Liberating Cels: Forms of the Female in Japanese Cyberpunk Animation

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Two of the most unique cultural exports from Japan in the past century have been *anime* (animation) and *manga* (comics). Earlier this year, the Japanese government recognized the importance of manga and anime in its year 2000 Education White Paper, saying "anime and manga are among the most important forms of artistic expression in the modern Japanese cultural environment" ("Education White Paper..." 2000). This official recognition attests to the attention these often critically derided art forms have received worldwide. Anime in particular has become influential not only in Japan but in America as well, as one can see from the recent influx of imports being shown on daytime television, such as *Pokémon*, *Tenchi MuyM*, *Dragonball Z*, and *Sailor Moon.*

The purpose of this paper is to examine the strong woman as presented in Japanese cyberpunk animation, beginning with a look at customary portrayals of women in the Japanese media, examining specific elements by focusing on the titles *Bubblegum Crisis* (1987-91), *Serial Experiments Lain* (1998), and *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) as examples of the cyberpunk genre. These three anime are an OVA ("Original Video Animation," or anime that is released directly to video) series, a short, 13-episode television series, and a theatrically released film, respectively. I want to analyze how these examples treat the images of women, keeping in mind both the cyberpunk woman as well as customary portrayals of women in the Japanese media. These images of women in cyberpunk may seem at first to merely reinforce traditional notions of the woman, but they are, in spite of their occasionally flawed presentation, depictions that are potentially liberating.

There are many strong female characters portrayed in Japanese anime and manga. In *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*, Sherrie A. Inness discusses the role of the strong female in modern mass media culture. While her focus is specifically on such portrayals in American society, when thinking of strong women in other cultures, "the many tough women portrayed in Japanese comics come to mind" (1999: 9). The science fiction genre of cyberpunk presents a unique study because it possesses a very international vision; because cyberpunk fiction is so global in scope, it is a more straightforward genre in which to make cross-cultural comparisons. Japanese animation, and especially that of the cyberpunk genre, provides many examples of strong women. Yet while these women are portrayed as powerful, they are often shown being sexually objectified. These portrayals of women may seem rather exploitative at first, and little is encountered to deny this initial assessment. Yet it would be incorrect to say that such anime is being *merely* exploitative; many aspects of the cyberpunk female directly contradict the usual portrayal of the woman in Japanese media. We must look closer at what is being communicated through the use of such powerful, yet objectified, women. I argue that these images, rather than reinforcing women in a subservient role, in fact place males in the weaker role, which is that of mere observer. Such a conclusion supports Susan Napier's assertion that "certain texts of popular culture not only implicitly resist the ideology of the patriarchal Japanese super-state, but actually work to problematize it, if not to actively subvert it" (1998: 91).

Manga and anime have traditionally not been given as much attention as other forms of artistic expression, such as film and painting. Furthermore, even critics who have studied Japanese film in depth have a tendency to misunderstand anime. According to famed critic of Japanese film Donald Richie, "Japanese anime could be seen as the quintessential Japanese product...Animated cartoons are pure presentation, nothing actual or real is allowed near them...Perhaps that is the reason anime are so fast, and so violent, that they have to make themselves apprehendable through splash alone" (Pocorobba 1999: 19). Such a claim demonstrates the scant critical attention paid to animation, allowing it to be easily dismissed by scholars. Yet to characterize an entire medium in this way is absurd. There are as many different genres in anime as there are in the world of cinema, and to pigeonhole anime would be similar to pigeonholing live-action film. Some anime are quiet and thoughtful while others are

comedic; the anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* was a meditation on interpersonal relationships on a grand scale. The study of Japanese animation is important not only because it has become one of Japan's primary cultural exports to the rest of the world, but it is also valuable on its own artistic merits as well as providing a direct view of how Japanese culture is portrayed in their own media.

Presentations of Women in Japanese Media

Generally speaking, most anime series and films are created by men. It seems rather odd to imagine that the many strong women in anime are being intentionally promulgated as progressive feminist statements, because the masculine and feminine spheres are often kept quite separate in Japanese society. According to Anne Cooper-Chen, "In cultures like Japan's, women and men occupy different places; few women hold professional or technical jobs, and they tend to be segregated from men in education" (1997: 7). Because of such differentiation, one might expect that the entertainment media directed at the male and female spheres would be likewise segregated. However, this is not the case at all, and there actually seems to be quite a large crossover readership of manga, with a large number of works that appeal to readers of both sexes (Cooper-Chen 1997: 102). Thus, the strong woman in manga and anime could be seen as an attempt by the creators of the works to garner the maximum possible audience share. Anne Allison attributes the increase in female heroes in Japanese popular culture to, rather than a "greater feminist consciousness in Japanese society," an "increase in female manga artists in recent years as well as to the large consumer audience of girls who read, watch, and even write their own, fantasy stories" (2000: 268). Thus, the increase in strong female characters seems primarily due to the market pressures in Japanese consumer society. With an increased and attentive female audience, the creators must then take care to market effectively to both male and female audiences, often within the same show. This could explain the display of both strength and an increased objectification of the same women.

We must also keep in mind that despite the universal cultural similarities of science fiction, Japanese animation is generally made for domestic consumption in Japan, and thus any analysis must take into account this cultural relativity. In Anne Cooper-Chen's *Mass Communication in Japan*, she formulates five principles of how the Japanese media portrays women, which we should keep in mind during the analysis of *Bubblegum Crisis*, *Serial Experiments Lain*, and *Ghost in the Shell*:

1. *Women and men are evaluated differently*. Considering the language, the use of the noun form alone suggests the standard, meaning male, while the added adjective "female" or "woman" suggests something special. For example, Margaret Thatcher was not a prime minister but a "woman prime minister."

2. *Women are objects*. The camera's perspective is usually male. One story on new corporate hires showed the legs of new female employees and then panned up to their faces. Glamorous women are often depicted, while handsome men seldom are. Women are evaluated from a man's point of view in the media.

3. *Women are subordinate*. Standard news story style uses a man's full name ("Mr. Suzuki said") but only a woman's first name ("Sumiko said"). This shows the remnants of paternalism. In Japanese, a husband can still be called *shujin* (literally, master), and a wife, *kanai* (literally, "back in the house").

4. *A woman's ability is low*. Media sometimes use expressions such as "even a woman can do it" (it's so easy) and "even a man cannot do it" (it's so hard).

5. *A woman's place is in the home*. In commercial films, a woman's role is often in the house, where she is shown washing dishes, taking care of children and helping with the man's work. The media may comment that "marriage brings a woman happiness" but will never consider what marriage brings a man. (211-212)

Cooper-Chen's five principles point out the specifics of a generally subservient portrait of women in the Japanese mass media. Keiko Tanaka also points out that in marketing products to Japanese women, even the use of words such as "feminism," "intelligence," and "individualism" serve to reinforce traditional and conservative social values

rather than embodying what such terms imply in English (1990). Yet perhaps the Japanese media should not be considered to have so monolithic a viewpoint. John Clammer states in his article investigating how women are portrayed in Japanese magazines, "while the Japanese media present docile and disciplined bodies...they also present liberated ones" (1995: 216). Thus, there probably cannot be said to be one sole perspective the Japanese media takes when depicting women. Within this range of viewpoints, though, Cooper-Chen's five principles probably present some of the more basic general trends, and can be used as a starting point for the investigation of women in anime.

Japan and Cyberpunk

The three anime we will be looking at are all of the science fiction genre, existing in a possible future world extrapolated from our current world. Additionally, these anime can be further classified under the subheading of cyberpunk. Cyberpunk was originally a movement in American science fiction beginning in the early- to mid-1980s, the cornerstone of which was the publication of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984). One of the most concise definitions of cyberpunk was given in Bruce Sterling's introduction to *Mirrorshades*, the 1986 anthology of cyberpunk fiction he edited. In it, he states that beneath the technologically sophisticated surface of cyberpunk literary works are two recurring themes: the invasion of the body and the invasion of the mind, questioning what is meant by the terms "body" and "mind," which and "radically defin[es] the nature of humanity, the nature of self" (Sterling 1986: xiii). From its outset, cyberpunk fiction has had strong ties to Japan, even if these elements are merely on the surface. For example, *Neuromancer* begins its narrative in Chiba, a city in Japan, and introduces a further sense of cultural dislocation by the use of keywords such as *yakitori* (grilled chicken) and *shuriken* (throwing stars). The role of the corporation as adversary is also a theme in many cyberpunk works, and these corporations are sometimes referred to using the Japanese word *zaibatsu*. Additionally, cyberpunk is relevant to Japan because Japanese culture rapidly embraced cyberpunk ideas and fiction in the mid-1980s. In his essay "The Japanese Reflection of Mirrorshades," Takayuki Tatsumi states that:

Neuromancer was translated more quickly than most Anglo-American novels. And the more influential cyberpunk becomes, the shorter the translation time: thus *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, which Gibson published in October 1998, appeared in Japanese in February 1989. This is the primary point. The Japanese acceleration of translation was itself made possible by the effect of the cyberpunklike development of a global communication system–a system that endorses the synchronic nature of cyberpunk. (1991: 368)

..."[C]yberpunk" caught the eyes of so many people that it rapidly transgressed the boundaries of any generic categories, and came to refer to anything having to do with dead-tech environment, hypermedia activity, and outlaw technologists. It was, like cyberpunk itself, a semiotic ghost. (1991: 370)

Cyberpunk anime tends to be more sober in tone than anime of other genres, and participates in the global language of science fiction. Even though the anime we are examining were written and created in Japan, because they are science fiction, the burden of looking at them through the lenses of Japanese culture is minimized, as these anime tend to have a more futuristic, and hence international, flavor, as the current trend in speculative fiction seems to be toward increasing globalization. This fact of internationalization has even been explicitly acknowledged by artist Masamune Shirow, who drew the original manga for such Japanese cyberpunk films as *Appleseed* and *Ghost in the Shell*.[i] The conceptualization involved in cyberpunk is more of forging ahead, looking at the new global culture. It is a culture that does not exist right now, so the Japanese concept of a cyberpunk future, seems just as valid as a Western one, especially as Western cyberpunk often incorporates many Japanese elements.[ii]

Women in Anime

In her book *Samurai From Outer Space: Understanding Japanese Animation*, Antonia Levi touches briefly on the

theme of the strong woman in anime in the chapter "Outrageous Women." Unfortunately, this chapter is not a terribly detailed analysis of the woman as portrayed in anime, instead consisting mainly of a laundry list of events and series in which anime women are portrayed as "strong," regardless of the contexts surrounding these displays of "strength." Too often she evaluates the different anime she is examining by using the term "politically correct," a buzzword that means different things to different people and in the end signifies nothing. In summary, she says that the anime viewpoint of gender issues cannot "be defined as feminist or anti-feminist" (1996: 136). I agree with her assessment, although I must qualify that remark, as she hardly touches on the way in which the bodies of women are portrayed in anime, even while the very same women are being "strong."

Women who are strong and in control often seem to be fetishized in anime. The attraction of this type of woman seems to be inherent in their strength combined with a presentation of "feminine" attributes, most notably (and noticeably) the use of characters with large or prominent breasts. Some of these displays of strength can be accomplished through the use of accessories such as weapons. These armaments are often closely liked with power and masculinity, and as such can be seen as a phallic extension of the man. Therefore, guns and other similar weapons make one more masculine, more virile. The image of the physically threatening woman is an attempt to seize some of this power from men by being sexually intimidating. Violence is often a symbol of masculine power, and by utilizing such weapons, these women are then equating violence with masculinity. However, this display of power is balanced by the drawings of the women themselves, which often show the women displaying significant amounts of bare flesh, or being posed in sexual, nonthreatening ways. Thus, these images are both an appropriation of masculinity by women, and a reinforcing of it. Strong women are shown as being powerful, but never to the point that they cease to be feminine. Perhaps to reinforce the idea of femininity and take the edge off of the masculine connotations, these powerful women often feature exaggerated, curvaceous, and highly sexualized bodies. If these images are exploitative, do they detract from the issues of "strength?" When we, as the viewing audience, are invited to look upon a female character in a solely sexual way, the effectiveness of that character's displays of "strength" and "toughness" seem to be weakened. Through the emphasis of sexual displays and characteristics, we are provided with a simultaneous display of strength and vulnerability; sex tempers the strength, making the women seem tough, but not *too* tough.

The idea of looking at a female character in a sexual manner is an issue closely tied to the anime convention of "fan service," which is essentially the practice of interjecting "sexy" camera shots in generally non-sexual anime in order to please the fans. The term "fan service" can be defined as those scenes and shots of women in anime works that are meant to stimulate the male viewers of such works. However, fan service exists in U.S. live-action movies as well, even if it is not termed as such. For example, we can look at the scene toward the end of the original *Alien* film, in which Sigourney Weaver strips down to a small camisole and panties that barely cover her posterior. This scene seems to do little to further the plot, nor does it provide us with any insights into her character, but serves to reinscribe the idea of her femininity and vulnerability (Inness 1999: 107). Therefore, we must ask if "fan service" and "strength" can be maintained simultaneously. By presenting these female characters in such a sexually charged manner, we must ask if this is detracting from their status as symbols of power. Which takes precedence in the character – the empowering strength or the yielding sexuality that challenges no assumptions of how a woman should present herself?

Bubblegum Crisis

Of the three anime considered in this paper, *Bubblegum Crisis* is probably the most straightforward and raises the fewest psychological questions. It is a tale of four women, collectively called the Knight Sabers, who are mercenary soldiers in the city of MegaTokyo in the year 2032. The four members are: Priss, the toughest fighter of the group and a singer in a rock band; Linna, the most acrobatically skillful of the group, and an aerobics instructor; Nene, the physically weakest of the group whose expertise is computers and a member of the A.D. (or Advanced) Police; and Sylia, the leader of the group and the proprietor of a lingerie shop called the Silky Doll. The main conflict of the series centers on the large corporation known as Genom and one of their main products, Boomers, which are artificial mechanical organisms originally created to help mankind. However, sometimes

Boomers "malfunction" and begin running amok in the streets of MegaTokyo. In this case, the job falls to the A.D. Police, a special division of the regular police whose job is to deal with renegade Boomers and Boomer-related crimes, and who are often assisted by the Knight Sabers. The very premise of the series demonstrates a very cyberpunk ambivalence toward technology.

One interesting aspect of the Knight Sabers is their ability to constantly succeed where the A.D. Police (the fighting force of which is all male[iii]) consistently fail. One of the stated reasons for the Knight Sabers' success is the superiority of their armored exoskeletons, called hardsuits; these suits are not unwieldy hulking masses like those used by the police and the military in the series, but are instead very streamlined, forming to the shape of the human body. According to the storyline, Sylia designed the hardsuits based on work began by her father, who was also a pioneer in the design of the original Boomers. In a sense then, Sylia can be seen as the mother of the Knight Sabers, both in her role as the leader of the group and in being the person[iv] who fashioned the original hardsuits. The use of the suit and the power that comes with it are interesting for what they say about the male / female dichotomy at play in this work. It is the female that possesses the requisite power and flexibility in order to accomplish the job of saving the world from the rampaging Boomers, not the male. The male, represented by the A.D. Police, is stuck and immobile, both in terms of actual suits and in constrictive hierarchical organizations. The Knight Sabers are able to consistently defeat the Boomers specifically because the Sabers are able to adapt to new situations. In *Bubblegum Crisis*, this trait is clearly the mark of the feminine. In addition, one can tell that the suits of the Knight Sabers suits are very "womanly."[v] (See Figure 1.) Note the long, trim legs, visible hips, narrow waist, and breastplates. Also, their very color schemes appear to be rather feminine, tending toward the "cool" end of the color spectrum and consisting mainly of purples, blues, and greens.

Many cyberpunk texts deal with the future vision of the cyborg, and *Bubblegum Crisis* is no different. It is possible to see the Knight Sabers' hardsuits as a form of impermanent cyborg, one that cane be varied according to the needs of the wearer. This impermanence, however, allows the Knight Sabers to maintain some of the customary roles of the woman. While it is true that they are strong in battle, in their daily lives they seem to "forget" this, often affecting some of the more typically female Japanese mannerisms and speech patterns.. This provides a clear demarcation between the femininity of the real body and the masculinity of the technological body, showing that, at the core, the Knight Sabers are still real women.

One can see that in spite of the strength of the female characters, their bodies are clearly being depicted as objects, which was one of Cooper-Chen's criticisms of Japanese media portrayals of women. Not as much flesh is shown in *Bubblegum Crisis* as in some other anime series featuring gun-toting women (such as *Dirty Pair*), yet the male gaze is constantly present, albeit in an occasionally comical manner. This is represented by the character of Mackie, the little brother of Knight Saber leader Sylia, who is always hoping to catch his sister, or one of the other Knight Sabers, in a state of undress. This objectification can also be seen in a closer examination of the hardsuits. Figure 2 is an illustration of Priss used in numerous promotional shots and the cover of the first video. In this image, she is bursting out of her hardsuit, armed with both a pistol and a knife, which seems odd, as the implementation of such a pistol and knife do not appear anywhere in the series. (Such weapons would not be of much use in combat with a Boomer.) Rather, the weapons the Knight Sabers use are hardwired into their suits, many of them hidden in the hands or the forearms, and such weapons as pictured in the figure would be superfluous. Yet, the weapons are not drawn to provide the viewer with a true sense of threat because Priss is not brandishing them in a menacing manner. Rather, they seem to be mere accessories, an idea backed up by their lack of functionality in the show. Another item of note in the image is way the armor is fracturing off of Priss. The armor is flying away from its initial point of breaking, which in this case seems to be Priss' chest, drawing attention her partially exposed breasts. It almost seems as if Priss is so extraordinarily buxom that she is breaking out of her hardsuit. If one then also takes into account the almost playful look on her face and the high heels on what is supposedly an outfit designed for combat, it becomes clear that Priss' body is primarily being utilized for sex appeal.

It seems evident, then, that the male gaze is constantly present throughout *Bubblegum Crisis* (a situation which is

reflected in nearly all anime, as the majority of its consumers are male, although, as stated before, this is changing). Anne Allison looks at the issue of the male gaze in her book *Permitted and Prohibited Desires*, although her focus is mainly on the male gaze in cartoons specifically targeted at children. She looks at the depiction of sexual images within the context of Japanese society and the roles that males within the society are likely to occupy. One of the conclusions at which she arrives that is applicable to our discussion here is that "situating the male subject as a viewer and voyeur is not necessarily or unquestionably a practice of scopophilia [pleasure of looking] that empowers him" (1996: 49). In the anime examined in this paper, it is always the female who plays the active role; the few men there are in the anime are functionally impotent, as they are not the ones who are performing the main actions. In an analysis of the male gaze, it is the males who are passive, both in the anime itself as well as in the viewing audience. Even so, all of the examples Allison cites in her book consist of a form of humiliation for the female, such as the captain of a hockey team pulling down the pants of a girl in order to distract his opponents (1996: 42), which seems to be synonymous with the male gaze. Yet in none of these anime series is the male gaze in any way associated with any form of humiliation. Thus, I theorize that these anime do not empower the male viewer because these female protagonists are shown performing competently in positions of power, and even when they are being objectified, it is occurring in a way in which the male (usually the viewer) is placed in the subservient position of inactive observer (much like the role of the A.D. Police in *Bubblegum Crisis*).

Serial Experiments Lain

In *Serial Experiments Lain*, we are presented with a young girl, or *shMjo*, protagonist, a common image in manga and anime. The young girl is often projected as being strong and self-capable, even while sometimes exposing her more vulnerable sides. Such a protagonist is especially evident in the work of acclaimed anime auteur Hayao Miyazaki, and his films *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Winds* (1984), *Castle in the Sky* (1986), *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), and *Princess Mononoke* (1997) all feature self-sufficient young girls in leading roles. In discussing his decision to make the main character of *Nausicaä* a young girl, Miyazaki said that even though "making a young girl the heroine of the film might play into the hands of those who saw animation as antifeminist or simply as another chance to drool over young girls," having a male protagonist would impose "too many conventional ideas on the story" (McCarthy 1999: 79-80). Similarly, *Serial Experiments Lain* explores this idea of the young, competent female protagonist, in the title character of Lain, who becomes much more powerful than many of the previous shMjo presentations.

At first, it may seem as if *Serial Experiments Lain* is an odd choice for a comparison with *Bubblegum Crisis* and *Ghost in the Shell*. Unlike the main character of *Lain*, the protagonists of the other two anime are all much older, more mature women. The action in the other two anime tends to be much more physical, and more attention is given to the bodies of the women protagonists. However, *Lain* does share some characteristics with the other anime that makes a comparison worthwhile. The character of Lain is valuable for the insights into the treatment of the strong female, even while she is still developing into a woman. Although the focus on physicality is de-emphasized, it is still present, and the antagonists in *Serial Experiments Lain* are ominous, almost amorphous enemies, much like the corporations and government organizations in *Bubblegum Crisis* and *Ghost in the Shell*.

The world in *Serial Experiments Lain* is one very much like our own, where the adult/grown-up (and implicitly patricentric) society seems to be in control. Yet Lain is the one who has powers that nobody else has, which begin manifesting themselves when she begins her first tentative hacking exploits in the Wired (a term that is interchangeable with what has commonly come to be referred to as "the Net" or William Gibson's "cyberspace"). She begins exploring the Wired after receiving an e-mail from a classmate who had committed suicide. Lain soon learns that Wired is the hidden world, the world separated from our everyday experiences. Based on her own experiences and the fact that her classmate still seems to be leading some sort of existence in the Wired, Lain posits the theory that human beings are merely software, and that our bodies are disposable. Fairly early on, we see that Lain's powers are beginning to manifest themselves in the real world as well, exhibiting powers very similar to telekinesis. In the Wired, she meets a figure calling himself God, who does exhibit rather

divine powers. While we find out that even though he really does believe himself to be God, it is Lain who is actually the more powerful of the two. In the end, Lain realizes that humans are more than just software, and resets everything to the way it was before she began exploring the Wired, except that she erases the memory of herself from the minds of everyone she had met. Lain continues to exist in the Wired as a non-corporeal form, yet she retains control over events in the real world.

Serial Experiments Lain is an interesting series for its treatment of the tough young female, differing from some of those presented by Miyazaki. According to Frederik Schodt, "[c]ommercial animation in Japan puts a heavy emphasis on 'prepubescent female cuteness'" (1996: 279), and while we see these images of cuteness in *Lain*, Lain herself is not portrayed in a particularly cute style. In addition, the cute artifacts Lain possesses seem quite limited for a young girl. She has a row of stuffed animals above her futon, and she appears from time to time in a bear suit (it is never explained in the show, but it seems to function as a set of relaxation clothes or pajamas). Her room is devoid of decoration, save for the stuffed animals. She has no cute pink pillows, no posters of SMAP or other pop idols, no Sanrio character goods. In fact, Lain's friends express the tendency to try to look more grown up, rather than cuter. When Lain first meets her friends at a nightclub called Cyberia, they criticize her choice of clothing, saying that next time she will have to wear more adult clothes. Thus the cuteness factor is de-emphasized and a more clear view of the strong pubescent heroine is provided.

As Lain begins to spend more time in the Wired, it begins to become more of a part of her and begins to take her into itself. One way of viewing the character of Lain is as a child of the Wired. According to Claudia Springer, "Cyberspace also functions as a maternal substitute, surrounding the computer user with its all-encompassing embrace. By enveloping the body, cyberspace recalls the powerful sense of unity with the mother experienced by an infant before the disruptive awareness of its own separateness intervenes" (1999: 213). This concept of the embracing mother is made even more explicit in the closing credits of each episode of Lain. The first image we see of Lain in the credits is that of her sleeping peacefully on her side, her hands up by her face. As the credits roll and the camera pulls back, we see the larger picture: Lain is actually naked, posed in a very fetal-looking position, her arms and legs pulled up very closely to her body. Yet surrounding her are what appear to be the many plugs and wires of electronics and computer parts, their shapes made even more confusing by the surrounding darkness. As the camera pulls back even further, we see that Lain is the only person in the scene. There are a few lights strewn throughout the jumble of cables, but even these are rather dim, and the figure of Lain is the only real point of light we see. Yet Lain still looks very comfortable in her nest of wires, as if she is being warmly embraced by them, making her look more vulnerable and even younger than she is.

Lain begins as a young child of the Wired, but by the end of the series she is a mother figure herself. In the last episode after their encounter with "God," Lain nurtures her friend Arisu, reassuring her that everything will be all right. This mothering is not something inflicted upon her by an outside force; rather, it is a power that she discovers within herself. When Lain becomes non-corporeal, existing only in the Wired, her transformation into mother figure is complete. She can come and go in the real world at will, and we see her taking care of everyone who has appeared in the series, improving their lives. However, the nurturing mother does seem to be an almost stereotypical trope in presentations of Japanese popular culture, and such a presentation of character at first seems neither novel nor groundbreaking. However, customary portrayals of motherhood are usually not so powerful. When Lain becomes a mother figure, she has the ability to shape the entire physical world to her will. Although she no longer exists in the world herself, she is able to take an active and very participatory role in the events that do occur. In this sense, with her grand powers, she is able to nurture the entire world.

Ghost in the Shell

In *Ghost in the Shell*, we are presented with another vision of the cyberpunk woman, one that strikes a compromise between the all-out physicality of *Bubblegum Crisis* and the cerebralness of *Serial Experiments Lain*. The main character of *Ghost in the Shell* is Major Motoko Kusanagi, a government operative in the secretive branch called Section 9.[vi] Kusanagi is a cyborg; her body is almost entirely artificial, yet there remains, in theory, an organic

core of brain matter. The main plot of the movie involves Kusanagi's pursuit of the mysterious entity known as the Puppet Master, which turns out to be an artificial life form that evolved on the Net from a government program. In the end, Kusanagi and the Puppet Master somehow "merge," creating a new being. This new being, borne in the body of Kusanagi, is then immediately transferred to the shell body of a small cyborg girl when Kusanagi's body is destroyed by government soldiers. The film ends on an optimistic note: Kusanagi asks herself where she can go from here, responding, "The Net is vast and limitless."

The film version of *Ghost in the Shell* is certainly more responsive to a feminist inquiry than is the original manga by Masamune Shirow upon which the film was based. The original designs for Kusanagi show a much more youthful looking character; her hair is larger (the film gives her a very straight, almost masculine, cut), she has a rather diminutive nose, and she is drawn in a much more "cute" fashion. She is a protagonist typical of the type that populates Shirow's manga.[vii] Examining some of the works of Shirow, we can see an obvious sexual agenda at work. (See Figure 3 and Figure 4.) The girls portrayed are cute, even when they are trying to look mean. They are tough, but not too tough, and are never in any danger of sacrificing their femininity. Their external trappings help to give them an air of the forbidden, showing that they are "bad girls." However, they are bad girls for men to behold and about which to fantasize. They might be supplied with the cultural symbols of power, but they are never given the chance to utilize them effectively. They are never a threat to the masculine power structure. They are merely sexual pinups, made somewhat more exotic by their armaments. However, it is a somewhat difficult assessment to make, as these are just representative drawings; there is no context in which to place them, and all we have to go on is what is communicated directly via the image. The anime that have been based on Shirow's manga are somewhat more complimentary. For the film *Ghost in the Shell*, Character Designer and Key Animation Supervisor Hiroyuki Okiura said that he wanted to make Kusanagi appear more mature, in order to reflect the fact that she is "older than she looks."[viii] Her behavior has changed, too; she is no longer the character we are introduced to in the manga drinking sake with her crew at a cherry-blossom viewing party. She is less brash and much more introspective, which suits well the general tone of the film. This also helps to sever more ties to the manga Oshii may have felt was holding his story back.[ix] Oshii may have felt that the outright sexiness of Shirow's original characters would distract from the story in the film, and cut that which he did not feel fit.

However, this is not to say that Oshii completely de-sexualized the story in order to portray it onscreen. Another problem *Ghost in the Shell* presents us with in a feminist reading of the text is the view of Major's body: if we are to take her seriously, why is she shown in such a sexualized fashion? This problem is immediately apparent when one looks at the cover art of the American video release. It shows as obviously sexualized portrait of Kusanagi, with the majority of one of her breasts visible. This is accented by the copy that scrolls across the image, saying, "It found a voice... Now it needs a body." As it covers the remainder of the breast from being seen, the placement of the copy would seem to be for decency's sake. However, the placement has a more subtle purpose: by leading the eye to that specific part of the cover art, the copy actually accentuates Kusanagi's breast. Other themes in the movie play themselves out in the cover art as well. Kusanagi is armed with a small handgun, which, unlike the one Priss carries of the cover of the *Bubblegum Crisis* tape, she may actually implement. The fact that she is armed gives the video immediate appeal because it means Kusanagi is obviously "tough" in some way. Another theme illustrated through the cover art is that of technology and connectedness / disconnectedness. There are cables hanging behind Kusanagi, and there are wires entering her right bicep and left shoulder, which are exposed. In their exposure, we can clearly see that Kusanagi is not "human," that her body is something other than flesh and bone.

Interestingly enough, even though continually shown in a sexual manner, Kusanagi is never actually shown in the nude in the American version of the manga.[x] In the film version of *Ghost in the Shell*, though, it initially looks as though she does appear naked a number of times when using her thermoptic camouflage, posing a problem for a feminist reading of the film. In his article "Refiguring the Radical Cyborg in Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell*," Carl Silvio argues that while the film may appear to have a message of liberation on an initial reading, through its depictions of Kusanagi's body in a sexual manner, it really serves to reinscribe the traditional patriarchal roles

(Silvio 1999). Yet, upon closer examination, one can see that in many of the scenes Silvio mentions Kusanagi is not nude at all, but rather wearing technically advanced flesh-colored tights. An example of this can first be seen in the initial assassination scene; when Kusanagi disrobes, there appears to be a seam around her neck. This seam is not evident during Kusanagi's creation process in the opening credits (which does depict her in the nude, but not is a sexually suggestive fashion), nor when she is shown waking up immediately after the credits. The fact that Kusanagi is in fact wearing a body tight suit of some kind is even more readily apparent after she beats up the goateed man after the garbage truck sequence. When she turns off he camouflage, we can see that the seam has returned again, and the color of her body's flesh on her face and upper neck is slightly lighter than that on her torso. This can be seen yet again when she faces the tank in the Crystal Palace toward the end, although some of the suit does get ripped off of her in the course of the combat. Therefore, I do not think that Oshii's intention was to depict Kusanagi's body is a sexual fashion, as she is not nude as long as some critics have said she is.[xi] Her nudity at the very beginning and very end can be seen as completing a cycle. She was nude in the opening credits because she was being "born" and, like human beings, entered into this world in a state of undress. Similarly, her nudity toward the end of the film serves to close that part of her life, exiting the world (or rather changing from the entity known as Kusanagi) in the state in which she entered it. Thus, the nudity is not exploitative, but serves to make her more human, painting her as a sympathetic character. This sympathy with the audience also serves Kusanagi well in her new role as mother to the new life form that she becomes.

Cyberpunk Representations of Women

Joan Gordon, in her article "Yin and Yang Duke it Out," asserts that "cyberpunk is feminist science fiction" (1991: 196), drawing clear lines between cyberpunk and what she perceives as more "overt" feminist science fiction. Typically feminist science fiction has portrayed women as "in tune with nature, living in it, adapting to it [as] vegetarian, nonpolluting earth mothers, representatives of prepatriarchal nature religions" (1991: 196). In cyberpunk, on the other hand, "men and women travel as equals" (1991: 196), which "allows an escape from the present nostalgia for a distant and irrecoverable past" (1991: 197). However, one must wonder at what exactly Gordon means by traveling as equals. In the world of cyberpunk, the women are just as tough as the men, sometimes even more so. Yet this toughness may just be another male fantasy. Said Dani Cavallaro in her discussion of the "street samurai" character Molly in *Neuromancer*: "Arguably, the reason for this type of woman being popular among male consumers of action fiction is that she incarnates the ideal of a hard, sealed and thoroughly technologized female body and is thus able to counteract the sense of threat traditionally associated with the soft, leaky and unbounded natural body of woman" (2000: 124). Rather than being a danger to the patriarchal system, this technological woman is seen as being the safest of all possible choices, providing all the seductive feminine aspects and accoutrements with none of the potentially threatening (to the male) downsides.

One key factor of this technological woman is the vacillation between a sole focus on the maternal (see Balsamo 1996: 6-9) and the lack of any maternal aspect at all. Yet the maternal and the cyberpunk do appear to have some close association in all three anime being examined here. In Japan, it is generally the role of the mother to adjust her children to the norms of society (Allison 1996). In these anime, though, the protagonists can serve as role models for a new form of woman in society, one that is not bound by convention. It is possible to view Sylia, Lain, and Kusanagi as maternal figures, yet they are empowered ones. Their maternalism does not restrict them; quite the opposite. Often the criticism of motherhood is leveled at a character in a text in order to show how she is not as progressive as she may seem, but still ascribes to conservative traditional standards. My reasoning for mentioning motherhood is to do just the opposite. The positions of power in which these female protagonists are placed enhance their connections with the concept of motherhood, rather than motherhood being a detractive factor. Sylia is able to bring about the rise of the Knight Sabers in order to combat the Boomer crimes and the workings of Genom that the A.D. Police cannot handle. Lain is able to bring about an entirely different world and set things the way she believes things should be. Kusanagi is able to break free from the constraints of her controlling cyborg body and obtain one over which Section 9 and the government have no jurisdiction. Thus, in all three anime, it could be said that it is specifically because the main characters are women and are symbolically mothers that they

have a greater power. This is in direct contrast to the portrayal of motherhood in an anime with a more traditional theme, such as *Devil Hunter Yoko*, where motherhood and sexual fulfillment are depicted as synonymous with a loss of power (McCarthy and Clements 1998: 97).

It must be noted that what is occurring in these anime are not actual interactions with technology, but merely representations of them. Do representations of freedom actually engender and promote freedom in the real world? In their article on Japanese science fiction, Hull and Siegel state

Both technologically extrapolative and psycho-sociologically metaphorical science fiction are strongly represented in Japan today. The extrapolative tendency seems more oriented toward enthusiasm for the benefits or potential consequences of technology itself than for any social changes likely to by caused by that technology.... The psychologically or socially oriented science fiction of Japan likewise seems less concerned with the idea of change than does its American equivalent. The two strains reinforce our image of Japan–and the Japanese self image–as a traditionally stable culture where change occurs constantly, but change that concerns the pragmatic development of Japanese resources, leaving the essential Japanese personality and society unchanged. (1989: 262)

This would attest to the relative harmlessness of manga and anime to the established social order, in which these media are “a kind of inverse image of the Japanese, a way to gather and explore the collective wishful thinking” (Smith, Patrick 1997: 304). However, it does seem as if a change is occurring in Japanese science fiction that may reflect an actual change in the social system. In many ways, cyberpunk science fiction has been a prognosticator of changes to come. For example, in 1984, the image of cyberspace was just something William Gibson dreamed up by watching kids play video games, but now it is an actual entity with which thousands of people interacton a daily basis. Cyberpunk is an especially critical branch of science fiction because it is so closely tied into what is going on in the world *right now*. Thus it seems that cyberpunk anime may in fact presage an actual change for women in the social structure of Japan.

When we take another look at Cooper-Chen’s principles of how women are portrayed in Japanese media, we can contrast them with the portrayal of women in cyberpunk anime. The only point that seems to hold is the second one, stating, “Women are objects.” We have seen that most representations of women in anime carry with them some degree of objectification. However, each of the anime we have examined has contradicted at least one of Cooper-Chen’s points. In the cyberpunk world, women and men do seem to be treated as equals, as previously pointed out by Joan Gordon. In none of the anime are the women subordinate – they are the ones who are striking out to defeat the bad guy or chart new territories. Such actions also mean that the ability of the woman is not low; in fact, quite often it is only the women who continually succeed. Finally, in none of the anime are the women relegated to the home. The place of the cyberpunk anime woman is reaching out for the future.

Conclusion

It cannot be said that these works are representative of the medium of anime as a whole, nor even of cyberpunk anime. These three anime are a small sample of what is commercially available in the United States. It is very difficult to generalize about Japanese animation as a whole, particularly because there is so much of it out there. One could not say what is predominant in anime without an accurate view of everything that is out there, and certainly, from our vantage point in America, we cannot see the full picture. The anime that are brought over to the United States are those that are believed will sell well. It must be admitted that “tough” girls and shapely women toting futuristic weapons will sell well in the United States. For example, both *Bubblegum Crisis* and *Ghost in the Shell*, which have become “must-see” videos for any American anime fan, have been much more popular in the United States than they were in Japan. The prevalence of the strong woman character in anime may merely be due to economic considerations of what will sell well overseas. To accurately assess whether the theory that such images have to ability to empower women, a much larger-scale investigation into the anime industry would be required.

The strong woman is a common theme in Japanese cyberpunk animation. These women are unusual, in that they

contradict many of the customary ways women are portrayed in the Japanese media. *Bubblegum Crisis*, *Serial Experiments Lain*, and *Ghost in the Shell* do seem to, at times, break free from convention and offer a refreshing vision of the female. While this vision is not completely free from presentations of the strong female as sexual object, the strength of the female protagonists turns such liabilities into assets. Rather than having her freedom is proscribed by the manner in which her body is perceived, the strong woman in cyberpunk anime seems to be a subversive and potentially liberating element.

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[i] "'*Appleseed* and *Ghost in the Shell* are relatively international works,' says Shirow. 'They transcend national boundaries. Even native speakers may have different reactions to the multiple meanings I've built into the story through the Japanese characters.'" (Ledoux 1997: 39)

[ii] For a short but interesting analysis of the Japanese themes in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, see Cavallaro 2000: 151.

[iii] While Nene is an employee of the A.D. Police, she is not out on the front lines, physically combating Boomer crimes as she does with the Knight Sabers. We are usually presented with an image of Nene as accessing computer data banks and pushing paper; the closest she gets to the action in the A.D. Police is being assigned to traffic duty at a road blockade surrounding an incident.

[iv] Whether of not Sylia is a "person" in the "human being" sense of the word has been a matter of some debate; it has been suggested the Sylia is a Boomer herself, created by the man identified as her father.

[v] This is in contrast to Annalee Newitz's assertion in her article "Anime Otaku: Japanese Animation Fans Outside Japan," based on a misinterpreted snippet of dialogue, that the Knight Sabers' hardsuits actually obscure the femininity of the team (Newitz 1994).

[vi] In the *Ghost in the Shell* manga, Section 9 is a "special power-suit assault force.... [formed to] identify the source of criminal activity and eliminate it" (Shirow 1995: 50). However, the purpose of Section 9 in the film is somewhat more ambiguous, and lacks the ubiquitous presence of the *fuchikoma* (the semi-autonomous power suits) found in the manga.

[vii] "...Shirow's works teem with sleek femmes dressed in skintight battlesuits, personal mecha worn like armor, military hardware, cyber-hacker gear, and virtual reality special effects" (Ledoux 1997: 38).

[viii] From "The Making of *Ghost in the Shell*," a special feature included on the American release of the *Ghost in the Shell* DVD.

[ix] I think this film can be said to be the work of the director in a way that very few manga-to-anime adaptations are. Said Oshii: "When I decided to direct the film, I went to see Shirow–and Shirow is very famous for not going out to meet his public...I asked him to please, let me direct the film in my own style, with my own ideas–and he agreed, so I was able to proceed. I had the freedom to put *Ghost* into my world, without having to further ask his approval" (Horn 1997: 137).

[x] In the original Japanese manga, on the other hand, there was a virtual lesbian sex scene with Kusanagi and two of her friends. This was cut for the American version of the manga (with Shirow's full approval and cooperation) due to economic factors. If these pages had been included, they would have necessitated a "Mature Readers Only" warning, which, in the past, has been known to cause up to a forty percent reduction in sales (Smith, Toren 2000).

[xi] This error was made in both Carl Silvio's article and in Roger Ebert's review of the film, in which he drastically overstated the case and said Kusanagi was "almost continuously nude" (Ebert 2000).

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