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Anime Otaku: Japanese Animation Fans Outside Japan

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In Japan, the term *otaku* is a kind of insult; it refers to a person who is so involved with a particular type of fan subculture that he or she becomes obsessed, even insane. One way *otaku* gets translated into English is with the somewhat derogatory term 'fanboy.' In America, fans of Japanese animation often call themselves *otaku* with pride, although they are quick to point out that the term is, in fact, insulting. *Otaku* gets appended to any number of fan subculture categories to indicate one's allegiance to them. For example, a motorcycle fan would be 'motorcycle *otaku*,' and fans of Japanese animation -- known as anime -- would refer to themselves as 'anime *otaku*.' This form of self-identification among (largely American) fans of Japanese animation tells us something about what it means to consume anime outside Japan: in order to affiliate themselves with anime fan culture, American fans are calling themselves by a name the Japanese use as an insult.

In 1980-1981, exports of Japanese television shows were led by animated programs, which accounted for 56% of total exports (figures taken from Bruce Stronach's article 'Japanese Television' in *The Handbook of Japanese Popular Culture*, 1989). That is, animation is in many ways another Japanese export commodity -- like high technology or cars -- consumed avidly by Americans who often feel it is unlike anything available in the West. Hence, we might say, anime *otaku* interact with Japanese culture and the Japanese economy when they watch anime.

Here I want to explore what it means when one nation's culture produces an audience beyond its own borders. In this specific instance, I believe that part of what makes anime so appealing to an American audience is the way it so closely resembles American popular media. Many of the genres and stock characters found in Hollywood movies and American television appear in anime. Often, anime make overt references to American popular culture, or feature Western characters. I would argue that American fans might take pleasure in anime precisely because they do not, at some

level, feel responsible for participating in the culture which creates it. Although anime fans realize how similar anime stories are to American stories, they eagerly watch an anime because it comes from 'far away.' Watching anime gives Americans a chance to reflect on their own culture, but it also lets them *deny* that they are doing so. What I want to suggest here is that anime otaku in America consume anime as a way of dealing with -- in a displaced form -- their investment in American popular culture. That anime is Japanese in origin tells us that Americans' feelings about their own culture are deeply bound up with America's evolving relationship to Japan.

'Subtitled by Fans for Fans'

Anime can be feature-length films which receive theatrical release in Japan (and sometimes in America). They may be 'OVA' or 'OAV,' acronyms fans use interchangeably to mean 'Original Video Animation,' or anime which are released only on video (mostly laserdisc). OAV are usually shorter than a feature-length film. There are also a number of animated TV series the fans watch. Often a popular anime exists in all three formats, with a TV series spawning a number of related OAVs and movies. Furthermore, anime are frequently based upon manga, or comic books. The incredibly popular *Ranma 1/2*, for example, is a comic book, TV series, and several movies. The different forms of an anime narrative are related, but focus on different aspects of the same storyline. For instance, a TV series would feature a whole cast of characters, but an OAV based on the TV series might tell the story of what three of these characters do on a trip to the beach. What might seem most unusual to the American consumer of anime would be the fact that one narrative could exist in so many different formats: manga, television episodes, OAV, and movies.

Small distribution companies in the United States will sometimes make anime available to fans who shop at specialty video stores and through catalogues. More often than not, fans get their anime from each other; there are networks of fans who use home multimedia technology to subtitle anime brought from Japan. Using a software program designed for this purpose, fans transfer anime from laserdisc to videotape, editing in the subtitles. Many of the anime contain this edited-in subtitle: 'Subtitled by fans for fans. Not for sale or rent.' I found this on bootlegged tapes and several tapes I rented from a local specialty videostore. Fans prefer what they call 'subbing' (subtitling) over dubbing, which can sometimes mean a soundtrack of people simply reading an English translation without any effort to 'act' the lines. It is not unusual for fans who do not understand Japanese to watch entirely untranslated anime. With a few exceptions, such as American releases of films like *Akira* or the TV series *Robotech* and *Speed Racer* (both broadcast on American television), anime are circulated through fan communities, either at conventions or fan clubs. It is for this reason that watching anime, and getting anime, are often associated with an organized network of fans who meet in order to share their anime at public showings or to trade videos with each other.

Fans of anime in America are engaging in what critics such as Dick Hebdige and John Fiske call 'appropriation.' That is, they are transforming Japanese culture for their own

uses, which are somewhat different from the uses to which it might be put in Japan. Whereas anime are mainstream culture in Japan, in America they are still somewhat 'alternative.' For this reason, fans enjoy anime partly because it allows them to feel as if they have specialized knowledge ordinary Americans do not. On another level, the fans' appropriation of anime involves translating and duplicating it so that it is accessible to a wider audience in the West. This allows them to convert an entirely Japanese product into a uniquely American one. Some of what may be satisfying for American otaku about their fan culture is that it allows them to 'steal' Japanese culture. In part, this could be conceived of as a form of revenge. Japanese animation, so heavily influenced by Hollywood, is itself already 'stolen' from American culture.

'It Used to Be 20 Guys at a Showing'

In preparation for this article, I made contact with over a hundred fans of Japanese animation mostly by using the so-called Information Superhighway -- that is, the Internet. Many of these fans responded to a lengthy survey about their interest in anime which I posted on an Internet newsgroup (rec.arts.anime) devoted to the discussion of Japanese animation. This newsgroup, which is read by people all over the globe, sometimes posts up to 500 messages a day from fans who want to discuss everything from the latest TV series they watched to frequently used Japanese slang terms.

I got the most detailed information about anime from a highly organized fan club on the UC Berkeley campus, the Alpha chapter of Cal Animage, a California-wide Japanese animation fan club with chapters at many University of California campuses, Stanford University, and USC (University of Southern California). The officers of Cal Animage Alpha sponsor free weekly showings of anime on the UC Berkeley campus, which routinely draw over two hundred people. They also desktop-publish a free weekly newsletter, *Konshuu*, which contains information about the anime being shown by Cal Animage, fan responses to anime, and even information about Japanese television and video technology. I handed out copies of my survey to people attending one of the Cal Animage showings, and I also personally interviewed a number of the officers of the club. Because the fans I surveyed were UC Berkeley students and locals or people with access to the Internet, most respondents tended to be members of the educated middle-class (or future middle-class). I also received a few responses over the Internet from fans in Canada, Australia, France, England, the Netherlands, and Indonesia; hence, while the vast majority of the fans I discuss here are American citizens, a small portion are not.

Ben, president of Cal Animage, told me that in past years, 'it used to be 20 guys at a showing.' His comment is a typical one; anime otaku are overwhelmingly male. One officer of Cal Animage I interviewed estimated that 13-14% of their membership is female. While attendance at Cal Animage showings has gone from 20 to 200, their audience is still mostly 'guys.' The racial composition of the audience, according to information I gathered in surveys, is more highly mixed. People of Asian and Caucasian descent dominate, in nearly equal proportions. Finally, the fans tend to be between the ages 18-25, with a significant minority between 25-30. What this

information provides us with is a sense of the target audience for anime culture in America: racially diverse men between the ages 18-25. Furthermore, it is clear that the audience for anime has expanded rapidly over a relatively short period of time.

I conducted a group interview with five officers of Cal Animage at a local cafe. Their comments about becoming involved with anime fan culture and what it is they enjoy about anime are typical of what I heard from fans in the surveys. Ed, Trulee, Rodney, and Egan are all undergraduates at UC Berkeley. Randall is a first year graduate student. Ed emphasized to me a number of times that the most important aspect of any anime is 'character.' Indeed, during the interview, what got discussed most were popular anime characters from a variety of TV series and related OAV. Typical characters in an anime, they agreed, were the young male 'hapless otaku' and what Ed called 'a special girl.' Together, they came up with a description of the typical male character as 'a nice guy, a virginal young man in high school or college who has no luck with girls.' Trulee noted that many of the women in anime are 'stereotypical,' but that some are not. 'They fight back,' she said, 'they throw things.' Egan then explained that one of the more popular female anime characters, Ai from *Video Girl Ai*, is referred to as 'a comfort girl' in Japanese. 'This is the same term the Japanese used for Korean women used as prostitutes during World War II,' he added. Ai is a character who accidentally comes to life out of a videocassette designed to make its (male) owner feel better when it is played. These character descriptions apply mostly to the genre of anime most popular with members of Cal Animage: the romantic comedy.

Ultimately, the officers I interviewed seemed least interested in discussing the national origin of anime. While they all expressed an interest in traveling to Japan, they finally told me that asking them about Japanese culture in anime was to pose the wrong questions. Rodney, who said that when he was very young he might have wanted to be Japanese, did note that his interest in anime made him want to go to Japan to 'find out what makes it tick.' Later, he said that the Japanese seem to have a 'strong sense of culture...In America, people don't have a grasp of history.' Although statistically it would appear that anime fans are racially diverse, those I interviewed were mostly Asian-Americans. Often, they wanted to account for this by linking their Asian backgrounds to an increased sympathy for the moral values associated with anime. Egan and another officer not present at the interview, Brian, both said that people with somewhat non-Westernized Asian backgrounds might be 'more open' to anime because it reflects the kinds of culture they grew up with. None of the Asian-Americans who said this were of specifically Japanese descent.

I would point out that both the fans I interviewed and those I surveyed had consistently confused responses when I inquired about the national origin of anime. Many fans claimed that Japan is the only source of good animation, and criticized American popular culture for being, among other things, 'stupid,' 'simplistic,' 'boring,' and 'impolite.' But at the same time they often did not want to connect their enjoyment of anime to any feelings they might have about Japan specifically. Furthermore, the non-Asian-American fans were just as likely as Asian-Americans to indicate that they sympathized with Japanese cultural values. Racial background seems to be largely irrelevant to fans' interest in anime. Their ambivalence about anime's status as

Japanese culture, it seems to me, tips us off to how important this issue really is for otaku. For if fans really were indifferent to anime as a specifically Japanese product, they would certainly not need to organize themselves into clubs devoted to *Japanese* animation --nor would they have such strongly polarized responses to questions about it. As much as otaku get pleasure out of anime, it seems to me that their enjoyment depends on avoiding anxieties and questions they have about anime's relationship to Japan.

'Only Japan Can Write a Good Story'

American fans find anime attractive because it refers to Western -- and particularly American -- popular genres while at the same time appearing to alter them. In a basic sense, the combination of animation, considered a children's genre in the West, with explicit violence, sexuality, and 'adult situations' is itself a juxtaposition American media have not often attempted. In the next few sections, I will be discussing three popular anime genres which tend to overlap with each other: romantic comedy, 'mecha' (a term used to designate science fiction-type narratives which focus mostly on technology), and fantasy-horror. I also want to suggest that fans' discomfort with the Japanese origin of anime can be connected to male anxieties about sexuality and social power found in the content of anime themselves. This certainly helps to account for the overwhelmingly male-dominated audience for anime in America.

One fan wrote to me: 'I often tell friends that the best American reference point for comedic anime is American TV sitcoms of the 60s.' Partly his response is related to what the Cal Animage officers told me about typical characters in an anime. The 'nice guy' and the 'special girl' so common to romantic comedy anime are unusual in contemporary American comedy, unless they are represented ironically. There is a name fans have for one particular subgenre in this vein: 'magical girls.' Magical girls appear in a number of romantic comedies, such as *Video Girl Ai*, *Urusei Yatsura*, *Tenchi Muyo*, and *Ah! My Goddess!*. All feature young men who have romantic, but non-sexual, relationships with women who possess superhuman powers. Ai comes to life out of a videocassette, Lum in *Urusei Yatsura* is an alien, the women in *Tenchi Muyo* are spirits, and Belldandy in *Ah! My Goddess!* is a goddess Keiichi (the college student 'nice guy') accidentally orders over the telephone from the 'Goddess Relief Agency.' Like American sitcoms of the 1960s such as *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie*, the magical girl genre features women who are simultaneously powerful and traditionally feminine. Often jokes center around the mishaps involved in the magical girl's effort to hide her powers so that she may appear demure.

The magical girl subgenre, based upon the idea that women should conceal their power, could hardly exist in the United States at this point in history, particularly since the advent of feminism and the women's rights movement. In Japan, feminist issues are largely unrecognized as legitimate social concerns, and their popular culture reflects this tradition. When American fans consume magical girl anime, what they enjoy as 'different' about the genre is precisely its historical incongruence with American mainstream culture. That is, it appears to be a 'new' genre because its comedic exploits

are based upon a set of cultural assumptions Americans are generally no longer comfortable with: specifically, the idea that women are subordinate to men and do not participate meaningfully in the public sphere. Magical girls exercise their power, like Jeannie in *I Dream of Jeannie*, largely in the home or in their private relationship with a young man -- they do not, for example, ordinarily use their power to get work or influence outside the domestic realm. Furthermore, the idea that a powerful woman would have to be 'magical' in the first place is an indication that the kinds of gender roles anime are joking about in romantic comedies are ones which understand female power to be itself a fantasy. In America, female public authority is an undeniable social reality; hence, I believe, Americans consume magical girl anime partly as a form of nostalgia for the kind of comic situations made possible by traditional gender roles.

A fan who wrote to me said: 'Koreans and Filipinos have been farmed out to do art, but only Japan can write a good story.' What it is about Japan that fans believe makes this 'good story,' I want to argue, is precisely its continued investment in social roles no longer widely accepted in American everyday life. Traditional gender roles in America are associated with various kinds of social oppression and prejudice. However, they are also linked to an idealized notion of romance found in the romantic comedy anime. Male fans might take pleasure in romantic comedy anime not because they wish they could dominate women, but so that they might experience an 'old-fashioned' romantic story. A 'good' romance like this is made possible to a certain degree by the Japanese practices of segregating girls and boys in public situations and placing a strong taboo on sexuality. As a result, relationships between young men and women in romantic comedy anime are based upon sexual innuendo and deferral -- that is, they are about fantasized expectations, rather than sexual consummation and its aftermath (a common theme in American romance). In anime, romantic love is possible precisely because overt sexuality is not. This sets up, for American audiences, what seem to be a more 'innocent' and intensely romantic series of encounters between the characters.

The TV series *Kimagure Orange Road*, which is one of the most popular romantic comedy anime with American fans, demonstrates how this works. Like the magical girl genre, many of its basic themes are, for an American audience, somewhat anachronistic. *KOR* (as fans refer to it) is the story of a 'magical boy,' a high school student name Kyuosoke who has telekinetic powers. He falls in love with a young woman named Madoka who is not magical, but nevertheless so strong that she routinely beats up whole groups of men who menace her. Clearly, both characters are fantastical, and this aspect of the narrative is enhanced by the fact that Kyuosoke continually has fanciful romantic dreams about kissing Madoka. That Kyuosoke should get so excited and embarrassed by his desire to kiss or date Madoka is a source of amusement for American fans, but also a source of this anime's potency as a romance. In America, young men (and, increasingly, young women) are encouraged by their popular youth culture to experience their romantic feelings as overtly sexual. Romantic comedies in America are largely sex comedies, not comedies about emotions and wishes. I think in many ways young American men become fans of romantic comedy anime because they represent a form of heterosexual masculinity which is not rooted in sexual prowess, but romantic feelings. Anime offer to the post-sexual

revolution generation romantic comedy narratives which suggest that young men and women do not need to have sex in order to experience love. Admittedly, the kind of love recommended by these anime is often based on social values American feminism has done right to condemn. But the Americans who consume them are also responding to -- and perhaps attempting to escape -- the hypersexuality of their own media culture by reimagining romance as a relationship which goes beyond the purely sexual.

Like *KOR*, the TV series *Ranma 1/2* is very popular with American fans. However, *Ranma 1/2* is not nearly as romantic as *KOR*, and epitomizes those aspects of anime which arouse male discomfort. It features a magical boy, Ranma, whose special power is actually a curse -- when splashed with cold water, he turns into a beautiful, bosomy girl. His father, Genma, suffers a similar curse, for he turns into a giant panda when splashed with cold water. Both return to their 'normal' bodies when splashed with hot water. Unlike most of the romantic comedy anime, *Ranma 1/2* features a good deal of nudity and sexualized encounters between Ranma and nearly everyone he knows. A frequent joke revolves around someone squeezing Ranma's breasts in order to 'believe' that she has transformed into a female. Ranma is perpetually trying to hide his female half at school; many of the slapstick routines in the series depict his efforts to avoid being splashed with cold water in public (although at home, Genma is constantly throwing him into a handy pool of water outside).

I would argue that *Ranma 1/2* betrays a number of male anxieties at the heart of the comedy romance genre, which emerge full-blown in the mecha and horror-fantasy anime I'll discuss in a moment. Quite simply, *Ranma 1/2* demonstrates to the young man who enjoys anime that he is constantly in danger of becoming a girl. Because women are often associated, in anime, with passivity and dependence, a character like Ranma stands in for a number of male fears about losing control or power. Like Ranma, the male anime fan has a 'feminine half' which enjoys passively consuming animated fantasies about love. His attachment to non-sexual romance might be said to feminize him. Especially for the fan who watches anime in an American context, this fear would be particularly acute, for American romantic comedies are largely aimed at a female audience. But the American otaku's worries about gender transposition, solicited explicitly and humorously in *Ranma 1/2*, go beyond a fear that he might be enjoying 'women's culture' too much. He is, more importantly, enjoying Japanese culture -- a culture upon which he is increasingly more dependent for 'good stories,' as well as any number of other valuable commodities. In other words, his anxieties about becoming a passive 'hapless otaku' might be related his dependence upon Japanese culture itself. One might say the otaku is a 'girl' in relationship to Japan, the only country which has the power to give him what he wants -- a 'good story.'

'A Culture Not Poisoned By Political Correctness'

'I guess I've been watching too much animation,' says a young male character in an OAV version of the mecha *Guyver: Bio-Booster Armor*. He has just encountered a piece of alien technology which envelops him in a huge, high-tech suit of armor. While it greatly enhances his physical strength and stature, the guyver armor also penetrates

his body and fuses with him at a biological level: metallic tentacles bury themselves in his face and body and cause excruciating pain. After he uses the armor to defeat a mutant 'bionoid,' it evaporates and the young man thinks he has been dreaming the whole episode as a result of watching anime. While a narrative like *Ranma 1/2* offers to its fans the possibility that the narratives they enjoy might feminize them, *Guyver* seems to hold out the opposite promise. Here we find a young male character whose status as an anime otaku ultimately allows him to participate in a fantasy where he becomes strong, aggressive, and nearly omnipotent as a result of his merging with a piece of technology. We might say that the mecha genre is about the kind of hypermasculinity which otaku identify with in order to combat their sense that 'too much animation' makes them into passive consumers, like 'girls.'

But in many ways, mecha is treading the same ground as the romantic comedy. There is a subgenre of mecha which closely parallels the 'magical girl' subgenre of romantic comedies. These mecha, such as *Bubblegum Crisis*, *Dominion*, *Iczer-1* and *Appleseed*, feature women or female mutants who use guyver-like armor or high-tech ships and motorcycles to fight crime, corruption, or monsters of various types. Unlike magical girls, however, these women use their power openly but tend to hide their gender in one way or another. Especially in the series *Bubblegum Crisis*, the team of women are so heavily armored that occasionally a character will marvel, 'You're women under there?' The space-romances *Robotech* and *Macross* (which several fans called 'technoporn') combine romantic or sexual themes with mecha adventure and battles. In these anime, the romantic themes are, like the women's bodies in *Bubblegum Crisis*, hidden beneath mecha action and sexuality.

To demonstrate what this might mean, I want to return briefly to representations of men and women in *Guyver*. While men who come into contact with the guyver armor experience agony as it first penetrates their skin, the women who don guyver armor are penetrated vaginally by its metal tentacles, stripped naked, and given what appear to be orgasms as the armor envelops them. The technology characteristic of the mecha genre does not just conceal female bodies, but female sexuality and, ultimately, reproduction. Bodies manipulated by mecha science are merged with pieces of technology in order to 'give birth' to new beings. In *All-Purpose Cultural Cat Girl Nuku Nuku*, for example, the main character Ryunosuke gains a 'new sister' when his father, the scientist, creates Nuku Nuku out of the body of a robot and the brain of a cat. This is an instance in which childbearing is certainly being equated with the merging of technology and biology. I would submit that this kind of reproduction in mecha gets associated with women because it is understood to be a sign of weakness.

Mecha reproduction involves the co-dependence of two radically different orders of being: human and machine. In some ways, mecha bodies might be read as fantastical representations of interracial or international relations. Seen from this perspective, the human-machine union stands in for separate peoples or countries who depend upon each other for strength. In Japan, a country with a history of isolationism and racism, such co-dependence would indeed appear to be a problem, or source of vulnerability. Unlike Americans, who in general are familiar with the idea that their culture is a

'multiculture,' the Japanese do not wish to consider their culture 'mixed' in any way. Multiculturalism is a concept quite alien to Japanese society, in which non-Japanese people -- such as Koreans -- face intense discrimination and contempt. Children born in Japan of mixed-race couples are equally likely to be the victims of prejudice, particularly because they embody the result of two separate cultures or societies coming together.

American fans of anime are aware of Japan's tradition of maintaining racial purity, but they do not seem to understand it as racism. One fan, of Korean-American descent, remarked to me that his grandfather was rather upset by his interest in Japanese culture. 'But I don't want to blame Japan for what they did in the past,' he said. Another fan wrote to me that what he found noteworthy and refreshing about anime is the fact that it is 'made by people from a different culture, and one that's not utterly poisoned by political correctness.' In America, the problem of interracial or international relations in mecha is understood as a problem with political correctness. American fans may consume mecha as a form of escape from the kinds of stories America produces when it wants to appear non-racist, non-sexist, and non-homophobic. The absence of 'political correctness' in anime might be a source of pleasure for American fans confused and alienated by new rules of social interaction which have grown out of multiculturalism. This allows American fans to overlook the way Japanese anti-political correctness shows up in anime largely as a result of nationalist xenophobia, and specifically as a form of attack upon American national ideals of racial and cultural equality.

In horror-fantasy anime, it is frequently the case that social disruption is a direct result of the merging -- or interdependence -- of formerly separate cultures, realms, or species. The movie *Vampire Hunter D*, for example, centers upon a half-vampire character who battles to preserve the separation between the supernatural and human realms. *3 x 3 Eyes* is a fantasy-horror series about the chaos that ensues after Pai, a non-human girl from Tibet, meets up with the young man Yakomo. Pursued by mutants and spirits which interfere with Yakomo's social life as a high school student, she eats Yakomo's soul and forces him to help her on her quest to become human. The OAV series *Overfiend* offers the most explicit instance of this anti-multicultural bent in anime. The Overfiend is a being who has the power to unite the human world with 'the demon world' and 'the man-beast world,' and we discover early on that this is a dangerous power because it will lead to chaos, death, and miscegenation between beings from each world. In fact, in a vision of the post-Overfiend future, we see a burning city filled with humans copulating quite graphically with beasts and demons.

I should state up front that *Overfiend* is one of the most unpopular anime among American fans because it is pornographic and extremely violent. I would argue that possibly another reason why fans dislike it so much has to do with its open hatred for what it associates with American culture. When the Overfiend begins to manifest itself, we discover that his power is linked to sexual reproduction. Nagumo, the Overfiend's human father, first experiences his supernatural powers when engaged in intercourse. His penis becomes so large that it causes his partner's body to explode;

then it grows to the point where it bursts out of the roof of the building he is in and destroys the city in a flaming blast of sperm. Watching this animated image, it is clear that his penis has become some kind of atomic bomb. Moreover, this 'atomic blast' sets the stage for the birth of the Overfiend, a being who will allow the human realm to be invaded by demons and man-beasts. Regarded in this way, we might understand the Overfiend to refer allegorically to American intervention in Japanese culture during and after World War II. Since the American occupation of Japan did begin with an atomic blast, and did cause the intermingling of Japanese and American culture, it is hard to avoid this interpretation. Moreover, the Overfiend is associated with hypersexuality and a post-multicultural world (the world after the realms come together). I stated earlier that American gender roles are more highly sexualized than those in Japan, and miscegenation is in many ways the sexual corollary to multiculturalism. What the Overfiend's gigantic penis grotesquely caricatures, I would suggest, is American imperialism in Japan.

The American occupation of Japan is a topic which has been treated in manga such as *Barefoot Gen* and anime films such as *Graveyard of the Fireflies*. In fact, American influence on Japanese culture during the occupation is in many ways responsible for both the look and generic narrative qualities of anime in Japan. Frederik Schodt, in his book *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics* (Kodansha America, 1983) writes that Japanese styles of animation are heavily influenced both by Western political cartoons and Disney animation. Many fans wrote to me that they felt good Japanese animation reminded them of Disney, and famous anime director/illustrator Hayao Miyazaki (*Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, *My Neighbor Totoro*) is open about his admiration for Disney's animation style. In other words, anime is itself a product of the American influence on Japanese everyday life, especially after World War II.

'I Wish it Were Western'

I suggested before that what makes the romantic comedy *Ranma 1/2* notable is the way it deals explicitly with male fears about becoming feminized otaku. At this point, I want to connect this anxiety up with *Overfiend's* allegorical representation of imperialism. If the otaku is feminized for consuming Japanese animation, and the Overfiend is hyper-masculinized because he is associated with imperialism, then we must come to grips with how these gendered representations fit together. I would argue that relationships in which women are subordinate to men could be said to stand in for imperialist relationships where one country is subordinate to the other. This would certainly help to explain why Ranma is not only feminized, but also associated with China, a country invaded and occupied by Japanese imperialist forces several times during the 20th Century. Ranma's 'curse' is in fact a Chinese curse, which he got during martial arts training with Genma in China. Moreover, Ranma wears his hair in a queue and his clothing is Chinese; at school, the students refer to him as 'the one in Chinese clothing.' Ranma's feminization, in other words, is bound up with his Chinese identification. On the other hand, the Overfiend's ability to cause separate realms to colonize one another -- to be an imperialist power -- is associated with American

masculinity. He literally penetrates a Japanese city with his penis. What matters here is that these figures bring together feminization with colonization, and masculinity with a colonizing country.

When Americans are anime otaku, they are in a sense admitting that they want to be colonized by Japanese culture. As much as they may dislike or avoid American culture -- and even if they are from Asian racial backgrounds -- *they are still Americans, and they are rejecting their national culture in favor of another national culture.* Furthermore, the act of doing so seems to threaten them with feminization and disempowerment. This suggests that fans are engaging, consciously or unconsciously, in an imperialist relationship where Japan is dominant. Certainly, Japan is not dropping bombs on America, nor is it threatening to invade. It doesn't need to. Japanese anime could be said to work as *cultural* imperialism, in which the 'superiority' of Japanese culture convinces Americans that it is only right for the Japanese to influence certain aspects of their lives. Granted, it is a long way from influencing Americans' imaginations through popular culture to controlling American national interests outright. But I think it is no coincidence that anime is growing in popularity just as Japanese systems of business management, and Japanese corporations themselves, are replacing American ones all over the United States. I do not wish to imply that anime are causing Americans to submit to Japanese economic control, but rather to call your attention to the way the two forms of influence go hand in hand: anime, as I said at the beginning of this essay, are just another Japanese commodity flooding the American market.

Randall, a fan I mentioned earlier, remarked that the only difference between Japanese animation and American popular culture is that 'it's in Japanese.' Later, when I was talking to the Cal Animage officers about American cultural influences on anime, Randall said, 'I wish it were *more Western.*' Randall's statements, it seems to me, go to the heart of what American otaku both love and fear about their status as fans. They are pleased to recognize aspects of their own culture in Japanese narratives, for it makes anime seem familiar and yet distant -- therefore they can enjoy American stories (like romances) that they do not feel invited to enjoy in American culture. Fans also appear to take pleasure in narratives which seem American and yet remain free from contemporary American conventions associated with feminist and multiculturalist 'political correctness.' However, as Randall implies, there is a way in which fans desire to make anime into their own, 'more Western,' culture. But if anime is, for many fans, just American culture translated into Japanese, what is it that they wish would be 'more Western' about it?

The answer to this question takes us back to the popularity of anime romantic comedies, which American fans find so potent because they are based upon gender roles Americans associate with the 1950s and 60s. This period of time, the Post-War period, was also when America exerted its greatest influence over Japan. In fact, this is when American troops occupied Japan. In other words, American nostalgia for previous forms of gender relations in America is linked to a nostalgia for earlier versions of imperialist relationships as well. Romantic comedy anime remind

Americans of a time when the Japanese were firmly under American control. It is interesting to note that by 1963-64, there were fifty-four American TV series running on Japanese television (Bruce Stronach, 'Japanese Television'). Hence, American control over Japan consisted of a combination of military and cultural imperialism. When fans desire to make anime more Western, they are wishing that their own American culture could be as 'superior' as Japanese culture. And, perhaps, that America might then occupy the dominant position in an imperialist relationship with Japan. Ultimately, Japanese culture seems to resemble American culture so closely because both are cultures dedicated to imperialism.

'Simply Because You Can Draw Something Doesn't Mean You Should'

I want to close with some speculations about why animation specifically has become Japan's chief cultural export. In particular, I was intrigued by the way fans responded to Japanese animation as 'realistic,' but simultaneously better suited for representing fantasies. Fans I interviewed and surveyed remarked upon the fact that anime are realistic because they are aimed at an adult audience, unlike Western animation, which is aimed largely at children. Randall said that he enjoys the way animation allows him to feel that 'there is no dividing line between special effects and what is real...it's just the way somebody imagined it.' One fan who wrote to me, disgusted with 'bad animation,' seemed to imply that he felt this was part of the problem with anime, where all things are possible. 'Simply because you can draw something doesn't mean you should,' he said.

Throughout this analysis, I have been referring to 'culture,' and how it generates relationships between individuals and nations. One way culture does this is through ideology, which Louis Althusser has described as the 'unity of the real relation and the imaginary relation between [people] and their real conditions of existence.' What this means, put simply, is that ideology is one way people make reality change to suit their imaginations. Animation, to my mind, is therefore a narrative form which is well suited to act out ideology. I do not mean that animation is *more* ideological than other forms, but simply that it is easier to convey the possible reality of what we imagine in a form which does not distinguish between reality and fantasy. If we consider anime to be part of Japanese national ideologies, then it is no wonder that American fans have become convinced that Japanese culture is superior to American culture. Anime promise that what Americans imagine to be pleasurable can be acted out only with the help of Japanese intervention.

Let me offer you a final example of the way Japanese animation works as a form of ideology specifically aimed at influencing a Western audience. Anime feature multiracial casts of characters, many --if not most -- of whom are clearly Western. Often lead characters, especially women, have blonde hair and big blue eyes. Some anime, such as *Riding Bean*, take place in America -- although Bean himself is supposed to be a combination of all the 'best races' in the world (what this means is unclear). *Bubblegum Crisis*, with its team of Asian and Caucasian women, takes place

in 'Mega Tokyo,' a city of the future populated by people of all races in what appear to be equal numbers (unlike contemporary Tokyo). What these anime act out is a fantasy in which white people and Japanese people are interchangeable. But what is important to remember is that these representations are ideological -- they are imaginary versions of East-West relations which might exist someday, but do not exist yet. While this kind of ideology might seem satisfying and 'right' to Americans raised in a multicultural, we must also remember that the Japanese are *not* a multicultural. Furthermore, this multicultural fantasy takes place largely in Japan, and all the races are speaking and being Japanese. What these anime suggest is that a very American-looking multicultural is in fact Japanese. And it suggests that the Japanese are quite aware that part of their target audience for this anime is outside Japan, in multicultural America. In a way, these anime want to imply that Americans are *already* Japanese.

If Americans are already Japanese, then it should be no surprise to any American that Japan, economically speaking, owns a large portion of the United States. This is how ideology works to cement imaginary relationships to material relationships. Americans who are fans of Japanese anime are in many ways undergoing the same process American corporations pass through when they are bought by Japan. They are both being assimilated into another culture, one which they are convinced is somehow superior. More often than not, it seems to them that they were *always* a part of that culture. While I do not think it is necessarily a problem for one culture to influence another, and there are a number of lessons America would do well to learn from Japan, the idea that Japanese culture is 'superior' to American culture is what makes the ideology of anime dangerous. Anime help accustom Americans to a subordinate position in relation to Japan.

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