

Impotence Culture – Anime
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Whenever I try to explain what I think about Japanese animation (*anime*), I find myself at a loss. *Anime* has a complex cultural profile. Grasping exactly where it came from, and how it is developing today, is terribly hard.

In the beginning, clearly, *anime* was heavily influenced by American animators such as the Fleischer brothers and Walt Disney, yet it is hard to see this influence init today. It has developed into a vibrant form unique to Japan, to the point where the world “anime” has become a proper noun. Further, anime’s intertwining connections with other Japanese subcultural genres such as manga (comic books) and video games are so deep and complex it is hard to know where to draw the line between one subculture and the other.

In the past several years, many artists, mostly based in Asia, have begun to create anime-inspired art. This art responds to the complex milieu of its progenitor in varying degrees. Yet the desire to understand even a part of the deep cultural forest of anime is to me, perhaps surprisingly, as pure and creative a motivation as the artistic drive to capture the beauty of a landscape or a nude with the rough tools of the art. Indeed it is a creative motivation I sometimes share. But the modern art scene’s desire to understand the subculture of anime will not stop with the pure-hearted creation of art. No, we must peel back anime’s skin, strip away the flesh layer by layer, carve into its bones, and analyze its very marrow before we are satisfied.

Anime productions are released one after another in video games and on television, targeting every age group – anime with stunning effects, anime on occasion so excessively violent and sexually charged that it has become a social problem. Yet behind the flashy titillation of anime lies the shadow of Japan’s trauma after the defeat of the Pacific War. The world of anime is a world of impotence. I would like to take a look at this creative marrow of impotence, while talking about animators and peculiar developments in the anime they make their life’s work.

In 1974, the televised anime show *Uchusenkan Yamato* (Space Battleship Yamato) changed the face of Japanese animation overnight. Fans sprang up everywhere, much like the “trekkies” of *Star Trek*, and a theatrical version of the anime was soon produced. The movie was a bigger hit than either the fans or the producers could have dreamed. A sequel was made, and a magazine, *Animage*, was created to cover the phenomenon. The birth of *Animage* sparked today’s late-teen anime culture, and, it could be said, paved the way for the rise of *otaku* or “nerds,” one of the most bizarre facets of Japan’s postwar subcultural history. *Animage* examined, analyzed, and discussed anime from every possible angle: who are the directors? How is work divided between animators? What shows are the most popular? How does someone become a voiceover actor? Learning from the techniques of anime creators, the magazine’s readers soon began making their own 8mm animated shorts, critiquing works in the pages of fanzines and producing parodies. Although at an amateur level, the audience had made a tentative first step onto the stage.

Though the success of *Uchusenkan Yamato* owed a lot to the steady endorsement of its fans, its mixed-media promotion was also remarkable. At the time, late-night radio was the life pulse of the youth subculture. The night before the movie release, a live preview drama was broadcast on *All-Night Nippon*, one of the most popular radio programs. During this broadcast and also in newspaper articles, it was released that moviegoers would receive prints of animation cels (formerly thrown out after a movie was completed) on a first-come-first-serve basis. The night before the film's release, eager fans formed lines to wait for the first screening. The size of the turnout was entirely new.

Through their fanzines and homemade anime, these fans had inspired a theatrical remake of a TV series. In their active ability to effect change, they already had far more power than they had possessed before, and possibly even the potential to have more. As more anime were released in the hopes of a second *Yamato*, *Animage* took note of this fan activity and launched a campaign to follow fan involvement in the theatrical release of one of these new anime, *Kidou Senshi Gundam* (Mobile Suit Warrior Gundam). Detailed reports followed of high school students, college students, and working people who led "anime life-styles" dressing in costumes based on characters in the movie. The night before *Gundam's* release, like-minded youths gathered in the movie lines, transforming them into a night-long party in honor of the film's director, Yoshiyuki Tomino, and creating dedicated costume players and *otaku*.

Speaking of *otaku*, where did the practice of calling anime devotees by this name, which is close to the English word "nerd," come from?

From the beginning there was a crossover between anime fans and fans of science fiction in general. Part of the success of *Uchusenkan Yamato* was due to the depth of its setting, replete with science fiction jargon such as "warp drive" and "wave beam" (taken from the original anime by Leiji Matsumoto). The show's producers had wanted to create a science fiction work of true substance – a dedication that fans appreciated and were even moved by.

Otaku critic Toshio Okada claims that Studio Nue, responsible for assisting with the mechanical designs used in *Yamato*, was the prime origin of all that is *otaku*. Let us take a brief look at this studio, the cradle of *otaku* culture. The first generation of artists at Studio Nue included the science fiction novelist Haruka Takachiho, most famous for his work *Crusher Joe*, Kazutaka Miyatake, the mechanical designer for *Seisenshi Danbain* and other works; the science fiction illustrator Naoyuki Kato; and Ken'ichi Matsuzaki, the scriptwriter for the first *Gundam* movie. The second generation at Studio Nue, headed by Masaharu Kawamori and including Haruhiko Mikimoto and others, was responsible for creating *Chojiku Yosai Macross* (Super-Dimensional Space Fortress Macross), truly a product of the *otaku* generation. With the next *Yamato* or *Gundam* in mind, these two entered the industry and began their professional work while they were still registered as students at Keio University in Tokyo.

Keio is known as one of the more upstanding and relatively upper-class institutes of learning in Japan. In tune with their somewhat aristocratic surroundings, Kawamori

and Mikimoto used the classical, refined second-person form of address “*otaku*,” in preference to “*anata*,” the usual form of address. Fans of the studio’s work began using the term to show respect toward Studio Nue’s creators, and it entered common use among the fans who gathered at comic markets, fanzine meetings, and all-night line parties before major anime movie releases. The subculture critic Ako Nakamori later used it derogatorily to refer to anime and science fiction fans, who subsequently started referring to themselves that way, half derogatorily, half proudly. Now true *otaku* culture was born. The image of the *otaku* in Japan is that of an overweight, clumsy addict of computer games or other media who groups with like-minded people, all sharing an utter lack of the necessary communication skills that might allow them to relate to the outside world. Cut off in this way, the *otaku* pour all of their energy into the anime and *otaku* worlds, showing fervent devotion to successful titles and forming a market 1,000,000 strong. (This market is currently swelling to a sizeable 20,000,000 people.)

In addition to Tomino, director of *Gundam*, other well-known creative talents in the anime industry include Hayao Miyazaki, the director of *Tonari no Totoro* (*My Neighbor Totoro*); Mamoru Oshii of *Ghost in the Shell* fame; and Hideaki Anno, the creator of the television of movie series *Evangelion*. Anno was a member of the first generation of self-aware *otaku*. At the time, he was a student at the Osaka University of Art, surrounded by people joined in an almost conspiratorial devotion to creating more *otaku*. His fellow alumni include, first, Toshio Okada, originally an *otaku* critic who later became the driving force behind the creation of the venture animation-production company Gainax. Second might be Yamaga Hiroyuki, the director of that company’s first theatrical release, *Oritsu Uchugun – Honneamise no Tsubasa* (*The Wings of Honneamise – Royal Space Force*). Another is Takami Akai, the character designer for the game *Princess Maker*, where players create and virtually raise a girl to become a princess. This game has been a record-breaking hit for Studio Gainax. In addition to these three, many other core members of the company who wore the crown of *otaku* and chose animation as their artistic medium got their start doing amateur work at the same university. This, then, all leads to the now legendary science fiction convention DAICON.

DAICON is the Osaka installment of a traveling exhibition that moves throughout the country each year. Based on similar conventions in the U.S., the exhibition attracts science fiction fans from across the country, filling up hotels, participating in stage events and panel discussions dressing up as their favorite characters, holding all-night video screenings, and selling fanzines on the exhibition floor. The first convention opening ceremony into which Anno and his staff poured all their effort was the opening animation for DAICON 3 in 1990 (ed.: should be 1980) The animation, clearly well above amateur creations in its level of quality, was received with the highest praise by the audience of fans. No standard media had been set for the opening show in previous years, but the impact of this presentation established the traditional of an opening animation at every DAICON.

The opening animation at DAICON 4, in 1991, (ed.: should be 1984) was a distillation of all that was *otaku* at the time into an 8mm animated move just under five minutes in length. Hiroyuki and Anno had gone to Tokyo to participate as staff on Studio

Nue's production of *Chojiku Yosai Macross*. Returning to Osaka, they directed all the know-how they had gained during that time into making this opening movie, remarkable for its decidedly nonamateurish concept, composition, technique, and exceptional quality. Combining science fiction themes, live action and *anime*, it was a kind of catalog of "symbolic *otaku* elements" presented tongue-in-cheek to an enthusiastic audience of anime and *otaku* fans. Akai also brought the *otaku* in the audience live, Lolita-faced girls dressed in bunny girl suits.

The movie was a work of storytelling, drawing the audience into the world of the *otaku*. A particularly memorable scene was a hand-drawn animated copy of a famous archive film of an A-bomb test carried out by the U.S. military. This scene had played over and over throughout the '70's on Japanese television. In the original film, a small house is shown being hit by a shock wave from the explosion and blowing into bits. In the DAICON 4 version, however, the explosion takes place in a familiar cityscape somewhere in Japan. In the wake of an explosion that sends buildings disintegrating and flying, green trees miraculously spring up from the earth. Then, on the land now covered with green, innumerable sci-fi character gather together for a grand finale. This experimental image combined *otaku* sexuality, tastes, and a final catharsis all in one package. The scene of the explosion and shock waves already existed – the staff had made it for use in *Chojiku Yosai Macross*, and similar scenes appeared in Gainax's later commercial animated films. In a sense, the oft-maligned *otaku* of Japan had managed to retain an understanding of the trauma of Japan's defeat in World War II, albeit an understanding encased in the easily digestible gel capsule of science fiction. In other words, the opening animation at DAICON 4 was a self-portrait of the *otaku* and, at the same time, an honest, indeed naked self-portrait of the defeated citizens of Japan.

In hindsight, we can clearly see that *Uchusenkan Yamato* is a story of the resurrection of the warship *Yamato*, sunk during World War II before it even joined battle. *Gundam*, too, is a story of the birth of a human "newtype" with superpowers in the wake of a space war, gave the *otaku* a dream to flow, and provided a sort of psychological escape zone for defeated spirits by equating the newtypes with postwar Japanese. These core *otaku* works remain a considerable influence today.

Japan – a country weakened, made impotent in its defeat. The more anime has attempted an honest understanding of this impotence, the more ripples it has caused, and the more the *otaku* have been shunned within Japanese society. Neither the *otaku* nor the *otaku*-haters realize that these works are merely a form of self-portraiture. No, they actively don't want to realize it.

Is this the same as or the opposite of famous American cartoonists who pull characters, so enduring in the world of today, from the nightmare of drug addiction? Nowadays, even *otaku* culture has produced several characters that can compete with American cartoon icons on equal footing.

The pillars of Japan's postdefeat culture of impotence, *otaku* and *anime* rely on that rich soil and (unlike Disney) the dark side of dreams-made-real. With these as their

weapons, they have seized an enormous entertainment market and are developing into a deep cultural forest, attracting and enticing even fine artists with its potential. *Otaku* and *anime* have been appropriated as a Disneyesque escape mechanism from reality. Yet they continue, and will continue in the future, to grow as a culture of impotence.