</sup>

### **Factors Contributing to the Growth of Anime *Otaku* in the UAE**

Economic, cultural, and technological factors have facilitated the diffusion of anime *otaku* in the UAE. The animation-based industry is often called 'Japan's greatest cultural export'<sup>30</sup>. The Japanese government noticed an economic opportunity around the 1990s: the anime industry could be utilized as an aspect of Japanese soft power to influence the international public, especially younger generations<sup>31</sup>. It found a fertile market in the Middle East<sup>32</sup>. Many Emirati youths have gotten addicted to the consumption of manga, anime, and their subproducts, signaling an increased absorption of Japanese culture. The enthusiasm for manga and anime often causes

Emirati youth to seek deeper associations with Japan and manifests as language learning, travel ing, eating Japanese food, etc<sup>33</sup>.

From a psychological perspective, anime shows differ from standard cartoons and thus tend to attract broader audiences. Their elaborate and profound narratives, production techniques, and unconventional characters belie the misconception that animations are reserved for children<sup>34</sup>. Dalil has affirmed that anime storylines are difficult to predict; thus, they elicit the curiosity of viewers who become intensely involved with the narrative<sup>35</sup>. Emotions are pivotal to this identification process between the audience and the characters of anime; audience members experience the reception and interpretation of the text internally as if the events were happening to them<sup>36</sup>. The development of characters also appeals to youths because the shifts demonstrate that they can also be strong and face their problems like adults<sup>37</sup>.

Anime and manga have become easily accessible. The ubiquitous presence of digital content independent of state-controlled media offers youngsters diverse viewing choices<sup>38</sup>. Young viewers seek high-quality productions that include engaging visual effects and realistic animations because they can consume increasingly immersive content through ultra-high-definition televisions, tablets, smartphones, and virtual reality devices<sup>39</sup>. Digital media platforms in the UAE provide easy access to a wide range of anime and manga free or at a negligible cost. They also encourage Emirati *otaku*, bloggers and fans to form a community and participate in the development and exchange of fan-made productions<sup>40</sup> and *scanlations*<sup>41</sup>. Digital media facilitate connections between enthusiasts and generate new forms of fandoms; for instance, several online manga and anime clubs are headquartered in high schools and

universities<sup>42</sup>. Fans connect online to participate in Japanese gaming communities, podcasts, Comic-Con conventions, and anime festivals<sup>43</sup>.

However, extant academic investigations addressing the habits, needs, modes of access and tendencies of Emirati *otaku* remain scant. Therefore, the present paper explores a neglected but crucially important dimension of the history and theory of anime fandoms: the social tendencies, media consumption habits, and cultural perceptions of anime *otaku* in the UAE.

### **Research Objective**

This study analyses the anime phenomenon and its impact on anime fandoms in the UAE. In so doing, it offers valuable insights into the contemporary unfolding of socio-cultural habits in the UAE and contributes to varied ramifications with respect to fandom studies. More specifically, it postulates and examines the following assumption: if the Emirati have been exposed to Japanese popular culture from an early age, local anime fans should evince specific patterns and archetypes conforming to that culture.

Discrete aspects pertaining to Emirati *otaku* must be evaluated to ascertain the validity of the above assumption. The first section of this study tackles the reasons for the strong visual, emotional and contextual appeal of manga and anime for their aficionados to grasp why fans are attracted to this art form. Subsequently, the study explores how enthusiasts in the UAE access manga and anime and interact with these genres. In so doing, it attempts to understand their involvement with other fans and appraise their level of commitment in comparison to other *otaku* communities. Next, the study assesses whether and how fans are culturally affected by anime and manga. Ultimately the present investigation seeks to reveal whether the UAE *otaku* also partake in the hybridization of their own culture.

Hence, the main research questions posed for this study are as follows:

RQ1: What aspects of Japanese anime and manga appeal to Emirati youth?

RQ2: What are the modes of media access and consumption patterns of the Emirati youth with regard to Japanese anime and manga?

RQ3: How do Japanese anime and manga influence Emirati cultural values?

## **Methodology**

A qualitative approach was selected for this exploratory study. The scarcity of literature examining the UAE's animation industry and fandom tendencies prompted the researchers to utilize in-depth focus groups as their primary sources of data collection. This method offered adequate flexibility, was less time-consuming compared to personal interviews, and allowed the researchers to interact directly with the respondents<sup>44</sup>. It also facilitated the exploration of shared beliefs in the expression of views and aided the stimulation of new ideas among the participants, all aspects that were essential to the accomplishment of the study.

All of the targeted respondents were students enrolled in a university in the UAE. Female respondents were selected from the Anime and Japanese Club, whereas male respondents were chosen based on their responses to a poster created and publicized in the male lounge area. All prospective participants were orally questioned before being shortlisted to ascertain their individual knowledge of Japanese animation and the animation industry in the UAE. A total of 24 students aged 17–22 years and enrolled in discrete colleges (12 males and 12 females) were subsequently selected. The respondents were divided into four groups of six males and six females to better handle the large number of participants, and four interviews were conducted (six respondents per interview) in gender-segregated groups because of cultural and privacy constraints.

During the focus group discussions, an assistant helped the main interviewer by taking notes of the participants' responses, and another recorded their voices. The presence of two assistants enhanced the reliability of the findings as the analyses were cross-checked manually to discover similarities and discrepancies. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, and the participants were identified by numbers rather than names to preserve confidentiality. The recordings were transcribed and assessed according to the qualitative first and second cycle coding methods<sup>45</sup>. In the first cycle, the answers were categorized into descriptive strings and were specifically grouped under the words 'appeal', 'intrigue', 'habits' and 'difference'. The summarized first cycle strings were inserted into columns and matched with pattern codes of participant's explanations, in relation to the question asked. The data helped explore some common themes which are addressed in the research findings.

## Research Findings

### *Features of Japanese Anime and Manga that Appeal to Emirati Youth*

Participants' attraction to anime and manga was reported as a fascination towards the originality of the content, soundtracks, storylines, interesting characters and artwork. Most females thought the Japanese anime storytelling style was unique, balanced and could tackle serious issues with profundity, humour, tragedy, and drama. "Anime are interesting, they go in-depth emotionally and story wise; they reflect Japanese culture and the way they tend to stick to normal routine in their daily life. They [people] find anime to basically vent their feelings and express more bizarre behaviour, that's what attracts us to anime storyline" (Respondent 9).

Some respondents compared Japanese and American animation to explicate the appeal of the Japanese anime storylines: “When American animation wants to be overly creative, it stops making sense, but when Japanese animation want to be more creative, the story itself makes perfect sense” (Respondent 10). Respondent 9 elucidated further, explaining that people do not usually identify themselves with hyper-fictitious stories such as Harry Potter. Japanese culture employs manga and anime narratives as a means of escaping reality and as a mode of expressing emotions that people cannot articulate in their daily lives: “By accepting bizarre ideas, they get more chances to explore imaginary borders” (Respondent 9).

Observations conducted by Dalil and Nagata have also alluded to this craving for the extravagant and fantastic<sup>46</sup> and other researchers have emphasized that the acceptance and appeal of bizarre ideas are vested in the desire to escape the monotony of reality<sup>47</sup>. Some researchers, however, assert that fantasy literature should not be considered mere escapism. It also facilitates mental stability, improves psychological health, and allows readers to avoid unpleasanties. They suggest that people crave beauty and are inclined towards it<sup>48</sup>. Perhaps the present study’s respondents seemed attracted to the visual aesthetic features of anime and manga for this reason; they used terms such as ‘unique’, ‘great details’, ‘amazing graphics’, ‘attractive artwork’, ‘creative’, and ‘original’ to describe the artwork and the characters. ‘A variety of Japanese and American animation content was also compared: “American animations are more about patriotism; they have subliminal messages that are political or about saving the world and are repetitive and boring” (Respondent 14). Three other respondents agreed that Japanese anime differs from American cartoon films, which present the same styles and plot-types and are “patriotic and political” (Respondents 5, 9 and 23).

*Media Access and Consumption Levels of Japanese Anime and Manga*

All of the participants confirmed their easy access to anime and manga. They grew up watching anime on Arabic TV channels. However, many respondents shifted to digital platforms after a few years and recounted more than ten streaming sites and apps that held no copyrights. They viewed anime online primarily because the local TV channels censored episodes, dubbed them into Arabic, and broadcast the shows at specific times. They claimed that the dubbed versions or voice-overs often did not suit the anime characters and did not adequately present the storyline (Respondents 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, and 23). Storylines broadcast on TV were often altered to suit a younger audience (Respondents 3, 4, 5, and 12). One respondent chose to view the original versions because, “The original goes deeper in the Japanese culture and exposes [us] to more similar anime; we need to know more about Japan and how they did the anime and manga” (Respondent 21).

Participants also confessed to a sense of guilt about watching anime for free. They understood that tremendous effort had been expended into the creation of the shows. Thus, female respondents willingly paid for subscriptions online and purchased anime figurines, hardcopy manga and other merchandise to support the artists; males invested in video games and tournaments to support Japanese artists because they favoured the digital experience of playing fictional characters<sup>49</sup>.

Respondents evinced equivalent anime and manga product choices. Almost half of the respondents opted to watch anime rather than to read manga even though they acknowledged that manga was more popular than anime because hardcopies were shared among friends during their school days. They watched anime because it was “much easier” (Respondent 14) and because, “we [Emirati] prefer visualizing things over

reading” (Respondent 18). However, the other half of the respondents, mostly female participants, claimed they still read manga for two reasons. First, anime series are produced in Japan only after the highest ratings and reviews of specific manga or graphic novels are tracked and demand is determined. Nonetheless, anime series are often delayed, left incomplete, or padded with fillers. Hence, an increasing number of viewers read the original manga to understand the rest of the story (Respondents 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, 19, 20, and 21). Second, many participants declared personal leanings towards art and reading and preferred printed manga more because of the artwork and visual appeal. Males evinced no specific consumption habits or timelines for watching anime; however, females allocated specific free time to binge-watching anime shows. Many female respondents often viewed anime with friends and siblings who shared similar interests; conversely, males seemed more prone to solo viewing. Also, female and male respondents revealed spending a daily average anime viewing time of three hours and two hours, respectively. However, some respondents admitted to continuous viewing/reading until the end of the show/book, if the story was exceptionally good (Respondents 1, 3, 9, 21).

### *How Japanese Anime and Manga Influence Emirati Cultural Values*

Most respondents avoided identifying themselves as *otaku* because they felt that this term was associated with an unhealthy addiction to anime and manga. Instead, they preferred the term “anime fan”. According to one respondent, *otakus* are obsessive Japanese followers because they spend so much time on Japanese entertainment such as anime or manga that they forget to even eat and cut off human interaction. “We (Emiratis) have human relationships; we go out, we study and we do other things, but

when we have leisure time or want to, only then we watch it, and that does not mean we are fully immersed in it” (Respondent 1).

Another interviewee asserted that only people of Japanese nationality could truly be *otaku*: Japanese youth were more deeply immersed in manga and anime fandoms because their access to anime- and manga-related merchandise was greater and because they also had the “freedom they want to have a big room, filled with more figurines, posters and these things” (Respondent 13). Respondent 13 also confessed to restrictions imposed by his family because they thought his *otaku* status implied that he had not grown into “a real man”. Another respondent mentioned a story about a candidate who was denied a job offer because he was an *otaku*, evincing negative social attitudes towards *otaku* (Respondent 7).

Many of the participants agreed that the word *otaku* encompassed a diverse range of commitment levels and resisted any general definition. However, they emphasized that Emirati anime fans are balanced and flexible – they interact with others, study, and align their personal and professional lives with their hobbies (Respondents 5, 9, 15, 19, and 21). Finally, a male respondent admitted to being *otaku* “here” (in the UAE) but not in Japan (Respondent 21), probably alluding to the different levels of involvement the word implied in the two countries.

Aspects of engagement with anime- and manga-related activities also arose when respondents were questioned about their participation in Comic-Con, Game-Con and other related events. Parental approval was pivotal to female attendance, as festivals allowed mixed participation. Some females confessed that their parents or relatives attended such events with them because they were not allowed to go alone. Most male respondents admitted they would attempt cosplay if their close friends or siblings did

too. Finally, the respondents were asked whether anime posed any threats to local values, culture, and traditions. The female respondents recognized that the online exposure and the easy availability of anime (in comparison to the 1980s and 1990s) and their consequent exposure to Japanese anime of certain genres could be considered offensive such as *hentai* (adult anime) because they clashed with the region's codes of ethics. Respondents 3, 4, 5, 8 and 9 substantiated this observation and stated that some anime shows explored themes such as sex, unrealistic body standards, and violence. Additionally, Respondent 20 stated that Japanese entertainment could sometimes be insensitive to religious sentiments and recalled a few such instances. Respondent 8 highlighted another important aspect concerning anime selection: most foreign viewers could not read the Japanese disclaimers regarding explicit and unsuitable content. Consequently, exposure to explicit or offensive content was often unanticipated. Even if local channels broadcasting these anime constantly monitor and censor such content, issues still arise when such content is viewed through less regulated digital media<sup>50</sup>.

Overall, participants felt that anime shows are becoming increasingly explicit, and that this phenomenon has become the new normal. "Overexposure to such characters and topics through anime has become normalized to an extent that we don't find it offensive anymore, which is a concern" (Respondent 4). A few respondents acknowledged their individual responsibility to choose: if the content clashes with their ethics, the person should avoid it or simply absorb the "good" and ignore the "bad" (Respondents 2, 4, 5, 6, and 8).

Almost four-fifths of the respondents, however, claimed that exposure to Japanese anime is not generally a big issue. The experience of watching anime or reading manga introduced them to sketching anime and opened the doors of creativity

to them. It also accorded them the opportunity to learn about Japanese traditions and language. Most respondents also believed that the promotion of Japanese culture in the UAE fulfilled objectives of enjoyment and cultural understanding. Others asserted that exposure to the Japanese entertainment industry prompted the fostering of otherwise improbable inclinations in the UAE: entrepreneurial aptitude, artistic skills, and creativity.

## Discussion

The study revealed that Emirati youths were most strongly attracted to the visual aesthetics and emotional appeal of anime. Some theorists have commented on the aspect of the visual appeal<sup>51</sup>, claiming that Japanese popular culture lacks a national visual identity because all the characters evince non-specific and idealized features<sup>52</sup>, such as ‘superflat’<sup>53</sup> and ‘big-eyed’<sup>54</sup>. These characteristics appeal to the young Emirati population that seems to have developed a fine-tuned sense of aesthetics manifesting as a constant search for beauty, the ideal, and the transcendent.

Pressure from a conservative society and family restrictions increase the appeal of anime as an ideal escape from reality. The respondents confirmed explicitly that the bizarreness of anime and manga helps them relieve anxieties. Respondent 9’s comments about how the Japanese simultaneously adhere to daily routines and escape to surreal worlds through digital media and access anime and manga can be seen as parallelism between the two cultures: both share an understanding of the importance of community values<sup>55</sup> that encompass cultural norms to follow and respect traditions without objection<sup>56</sup>. Thus, the need to carve out some ‘self-space’ is justified<sup>57</sup>. This attitude is also aligned with the findings of Napier’s study, which claims that anime fans interpret their favourite entertainment genre as more than a meaningless pastime: anime makes

them feel exotic and unique because it accords them the freedom to express themselves within fandom communities<sup>58</sup>. It also confirms Jenson's theory that fandoms often comprise misunderstood individuals who seek comfort and joy in activities shared with like-minded people<sup>59</sup>. Resistance becomes part of their identity because very few adults understand their hobby<sup>60</sup>.

It was also interesting to observe how Emirati respondents compared Japanese anime with American cartoons. They clearly articulated their dislike for the American renditions of patriotism, complicated political dialogues and unoriginal cartoon styles, reiterating the outcomes of a recent study on entertainment media in the Middle East that reported the opinions of 6,000 interviewees from countries in the Middle East and North Africa. The study clearly asserted that in spite of enjoying Hollywood films, a substantial proportion (79 per cent) of Middle Eastern respondents perceived American entertainment to be morally harmful <sup>61</sup> and responsible for the promotion of negative Arab stereotypes<sup>62</sup>.

In terms of access to the Japanese entertainment industry, young Emiratis exposed to dubbed anime through television have drastically shifted to digital media<sup>63</sup>. The respondents stated that they preferred internet-based sites and apps because they could view the undubbed and uncensored versions. Studies on censorship have shown that consumers are often attracted to "uncensored material", especially if it is attractive or relevant to the user, even if it is regulated by an "expert agent"<sup>64</sup>. Emirati youths seek new ways of accessing uncensored material through virtual private networks, and this behaviour was found in a similar study by Hobbs and Roberts<sup>65</sup>. Some of the study's respondents disclosed their discomfort in reading or viewing *haram*<sup>66</sup> content or feeling "unsensitive" because of their long exposure to diverse content. It would be interesting

to probe whether Emirati youths choose the Internet over the television because they are genuinely curious about watching anime in its original form. The digital medium seemed to help them attain a deeper understanding of the story and language; it can function as an access point to satisfy their attraction to the uncensored parts that offer avenues for evasion and speculation, giving them the privacy, accessibility, variety, and freedom of choice to their content. Generally speaking, Emiratis find it difficult to discuss certain topics<sup>67</sup> or admit to their “guilty pleasures”<sup>68</sup> due to their conservative upbringing; therefore, exposure to certain content may help them understand issues that are societally deemed taboo.

A gendered divide was observed among participants vis-à-vis the consumption of cultural products: boys preferred watching anime and playing video games and felt that the visual approach facilitated greater immersion. Girls seemed to be more interested in the storylines and preferred manga because some anime series were left incomplete or ruined by inconsistent fillers.

Further, analysis of the respondents’ access to manga and anime evidenced that the vast number of websites, apps, and podcasts used by the participants allow fans to recommend and promote content, create and host discussion groups, upload videos or files of their creations and create cosplay ideas. These aspects influence their growing consumption habits, as access to digital media has made anime more appealing, popular, and a part of the daily lives of Emirati youths<sup>69</sup>.

The overall evaluation of Emirati *otaku* revealed that young Emiratis can strike a balance between immersion in fantasy and reality despite their heavy consumption of cultural productions enabled by digital technology<sup>70</sup>. Most of the respondents elucidated that their involvement as anime *otaku* was far from qualifying as an obsession because

they generally valued their commitments to their families and communities, and their hobbies evolved around those responsibilities. Enthusiasts, especially female fans, attained a sense of freedom from societal restrictions by connecting with online communities, attending anime conventions, viewing anime, involving themselves in artwork, and delving into the anime fandom.

### Concerns

The findings of this study indicate that the dissemination of Japanese popular culture has indeed influenced Emirati youths in a manner similar to other geographical regions. Localized *otaku* fandoms bring together like-minded individuals who need to share their emotions and experiences<sup>71</sup>. Their formation corroborates the presence of a new mode of youth interaction and a desire to escape conventional social mandates through digital media<sup>72</sup>.

Are Emirati *otaku* deeply committed to this passion? Could anime and manga become an intrinsic part of their lives (i.e., their line of work)? Or is being an *otaku* a youth trend that Emirati youngsters will eventually outgrow?

The UAE remains a young country; it is possible that this generation is consuming popular trends of foreign cultures, because (a) there is still no long-established popular tendency that places the UAE above other countries and, therefore, (b) the new generation seeks to define its own modern identity. Young Emiratis are broadening their vision, devouring products of other cultures, and learning by example in their efforts to construct a new identity. However, as Japanese culture is not their own, it seems unlikely that they will embrace Japanese culture to an extent that compromises their own collective identity and values. These findings reflect Newitz's thesis that American anime fans do not morally associate Japanese popular culture with

their own, nor do they feel responsible for these overseas creations: “American fans [...] eagerly watch an anime because it comes from *far away*”)73.

Often Japanese manga and anime encompass narratives that discuss issues such as relationships, sexuality, transgender relations, abuse, alcohol, violence, and drug consumption that exist in Japanese and other cultures but are not easily debated in the Arab world74. Thus, Arab fans immediately notice divergences between their traditions and Japanese culture, especially when they are confronted with uncensored scenes or dialogues that embarrass some and desensitize others because they cannot, and perhaps will not entirely relate to such issues. Further, Emiratis may consider Japanese popular culture merely a pastime because the foreign animation industry has generated in them a resistance towards the local animation industry75. The paucity of government support, training, religious sensitivities and restrictions stemming from their traditional society easily discourage Emiratis from embarking on serious careers in animation.

Despite these challenges, Emirati youths were seen to engage with anime because they identify emotionally with the characters of anime stories. Feelings are universal to all humankind; they mesmerize young followers, making them read manga or watch anime for hours to discover how the plot is finally resolved, how human disputes are handled, and how good triumphs over evil. As previous studies have already confirmed this process of identification between fictional characters and audiences76, it is discernible that the immersion of young Emiratis in manga and anime is a way for them to learn about human relations and different people without having to interact with real family members or friends. Could escaping reality to get immersed into a fantastic world be interpreted as a beneficial way to lay the grounding for an inner sense of idealism that helps enhance one's values and the meaning of one's existence77?

## Recommendations

One way to support and enhance the growth of Emirati *otaku* in the UAE and to make them an asset to the local culture and economy is to turn them from consumers to producers.

While artistically skilled Japanese *otaku* can translate their passion to employment as animators, illustrators, writers, or even producers for Japanese manga and anime studios and editorial houses, such options are scarce for Emiratis. A recent statistic on the entertainment industry in the Middle East suggests that the UAE population wants increased cultural integration into modern society through a ‘re-traditionalization’ wherein traditions and religious conservatism can co-exist with modern globalized society<sup>78</sup>.

The government has started to address related issues in the context of potential opportunities the animation industry brings to the economy and to political learning<sup>79</sup>. However, even if the UAE has recently started to operationalize its creative industries, a few pioneers have already made their mark in the entertainment sphere<sup>80</sup>. Self-trained local illustrators have imitated anime prototypes that often lack a local identity. They need direction and training to create their own unique styles that capture their country’s distinctive culture and represent them and their societies.

The Emirati educational system could help feed the local creative industry by creating a new generation of diverse local animators, illustrators, writers and other associated technical occupations. To meet the UAE’s cultural demands, this task would not merely require faculty and courses but would also demand the adequate nurturing of competence in film language and the changing of perceptions about the industry. The

government should encourage students to undertake such careers so that restrictions imposed on them by their families could be minimized.

## Conclusion

Previous studies have addressed the issue of globalization instead of attending to the experiences of people and attempting to understand them. This empirical study contributes to globalization debates on a local level by examining the perceptions of Emirati youth and attaining a more comprehensive understanding of how they view and consume anime and how the genre influences their native culture.

Its findings corroborated the theory that Emirati fans exposed to Japanese pop culture since childhood have developed specific patterns and paradigms that align with their culture. Although this study's findings are significant, some limitations must be acknowledged. The investigation was restricted to a focus group comprising a limited number of participants who were gender-segregated; therefore, it is impossible to make valid inferences and generalizations. Further, the study used a single qualitative method. Quantitative analyses may be appropriate for the analysis of anime consumption patterns among Emiratis for the correlation of different factors and testing theories. Triangulation approaches, such as data collection, participant observation, single interviews, and document analysis could also be adopted in future studies.

Overall, this exploratory study encourages other researchers to study such changes occurring in the region: collaborations between several universities, media production houses and Comic-Con convention centres in the UAE could provide rich data on the impact of the animation industry on Emirati youth. Additional research on Emirati animation, hybridized art forms or an exploration of the emerging local anime

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## Notes

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## To Live is to Devour Others: Food Ethics and Tragedy in *Tokyo Ghoul*

**Christian Frigerio**

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**Abstract:** This paper studies how Ishida Sui's *Tokyo Ghoul* creates its typical sense of "tragedy," by stressing the injustice inherent in every act of eating, and by generalizing the model of nutrition to every ethically laden act. Ishida undermines the Kantian principle that "ought implies can," depicting a twisted world which forces us into wrongdoing: we have to eat, but there is no Other we can eat with moral impunity. Still, his characters provide some ethical models which could be implemented in our everyday food ethics, given that the tragicality spotted by Ishida is not that alien to our food system: food aesthetics, nihilism, *amor fati*, living with the tragedy, and letting ourselves be eaten are the options Ishida offers to cope with the tragedy, to approach the devastation our need for food brings into the world in a more aware and charitable way. The examination of Ishida's narrative device, conducted with the mediation of thinkers such as Lévinas, Ricoeur, Derrida, and other contemporary moral philosophers, shall turn the question: "how to become worthy of eating?" into the core problem for food ethics.

**Keywords:** food ethics, vegetarianism, animalism, otherness, ecology.

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## Introduction

The first chapter of Ishida Sui's *Tokyo Ghoul*<sup>1</sup> ends with the protagonist, Kaneki Ken's prophetic statement: "If I were to write a book with me as the main character, it would be a tragedy."<sup>2</sup> This paper examines the double narrative device through which Ishida stages this tragedy. First, he depicts a situation that stresses the injustice inherent in any act of nutrition: Kaneki is saved from the aggression of Rize, a girl he had dated and who reveals herself to be a ghoul – a creature identical to a human, except for its extraordinary physical skills and the fact that it can only eat human meat – by the mysterious fall of some steel beams that kill her. But the transplant he undergoes to cure his injuries is done using Rize's organs: Kaneki's own body begins to turn into that of a ghoul, normal food starts tasting disgusting to him, and he rapidly understands that only human meat will placate his hunger. Second, alimentation is adopted as the paradigm of any ethically laden action: acting is often, like eating, inevitable, and inevitably unjust. "To live is to devour others"<sup>3</sup>: this is the best summary of *Tokyo Ghoul*'s tragedy, which enhances reflections affecting our everyday ethical dilemmas.

Even if the theoretical frame of this paper is not unitary, there are two main fields of reference. The first is, for obvious reasons, contemporary moral philosophy, and especially analytic food ethics. What a reflection based on *Tokyo Ghoul* can contribute to food debates is the overcoming of the philosophical prejudice according to which a right choice is always possible (even vegetarianism, that would appear as the best solution when one considers the suffering brought about by eating, seems to be disqualified by the tragic situation staged by Ishida; this point is dealt with in the conclusion). The positive result of this inquiry is not a definite diet, but rather an *ethos* that could teach us to cope with an ill-structured world. This is why the second

main field of reference is modern French philosophy: post-structuralist thinkers (if we may call them all so) like Derrida, Lévinas, Ricoeur, and Deleuze have often pointed to an ethics of undecidability that fits well with a vision of the world that teaches the intrinsic unfairness of every positive solution.

### **The Meat of the Other**

As Christian Coff has said, “Eating is a transformation where what is ‘other’ is transformed into the self. Eating confronts us with one of the most fundamental kinds of transformation, namely, encountering the *otherness* of our surroundings, which, through this activity of ‘internalizing’, are transformed into oneself, into one’s own body.”<sup>4</sup> But this transformation is only possible because nutrition brings the differentiation between Same and Other to a critical point. Discussing the plausibility of ascribing a moral status to beings according to their “capacities,” Cora Diamond has spotted a fallacy in many animalist arguments: the problem resides for animalists in the suffering of slaughtered animals; thus, they would have no problem eating, say, a cow killed in a storm. But why then would they refuse to eat the human victim of an incident or an amputated human limb? The core of the problem, for Diamond, is not that the cow should not be killed because it is capable of suffering; rather, “what underlies our attitude to dining on ourselves is the view that *a person is not something to eat*.”<sup>5</sup> Our refusal to eat people “is not justified by what human beings are: it is itself one of the things which go to build our notion of human beings. And so too... the idea of the difference between human beings and animals. We learn what a human being is in – among other ways – sitting at a table where WE eat THEM.”<sup>6</sup> In Diamond’s view, the felt impossibility of eating something and its recognition as Same to ourselves – as a person or a “fellow creature” – ground each other.

This surely goes for Western contemporary cultural norms, to which *Tokyo Ghoul* seems to conform (the objection of cannibalism should be treated carefully since, despite the “myth” construed around it, cannibalism is less a cultural phenomenon than something attributed to “other” cultures in order to discriminate between “human beings” – given the idea that “human beings don’t eat one another” – and uncivilized or enemy populations<sup>7</sup>). At first, Kaneki refuses to eat human flesh despite his hunger, because he feels that in doing so he would cease to be a person; he says to Touka, one of the first ghouls he meets: “Human meat... There’s no way I can eat it. How could I possibly eat it? I’m human, I’m different from you monsters!”<sup>8</sup> I cannot eat what I recognize as the Same, as a person; and I am a person only insofar as I refuse to eat people. The point of view of a ghoul is displayed by Nishiki, who says to Kaneki, when he refuses to eat his best friend: “To ‘us’ humans are just food. It’s the same as beef or pork to ‘them’. Why are you pretending to be friends with some food?”<sup>9</sup>

Emmanuel Lévinas’s work is one of the best starting places when one needs to conceptualize the Other and our relation to it. According to Lévinas, the Other becomes manifest in the “face,” and is signaled by “the ethical impossibility of killing him in which I stand.”<sup>10</sup> But this impossibility is specular to the foundational role of alterity or otherness with respect to killing: “The alterity that is expressed in the face provides the unique ‘matter’ possible for total negation. I can wish to kill only an existent absolutely independent, which exceeds my powers infinitely.”<sup>11</sup> Hence Lévinas’ negative definition of the Other: “The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill.”<sup>12</sup>

The situation dramatized by *Tokyo Ghoul* obliges us to put this definition in even stronger terms – to make it *tragic*. While killing is a somehow gratuitous act, a

bare affirmation of power, eating is necessary, since living beings are metabolic systems: as Derrida says, *il faut bien manger*, everybody has to eat. The thought of the Other becomes tragic when we substitute the act of killing with that of *killing in order to eat*. We do not simply kill the Other; we *prey on* the Other. And this suggests a new definition: *the Other is the sole being I can wish to eat*.

Now, the tragedy in *Tokyo Ghoul* is engendered when the main character is deprived of his Other. Kaneki, formerly human, discovers that his body rejects everything that is not human meat; the only alternative would be for him to eat ghoul meat. But even this option seems ethically foreclosed after Mr. Yoshimura, a ghoul managing a cafe where ghouls can find shelter, employs him as a waiter, and he begins to make friends with other ghouls. Against Touka's accusation that Kaneki is neither human nor ghoul, a bastard without a place in the world, Yoshimura will sustain that, actually, he is both, "a single person who has two worlds in which to belong."<sup>13</sup> Yoshimura's well-intentioned words bring to light the heart of the tragedy: Kaneki's alimentary choices are reduced to two domains, and he belongs to both of them. He has no Other to eat and still he has to eat; he is a structural cannibal, and if he doesn't want to starve, he can only eat the Same to himself.

In the light of alimentation, the problem is not the ethical necessity to admit the other as such, but what happens once we exclude it. *The tragedy is the absence of the Other*, the absence of anyone I could possibly wish to eat. The tragedy lies in the physiological impossibility of holding to ethical principles that we perceive as fundamental: namely, don't eat the ones belonging to your same existential category. To resume Diamond's metaphor, Kaneki's tragedy is that he is obliged to eat around the table and not on it.

## A twisted birdcage

Tragedy comes from an inescapable “tension between *opposite necessities*.”<sup>14</sup> It is the dynamics of alimentation that moves (somehow like Fate in Greek tragedies) the world of *Tokyo Ghoul*: ghouls act in order to eat humans, and humans act because of fear and hatred towards ghouls; humans live in fear of being eaten, ghouls live in fear of being hunted. “I have to eat. To eat is to steal. I have to eat. To eat is to protect. I have to eat. To eat is to lose. I have to eat. To eat is to make a mistake.”<sup>15</sup> These tormented words of the narrator display the way the question of alimentation is generalized and becomes a model for every ethically laden act<sup>16</sup>: the characters are often obliged to act, just like they are obliged to eat; this obligation is all the more urgent when the Other moves them through hatred and fear, and both parties feel they are justified in acting only while they have an Other they can damage without moral consequences.

But Kaneki, both human and ghouls, problematizes this opposition. He will come to consider himself as the symbol of hope that humans and ghouls may come to understand each other, to consider the opposing party as the Same. But once again, if the Other disappears, tragedy is engendered: if all parties belong to the Same, then in acting I can only hurt the Same. When the Other disappears, the tragedy is extended to the domain of praxis in general, because there is no existential opposition that grounds the righteousness and superiority of my ideals.

According to Christine Korsgaard, one of the reasons why many believe in the Kantian principle that “ought implies can” is that, if we were to reject it,

We would have to conclude that the world is in a certain way morally objectionable, a way that forces us into wrongdoing. Life does prey on life; nature is a scene of suffering; if those things are repugnant to human moral standards, then the world is set up in a way we must deplore, but in which we must nevertheless participate.<sup>17</sup>

This is exactly the conclusion found in *Tokyo Ghoul*: eating is wrong, and the world is wrong because we have to eat. The mantra “the world is wrong”<sup>18</sup> is the motto of the champion of justice, Amon Koutarou, a CCG (Commission of Counter Ghoul) investigator and Kaneki’s nemesis.<sup>19</sup> Amon is initially convinced of the possibility of justice: “This world is wrong. We must correct it... I’ll show them I can change it. I’ll change this incorrect world.”<sup>20</sup> The reason for his faith in justice is that he thinks the world is wrong because ghouls predate humans<sup>21</sup>: once ghouls disappear, justice becomes possible.

Amon will soon change his mind. The acquaintance with Kaneki, and the fact that he himself is turned into a ghoul, make him understand that the world is wrong, but not because of ghouls: in a world like this, there is no possibility of acting right. It is the arrangement of the world itself – the fact that ghouls can only eat humans and humans can only kill ghouls, and not ghouls or humans themselves – that is contorted. This also means that there is no possibility of eliminating the wrong: ought does not imply can, justice is foreclosed.<sup>22</sup>

This shows an interesting shift, in Amon, from a Hebrew-Christian conception of the wrongness of the world, to a tragic one. As Salvatore Natoli explains,

in tragedy guilt, if it does not spring directly from the innocent cruelty of existence, surely finds in it its primordial reason for emergence. Suffering is not the only one but is surely the preponderant matrix of guilt. In the Hebrew tradition exactly the opposite happens: guilt originates sufferance and pain comes to men as the *wage* of sin. If things are so it is evident that tribulations, pain and death follow sin. On the other hand, the opposite is true: if there is no sin there will not have to be tribulations, pain and death.<sup>23</sup>

Amon initially thinks that eliminating ghouls would resolve the problem, just like in the Hebrew-Christian tradition ceasing to sin would eliminate pain. In Greek tragedy however, it is guilt that comes from the cruelty of the world, which is

structured so that in acting we can only produce suffering. This way, guilt gives place to a somehow twisted innocence. Natoli continues:

There is something guilty in this innocence... The image of the world deployed in the tragical draws an innocent guilt, that is not guilty because it cannot be imputed to anyone, because no one chose and willed it; at the same time innocence is guilty because guilt is identical to the immediacy of existence. There is an original guilt that is one with the injustice of birth.<sup>24</sup>

The human leader of the society for the defense of ghouls enunciates this situation clearly in stating the principle of his association: “We just happened to be born human.”<sup>25</sup> The *fortuity* of our being born human or ghoul forbids us to consider an agent guilty of certain acts on which its existence depends. Ghouls are the “born wrong”<sup>26</sup>; as Touka cries against agent Mado Kureo: “If the only thing you can eat is people then that’s what you do, right? How can we live correctly with a body like this?”<sup>27</sup> As the president of the society continues, “In this world, the circumstances of your birth dictate your side in that war. No wonder we cannot but become twisted.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Ethics for a twisted world**

It is the presence of the Other that defines the conditions of an action itself, in the form of hunger (for ghouls) and hatred (for humans). This engenders the “spiral of revenge”<sup>29</sup>: for instance, CCG agent Mado Kureo fought ghouls to vindicate his wife; he will kill the parents of a ghoul child, Hinami, and will be killed by her and Touka. Mado’s daughter, Akira, will fight ghouls to revenge her parents. But she finds herself in the impossibility of acting after her acquaintance with ghouls – Hinami and Touka among them – makes her understand how futile her hate was: “If I can’t even feel hatred, then it’s a dead end. I can’t go anywhere.”<sup>30</sup>

This is the form that tragedy takes in the dominion of praxis. Otherness, creating the spiral of revenge, dictated one’s reasons to act; but when the Other, the object of hatred vanishes, acting becomes, in a certain sense, a *groundless*

*inevitability*: the necessity of acting with the awareness that our reasons are not better than our opponents' is a constant in *Tokyo Ghoul*. As a hallucinatory Rize declares to Kaneki: "In choosing both, losing both... There are times when you'll have to protect something, even at the cost of something else."<sup>31</sup> Furuta is even more radical: "There is no real need to have a reason to do things. People who can't act without a reason are trash."<sup>32</sup>

Amon defines the loss of the Other (the loss of one's reason to act) as a state of "emptiness."<sup>33</sup> But this emptiness can be filled. Almost all the main characters fill it through what Yomo calls "being connected"<sup>34</sup>: finding people to care for and protecting them. For instance, when Amon meets Kaneki after a long time, he asks his reason for fighting for ghouls; Kaneki answers that "instead of fighting for someone I can't even see with my own eyes, I want to fight for the people near me. It's just that in my case, a lot of those people are ghouls."<sup>35</sup> Even if this is a "pretty weak motive," clinging to it is the sole criterion for action when the Other doesn't push us through hunger, hatred, or fear.

However, this is of little help when we turn to food ethics, where the question is not about whom to protect, but what to hurt. Ishida never gives a definite answer; but he gives a number of hints for a true *ethics of tragedy*. This is done through the creation of some *conceptual personae* (to borrow the term from Deleuze and Guattari), ethical models that, while never completely satisfying, furnish suggestions on how to move in a twisted world. I'll expose briefly the peculiarities of four of these models, that constitute divergent responses to the same feeling of the wrongness of the world: while the first two remain on a somehow nihilist terrain – the first is an enjoyment of one's role in the tragical play; the second, an attempt to turn tragedy

into a *comedy* – I suggest that the third and fourth models are the more robust ethical tips we can get from *Tokyo Ghoul*.

First: *food aesthetics*, something like an alimentary version of Kierkegaard's aesthetic life, an existence that is content with a continuous drift among pleasures and sensuality. Whereas taste has been mistreated in traditional accounts of senses, the omnipresence of the alimentary aspect turns it into the major worry in *Tokyo Ghoul*,<sup>36</sup> where the tragical necessity of eating is often transformed into a source of pleasure. It can assume two forms. Firstly, gluttony: as stated by Touka, "the hunger of a ghoul is literally hell,"<sup>37</sup> and Kaneki admits that it is hardly surprising that ghouls such as Rize exist.<sup>38</sup> Rize was in fact known as the Binge Eater, given her insatiable hunger. Discussing with Tsukiyama, she articulates her ravenous philosophy: "It's true that nothing is better than food being delicious when you're eating, but for a ghoul to fuss over flavor and form an elaborated plan over it stinks of being upper class. That's completely like a human and utterly ridiculous."<sup>39</sup> This is why Tsukiyama, the ghoul nicknamed Gourmet and self-proclaimed Epicurean,<sup>40</sup> despises her: "That woman... if she was full then she didn't care about anything else. Just a pig that would swarm around grain... That gluttonous female pig ridiculed my food."<sup>41</sup> Tsukiyama displays the second mode of this way of existence: he is a food aesthete, always in search of "the very essence of the desire to eat": "I've made tons of attempts to test it out but my interest still hasn't waned. The path of gourmet is pretty profound."<sup>42</sup> He will find this magic ingredient in the sole ghoul with a human scent, Kaneki, with whom he will become obsessed. His philosophy is one of food uniqueness, based on the conviction that "finding a new feast does more for a person's happiness than discovering a star,"<sup>43</sup> and it assumes a dimension that crosses the sexual and the religious: he reserves to gastronomy – "the preparation for

taking the Other into oneself”<sup>44</sup> – a maniacal carefulness, for instance when he stages a situation where he will be able to eat Kaneki while he is eating a human.<sup>45</sup>

In both cases, food is strongly sexualized, but libido takes two different courses: either it is vented without restraint, or it is sublimated in an aestheticization of taste. Even if we lack the space to discuss the relation between the two, it should be noted that the axiological distinction endorsed by Tsukiyama between nutrition and cuisine is not that plain, and that the possibility of an “aesthetics of hunger” as the one assumed by Rize, is not as absurd as it may seem.<sup>46</sup>

Second: *clownish nihilism*. The Clowns are ghouls interested only in having fun through devastation and chaos. Roma, the founder of the group, states this clearly: “The world is a circus. Everything is funny meaningless.”<sup>47</sup> Identically, Furuta decided to destroy everything because of his belief in the pointlessness of the world: “this world is just a toy chest. You play with it while you can, but when the time comes, it’s all over. The chest is shut, and there’s no reopening it.”<sup>48</sup> When nothing has intrinsic meaning, fun becomes the only criterion of action. Like food aesthetics, nihilism can give rise to two different models. The first is displayed by Itori, when, after Kaneki’s monstrous transformation, she discourages his friends from intervening, stating that the only thing they can do is watch him;<sup>49</sup> an ethics of entertainment that shifts the clown’s position, from onstage actant to spectator: if nothing is meaningful, then one can only watch, hoping to be present at the moment of destruction.<sup>50</sup> On the contrary, Roma finds in acting the only way out of despair: “What do you think ghouls and humans have in common? It’s boredom. It’s like a terrible cold that’s hard to recover from. If it’s not treated properly, you’ll start thinking ‘what’s the point of even living?’ Change what’s around you, and keep on stimulating... that’s the best cure.”<sup>51</sup>

Clownish nihilism stems from awareness of tragedy; as Itori says, “The clowns are ghouls who got tired of despair. We’ll keep on cracking jokes onstage so that we don’t go crazy.”<sup>52</sup> The clowns are the ones who were incapable of living with the tragedy and had enough power to put the world itself at risk. The same opposition between “carelessness” and “desperation” is displayed by Takizawa, a human turned into a murderous ghoul: but while Clowns choose carelessness in order to overcome desperation, Takizawa, after he is partially redeemed by Amon’s words, embraces desperation, accepting his sins and striving for what of good can still come from his evil existence.<sup>53</sup> Takizawa thus demonstrates that escaping from tragedy is not the only ethical possibility in a twisted world.

Third: *amor fati*. When he is shown the amount of death and devastation his actions have caused – and after Rize says to him that he “should’ve done nothing from the start”<sup>54</sup> – Kaneki recognizes that it was only through pain that he found teachers, friends, allies, and love: “And even though I have erred so much, and hurt so many, I simply don’t believe that it was all for naught. And that’s why, even if I were to know everything that’d happen after, I still would have gone to meet Rize that day. To me, all of it was necessary. This world isn’t wrong. It just is.”<sup>55</sup>

When he is asked if he will be able to shoulder his sins, he answers: “I’ll try to take responsibility.”<sup>56</sup> This is the final step of Kaneki’s maturation: from the despair of being incapable of defending the ones he loves, to the despair of having caused destruction, to the quiet acceptance of all these happenings. But this *amor fati* – as the Stoics and Nietzsche call the heartfelt acceptance of a destiny that one has not chosen<sup>57</sup> – seems somehow hypocritical: it is not only his suffering that he is accepting but also the deaths that his last transformation has caused. Is it ethically legitimate to accept the pain we have caused to someone else? Kaneki even justifies it

through his personal acquisitions: “I’ve experienced all these things, but I feel like it was necessary so that I could meet all these people in my life.”<sup>58</sup> We must however keep in mind that Kaneki has undergone a process of transformation that has excluded the Other from his world: there is no way he could hurt someone without caring. Through *amor fati*, Kaneki does not escape tragedy; rather, he (somehow heroically) endorses it. *Amor fati* also becomes Kaneki’s way of finding reasons to act without the intervention of the other: after Furuta derides him for striving despite the futility of the world, Kaneki answers that “even if eventually everything will come to naught, I’ll still strive, like I did today, Furuta.”<sup>59</sup> Action is what gives sense to a meaningless world, redeeming it. Contrary to the Clowns, Kaneki doesn’t lose the sense of importance of everything that happens – he holds that “life is an accumulation of decisions... that one decision you make can derail you from your final destination, and you can’t turn back from that altered path.”<sup>60</sup> Only, rather than letting the world produce casual suffering, he prefers to be the one whose choices can determine who will be spared from pain.

Fourth: *living with the tragedy*. The last model is displayed by Amon, once he understands that wrongness comes from the world itself: “This world is twisted. What is right, what is wrong... you can’t easily tell the difference. That’s why you must keep thinking whether what you’re doing is right or not. That act itself, alone, can be called right.”<sup>61</sup> With Amon, justice becomes less a law or a criterion than a disposition or a state of mind: justice is a sincere and tormenting interrogation regarding a conduct that can only be unjust. This is somehow similar to Derrida’s hyperbolic ethics, according to which “casting doubt on responsibility, on decision, on one’s own being-ethical, seems to me to be – and is perhaps what should forever remain – the unrescindable essence of ethics, decision, and responsibility.”<sup>62</sup> The

difference is that Amon's is more than a doubt: what underpins his interrogation is the awareness of the impossibility of justice. He has no Other from which a distinct call for responsibility could come. In this model, justice is the awareness and the burden of your own inescapable injustice. While Kaneki endorses and transmutes it into an affirmation of fate, Amon refuses to renounce the tragedy and preserves it as the matrix of a torment that becomes the only way to morality.

The third and fourth models are not that distinct, and it seems that modulations are possible between them. For instance, Takizawa's "desperation" lies in the awareness of being not only unjust but actively evil. But even more perspicuous is the case of Yoshimura. Twice, before engaging in battle to protect his employees, he states his philosophy:

The world continues to give birth to anger and sorrow, struggling and killing one another. So it's natural that everyone is trying to justify themselves... There's no good reason to kill someone. The act of taking away life is equally evil.<sup>63</sup>

We, from the moment of birth, continue to take. Food, connections, even fellow blood... Life is to constantly sin. Life is evil itself. I am aware I am evil, and so are you all. Come, kill me. And I shall do the same!<sup>64</sup>

Alfred N. Whitehead once wrote that "life is robbery," and therefore "the robber requires justification."<sup>65</sup> According to Yoshimura, the robber is never justified: there is no possibility of escaping the twisted spires of this world.

Whether we prefer to endorse the tragedy or to live with it, it seems that a certain degree of *amor fati* is needed anyhow. Amon would not act at all if he stopped at the interrogation of his actions; a certain *consent* is required. In his philosophy of the will, Paul Ricoeur depicts consent to three conditions we have not chosen – our character, our unconscious, our biological life – as an integral part of the freedom of our acts.<sup>66</sup> Ricoeur writes that "consent which reaffirms an existence which is not chosen, with its constriction, its shadows, its contingencies, is like a

choice of myself, a necessary choice, as the *amor fati* celebrated by Nietzsche.”<sup>67</sup> Consenting to my character, unconscious and life means transforming them into myself. Thus, “Freedom is not a pure act; it is, in each of its moments, activity and receptivity. It constitutes itself by receiving what it does not produce: values, capacities, and pure nature.”<sup>68</sup> It is especially the biological side that matters in *Tokyo Ghoul*: the question is on which side of the barricade that divides two great Others – human or ghoul – we will casually fall, together with the awareness that, once we are situated, we will only be able to act unjustly. Kaneki comes to a radical form of consent when, during the final battle, he says to himself: “I choose ‘this one’. Forever choosing. Forever being chosen.”<sup>69</sup> This co-constitution of choosing and being chosen could be considered as the common root of the two strategies of endorsing the tragedy and living with it. Whether stoic or tormented, the ideal actant of *Tokyo Ghoul* is something like Deleuze’s “spiritual automata”: “Only he who is chosen chooses well or effectively.”<sup>70</sup> In order to act, we need to consent – and that always means to consent to tragedy.

### **How to become a good meal**

We may choose to follow the aesthetic path, either the glutton or gourmet one; or to treat the world as a toy chest, turning tragedy into a meaningless comedy; or to endorse the pain our existence causes, or to continue eating while preserving the awareness that what we are doing may be both inevitable and evil. These options conform to the usual model of food ethics: since humans are at the top of the food chain, the question is how to eat properly. But in *Tokyo Ghoul* they aren’t. Thus, a new problem arises: are there cases where we should rather wonder how to become a good meal, how to let ourselves be eaten for the benefit of something we consider more important than ourselves? When he was a child, Kaneki’s mother asked him to

be always gentle: “Rather than a person who hurts others, become the person getting hurt.”<sup>71</sup> Turning to nutrition, the request can be restated thus: *Rather than someone who eats, become someone who gets eaten*. Volunteering one’s flesh is anything but unnatural: it is widespread among animals<sup>72</sup>; it is sanctioned by some cultures (like the Chinese, where as a reflection of the Confucian philosophy of filial piety, many cases are known of children volunteering body parts as food for their parents<sup>73</sup>), and it should not strike as absurd the descendants of a religious culture whose adepts get redeemed by eating the blood and flesh of their savior.

Offering oneself as food to allow someone else to continue living is a constant option in *Tokyo Ghoul*; the existence of a last conceptual persona is thus suggested, one which shifts our place from the exclusive *subjects* of food ethics to its possible *objects*. First, in order to give Touka the strength to fight Tsukiyama, Kaneki will let her eat a portion of his meat.<sup>74</sup> Second, Nishiki tries to heal his wounds by eating his human girlfriend, Kimi. Discovering only then he is a ghoul and revealing to him how he had dispelled her temptation to commit suicide after her parents’ death, Kimi offers her body to him: “You came to my side and saved me. So it’s fine. Continue living.”<sup>75</sup> Third, the CCG agents’ belief in “justice” is so strong they use Arata, a special armor construed with ghoul cells that reaches its maximum strength by consuming the meat of its user. Fourth, after Kaneki is mortally wounded, his human best friend, Hide, who had already intuited his transformation, volunteers his body to allow him to escape from CCG: “I want to help you. Eat me.”<sup>76</sup> Finally, to overcome the usual impossibility of having human-ghoul hybrid children born – a ghoul bearing the child of a human would digest the fetus, while the child of a ghoul growing in a human womb would lack nourishment – Ukina, Yoshimura’s human

partner, will create a “miracle;” she will eat her own meat to give her child the human nourishment she needs.<sup>77</sup>

Offering himself, Hide says to Kaneki: “I’m letting you know that you’re worth saving.”<sup>78</sup> This suggests a new perspective for food ethics. The question is not if eating something is right or wrong, since eating is necessary; nor how to *bien manger*, how to eat correctly, since nutrition is always more about the death of the eaten than the life of the eater. Rather, the question should be *how to make ourselves worthy of eating*. On which conditions, given our ecologically negative value – we take from the environment more than we can give – is our existence worthy of being preserved? On which conditions are we worthy of maintaining our place as the subjects of food ethics, even in front of the possibility of becoming its objects?

Urie, a human agent with ghoul powers, says to his subordinates that he would kill them should they lose control of their capacities, expressing the idea that “because we have been bestowed power that far surpasses that of the average mortal, we are also shackled with the responsibility to quietly and quickly disappear if needs must.”<sup>79</sup> Humans have been bestowed the greatest power on Earth, and given the ongoing ecological crisis, we should probably wonder whether we still deserve to eat, whether we should take disappearing as a serious ethical option; or better still, we should wonder how to become worthy of the monstrous consummation with which human existence burdens the planet. Even on an individual scale, a tragical conscience reminding us that our existence is never free could act as an encouragement to make the best we can out of our lives, while causing the least possible suffering and eating in the most aware and charitable manner.

## Conclusion

At the end of the manga, humans and ghouls are able to create a unified front to fight a new common enemy. On the alimentary side, this is possible through the creation of artificial food that ghouls can eat instead of human meat. This somehow inhibits the tragedy which constitutes the core of *Tokyo Ghoul*. Rather than dispelling the tragedy, a more narratively robust solution could have been to make it *apparent*. Realizing what kind of world we live in could bring about a more attentive *ethos*, a more sensitive mode of existence towards other beings, now conceived as our fellow sufferers in tragedy. For instance, stating that “coexistence and confrontation are both trivial matters,” Hirako says that Arima envisioned a more radical upheaval: the possibility for all humans to be turned into ghouls.<sup>80</sup> Even if Ishida does not elaborate on the question, it is important to note that, while the opposite option (the disappearance of ghouls) would not bring any effect since humans would continue eating as usual, their transformation into ghouls would mean they could only cannibalize. Arima’s solution would be to make apparent the tragedy inherent in every form of nutrition.

Explaining the apparent lack of moral sense in many ghouls, Yoshimura generalizes the tragedy to our world:

When you look at cooked meat or fish, do you feel sorry for it? Even if you don’t see the living form, it’s hard not to have any feelings of guilt when eating a life. However, there are many ghouls who naturally kill people with their own hands, and each time they do so they must face a life. In order for ghouls to walk atop the empty husks peacefully, they mustn’t just strengthen their hearts. So they kill their emotions. They must defend themselves. And in order to do so, a living ghoul will forget the value of life.<sup>81</sup>

We would probably go mad if we had to consciously shoulder the whole burden of what comes to our tables. It is possible that Kaneki’s condition is not that far from our own: as Kaneki finally recognizes, “Everyone is the protagonist of their own tragedy.”<sup>82</sup>

There is a saying among Inuit, for whom a plant-based diet is a biological impossibility, that “the great peril of our existence lies in the fact that our diet consists entirely of souls.”<sup>83</sup> They cannot help preying on animals they recognize as fellow creatures. In other cultures, vegetarianism and veganism are the most immediate responses to this feeling, and surely they are a way of diminishing the amount of evil brought about by our need for food; but it is not plain that pain is the sole criterion for what should be taken into ethical consideration, as assumed by the mainstream of the animalist movement.<sup>84</sup> Human relationship to plants is just as culturally informed as that with animals<sup>85</sup>: why should animal pain deserve more respect than a leaf’s stretching toward the light or the thirsty plunging of roots into the terrain? As demonstrated by Diamond, the restriction of the domain of the Same is always somehow arbitrary and dependent on our concrete life practices, and what we consider the Same to ourselves can virtually come to coincide with all that exists. This is precisely the resolution that the ongoing ecological crisis suggests we should take. This would mean that every diet is a virtual form of cannibalism, since what we put on the table always comes from the Same, from a fellow claimant to a place in the world.<sup>86</sup>

It is obvious that there is something profoundly wrong with our food system: “The gap between consumers and producers, scientific developments that we are losing control of, impotent governments, the boundless greed of large food and agriculture companies, apathetic consumers,”<sup>87</sup> and so on. While improvements would surely be possible, *Tokyo Ghoul* suggests that the destruction inherent in nutrition implies that we are structural wrongdoers. We may choose to exclude animals from our diet, or to purchase food in a more conscious way; it remains that the amount of violence our bellies bring into the world appears hard to justify. The

difference between Kaneki's world and ours is a difference in degree, not in kind. But it is precisely in this situation that the root of a permanent ethical disposition could be found.

Talking about the "universal cannibalism of the sea, all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began," Herman Melville wrote thus:

Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!<sup>88</sup>

*Tokyo Ghoul* reminds us how close we are to this ocean, and how creating our little Tahiti, excluding something from what we consider as "edible," should not blind us to the tragedy we are immersed in. Whether we choose to embrace fate or to live with the tragedy, we should make things so that we are worthy of eating, worthy of being saved from what we consume.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ishida Sui, *Tokyo Ghoul*, 14 vols. (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2011-2014) (hereafter: TG followed by the chapter number); Ishida Sui, *Tokyo Ghoul:re*, 16 vols. (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2014-2018) (hereafter: TG:re followed by the chapter number).

<sup>2</sup> TG 1.

<sup>3</sup> TG 63, 103.

<sup>4</sup> Christian Coff, *The taste for ethics*, trans. E. Broadbridge (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Cora Diamond, "Eating meat and eating people," *Philosophy*, vol. 53, no. 206 (1978), 468.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 470.

<sup>7</sup> William Arens, *The man-eating myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 129. In *Tokyo Ghoul*, cannibalism has an ambiguous status, being at the same time a source of strength and monstrosity. Kaneki will recur to it in order to protect his friends, since cannibalism makes ghouls stronger. But, as stated by Tsukiyama, "cannibalism would only ruin a ghoul. It's a chaotic power" (TG 104). Kaneki almost goes crazy when he feels like the ghouls he ate are eating his mind back: "I wasn't the one eating ghouls. The one being eaten was me" (TG 136); and his final, monstrous transformation is obtained by an extreme act of quasi-self-cannibalism, eating ghouls created with Rize's cells, which are his own (TG:re 144).

<sup>8</sup> TG 5. This is an ancient idea: even Plato could write that "anyone who has tasted even a single morsel of human entrails mixed in among those of other sacrificial offerings is bound to become a wolf," Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University, 1993), 307.

<sup>9</sup> TG 8.

<sup>10</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 87.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> TG 9.

<sup>14</sup> Salvatore Natoli, *L'esperienza del dolore* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999), 36.

<sup>15</sup> TG 143.

<sup>16</sup> This generalization is very present in our world; for instance, croissants are said to have been invented in Vienna in 1683, to celebrate the victory over Ottomans: "In this case, not only is the crescent shape recognized as denoting the foreign enemy, but the fact that one *devours* the crescent reenacts the defeat of the invaders, and perhaps also represents Christianity conquering Islam;" Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making sense of taste* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 119. Ghouls and humans are reciprocally Other, just like Christianity and Islam.

<sup>17</sup> Christine Korsgaard, "Fellow creatures," *Tanner Lectures on Human Values 2004: 24* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2004), 107.

<sup>18</sup> The metaphor of a "twisted birdcage" is also used: TG 99; TG:re 61, 64.

<sup>19</sup> The claim is pronounced when he sees an orphan whose parents have been killed by a ghoul (TG 13), after a colleague of his has been killed for revenge (TG 21), and when Amon first meets Kaneki and tries to understand how ghouls can kill humans without remorse (TG 25).

<sup>20</sup> TG 21.

<sup>21</sup> TG 25, 106.

<sup>22</sup> TG:re 98, 171.

<sup>23</sup> Natoli, *L'esperienza del dolore*, 159-60.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>25</sup> TG:re 103.

<sup>26</sup> TG:re 68.

<sup>27</sup> TG 25.

<sup>28</sup> TG:re 103.

<sup>29</sup> TG 95.

<sup>30</sup> TG:re 121.

<sup>31</sup> TG 63.

<sup>32</sup> TG:re 101.

<sup>33</sup> TG:re 121.

<sup>34</sup> TG:re 71, 171.

<sup>35</sup> TG:re 119.

<sup>36</sup> This goes also for the other overlooked sense, smell, that drives ghouls to meat. Tatara even holds that smell is what ruins civilization: “The act of finding things by sniffing them out always leads to devastation” (TG:re 124).

<sup>37</sup> TG 6.

<sup>38</sup> TG 26.

<sup>39</sup> TG 35.

<sup>40</sup> TG 97.

<sup>41</sup> TG 35.

<sup>42</sup> TG 35.

<sup>43</sup> TG 35.

<sup>44</sup> Coff, *The taste for ethics*, 77.

<sup>45</sup> TG 41.

<sup>46</sup> Nicola Perullo, *Taste as experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 43.

<sup>47</sup> TG:re 135.

<sup>48</sup> TG:re 176.

<sup>49</sup> TG:re 148.

<sup>50</sup> TG:re 116.

<sup>51</sup> TG:re 135.

<sup>52</sup> TG:re 169.

<sup>53</sup> TG:re 115.

<sup>54</sup> TG:re 158.

<sup>55</sup> TG:re 176.

<sup>56</sup> TG:re 159.

<sup>57</sup> Michel Onfray shows how Nietzsche’s concern with dietetics “is a pragmatic illustration of the theory of *amor fati* as well as an invitation to the ascetics of ‘become who you are’. The regimen is the will to self-harmony, the demand for the consonance of appetite and consent. It presumes the choice of what is imposed, the selection of the necessary;” Michel Onfray, *Appetites for thought*, trans. D. Barry and S. Muecke (London: Reaction Books, 2015), 66.

<sup>58</sup> TG:re 159.

<sup>59</sup> TG:re 176.

<sup>60</sup> TG:re 143.

<sup>61</sup> TG:re 98.

<sup>62</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The animal that therefore I am*, trans. D. Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 126.

<sup>63</sup> TG 78.

<sup>64</sup> TG 126.

<sup>65</sup> Alfred Whitehead, *Process and reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 105.

<sup>66</sup> Ricoeur, *Freedom and nature*. trans. E. Kohak (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 484.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 484.

<sup>69</sup> TG:re 177.

<sup>70</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 178.

<sup>71</sup> TG 62.

<sup>72</sup> For instance, newborn black lace-weavers eat their mother alive following a signal of hers, and caecilians’ skin has developed a capacity to repair and replenish that allows broods to eat their mothers; cf. Bill Schutt, *Eat me* (London: Profile Books, 2017), 30; *ibid.*, 66-7.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 146: “the practice was intended to provide nutrition to a starving loved one or as a treatment of last resort, to afford the sufferer some medical benefit.”

<sup>74</sup> TG 44.

<sup>75</sup> TG 43.

<sup>76</sup> TG:re 68.

<sup>77</sup> TG 119.

<sup>78</sup> TG:re 68.

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<sup>79</sup> TG:re 111.

<sup>80</sup> TG:re 162.

<sup>81</sup> TG 40.

<sup>82</sup> TG:re 177.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Paul Thompson, *From field to fork* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 150. On the anthropology of eating – a good reminder that “Humans will swallow almost anything that does not swallow them first” – cf. Peter Farb and George Armelagos, *Consuming passions* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 165.

<sup>84</sup> Peter Singer, *Animal liberation* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).

<sup>85</sup> For instance, “In the German perception of nature, extensive virgin forests with primeval cattle play an important role; a greenhouse is regarded as an unacceptable intrusion. The Dutch perception is different: since hundreds of years, fruits and vegetables have been cultivated here in greenhouses”: Micheil Korthals, *Before dinner* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2004), 62.

<sup>86</sup> Stressing the arbitrariness inherent in every ethics which prescribes boundaries between what we should or should not eat, the vision sketched here is near to Michiel Korthals’s pragmatist, practice-based food ethics, according to which “material, conceptual, and social sources are changed or modeled in a long-term process of knowledge production without a clear final goal. The particular novelty and fruitfulness of this lies in two aspects. Firstly, material aspects such as equipment, accommodation, and means of transportation are just as important during the production of knowledge as social sources and cognitive impressions, ideas, and concepts. Secondly, an acceptable knowledge product only comes about in a continuous process of transformation, in which the three above sources permanently change through continuous fine-tuning and tinkering. Concepts thus keep getting adjusted in response to the social and material sources, and vice versa. Applying this practice concept to our involvement with animals means that not only material aspects such as accommodation and care constantly change in response to each other, but also conceptions about the nature, the subjective experience, and the welfare of animals, as well as the social rules related to their treatment and further processing” (Korthals, *Before dinner*, 78). The main difference between the two is once again the ontological teaching of a vision based on *Tokyo Ghoul*, according to which not only do right and wrong depend on concrete practices, but wrongness is ineliminable given the metabolic nature of living beings.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>88</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: Penguin, 1978), 380-1.

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## Haunted Psychologies: The Specter of Postmodern Trauma in

*Bakemonogatari***Barbara Greene**

Volume 2, Pages 243-281

**Abstract:** The anime adaptation of the light novel franchise *Bakemonogatari* was released in 2009. The story revolves around the character Araragi Koyomi, a high school student in his senior year who encounters a powerful vampire during a school break and is transformed into a semi-supernatural being himself. However, this is not merely an example of a supernaturally-focused *anime*, but rather is a discussion on the impact of capitalism on the subjectivity of the individual. The narrative and experience of viewing *Bakemonogatari* is a commentary on the trauma of postmodernity and otaku consumption's failure to remediate the objectification of consumer-capitalism. The series' design and narrative choices is designed to attract otaku, to whose consumption these patterns are designed to appeal, and thereby give warning to otaku concerning the potential dangers posed by their approach towards media. The characters in this series are possessed by Specters who dredge up and yet simultaneously suppress this traumatic state of existence in a world without catharsis and without justice. Otaku, attracted to *moe-kyara* to escape the drudgery and misery of the three-dimensional world, are shown that this escape itself is a form of harm—like Araragi, they turn meaning into a form of self-flagellation and heap untold suffering on the *moe-kyara* towards which they are inextricably drawn.

**Keywords:** Bakemonogatari, Postmodernity, Otaku, Moe-Kyara, Consumer-Capitalism, Identity

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## Introduction

The anime adaptation of the light novel franchise *Bakemonogatari* was released in 2009. In the following twelve years, twenty-two more series of various lengths subdivided thus far into three seasons were produced with more scheduled for future release.<sup>1</sup> The story revolves around the character Araragi Koyomi, a high school student in his senior year who encounters a powerful vampire during a school break and is transformed into a semi-supernatural being himself. As a result, he and a harem of young women who are also tied to the supernatural engage in exorcisms and interpersonal struggles. However, the series itself is not told in chronological order—Araragi's battle with the vampire, entitled *Kizumonogatari*, was not released as an anime adaptation until 2016, nearly seven years after the release of the franchise's first season of *Bakemonogatari*.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, events occur out of chronological order within the episodes; cut-scenes and text flash across the screen, photography of real-world locations and people are incorporated into the animation, objects are endlessly copy-pasted to create the background, art styles dramatically and jarringly transform and then revert to the original. The series' imagery constantly accosts the viewer, bombarding them with visuals and splashes of primary colors. But to what purpose? The narrative and experience of viewing *Bakemonogatari* is a commentary on the trauma of postmodernity and otaku consumption's failure to remediate the objectification of consumer capitalism. The series' design and narrative choices are designed to attract otaku, to whose consumption these patterns are designed to appeal, and thereby give warning to otaku concerning the potential dangers posed by their approach towards media.

## Otaku as a Symptom

To fully understand *Bakemonogatari* as a reflection of the postmodern, one must understand its position as part of the larger, otaku-orientated media culture to which it belongs. Otaku, a notoriously tricky term to define, is best understood as a way of being in which an individual is drawn to the mass-produced fictional worlds generated by the Japanese media industry.<sup>3</sup> Otaku are different from collectors or hobbyists—as they prefer fictional worlds and elements that can never be tangibly possessed, unlike their collector and hobbyist counterparts.<sup>4</sup> This sub culture now interacts with media, not as a series of original and unique texts, but rather what Azuma describes as a large-scale database structure constructed around a myriad of mass-produced and hardly differentiated pop cultural products that can be broken into component parts and then reassembled according to need and desire. Even the existence of an original work has ceased to exist as contemporary anime productions and related goods are pure simulacra created by an industry focused on generating an infinite multitude of profitable copies, a fact of which otaku are fully aware.<sup>5</sup> However, for otaku, the artificiality of this aesthetic endeavor is unimportant, as it is the database nature of this medium that is the draw.<sup>6</sup> While this acceptance of the artificial is partially grounded in a type of sexuality in which the appeal of flat images becomes a locus of self-exploration, according to Saito, it is also due to the fact that these fictional worlds evoke an emotional resonance that is not found as expediently within reality.<sup>7</sup>

A key part of this appeal is that of the *moe-kyara*, a highly stylized yet uniform character design that has been particularly profitable for manga and anime producers. These flat images, readily if not automatically divorced from narrative and context, create allusions and linkages between unrelated series that allow for the arbitrary

creation of a chain of signification that only possesses meaning according to individual interpretation.<sup>8</sup> *Moe-kyara* have become prevalent in anime and manga over the last twenty years as they, by their flat nature, allow for a dissection of society and a questioning of hegemonic social values that otaku often find stifling.<sup>9</sup> Many of the character designs of *Bakemonogatari*, from Araragi's antenna hair to Hanekawa's appearing and disappearing cat ears, are common *moe-kyara* motifs.<sup>10</sup> These design choices allow for easy access to the database, as with standard character designs, it becomes easy for otaku to dissect the *moe-kyara* into their component pieces and to thereby create and project meaning.<sup>11</sup> This individualized creative act, drawn counterintuitively from simulacra, allows otaku to possess their own iteration of the fictional worlds that draw them in and creates a new way of being that provides them with meaning.<sup>12</sup>

*Moe-kyara* thereby create entry-points into the fictional, allowing otaku to freely explore worlds that are otherwise blocked to them (either due to their unreality or present impossibility).<sup>13</sup> *Moe-kyara* have even become a type of social strategy, with youth creating their own *kyara* personas that allow them to create relationships with others in reality. Through the mediation of *kyara*, these relationships become smoother.<sup>14</sup> Notably, this is not due to social anxiety, but rather is a means of better tailoring individual responses to the perceived need of others.<sup>15</sup> Otaku consumption of a fictional world that is overlaid onto reality via a close affiliation with the fictional and the consumption of goods tied to the media industry has thereby become extended into interpersonal relations outside of the media itself. The fictional has now become a tool for survival in a changing world. This is a symptom of the interpersonal dysfunction created by consumer-capitalist societies; personal satisfaction is the primary driver for

individuals within this system, and yet this creates a form of inescapable *anomie*.<sup>16</sup> *Moe-kyara* thereby becomes a means of attempting to reconnect—being semi-virtual, *moe-kyara* promise a form of interpersonal relationship between itself and the otaku that could never falter as it is ultimately entirely under the control of the otaku instead of being negotiated between two independent entities.<sup>17</sup>

The necessity of this level of mediation is an outgrowth of contemporary Japanese society. Commentators have noted that by traditional standards, youth often seem to be asocial. However, youth are quite social through the mediation of the internet or through media in general.<sup>18</sup> This, too, is a symptom of consumer-capitalist societies, where escape into virtual or parasocial relationships offers a sense of connection without the potential hardship of interacting with other subjects.<sup>19</sup> This can even be seen with the types of *moe-kyara* who appear in media—self-insert *moe-kyara* who replicate otaku behavior have become increasingly common, as is the case with the character Araragi in this series and Homura in the franchise *Madoka Magica*.<sup>20</sup> However, the exploitation of *moe-kyara* is also a source of guilt as, by projecting their own personal needs and individual traumas onto the fictional characters with whom otaku experience close emotional relationships, the otaku become complicit in the propagation of misery.<sup>21</sup> Otaku are tied inextricably to the desiring-machine<sup>22</sup>—the mode of consumption and identity derived from contemporary Japanese popular media—and yet seek to become one with the body-without-organs, the *moe-kyara* that serve as a locus of meaning, the production system itself as represented as its major anthropomorphized product.<sup>23</sup> However, joining the desiring-machine with the body-without-organs is an impossibility, a trauma of failing interpersonal relationships in

consumer capitalism built upon another trauma—that of the postmodern condition—which leads otaku to the use of media as a tonic for a condition exacerbated by media.

Interestingly, the otaku insert *moe-kyara* is the only liminal character within the *Bakemonogatari* narrative: he is neither fully human nor fully monster. Attacked by a vampire during his Golden Week holiday break, Araragi is able to retain elements of the supernatural voluntarily by retaining a connection to the now substantially weakened Shinobu—a once powerful vampire who existed in the guise of a beautiful, adult woman, but who is now trapped in the body of a small child. In her original form, Shinobu possessed none of the characteristics common among *moe-kyara*—she was adult rather than childlike, and sexy rather than cute. She represented in her original form the vampiric nature of the Adorno and Horkheimer’s Culture Industry, rendering her victims powerless under her thrall.<sup>24</sup> But now she is reduced to existence as a moeey *moe-kyara* who sulks in a corner like a scolded child, serving Araragi’s needs. As an otaku, he is comfortable with his bifurcated existence between the two-dimensional world of the supernatural and his three-dimensional hyperreal reality.<sup>25</sup> It is the otaku, with their database approach to popular culture, who are able to render the Culture Industry into an entity over which they hold power – transforming the vampire into a *moe-kyara*.<sup>26</sup> Notably, after the attack, Araragi is surrounded by a harem of other *moe-kyara*, a revolving door of young women in desperate need of his help to exorcize them from the grasp of a variety of spiritual possessions. Hanekawa, one of the myriad of possessed girls, explicitly states that Araragi likely has some form of glamour due to his connection with the vampiric that attracts these young women. Like *otaku*, Araragi surrounds himself with *moe-kyara*.

Within *Bakemonogatari*, Araragi is the *moe-kyara* stand-in for *otaku*, his liminal nature is likely a statement of *otaku*. Not fully a member of the vapid real world in which he lives, Araragi is able to tap into a more exciting and fulfilling realm that is visible to those willing to perceive it (as long as they can shift their perspective). Like *otaku* who find a multi-layered combination of the narrative of the real to be fulfilling, Araragi elects to retain this connection to the supernatural despite the hardships it can cause. This decision draws him towards an array of *moe-kyara* who give him greater access to the database world that is the supernatural in the universe of *Bakemonogatari*. Like the culture industry that spawned anime, Oshino, the slippery exorcist who saves Araragi from his vampiric transformation, is transformed into a *moe-kyara* servant by Araragi in the same way that *otaku* consumption radically altered the media landscape.

Even among Araragi's harem of possessed *moe-kyara* schoolgirls, there are only two who possess "real world" counterparts—Senjougahara and Hanekawa. In the opening credits and music for *Bakemonogatari*, the character of the possessed female *moe-kyara* is the focus—never Araragi. As an *otaku* insert, his internal life is left comparatively blank in order to allow the viewer to better project themselves onto him. However, his two key relationships take place with these two schoolgirls, and so they are the *moe-kyara* who exist most closely in line with reality. These two *moe-kyara* are the ones who will reside, via their connection with the *otaku* self-insert character, the closest to reality itself, and so their opening credit scenes use real-world photography as part of the bricolage: Senjougahara's curse is weightlessness, and yet she stomps throughout photographs of real-world locations as a giant, and Hanekawa is a faceless human model haunted by the cartoon of a cat.

As otaku possess a dual-layered approach, forever looking in the breaks in aesthetic choices and design in order to grasp hidden meaning within an anime, the decision to incorporate photography indicates to the database-minded otaku that there is a larger commentary within this narrative that they must seek out.<sup>27</sup> However, this commentary contains within itself a warning to the otaku—one that is similar to that of *Madoka Magica*, as Hanekawa's demonic cat, the only truly malicious supernatural entity within *Bakemonogatari*, states that humans and the supernatural can never mix. Araragi, by remaining in his liminal state, selfishly upsets the delicate equilibrium between the two worlds and threatens the world order. Yet, he cannot help but do so as the world itself is already unbalanced.

### **The Collapse of Knowledge into Otaku Irony**

Within the series, the characters' conversations, while cogent, come across as a form of collage. Dialogue is spliced with cut scenes where text expositing the thoughts or emotions of the characters splash across blank screens, body parts, or still images of objects or landscapes. Rarely is a character shown actually uttering something of importance; rather, vital speech is disconnected from the speaker, existing as a voiceover over these randomly selected images. In contrast, inane word-play and superfluous conversations are shown in the intense shot-reverse shot one would expect for deep character conversations. Nor is the dialogue realistic; rather, it comes across to the viewer as a high-speed word game in which each character attempts to outwit or outmaneuver their interlocutor. The dialogue itself gives an impression that it somehow stills propels forward the narrative and deepens the characters involved, yet even this is simulacra and merely another level of language games.

This is part of the larger fragmentation of meaning and context within the series. Just as the dialogue exists in a form divorced from its context, the landscape consists of wide blank spaces punctuated by copy-pasted objects in bold, solid colors. The series assaults the viewers' senses and gives a sense that of fragmentation despite the narrative's eventual flow into a cogent story. This is unsurprising as not only has anime become well known for its use of montage and collage, but also because the series is yet another anime adaptation of a light novel<sup>28</sup> and retains elements of the narrative form common in this genre. Yamada notes that while disjointed narration has become a common motif in contemporary anime, this trend began in the 1980s with *genbunichi*<sup>29</sup> literature.<sup>30</sup> *Bakemonogatari* is merely taking this aspect of contemporary fiction to its most extreme logical end that still retains a narrative function.

This new narrative form is a natural outgrowth of the postmodern as, despite the collapse of the Grand Narrative, storytelling retains its value as a means of transmitting understanding and creating connection. Narrative serves to exchange information and attempts to garner understanding according to a series of rules, formulas, and rhythms that in turn expand outward to create social bonds and connections.<sup>31</sup> However, the evaluation of narrative has shifted as contemporary narratives are judged according to their usefulness, whereas before, a particular argument was judged according to its adherence to the Grand Narrative.<sup>32</sup> Within *Bakemonogatari*, there exists no transcendental truth behind the supernatural—merely a series of weird objects whose power depends solely on context. The supernatural is thereby akin to narrative in postmodernity—useful when needed and to be exorcised from perception when unwanted.

With the decline of the Grand Narrative and the injunction to judge narrative according to its immediate utility, social bonds have also begun to dissolve. Relationships become contextual and maintained according to their need, with discourse transitioning into a form of a game in which members are not attempting to garner understanding but rather compete via a set of rules that may not be entirely shared.<sup>33</sup> This is demonstrated not only through the dialogue of the characters in *Bakemonogatari*, who engage in an endless series of word-games that the protagonist consistently fails to win, but in their relationships as well. Characters are constantly jockeying for social position and trying to establish their identity through the manipulated perceptions of others, wishing forever for signs of acclaim and yet constantly on guard for signs of disapproval.<sup>34</sup> Interpersonal relations are categorized according to need and desire. Even seemingly close relations such as boyfriend-girlfriend or brother-sister are merely signals to shift the type of rules to which the word play adheres.

This flattening of discourse into a game is not limited to the interpersonal realm. In postmodernity, knowledge itself has been delegitimized and requires constant verification, the requirements of which shift according to context.<sup>35</sup> Truth has ceased to exist as its own entity, but now is merely an aspect of a useful narrative.<sup>36</sup> Within *Bakemonogatari*, this antagonism between truth as an objective entity and truth as something that varies according to context is a constant source of tension. Midway through the second series, *Nisemonogatari*, the lead character's younger sister, is revealed to be a form of a changeling—a type of supernatural creature that inserts itself within families as their “child,” only to transform into a potential threat as it grows. Yet, when exorcists arrive to remove the false sister from his household, Araragi, claiming

that his sister's authenticity is irrelevant to him, fights them at great personal cost, stating that she is real to him. Objective truth, even when it is in regards to a danger to the collective, is irrelevant when it comes to personal desires.

Narrative within contemporary Japanese fiction has even become detached from the "truth" as defined as the meaning of authoritarian intent, and instead focuses on relative "truth" determined by the meaning as interpreted by the individual viewer.<sup>37</sup> This transition is part of the larger movement away from the Grand Narrative and the rise of postmodernity, as well as the fragmentation of society and a sense of shared purpose. Even individual actions that are intended to give meaning to personal existence become merely a source of frustration and fatigue.<sup>38</sup> This cynicism concerning personal development and the merit of one's sacrifices is repeatedly highlighted. Araragi continuously allows his body to act as a shield and a scapegoat for the ire of the supernatural, even to the point of being torn asunder and disemboweled. He is never truly in danger, though; as a semi-supernatural creature himself, Araragi can take any punishment thrown at him without receiving any permanent damage.

Furthermore, this liminal state is something that Araragi elects to maintain as, at any time, he could elect to become fully human once more. Additionally, it is noted by multiple characters that these performative self-sacrificial acts are ultimately pointless—more possessions will inevitably occur and even the apparently exorcised are never returned to their previous state. Araragi himself acknowledges that he is doing this for his personal satisfaction; he currently derives pleasure and meaning from these actions, and one day, may simply decide to stop. Like otaku, who, according to Azuma, have lost the sense of a transcendental other, such as "truth" or other similar concepts derived

from Grand Narratives, the lead is merely engaging in a form of play that he can quit whenever it becomes tedious.<sup>39</sup>

Otaku themselves are an outgrowth of the postmodern. Their identity is one that elects to affiliate itself with a form of hyperreality derived from the consumption of mass culture—a uni-directional form of socialization that avoids engagement with other individuals and further exacerbates the collapse of meaning.<sup>40</sup> Like Araragi, who surrounds himself with a harem of different type of *moe-kyara*, otaku have given themselves the ability to tightly mediate their relationships with others and have created their own idiosyncratic Symbolic Order—a series of motifs and tropes that allow them to decipher texts according to a series of shared rules.<sup>41</sup> This consumption pattern is merely an expansion of Lyotard's word-games writ large upon an entire mode of media consumption. That Araragi and those around him approach the world with cynicism is also an outgrowth of the otaku mentality—passion must be viewed through a lens of ironic detachment and zealotry is a source of derision and mistrust.<sup>42</sup> This is why Araragi is drawn to Oshino, a disillusioned and lazy cynic whose clear manipulation of information and economic self-interest is worn on his sleeve, and who is rejected by the other exorcists. Oshino can be trusted to be untrustworthy while the other exorcists pretend to act for the benefit of others while secretly conniving, as they believe in some larger truth that they must manipulate others into accepting.

Economic precarity is a constant source of anxiety in the text. Senjougahara's family sunk into poverty due to her mother's connection to an exploitative religious cult. To obtain help from Oshino, the only capable exorcist in the series, the characters have to pay between ¥100,000-1,000,000—steep prices for high school students at an elite high school where part-time jobs are frowned upon. After the Lost Decade,<sup>43</sup> a youth

underclass that lives in a state of precarity began to form in Japan. This has increased focus on the concept of a *kakusa shakai*—an unequal society that replaced the notion of Japan as a solidly middle-class society—and *kakusa ishiki*—the mentality of one who is constantly at risk of economic collapse and despair.<sup>44</sup> Even the world of *Bakemonogatari* itself appears to be in a state of decay: construction projects dot the landscape, but all have been halted—perhaps stopped due to funding shortages. Even the seeming middle-class comfort of the *moe-kyara* is precarious, or even false. Araragi lives in a large home, but his parents are forever absent, working long hours. Senjougahara's family lives in a half remodeled home due to her parents' recent bankruptcy and divorce, and Hanekawa sleeps on the stairs of her family's home. Even the supernatural lacks a home—the shrines that once housed the monsters and spirits have fallen into disrepair. The consumer wealth that overshadows the characters is naught but a façade that hides a myriad of horrors both domestic and supernatural. Precarity underlines all modes of existence.

Out of this precarity within contemporary Japan has risen the Superflat Art Movement, a modern art style which takes the imagery of otaku media to lampoon consumer culture in a society riddled with insecurity.<sup>45</sup> This movement began with the artist Murakami Takeshi, who holds a Ph.D. in traditional *Nihon-ga* and has attempted to blur the lines between commercial and high art.<sup>46</sup> Murakami's background in Edo-era art can be seen in the flatness of the movement's art style that mirrors the flatness of Edo-era aesthetics. Some critics have even noted that otaku culture appears to be reminiscent of Edo-era investments in pleasure and aesthetics, the *tsujin*.<sup>47</sup> Both contemporary otaku culture and that of the Edo-era *tsujin* were lifestyles predicated on consumption: one of media and the other of the pleasure quarters and theater district.

These lifestyles both created a consumer culture that takes expression and flattens it into a superficial series of images without meaning.<sup>48</sup> Unsurprisingly, the style of *Bakemonogatari* is heavily reliant on imagery taken from the Superflat Art Movement—a doubled layer as an anime riffing off of an art movement that itself is riffing off of anime.

Notably, Superflat Art has also relied heavily on the *lolicon*, the sexualized imagery of prepubescent girls, due to its ubiquity in otaku-focused art.<sup>49</sup> *Lolicon* is commonly seen with *moe-kyara*, as sexualized *moe-kyara* are attractive to otaku and their form of sexuality.<sup>50</sup> Araragi constantly worries that he will be accused of fetishizing the younger *moe-kyara* he encounters because as an otaku, will be accused of *lolicon*. Yet, he takes no precautions to prevent this perception; rather, he seeks out opportunities to engage in forms of semi-sexual play with these young characters. When exorcising one from a snake curse, Araragi and Suruga, a lesbian character has the possessed *moe-kyara*, strip her down to her underwear so that her body can be inspected. Araragi later publicly mishandles the underwear worn by this character. Araragi, after discovering that Hachikuji is a ghost and not truly a ten-year-old little girl any longer, sneaks up behind her to grope her chest. In the second series in the franchise, he also spends an extended period pinning his sister's body down to a bed to brush her teeth. Araragi, like otaku, is irrepressibly drawn to *moe-kyara* in a platonically sexual<sup>51</sup> manner.<sup>52</sup>

This compulsive drive is a source of repeated embarrassment, adding another layer of commentary to otaku consumption; this form of consumption is an attraction and a repellant. With the decline of the Grand Narrative in the 1970s, there has been a transition into what Azuma has called the “Fictional Age” where the grand narratives of

the past are recognized to be only that: stories that we tell ourselves and nothing more.<sup>53</sup> Even the two main male characters, Oshino and Araragi, represent two separate generations of otaku. Oshino is drawn to and lives in narratives that exist outside of mundane reality and Araragi is drawn to *moe-kyara* and *lolicon*.<sup>54</sup> For otaku, with their predilection for fiction as a means of socialization, the draw of well-constructed narratives that adhere to expectations has been increasingly strong.<sup>55</sup> This had led some scholars, such as Saito, to argue that otaku are not totally adapted to reality, but rather prefer a “multi-layered reality” that is partially mediated through texts and imagery.<sup>56</sup> Within *Bakemonogatari*, this preference is built into the very world-building of the series. Characters’ back-stories are fleshed out with multi-media montages that combine still imagery of real-world locations and human models, text splashed across the screen in bold lettering, digital graphics, and traditional animation in a variety of styles. Rather than explaining character history and motivation via dialogue or action, it is revealed to the viewer via monologue and montage. The viewer is also confronted by myriad signage hung almost weightlessly over frequently blank or impressionistic backgrounds that imply locations rather than traditional establishing shots.

### **Postmodernity as a Source of Trauma**

*Bakemonogatari*’s focus on endlessly recounting the past also highlights the very issue of attempting to narrativize, and thereby close, the past: attempting to create a linear and cogent story of past experiences simplifies them and destroys the many facets needed for critical reflection and understanding. New forms of approaching the past are needed in the postmodern age.<sup>57</sup> *Bakemonogatari* attempts to demonstrate new forms of addressing the past via the constant presence of a Specter—a being that stretches out from the past and into the present. Specters are a means of exploring traumas or

anxieties too horrible to be approached head-on—oft-encountered in liminal spaces.<sup>58</sup> The action of *Bakemonogatari* takes place primarily in these liminal spaces—roadways, derelict school buildings, shared public spaces, and entranceways are where its traumas reassert themselves.

However, the world of *Bakemonogatari* is also one forever trapped between the past of what was and the future of what may be as it is perpetually under construction. It is under constant, yet halted, construction—a world of stagnant consumption without identity. Characters meander through streets that are devoid of other persons. The only indications that the world may be otherwise inhabited are the infinitely replicated cars and trains that infrequently dot the background (but in which no passengers are ever visible). Araragi himself is aimless—a top student in junior high school, he has been unable to maintain his grades in high school and, despite being less than a year from graduation, has no clear plans for his future. A cold, alienated universe that crushes the spirit of once bright young men presages the mentality of the otaku and their shifting interests: where once this group was drawn to futuristic science fiction narratives of high adventure, they are now drawn to prurient titillation in order to mask, and simultaneously mirror, the grim reality in which they live.<sup>59</sup>

The supernatural in *Bakemonogatari* reflects and embodies the trauma of desire. Suruga wishes to be more and possess more than others, and therefore, to her own horror, the supernatural creature that possesses her arm seeks to harm or kill those of whom she is jealous. In contrast, Hachikuji is harmless, and can be only seen by those who wish to be lost—pulled away from some personal trouble to spend the day fruitlessly aiding another and forgetting their own problems. The crab god who removes Senjougahara's mass believes this is helpful to her.<sup>60</sup> Desire is required to experience the

supernatural, yet desire itself is shown to be harmful as it offers no real solutions. Consumer capitalism and postmodernity promise solutions to unsolvable problems and create a false sense that the system is focused on you.<sup>61</sup> There supernatural therefore is no longer a locus of the transcendent or great truths, but simply another hyperreality devoid of true satisfaction and meaning.

This is partially why otaku are drawn to narratives reliant on some form of magical realism, as it is a genre that can take the mundane world and its myriad flaws and elevate it to the sublime.<sup>62</sup> Magical realism draws in readership from the margins of society as it serves to mitigate trauma and also allows for multiple points of interpretation.<sup>63</sup> For otaku, drawn to narratives that can generate a multiplicity of meaning, magical realism is a perfect form of escape, offering endless new vantage points and interpretations with each new entry and re-watch. *Bakemonogatari*, with its media mix and atemporal nature, not only offers numerous adaptations and series from which a viewer can choose but also provides a form of slow revelation. As each new character is introduced, so too is their individual trauma slowly revealed. Moreover, this new trauma builds off of the trauma of previously established characters, intertwining in an increasingly elaborate realm of re-traumatization and temporary catharsis. These stories are told out of order in order to enhance their emotional impact, as seen with the introduction of the character Hachikuji Mayoi, a small child accidentally killed while attempting to locate her estranged mother on Mother's Day. Not only is her own particular trauma slowly and haltingly revealed, but so is that of the three characters that she encounters in the arc. Araragi, Senjougahara, and Hanekawa are also alone on that day and wander the streets as they have no mothers with whom they can celebrate this commercial holiday.

This failed holiday highlights yet another node of trauma in postmodernity. Postmodern societies produce a network of consumer goods that are designed to target a specific demographic, which themselves are created by standardizing individuals into a specific typology. Baudrillard calls this phenomenon the *conditioning of needs*—an act that alters subjects to view their own identities through their patterns of consumption and the signification attached to these commodities.<sup>64</sup> Mother's Day is one such conditioned need, and what are otaku, but an identity defined by the nature of their consumption of mass-produced media? Furthermore, while *Bakemonogatari* may be a world stripped of advertising, it remains one in which characters are endlessly bombarded by text. This constant stream of signification, tied to no signifiers, is necessary for the maintenance and existence of hyperreality. Hyperreal worlds manage to be overwhelming, yet simultaneously flattened and simplified, in order to create a sense of euphoria.<sup>65</sup> *Bakemonogatari* is also a flat world that somehow manages to overwhelm the viewer, providing an escape from the hyperreality of postmodern life in a text that replicates and transforms the trauma of living within simulacra into something manageable and heroic.

Another aspect of Araragi that is noted by other characters is his seeming childishness. Despite nearing college age, he is frequently drawn to young girls in order to engage in rough-housing and appears to deny his own incipient adulthood. Furthermore, other than the exorcists and the supernatural, no adults save one grace the screen during the series. In postmodernity, where meaning and structure are simultaneously dissolved and re-ordered, there remain only two potential responses: childlike passivity and revolt.<sup>66</sup> He desires, which becomes a form of masochism in order to create a false sense of purpose and depth that gives the desire a meaning

greater than itself.<sup>67</sup> Araragi prevaricates continuously between these two nodes, acting as a self-sacrificing savior rebelling against injustice in one instance and playfully bullying children as if he were a naughty classmate in the next. However, this hyperreality creates another mode of existence that is barred to subjects such as Araragi—that of the Specter .

The Specter , whether originating out of fear or a desire for revolutionary change, coalesces out of anxiety and tension. It exists not of itself, but rather creates its existence out of the minds of others.<sup>68</sup> The Specter is a form of repetition, constantly emergent and yet not fully formed. Like hyperreality, it has no substance besides that of a simulacra.<sup>69</sup> These are the creatures that stalk the world of *Bakemonogatari*, from the crab that allows Senjougahara to forget the hurt of her mother's betrayal without actually removing the memory of it, to the thwarted and unrequited love of Suruga that is turned toxic by her mother's destructive legacy—a demonic hand that grants twisted wishes, to the cold home of the unwanted orphan Hanekawa, the failures of familial love within a society in which such things cannot be commodified and are thereby viewed as worthless become in themselves ghostly.

Postmodern society is also imbued with a sense of malaise and economic decline in which individuals feel as if their existences as subjects rather than objects are precarious. This is particularly strong in Japan, where the Lost Decade stagnated wages for Japanese youth and ended the lifetime employment system that offered prosperity and comfort even into one's old age.<sup>70</sup> And what are *moe-kyara* if not objects transformed in the minds of their consumers into the simulacra of a subject? Furthermore, society itself has become increasingly commodified; even socialization and relationships have become commodified as economic production becomes

paramount. This transition has even sunk into the individual's very existence, as they, too, become a commodity that can become obsolete and disposable.<sup>71</sup> Even the cityscape of *Bakemonogatari* dumbfounds its residents: its constantly shifting nature leaves the supernatural homeless, and even Senjougahara's home, which she left a mere three years before, has been razed to the ground. The only remnants of the past are the lines of roads that connect half-abandoned buildings and vacant lots with glossy storefronts—the past can only be vaguely detected and yet is forever inaccessible.

Furthermore, otaku come into adulthood in a world in which the consumption of goods related to popular media, along with heavy consumption of the media itself, is a normalized practice.<sup>72</sup> It is this backdrop that informs *Bakemonogatari*, where relationships and personalities appear to be based off archetypes rather than individuals. Senjougahara, Suruga, and Araragi both note at separate times that Oshino has a *moe* name, with Senjougahara claiming that he must have been so as a child. Senjougahara is described by herself and others as a *tsundere*<sup>73</sup>—to the point where Araragi is given advice on how to treat her according to the tropes associated with this archetype rather than as an individual person. Later, there are extended conversations on how *maido* and *anime* characters work much harder than anyone realizes with no comment on the fact that only one is an actual position held by real people. It is no surprise that this fictional world is one haunted by Specters. Commodity fetishism goes hand in hand with the formation of Specters as commodities too begin to hold a value beyond their tangible use and cost.<sup>74</sup>

The characters of *Bakemonogatari* exist in a world of identical copies – a world in which the objects that construct their environment are copy-pasted images replicated *ad infinitum* towards a hazy, yet somehow suffocatingly close, horizon. In

postmodernity, society is constructed out of minute differentiations between standardized, mass-produced choices—whether one selects a particular color or feature is how one creates a self that is different, yet identical, to those around you.<sup>75</sup> Like the copy-pasted background and the collage that create the back-flashed montages, objects within postmodernity are constantly being updated and revamped.<sup>76</sup> However, this constant access to identical objects that all promise fulfillment does not satisfy. Like the innumerable “danger” (危険) and “caution” (注意) signs that hang unendingly in the background of the series, postmodernity is a world of ignored hazards – the claxons rendered silent by the flood of empty signification. Despite each commodity signifying *jouissance*, none can actually provide it, and this creates a compulsion to not only constantly consume, but also to endlessly explore in the hopes of locating the object that *will* offer enjoyment.<sup>77</sup> The constant rehashing of trauma in the form of Specters always promises a solution that will bring joy and satisfaction, but, as seen with Hachikuji, this catharsis is fleeting. Just as she is not freed from her spectral existence, rather promoted to a higher, and equally meaningless rank, so too are those in postmodernity trapped in an endless, deathless cycle of exploration and consumption.

The mimetic function of desire is also heightened within the narrative. By forming a dyad, mimetic desire allows for the object of desire that is unattainable to be erased.<sup>78</sup> This is embodied through Araragi and Suruga, as they both desire Senjougahara, although she is not something either can truly possess. Her dominant personality and Araragi’s inclination towards passivity means that in their romantic relationship, it is she who is the possessor and active agent. Her lack of same-sex desire or interest in close female friendships prevents Suruga from possessing her as a friend or a lover. By creating a dyad, Araragi and Suruga are able to create a stasis in which

neither are consumed by the Specter of thwarted desire. Yet even this is collapsed. Stasis is never truly achieved, and the object of desire is never safely resolved. This, too, signals another change of postmodernity—that of the failure of catharsis. Even the relationship between Suruga and Araragi remains only partially resolved insofar as Senjougahara reframes their competition by giving them both a new narrative through which they can define their relationship with her. All relationships are mimetic in form, which is why the Specters all resemble the character or trauma that they are attached to in either name or signification. Araragi and Suruga maintain their uneasy equilibrium by mirroring each other's behavior. However, to experience catharsis, a sacrifice must be made—an act that is increasingly blocked by the nature of postmodernity and its claims of perfection without sacrifice that can only cause dysfunction.<sup>79</sup> Neither Araragi nor Suruga make this sacrifice, and therefore, both remain in a state of tension. Through this mimetic rivalry, a form of simulated satisfaction is found.<sup>80</sup> Araragi's constant efforts to sacrifice his body are mimetic but lack the level of sacrifice necessary to create true catharsis. There is no sacrifice he can make that would provide denouement. This is why the characters are forever trapped in a cycle of possession and exorcism.

### **A Postmodern Possession and Sacrificial Crisis**

Postmodern societies create a world populated not by people but by objects—commodities that can be consumed and that weave a web of signification to create an impressionistic sense of emotion without any true meaning.<sup>81</sup> The world of *Bakemonogatari* is absent of people and full of relationships predicated upon obtaining something that one desires and maintaining an image rather than building a connection. It is a world mired in the *ideology of consumption*—a world where salvation is promised through objects and media.<sup>82</sup> Individuals in postmodern societies attempt to construct

meaning and satisfaction by gathering together the objects that are associated with the images that the individual believes will create identity and pleasure. However, this act drives away true signification and replaces it with simulacra that move beyond the individual and drive reality away from interpersonal interactions.<sup>83</sup> *Anime* is now merely a mirror of the real-world as it relies on the erasure of the subjective gaze of traditional visual media, in which an individual is an external observer, but instead creates a world in which the viewer's gaze is part of the world itself - thereby creating a world without external others.<sup>84</sup> This medium has co opted the gaze of the consumer and incorporates them directly into its fictional worldbuilding.

*Bakemonogatari* is a world of usurped gazes, where the viewer is turned into a voyeur who peers into the unreality of a world in which the internal minds of the characters and the external world around are unseparated by boundaries. This is a world in which possession without the supernatural is already the normal state of existence; all are consumed by the commodities and objects around them. Possession by something supernatural—something beyond the realm of consumer capitalism—is what allows for a shift in consciousness that facilitates a sense of differentiation and the ability to sacrifice, something that allows for true meaning to be constructed, even if only temporarily.<sup>85</sup> This is also tied to the discomfort of consuming a form of emotional reality through the mediation of a screen that usurps the gaze of the individual and takes it as its own.<sup>86</sup> Cinema initially attempted to recreate a form of reality, however, TV would combine a variety of imagery in layers that accepted the artificial as a type of pseudo-reality.<sup>87</sup> Otaku are imprisoned by their screens just as Araragi has been by the supernatural. He and the otaku have both become voyeurs, peering into the inner minds of *moe-kyara*, and themselves the victims of a gaze of the objects around them that

permeates their very being and colonizes their imaginations via postmodern consumer capitalism.<sup>88</sup>

The series is also a world in which time and space have ceased to have meaning. With the decline of the Grand Narrative, the perception of linear time and the distinction between the past, present, and future have become blurred. Cogent narratives of causality have lost their luster and have been replaced with simulacra that combine both the past and the present into a single image.<sup>89</sup> Time is constantly manipulated in anime: the actions of characters or images are slowed in order to create an emotional resonance as a means of giving flat images an artificial sense of depth, resultantly creating a medium that is essentially atemporal.<sup>90</sup> By layering flat image over flat image, a false sense of depth and movement is constructed that, in turn, manipulates and alters the perception of time for the viewer.<sup>91</sup> This also creates an illusion that the animated worlds have weight and dimensionality—a false sense that they are somehow tangible.<sup>92</sup> This is even highlighted in *Bakemonogatari*'s first opening credit sequence, *Staple Staple*, which is Senjougahara's theme, as the animated character's feet crush and shake the streets of real-world Japan.

This element of animation has even seeped into reality, as architects have attempted to recreate the flatness and immateriality of the Superflat Movement in their designs.<sup>93</sup> The use of flat images that exist without relation to time is a critical aspect of postmodern society as it twists culture and media into a single temporal point: that of an unending present.<sup>94</sup> This collapsing of time, in turn, disrupts the chain of signification that allows an individual to construct meaning, shifting the coherence of perception away from rational thought and towards pure experience and the resultant emotional

reaction.<sup>95</sup> Animation, as a form of aesthetic production, has taken a position as part of the economic production of society.<sup>96</sup>

Animation allows a subject to approach the specter of violence and death without confronting the reality of either.<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, animation also allows for form and space to be warped, creating a form of *dimensional excess* that, in turn, questions the nature of violence and turns the viewer into a voyeur.<sup>98</sup> This *dimensional excess* in animation transforms the experience of watching from just a simulacra of reality to a commentary on it.<sup>99</sup> The excesses of bodily harm and the results of violence in animation allow for larger meaning to be projected onto it.<sup>100</sup> This creation of commentary and the allowance for multifaceted meaning is what draws the otaku to anime; this *dimensional excess* allows for the easy construction of a database into which they can retreat.<sup>101</sup> In *Bakemonogatari*, the bodies that exist are nothing but excessive and fluid, but characters warp into a particular shape, be it a crab or snake. Bodies are transformed or torn apart—dimensional excesses that create tears that allow otaku viewers a glimpse into the database that promises meaning and depth, only to reveal another flat layer.

*Dimensional excess* is also involved in the creation of the female characters who make up the majority of the cast. Each adheres to a specific typology that signals personality and behavior at first glance. *Moe-kyara* are one such type—archetypal and largely female figures whose essences are divorced from a particular text and which allow for ready projection of individual desire.<sup>102</sup> In part, *moe-kyara* allow young male otaku who are not comfortable with the gender expectations foisted upon them to adopt, albeit temporarily, a more feminine personality, in addition to offering a form of mediated and controlled relationship with something that could seemingly never

disappoint.<sup>103</sup> Araragi is noted throughout the series as lacking in masculinity, to the point that in his engagement with younger girls, he feels as if his masculinity is suspended as they easily outwit and manipulate him. He also wishes to serve as a nurturing and supportive figure in the lives of those around him: he does not wish to dominate or command as hegemonic masculine ideals in Japan uphold as the pinnacle of manhood.

This form of escape from societal expectations via *moe-kyara* is also grounded in the need to subvert the discipline that the Symbolic Order inflicts on subjects. By engaging in a type of relationship with the *moe-kyara*, *otaku* can escape the social order and also construct a temporary new order.<sup>104</sup> Some scholars have posited this behavior as a form of sexual attraction towards *moe-kyara*, although Lamarre describes this as a form of *platonic sexuality*.<sup>105</sup> In *Bakemonogatari*, however, this is made to be platonic at a higher level. Although Araragi may grope and manhandle the *lolicon moe-kyara* around him, he is the only character who is ever penetrated. Even when drawing energy from the vampire Shinobu, Araragi is the one who removes his clothing and lets his body be pierced. The attraction of this form of sexuality is grounded in *moe-kyara*'s existence as creatures of *pure fantasy (junsui na fantajii)*.<sup>106</sup> All of the characters, even the audience-insert character Araragi, engage in this form of platonic sexuality as a means of escape from the rigors of reality. *Bakemonogatari* is a two-dimensional world that holds the trauma of the three-dimensional world in a type of emotional reality that cannot be grasped in reality.<sup>107</sup>

However, even these flat beings are haunted—they are postmodern beings haunted by the conditions of postmodernity. The Specter is a being caught forever in the act of becoming, just as the *moe-kyara* of *Bakemonogatari* are forever moving towards

independence and adulthood and yet remain mired perpetually in the past.<sup>108</sup> It is something on the edges of perception that is projected from within us, just as the demons and gods of *Bakemonogatari* are drawn to the *moe-Kiara*'s repressed trauma.<sup>109</sup> Like Senjougahara's crab, it exists everywhere and nowhere at once; all it needed was a small shift in perspective to become visible.

Similar to the supernatural beings in *Bakemonogatari*, the Specter emerges in many forms.<sup>110</sup> Like *moe-kyara*, the Specter possesses a *prosthetic body*—an avatar that is affiliated with, but not of, the Specter.<sup>111</sup> Throughout the series, characters grapple with the tangible and invisible, and wrestle with spirits who can only be discerned as floating text. In postmodernity, where the past bleeds continuously into the present, the Specter's lack of temporality serves as a means of understanding the present and conceiving of a future.<sup>112</sup> This bleeds into another aspect of *moe-kyara* as non-human or supernatural *moe-kyara* have become increasingly common over the last two decades, particularly as neutral figures that could be good or harmful depending on circumstance.<sup>113</sup> By using the database nature of *moe-kyara*, who already existed as beings without narrative context and thereby already narratively divorced from time, their flat images are merged with the *prosthetic body* of the Specter and become an avatar for the trauma that the Specter represents.

*Moe-kyara* and the Specter are incorporeal doubles, as *moe-kyara* and the Specter both exist as projections of internal desires and sublimated trauma. For the Specter, this means the exorcism is an impossibility—just as none of the *moe-kyara* are ever really freed from the supernatural.<sup>114</sup> Just like the vampire Shinobu, who seeks to create more vampires like her, hyperreality constructs endless clones: parents become matrixes, subjects are vanished, and death itself dies as the body is reconstituted

ceaselessly.<sup>115</sup> This is part of the destruction of the body in postmodernism, where the boundaries between the external and technological become blurred with that of the physical body.<sup>116</sup> The body becomes naught but projection.<sup>117</sup> And what are *moe-kyara* if not clones constantly projected onto one's internal imagination? Yet, even the *moe-kyara* are haunted by Specters, as Baudrillard states: "Of all the prostheses that mark the history of the body, the double is doubtless the oldest... it is an imaginary figure, which, just like the soul... makes the subject simultaneously itself and never resemble itself again... like a subtle and always averted death".<sup>118</sup>

Death is the one element of the supernatural missing from the world of *Bakemonogatari*; no one ever really dies in the series. Even the one corpse is merely a demon in the guise of a dead cat—a simulacra of death that springs to life with menace. With their excessive and infinitely replicated bodies, the characters in *Bakemonogatari* are blocked from experiencing something as permanent and real as death.

Postmodernity has removed from the characters even this – promising endless recursion and cloning, suffering and struggle, in a world where objects overwhelm and relationships and personhood are simulacra. This denial of the permanency of death ties into the overarching theme of *Bakemonogatari* – there can never really be justice. The Specter is also tied to the messianic promise of justice at some distant yet inaccessible point.<sup>119</sup> Glazier argues that with the Specter, Derrida creates a being not tied to orders of power or justification.<sup>120</sup> The Specter offers an opportunity via its immateriality to point the way towards the negation of time and an ephemeral utopia.<sup>121</sup>

*Bakemonogatari* uses its specters to point forever towards a future where justice exists, where the victimization of Senjougahara and Sengoku could not only be avenged, but

also erased. However, this erasure and justice is always immanent—yet never arriving. Justice will not and cannot come to this postmodern world; the Law no longer exists.<sup>122</sup>

Justice and sacrifice are mimetic in drive, seeking to control violence through the mediation of some form of transcendental other.<sup>123</sup> This can give violence a form of meaning, making such acts sacred responses to a social crisis.<sup>124</sup> Furthermore, for the sacrificial victim of violence, the sacrifice must bear some resemblance to the aspects being avenged—the part of humanity that failed to live up to the social ideal, that is also somehow distant from the community.<sup>125</sup> Where the female characters are often the victims of male violence in *Bakemonogatari*, it is Araragi who takes on this role. He absorbs the violence wrought by the myriad specters that haunt the *moe-kyara* around him, but he is the only young, male *moe-kyara* who graces the screen. He is the scapegoat that allows the otaku to mitigate their guilt about projecting their own traumas onto female *moe-kyara*.<sup>126</sup> *Bakemonogatari* thereby encapsulates a postmodern version of the sacrificial crisis—the collapse of boundaries that is rectified only by sacrifice.<sup>127</sup>

## Conclusion

*Bakemonogatari* is a narrative that contains and yet is also itself a Specter. The narrative and aesthetic choices, designed to draw in otaku viewers, provide a commentary on the trauma inherent to postmodernity and consumer-capitalism. The characters are possessed by Specters who dredge up and yet simultaneously suppress this traumatic state of existence in a world without catharsis and without justice. Otaku, attracted to *moe-kyara* to escape the drudgery and misery of the three-dimensional world, are shown that this escape itself is a form of harm—like Araragi, they turn meaning into a form of self-flagellation and heap untold suffering on the *moe-kyara*

towards which they are inextricably drawn. But there is no solution, no escape from this existence. Just like the supernatural in *Bakemonogatari*, media in reality may offer small escapes but possesses no transcendent meaning. Via postmodernity, reality itself is transformed into a database—and this transformation is the destiny of those living within it.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> “Monogatari Series Timeline and Watch Guide.” *Bakemonogatari Wiki*, Accessed July 22, 2021, bakemonogatari.fandom.com/wiki/Monogatari\_Series\_Timeline\_and\_Watch\_Guide#Anime\_Release\_.2F\_SHAFT\_Order.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Saito, Tamaki, *Beautiful Fighting Girl* (Minneapolis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 11-13.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid, 16-18
- <sup>5</sup> Azuma, Hiroki. *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 38.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid, 47-53.
- <sup>7</sup> Saito, Tamaki, *Beautiful Fighting Girl* (Minneapolis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 27-30; Galbraith, Patrick W. *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 7.
- <sup>8</sup> Azuma, Hiroki. *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 47-51
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid, 42.
- <sup>10</sup> Akgun, Buket, “Mythology Moe-fied: Classical Witches, Warriors, and Monsters in Japanese Manga,” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (2019): 1-4.
- <sup>11</sup> Azuma, Hiroki. *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 44.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid, 20
- <sup>13</sup> Galbraith, Patrick W. *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 10-13;
- <sup>14</sup> Murai, Fumika, Okamoto, Yuko, Ota, Masayoshi, and Kato Hiromichi, “Relationship between Friendship with Self-Acknowledged Kyara and Self-Monitoring in Junior High School and University Students,” *The Clinical Study of Childhood Development*. 15 (2021): 31-32
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid, 37.
- <sup>16</sup> McGowan, Todd. *The End of Dissatisfaction: Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 11-12; 69-70.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid, 70-71.
- <sup>18</sup> Oyama, Makiko, “The Role of Character in Interpersonal Relationships in Modern Youth – Consideration from Relationships in Family, Close Friends, Friends, and Involvement with Club Activities” *The Journal of Kansai University of Social Welfare*, 24, (2021):41-43.
- <sup>19</sup> Gowan, Todd. *The End of Dissatisfaction: Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 11-12;70-71
- <sup>20</sup> Greene, Barbara, “Reconstructing the Grand Narrative- The Pure Land of *Madoka Magica*,” *The Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, TBA (2021).
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Deleuze and Guattari defined Capital as the Body without Organs for those within a capitalist society (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 10-11). Otaku, as beings defined by their consumption of mass-produced, intellectual property that is a key form of Capital, are inexplicably drawn to the personified outgrowth of this Body without Organs – the *moe-kyara*.
- <sup>23</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 5-11
- <sup>24</sup> Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002),44-46
- <sup>25</sup> Galbraith, Patrick W. *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 7.
- <sup>26</sup> Azuma, Hiroki. *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 38.
- <sup>27</sup> Bolton, Christopher. *Interpreting Anime*. Minneapolis, (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

- <sup>28</sup> Light novels are a type of novel targeted at a young readership that combines traditional prose with heavy use of manga-inspired illustrations that inform the text.
- <sup>29</sup> This genre of contemporary Japanese literature relies on the heavy use of realistic language and youth vernacular.
- <sup>30</sup> Yamada, Marc. "The Database Imagination of Japanese Postmodern Culture," *Japanese Studies*, 33,1 (2013), 19-22
- <sup>31</sup> Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 18-22.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid, 27-29.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid, 15-17.
- <sup>34</sup> Girard, Rene. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), 244-245.
- <sup>35</sup> Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 37-39.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid, 36.
- <sup>37</sup> Yamada, Marc. "The Database Imagination of Japanese Postmodern Culture," *Japanese Studies*, 33,1 (2013), 22-24.
- <sup>38</sup> Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 37-38
- <sup>39</sup> Azuma, Hiroki. *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 71-72.
- <sup>40</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 80-81.
- <sup>41</sup> Hack, Brett. "Subculture as Social knowledge: A Hopeful Reading of *Otaku* Culture," *Contemporary Japan*, 28, 1 (2016); 45
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid, 48-49.
- <sup>43</sup> The decade of recession following the burst of Japan's bubble economy in the late 1980s.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid, 37-38.
- <sup>45</sup> Darling, Michael. "Plumbing the Depths of Superflatness," *Art Journal*, 60, 3 (2001); 83.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid, 77-78
- <sup>47</sup> Steinberg, Marc. "Otaku Consumption, Superflat Art and the Return to Edo," *Japan Forum*, 16, 3 (2004); 450-453.
- <sup>48</sup> Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 9.
- <sup>49</sup> Darling, Michael. "Plumbing the Depths of Superflatness," *Art Journal*, 60, 3 (2001); 81-83.
- <sup>50</sup> Saito, Tamaki, *Beautiful Fighting Girl* (Minneapolis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011); Lamarre, Thomas. "Platonic Sex: Perversion and Shojo Anime (Part Two)," *Animation: an interdisciplinary journal*, 2:1 (2007); 9-25.
- <sup>51</sup> Both Saito and Lamarre note that, while the attraction to these characters is erotic in nature, it does not imply desire to engage in sexual congress but rather a form of highly aestheticized desire.
- <sup>52</sup> Saito, Tamaki, *Beautiful Fighting Girl* (Minneapolis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011); Lamarre, Thomas. "Platonic Sex: Perversion and Shojo Anime (Part Two)," *Animation: an interdisciplinary journal*, 2:1 (2007); 9-25; Galbraith, Patrick W. *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019)
- <sup>53</sup> Azuma, Hiroki. *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 73.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid, 33-35.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid, 74; 90-92
- <sup>56</sup> Saito, Tamaki, *Beautiful Fighting Girl* (Minneapolis: University of Wisconsin Press, (2011), 24-25
- <sup>57</sup> Mason, Mark. "Historiospectrography? Sande Cohen on Derrida's *Specters of Marx*. *Rethinking History*," 12, 4, (2008); 484-485
- <sup>58</sup> Paphitis, Tina. "Haunted Landscapes: Place, Past and Present," *Time and Mind*, 13:4 (2020); 341-344.
- <sup>59</sup> Murakami, Takahashi (ed.). *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, (London: Japan Society, 2005), 168

<sup>60</sup> In *Bakemonogatari*, the *Hitagi Crab* arc reveals that the character Senjougahara weighs a fraction of what she should as she is possessed by a crab deity. As this deity only affixes itself to those that wish to forget, it is revealed that Senjougahara has asked the deity to carry the trauma of her mother allowing a fellow cult member to sexually assault her as a child. As Senjougahara defended herself and injured the culprit, her mother was penalized by other cult members and her father divorced her. Senjougahara is thereby only exorcised when she confronts the trauma, accepts her emotional response, and asks the crab to return said response to her. Like Hachikuji, the crab deity simply grants a respite to those in need.

<sup>61</sup> Gowan, Todd. *The End of Dissatisfaction: Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 66-67; Žizek, Slavoj. *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out*, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2001), 10-12.

<sup>62</sup> Takolander, Maria and Jo Langdon. "Shifting the "Vantage Point" to Women: Reconceptualizing Magical Realism and Trauma," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 58, 1, (2017) :46-47

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 41-44.

<sup>64</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society and Structures*, (London: Sage, 1998); 70-76.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 87-92.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 84-85.

<sup>67</sup> Girard, Rene. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, (London: Bloomsbury); 312-313.

<sup>68</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx*, (New York: Routledge, 2012); 130-135.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 10-11.

<sup>70</sup> Hack, Brett. "Subculture as Social knowledge: A Hopeful Reading of *Otaku* Culture," *Contemporary Japan*, 28, 1 (2016); 34-35.

<sup>71</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society and Structures*, (London: Sage, 1998); 38-41

<sup>72</sup> Galbraith, Patrick W. "Moe: Exploring Virtual Potential in Post-Millennial Japan," *electronic journal of contemporary japanese studies*, (2009); 6.

<sup>73</sup> A *tsundere* is a subtype of *moe-kyara*. It is defined as a character being initially cold or aggressive, yet possessing a warm-hearted personality within.

<sup>74</sup> Fisker, Tim. "The Spectral Proletariat: The Politics of Hauntology in *The Communist Manifesto*," *Global Discourse*, 2, 2 (2011); 27.

<sup>75</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society and Structures*, (London: Sage, 1998); 86-90.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid; 100-101

<sup>77</sup> Ibid; 78-81.

<sup>78</sup> Girard, Rene. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1987); 298-299.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 276.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 316.

<sup>81</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society and Structures*, (London: Sage, 1998); 25-29.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid; 59-60.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid; 31-35.

<sup>84</sup> Lamarre, Thomas. "Platonic Sex: Perversion and Shōjo Anime (Part Two)," *Animation: an interdisciplinary journal*, 2:1 (2007); 19-22.

<sup>85</sup> Girard, Rene. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1987); 304-306.

<sup>86</sup> Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001); 96-106.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 146-150.

<sup>88</sup> Gowan, Todd. *The End of Dissatisfaction: Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 46-50.

<sup>89</sup> Kosmina, Brydie. "Feminist Temporalities: Memory, Ghosts, and the Collapse of Time," *Continuum*, 34, 6, (2020); 902.

- <sup>90</sup> Ruddell, Caroline. "From the 'Cinematic' to the 'Anime-ic': Issues of Movement in Anime," *Animation: an interdisciplinary journal*, 3, 2, (2008); 117-199; Saito, Tamaki, *Beautiful Fighting Girl* (Minneapolis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 136-137.
- <sup>91</sup> Nakagawa, Miho. "Mamoru Oshii's Production of Multi-layered Space in 2D Anime," *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 8, 1, (2013) 65-66.
- <sup>92</sup> Ibid, 67-68.
- <sup>93</sup> Beynon, David. "Superflat Architecture: Culture and Dimensionality," *Art + Architectural Exchanges from East to West* (2012); 1-4.
- <sup>94</sup> Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 25.
- <sup>95</sup> Ibid, 26.
- <sup>96</sup> Ibid, 4.
- <sup>97</sup> McCrea, Christian. "Explosive, Expulsive, Extraordinary: The Dimensional Excess of Animated Bodies," *Animation: an interdisciplinary journal*, 3, 1, (2008); 4.
- <sup>98</sup> Ibid; 10-12
- <sup>99</sup> Ibid; 14-15.
- <sup>100</sup> Ibid; 15-17.
- <sup>101</sup> Hack, Brett. "Subculture as Social knowledge: A Hopeful Reading of *Otaku* Culture," *Contemporary Japan*, 28, 1 (2016); 41-42.
- <sup>102</sup> Galbraith, Patrick W. "Moe: Exploring Virtual Potential in Post-Millennial Japan," *electronic journal of contemporary japanese studies*, (2009); 7.
- <sup>103</sup> Ibid, 4.
- <sup>104</sup> Lamarre, Thomas. "Platonic Sex: Perversion and Shōjo Anime (Part Two)," *Animation: an interdisciplinary journal*, 2:1 (2007); 10-12.
- <sup>105</sup> Saito, Tamaki, *Beautiful Fighting Girl* (Minneapolis: University of Wisconsin Press, (2011); 27-29; Lamarre, Thomas. "Platonic Sex: Perversion and Shōjo Anime (Part One)," *Animation: an interdisciplinary journal*, 1, 1, (2006); 57-58.
- <sup>106</sup> Galbraith, Patrick W. "Moe: Exploring Virtual Potential in Post-Millennial Japan," *electronic journal of contemporary japanese studies*, (2009); 2.
- <sup>107</sup> Ibid, 7.
- <sup>108</sup> Fiske, Tim. "The Spectral Proletariat: The Politics of Hauntology in *The Communist Manifesto*," *Global Discourse*, 2, 2 (2011); 17-20.
- <sup>109</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 125-126.
- <sup>110</sup> Ibid, 147.
- <sup>111</sup> Fiske, Tim. "The Spectral Proletariat: The Politics of Hauntology in *The Communist Manifesto*," *Global Discourse*, 2, 2 (2011); 17-20.
- <sup>112</sup> Kosmina, Brydie. "Feminist Temporalities: Memory, Ghosts, and the Collapse of Time," *Continuum*, 34, 6, (2020); 904-907.
- <sup>113</sup> Lamarre, Thomas. "Platonic Sex: Perversion and Shōjo Anime (Part One)," *Animation: an interdisciplinary journal*, 1, 1, (2006); 45-46; Akgun, Buket, "Mythology Moe-fied: Classical Witches, Warriors, and Monsters in Japanese Manga," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (2019); 2-3.
- <sup>114</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 155-162.
- <sup>115</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 96-98.
- <sup>116</sup> Ibid, 100-102.
- <sup>117</sup> Ibid, 105
- <sup>118</sup> Ibid, 95.
- <sup>119</sup> Mason, Mark. "Historiospectrography? Sande Cohen on Derrida's *Specters of Marx*," *Rethinking History*, 12, 4, (2008); 493-495.

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<sup>120</sup> Glazier, Jacob. W. "Derrida and Messianic Subjectivity: A Hauntology of Revealability." *Journal for Cultural Research*, 21, 3, (2017); 242-244.

<sup>121</sup> Kosmina, Brydie. "Feminist Temporalities: Memory, Ghosts, and the Collapse of Time," *Continuum*, 34, 6, (2020); 908-910.

<sup>122</sup> Gowan, Todd. *The End of Dissatisfaction: Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 53-56.

<sup>123</sup> Girard, Rene. *Violence and the Sacred*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 25.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 26-27.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 12-13.

<sup>126</sup> Greene, Barbara, "Reconstructing the Grand Narrative- The Pure Land of *Madoka Magica*," *The Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, TBA (2021).

<sup>127</sup> Girard, Rene. *Violence and the Sacred*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 48-54.

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