



©San and Ashitaka, *Princess Mononoke*

More Animated than Life

By Sato Kenji

Japan's animation boom began in the summer of 1977, when the movie *Uchu Senkan Yamato* (Space Cruiser Yamato) captivated teenagers and young adults to emerge as a major box-office hit. The success of this sci-fi "anime" prompted a fundamental shift in the cultural status of animation.

Even before *Space Cruiser Yamato*, Japan had produced a considerable number of animated films, but they were generally regarded as children's fare or, at best, family entertainment; the few adult-oriented animated movies were not successful commercially. *Space Cruiser Yamato* was the first anime to demonstrate that the medium need not restrict itself to kiddie fare. Following suit, from the late 1970s, Japan put out a steady stream of animated films

geared to young adults, including *Ginga Tetsudo 999 (Galaxy Express 999)* and *Kido Senshi Gandamu (Mobile Suit Gundam)*. Most of these were commercial successes as well, although critics dismissed these as exploitation films pandering to teenage tastes. The attitude of film critics changed abruptly, however, with the 1984 release of *Kaze no Tani no Naushica (Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind)*, a film whose artistic quality was widely regarded as more than sufficient to hold the attention of adults. With this movie, writer-director Miyazaki Hayao overturned the conventional image of the anime director as a versatile hack, and was soon crowned as anime's first genuine auteur.

Of course, not all anime rose to the level of non-juvenile entertainment or art. In fact, in the late 1980s, with young adult anime showing signs of staleness, the focus began to revert to children's films. Nevertheless, the genre never relinquished the commercial foothold it had gained during the young adult anime craze; furthermore, Miyazaki began to enjoy a large degree of freedom in his filmmaking, as did several other directors who subsequently achieved the status of anime auteur. The results of those efforts, particularly the anime produced by Miyazaki's Studio Ghibli, are not simply movies with high box-office potential; they are in many instances artistically superior to the live-action films made in Japan, and they have won growing legions of fans overseas.

During the 1990s, animation, spearheaded by the work of a few anime auteurs, emerged as the face of Japanese film, positioning Japan as the world's undisputed "anime superpower." And in 1997 — a full twenty years since anime took off — animation's preeminence over live-action films in Japan was more apparent than ever. In a matter of months after its release, *Mononoke-hime (Princess Mononoke)*, Miyazaki's latest film to date which was then alleged to be his last directorial effort, broke every box-office record to become the biggest domestic movie hit of all time in Japan. In the languishing field of young adult anime, the avant garde sci-fi work *Shin Seiki Evangerion (Neon Genesis Evangelion)* scored a major box-office hit and won a huge cult following. Moreover, children's anime are as popular as ever. In all, it appears that anime has taken center stage in the Japanese film industry, pushing live-action movies into the wings.

Fleshless reality

The simplest explanation for this reversal of fortune between animation and live-action is that the former has ridden to success on the coattails of its older cousin, Japanese comics, or *manga*, a medium that emerged as a main focus of Japanese popular culture after World War II, and has grown particularly pervasive since the 1970s. It is true that many successful anime were based on popular manga and anime have been heavily influenced by manga's pictorial conventions. Another important factor is cost. Hollywood has made successful live-action films based on such popular comics as *Superman* and *Batman*, but the need for expensive sets and special effects to create the necessary visual realism has resulted in extremely high production costs. Japan's film industry, with its much smaller market, cannot afford such high-budget pictures. To put it another way, animation offers a means of producing slick, stylish films without spending much money.

Still, this ignores the fact that anime's very format has an inherent weakness. Because its characters are relatively small and simplified pictures painted on cels (thin pieces of plastic), they lack the fleshy presence of actors, nor can they rival the subtlety of good actors'

performances. Compared with live-action films, their reality is literally two-dimensional, which is why animated films were for so long regarded as fit only for children's (or family) entertainment. The reason Hollywood elected to make live-action films out of *Superman* and *Batman* is that they could be counted on to attract wider audiences and larger profits, notwithstanding the much higher costs of production.

It may be that Japanese under a certain age, having been weaned on manga and anime, are not bothered by the lack of visual realism. But this begs the question: Why is the cultural status of animation so much higher in Japan than in America, the home of Walt Disney? To be sure, ever since the anime boom began animated films have sought ever greater realism in both form and content, refining the animation itself and looking to more serious subject matter. They have gone far beyond Disney films, which remain essentially animated musicals performed by conspicuously cartoonish characters. Films like Studio Ghibli's *Mimi o Sumaseba* (*Whisper of the Heart*) and *Omoide Poroporo* (*Only Yesterday*) portray Japan's urban and rural landscapes with a realism that puts many live-action movies to shame. Visually, however, Japanese anime by no means transcend the medium, even though viewers may find some of them remarkably realistic for animated features.

In any case, a growing number of people accustomed to animation's lack of visual realism cannot in itself explain why anime has come to represent Japanese cinema in toto. For animation to push aside live-action films, a growing number of people had to prefer the thin, insubstantial reality of animation to the flesh-and-blood world of live-action — they had to be cool or even hostile to the real image. This, in fact, is precisely what began to occur in Japan in the 1990s.

Why, then, did the Japanese take a disliking to live-action? One reason is that most Japanese films are made on a low budget and look it, with low production values. Second, there is no denying that in theme and subject matter, some anime are more thoughtful and ambitious than their live-action counterparts. Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke*, a fantasy-adventure set in medieval Japan, is a critique of modernity founded on a deep concern for the environment. *Neon Genesis Evangelion* describes an individual's existentialist search for identity, calling to mind Jean-Paul Sartre's famous desperate axiom: "Hell is other people." And *Kido Keisatsu Patoreiba 2* (*Patlabor 2: The Movie*), released in 1992, lashes out at postwar society with its depiction of Tokyo under siege by urban terrorists — a portrayal eerily prophetic of the Aum sect's 1995 poison gas attack on Tokyo subways.

Of course, the artistic success of each individual film is open to debate. (*Evangelion*, in particular, is so incoherent that it virtually defies any real comprehension.) But to my knowledge, Japan's live action films today offer nothing at all to compete with anime when it comes to tackling such ambitious themes. Suo Masayuki's *Shall We Dance?*, crowned as the best Japanese live-action film of 1996, is a lightweight comedy about a middle-aged office worker who finds release from his humdrum life through ballroom dancing. And the big hit of 1997, *Shitsurakuen* (*Paradise Lost*), is a melodrama about another middle-aged salaryman who is demoted at work and eventually commits suicide with his married lover.



BENT ON ACHIEVING THE GOALS OF MODERNIZATION AND WESTERNIZATION, THE JAPANESE HAVE SOUGHT TO BECOME *NIHONJIN-BANARE* (DE-JAPANIZED)— GENERALLY A COMPLIMENTARY TERM, IMPLYING THAT ONE LOOKS AND ACTS MORE LIKE A WESTERNER OR A CAUCASIAN THAN THE AVERAGE JAPANESE.

Ethnic Bleaching

Still, there is a more alarming reason for moviegoers' rejection of live-action Japanese films. Their flight to anime is an inevitable result of the ethnic self-denial that has suffused Japanese society ever since the Meiji era, and especially since the end of World War II. Bent on achieving the goals of modernization and Westernization, the Japanese, in rejecting their own history and traditions, have sought to become *Nihonjin-banare* (de-Japanized) – a generally complimentary term, implying that one looks and acts more like a Westerner or a Caucasian than the average Japanese. "Japaneseness-free" might convey the nuance of the term even better.

Take a look at the animated characters featured in anime. Physically they are "de-Japanized Japanese" — a blend of Japanese and Caucasian characteristics. Given the setting of *Princess Mononoke*, it is obvious that the characters are intended to be pure Japanese (or at least Mongoloid), yet their features are

nearly identical to the presumably Caucasian characters in Miyazaki's earlier work, *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, a fantasy set in a future world suggestive of medieval Europe. (The heroine herself is named after the daughter of King Alcinous of Homer's *The Odyssey*). In Miyazaki's animation there is no physical distinction between Japanese and Caucasians. *Evangelion* features a Japanese girl, Rei, and Asuka, a girl who is one-quarter German and three-quarters Japanese. Apart from Asuka's Caucasian attributes of light brown hair and blue eyes, there are no significant differences in the facial features or physical development of the two girls. One should also note that Rei has blue hair and red eyes – rather remarkable traits for a Japanese girl!

In short, the characters of anime show the Japanese — who so aspire to Western traits — as they would like to see themselves. It is an effect that cannot possibly be duplicated by live actors, who — being alive — can never really change the physical characteristics determined by their genetic makeup. They can dye their hair and even change their eye color with contact lenses, but they cannot fundamentally alter their skin color, facial features, or physique. And even if they tried, using special make-up effects or plastic surgery, the result would be unnatural.

Only anime, and its cousin manga, can convincingly meld Japanese and Caucasian attributes into a natural-looking human being. This is because the upside of these genres' inherent lack of realism is their unique ability to exploit the appeal of and fascination for the unreal. And that is why manga and anime have attained such a high status in the popular culture of Japan, compared to that of other countries. These are the only two media capable

of portraying reality the way Japanese feel it should be. By comparison, live-action films sacrifice appeal from the outset simply because they feature Japanese actors. Fashion illustrator Nagasawa Setsu expressed the feelings of many Japanese in an essay he wrote in 1983 for the Japanese playbill of the British film *Don't Look Now*:

"With their sharp-featured faces and long-limbed bodies, Westerners (read Caucasians) are physically suited to the movie screen; everyone looks almost too beautiful, down to the minor characters . . . Japanese are just the opposite. Even people who appear delicately beautiful in person look round and dumpy and totally unstylish on camera. The reason many people today say they dislike the "ugliness " of Japanese films — content notwithstanding — is that the looks of Japanese screen actors put domestic films at a crucial disadvantage. Period pieces at least allow one to cover up these failings with elaborate costumes. But when they take off their clothes for bedroom scenes, even the most glamorous Japanese actors and actresses look hopelessly unattractive — which is why you can't pay me to watch Japanese porn."

That Nagasawa is not alone in his preference is attested to by the growing number of animated pornographic videos that have been produced in Japan since the mid 1980s. Thus, the history of the past twenty years, during which anime has pushed live-action to the side and emerged as the face of Japanese cinema, has in essence been the history of "ethnic bleaching" in Japanese film. Incidentally, it was also during the last two decades that manga, originally regarded as kids' stuff, truly came into its own as adult entertainment.

Dismantling the Cultural Framework

The tendency of Japanese to reject their own history and traditions in favor of a Western ideal has undermined live-action film also by affecting the performances of Japanese screen actors. An obvious example is the inability of today's younger actors to portray Japanese of earlier eras with authenticity. A live-action version of *Princess Mononoke*, for example, would be impossible to produce even if one could overcome budget constraints and the difficulty of its special effects. There are simply no young actors in Japan today who can wear the traditional clothing, duel with swords, or shoot arrows on horseback as convincingly as the animated characters in Miyazaki's film.

IF ANIME IS PERCEIVED AS MORE REAL THAN LIVE-ACTION, THIS MEANS THAT, INCREASINGLY, ANIME EMBODIES THE JAPANESE CONSCIOUSNESS OF REALITY. THE JAPANESE CONCEPTION OF REALITY, IN OTHER WORDS, IS UNDERGOING A PROCESS OF ANIMATION.



It is not only in period pieces, however, that the rejection of our country's history and tradition robs actors' performances of authenticity. In postwar Japan's cultural climate, it is exceedingly difficult for actors in any type of role to convincingly express complex, deep or intense emotion — in fact, any dramatic emotion at all. To appear real, this sort of emotional expression demands exactly the right modulation and combination of subtle elements, including not only choice of words and facial expression, but also posture, gesture, tone of voice, direction of gaze, and distance from other actors. And the "right" modulation and combination differs from culture to culture. Every culture has its own framework of expressive conventions from which actors must draw in order to express emotion that will strike their audience as authentic. As long as Japanese actors refuse to work within the framework of emotional expression stipulated by Japanese culture, they cannot express dramatic emotion in a convincing manner. The famed Meiji-era novelist Natsume Soseki once taught his students that the true Japanese translation for "I love you" is "*Tsuki ga tottemo aoi na*" (The moon is so blue tonight); what he meant was that to express within the Japanese cultural framework the same emotion expressed in English by "I love you," one must choose words like "The moon is so blue tonight."

Since every culture evolves naturally over time, the cultural framework for emotional expression is by no means immutable. But in post-war Japan the process of change has been unnatural and rushed. Regarding their traditional modes of expression as archaic and feudalistic, and eager to Westernize, the Japanese have attempted to adopt the Western (more specifically, the American) expressive framework wholesale. Yet given that they continue to use the Japanese language as their vehicle for verbal expression, any attempt to affect a "de-Japanized" manner at this level is half-baked. Today, one might say, a Japanese person is unable to convincingly express passion for another either by the English "I love you" or by the Japanese "The moon is so blue tonight." This may be why, since the 1980s, young people in Japan have increasingly disdained the expression of serious or dramatic emotion as *kusai*, or corny, and prized the appearance of emotional detachment as *kakko-ii*, or cool.

In terms of dramatic expression, then, the Japanese film labors under a heavy burden. If it portrays emotion within the traditional Japanese framework, it may achieve authenticity, but the effect is antiquated. If it portrays emotion within the Western framework, it comes

across as meretricious and unconvincing. Films that try to blend the two modes often end up antiquated and unconvincing. Yet in animation, which lacks visual realism and features de-Japanized characters to begin with, the expression of emotion paradoxically takes on a more convincing sense of reality. This may explain why most of the serious and ambitious film efforts have used the vehicle of anime. Given the serious dramatic deficiency, Japanese live-action films can no longer tackle any serious or profound subject matter.

In the context of contemporary Japanese film, then, anime often conveys a greater sense of reality than live-action films. The thin, insubstantial reality of animated film, that is to say, is more alive — literally, more animated — than the flesh-and-blood reality. And if anime is perceived as more real (i.e, closer to physical reality) than live-action, this means that, increasingly, anime embodies the Japanese consciousness of reality. The Japanese conception of reality is undergoing a process of animation.

The rise of anime as well as manga, is a cultural by-product of modern Japan's tendency to promote modernization and Westernization while rejecting its history and traditions. A medium that fuses elements of East and West, and lacks a clear national identity, could be considered international in a certain sense, and this is doubtless a major reason why anime has so many fans overseas. But the current state of affairs, in which anime represents the mainstream of Japanese cinema, is by no means desirable, inasmuch as it signifies an ever-widening gap between physical reality and people's conception of it.

Meanwhile, ever since the huge international box office success of *Star Wars* (released, coincidentally, in 1977, the same year as *Space Cruiser Yamato*), a growing number of Hollywood blockbusters might best be described as "live-action anime." Kathleen Kennedy, executive producer of Steven Spielberg's *The Lost World*, has acknowledged that Spielberg's method of conceiving a movie closely resembles the composition of an animated film in the sense that the visual ideas precede the story. The computer-generated images used so lavishly in *The Lost World*, and in other recent Hollywood films, are in essence animation drawn by computers. From this it might be deduced that the gap between physical reality and people's image of it is widening in other countries as well. That said, there is an undeniable difference between animation-like live-action and live-action-like animation. At the heart of this difference lies the Japanese people's deeply entrenched sense of self-loathing, extending even to their own ethnic traits.

The famous British science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke once published a short story in which aliens, visiting earth after the human race is destroyed by nuclear war, use Disney movies to study the extinct human species, never realizing that the films do not represent real life. Needless to say, Clarke wrote the story as a joke. But his joke is uncannily close to the actual situation in Japan today. And the concern that situation ultimately raises is that the Japanese people, like the human race in Clarke's short story, have engineered their own extinction.

Afterword

I would like to add a few revealing anecdotes relating to my theme. The first is a recollection by Tomino Yoshiyuki, creator and director of *Kido senshi Gandamu* (*Mobile*

Suit Gundam). In the mid-1960s, Tomino was one of the directors of *Tetsuwan Atomu* (*Astroboy*), Japan's first animated television series, which was produced by Mushi-Production, a studio headed by manga artist extraordinaire and *Astroboy* creator Tezuka Osamu. Soon other companies started to produce their own animated series, and among these programs there was one, Tomino recalls, that provoked particular hostility among the staff at Mushi-Production for one simple reason. It featured *tatami* mats.

"When the manga *Obake no Q-Taro* [*Q-Taro the Ghost*] was made into an animated series, the people at Mushi-Production never stopped hating it. I couldn't overcome that prejudice either. We felt that anime was fantasy, and that putting in *tatami* mats amounted to heresy." (*Dakara boku wa...* [*Therefore I Have...*], Tokuma Shoten, 1981).

Q-Taro was about a rather fleshly spook who haunts an ordinary Japanese household and makes friends with the young boy of the family. In terms of genre, it was clearly fantasy. Hence what Tomino seems to be saying is that even with a ghost as a main character, a program in which *tatami* appears is simply not fanciful enough for anime. Tomino's reaction to *tatami* mats – an integral element of the traditional Japanese house – is a clear indication of the deep-rooted presumption that a typically Japanese setting precludes the qualities of fancy and wonder.

Then there is the story told by Ide Toshiro, who co-wrote the script for the movie *Aoi sanmyaku* (*The Green Hills of Youth*, directed by Imai Tadashi), an enormous hit in 1949, during the Allied Occupation. Speaking of the movie's last scene, where the high school hero Rokosuke walks along the shore with his girlfriend Terasawa Shinko shouting, "I love Terasawa Shinko! I love her, I do!" Ide reveals the script originally had him yelling, "I hate Terasawa Shinko! I hate her, I do!"

Of course, this is simply an example of reverse psychology at work. Everyone knows Rokosuke is in love with Shinko. However, such rewrite kills the nuance conveyed by the original line, namely that Rokosuke is trying (rather transparently) to conceal his emotional vulnerability. How, then, did "I hate you" become "I love you"? Ide describes how the revision came about.

In those days we had to translate scripts and have them reviewed by GHQ (the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers). The young censor, a second-generation Japanese-American, said to me, "Your script is very interesting and democratic. The only thing that bothers me is why do Japanese say they hate someone when they should be saying they love them? If you love someone, isn't it better to come right out and say so?" Completely overwhelmed by this epiphany, I said, "You're absolutely right. Thank you," and then and there rewrote the line to read, "I love Terasawa Shinko! I love her, I do!" (*Shogen no Showa-shi7: Wanman saisho funto su* (*The Showa Era Speaks, Volume 7: Prime Minister Yoshida Soldiers On*), Gakken, 1982)

Unable to trust his own intuitive judgement as to the most genuine Japanese-style expression of emotion, Ide went along with a foreigner's opinion and turned the line on its head. Bowing to the idea that an American-style, forthright mode of expression was more suitable to the new "democratic" Japan, he made his character say something that went counter to his own Japanese impulse. Under the circumstances, one could hardly expect the actor to come up with a convincing performance. And indeed, film director Oshima Nagisa recalls going

to see *Green Hills* when he was in high school and finding the last scene "so embarrassingly awkward that I could hardly bear to watch." (*Taikenteki sengo eizo ron [Imagery of Postwar Japan: A Personal Recollection]*, Asahi Shimbun, 1982)

The problem is that these days it would seem just as false to say "I hate you" in such a scene. How, then, is an actor to perform? This is precisely the problem Aoi Yoji confronts when he criticizes Japanese dramatists for reeling off "line after self-satisfied line that actors are viscerally unable to make their own, justifying it by saying 'that's my style.'" Aoi complains with good reason that actors are forever struggling with dialogue that has "little style and even less substance, and since they have to render the material in some way, they have no choice but to resort to cheap theatrics."

The idea of ethnic bleaching discussed in the foregoing essay appears in unusually explicit form in the 1998 live-action sci-fi movie *Andromedia* (*Andromedia*). This is the story of a brilliant computer scientist who loses his only daughter Mai in a traffic accident but then resurrects her in cyberspace as an artificial life form named AI – pronounced like ai, the Japanese word for love, but being also the acronym for artificial intelligence. However, whereas Mai (played by Shimabukuro Hiroko, member of the teen pop group Speed) has black hair and eyes, AI's hair and eyes are both bluish, and her skin is lighter as well. In other words, Mai has undergone a drastic ethnic bleaching upon her digital resurrection. *Andromedia* would have us believe that instead of going to heaven when they die, the Japanese go to virtual heaven and become Caucasians.

In 1999, George Lucas, the creator of *Star Wars*, released the fourth movie of the series, *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace*. The film uses a tremendous amount of computer-generated images, so much so that producer Rick McCallum commented that it could be regarded as the first animated movie in history that was as realistic as live action. Inasmuch as *Star Wars Episode 1* is fundamentally a live-action movie, saying it could also be called an animated movie with all the realism of live action not only places animation on a par with live action but also implies that there are live-action movies without the realism of live action.

By ignoring the difference between reality pretending to be cartoons and cartoons pretending to be reality, McCallum's words eloquently attest to the fact that the gap between live action and animation is closing in the West as well. It would seem that Japan is not the only country where people's vision of reality is undergoing a process of animation.

This essay was previously published in KJ#41, but unfortunately at that time approximately one paragraph was deleted in production (following the pivotal example of Natsume Soseki's translation "The moon is so blue tonight...") We are pleased to present the essay here in entirety, with a new afterword. It has also been reprinted in Japan Echo's anthology Years of Trial: Japan in the 1990s (ed. Masazoe Yoichi).

Sato Kenji graduated from the University of Tokyo, where he majored in international relations. He is the author of *Chingu: Kankoku no yojin* (Chingu: a Korean Friend), *Gojira to Yamato to bokura no minshushugi* (Godzillanian Democracy: Ideological Subtexts of Japanese Popular Culture) *Genmetsu no Jidai no yoake* (Dawn of Disillusionment) and most

recently a forthcoming collection of essays entitled *Mirai soshitsu* (Future Lost).

©Illustrations used with permission.

[Media In Asia Contents](#) | [Asia Online](#) | [Asia Online Intro](#)
[Media Watchdogs](#) | [Pan-Asian Sources](#) | [Asian Cinema](#) | [Asian History](#)

Local Asia Online:

[Bangladesh](#) | [Burma](#) | [Cambodia](#) | [China](#) | [India](#) | [Indonesia](#) | [Japan](#) | [Korea](#)
[Laos](#) | [Malaysia](#) | [Mongolia](#) | [Nepal](#) | [Pakistan](#) | [Singapore](#) | [Sri Lanka](#) | [Taiwan](#)
[Thailand](#) | [The Philippines](#) | [Tibet](#) | [Timor](#) | [Vietnam](#)

[KJ Home Page](#) | [Gallery](#) | [Selections](#) | [Links](#) | [Reviews](#) | [KJ Info](#) | [Back Issues](#)