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Anime: Fortress of Solitude or Kryptonite?

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Fortress of Solitude or Kryptonite

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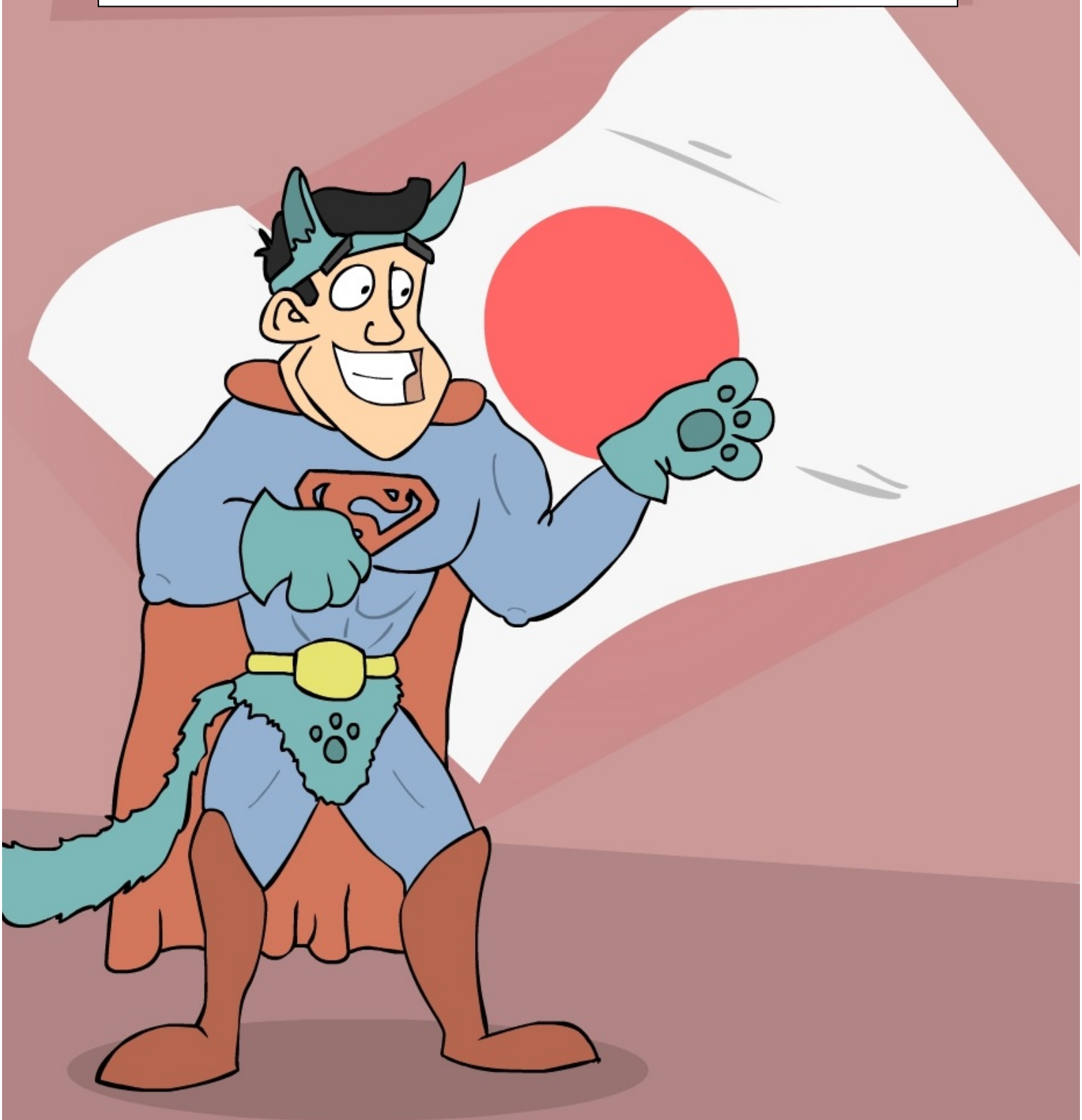

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THESIS

Anime is simultaneously therapeutic and toxic. It is therapeutic in its function as a stronghold into which a viewer can flee the cruelties of reality; it is toxic in its propensity to lure those same viewers into a state of disassociation from reality. Anime is the fan's safest haven as well as his most dangerous foe. It is a fantasy realm that offers the same comfort as a fairy tale, and yet it bears under its wooly exterior fangs that sink in and do not let go. It is a fan's Fortress of Solitude, but one that he must remain wary of as the walls just might be lined with Kryptonite.

CHAPTER 1

Anime as a Complex Medium[1]

Animation is an effective story-telling medium because it is simultaneously ephemeral and visual. It is not bound by the constraints of reality – as is film – nor need it be perceived on a completely imaginary level – as is literature. Instead, animation is both visual and free from notions of an outside reality.

Something is lost in translation from mind to word. No novel perfectly articulates the imagination of its author. Words paint mental images that are not identical to those of the author, because no two people imagine things in the same way.

Film – as a visual medium – is based on assumptions of underlying reality. There is unspoken normality beneath every film. These same underlying premises are absent from animation. Animation is visual and it is separate from reality: it paints the clearest picture of the creator's imagination.

Japanese anime in particular takes advantage of this imaginative window. Giant robots fight other giant robots; people's hair changes color; characters transform into magical girls; aliens play card games with school children.

Figure 1: Example of the Anime-Space

No matter how good a film's CGI technology, a scene like the one portrayed in Figure 1 could never function effectively in a film. It is too obscure, too weird, and too disjointed from reality. In any medium apart

[1] **Summary of Chapter 1:**
Unlike other story-telling mediums, anime is not based in reality. This allows it to function in an 'anime space' in which everything (no matter how obscure) is possible. It is a complex art form with roots in Japanese visual tradition. Anime propagandizes traditional Japanese values and simultaneously subverts them.

from animation, this scene would be completely impossible. In anime, however, scenes like this one not only occur but they add to the fantastical elements that characterize the medium.

Animation does not need any references to an outside reality because it contains within itself its own reality (Napier 24, 26, 34). Anime scholar Susan Napier enumerates this separation between anime and reality, and she further stresses the importance of animation as a medium because of its ability to become the pure embodiment of its creator's imagination. Napier argues:

> An even more important aspect of animation is that, compared to other twentieth-century visual media, is it explicitly nonreferential… In animation, there is no underlying expectation of any kind of normality. Characters may expand, shrink, or transform. Pigs can fly and cats can talk. The universe can take on the form of a gigantic human being before ones' very eyes. (Napier XII)

In this anime realm, there is no sin. Violence, gore, explicit sexuality and so on occur without threatening any natural balance because anime is separate from reality. At the same time, however, anime affects reality. It is not real and yet it affects the real and thereby becomes a modern fairy tale genre in its ability to provide an escape, a comfort, and a vicarious experience to viewers. Before I can discuss this, however, I will first articulate what makes Japanese anime special apart from other animation mediums. Namely, its Japaneseness.

Anime is clearly Japanese in reference to Japanese societal norms. On this level, it functions nearly as a propagandizing force that subconsciously instills in its viewers a traditional normative perspective of Japanese culture. Oftentimes, the woman stays in the home, and the man goes to work. The woman is kind, soft-spoken, and the man stoic and economical Characters conform to traditional Japanese gender and societal roles.

In the vein of distinctly Japanese characteristics, many anime are rife with Japanese spirits, visions of the ancient Japanese past, and the code of warriors also known as Bushido. *Inuyasha* is one such anime. It takes place in the Japanese past when spirits from Japanese lore run rampant. There are *youkai* (demons), *akuma* (devils), *miko* (traditional Japanese shrine maidens), samurai and monks, and all of these from Japanese tradition.

Furthermore, anime's pervasive aesthetic of transience – also known as *mono no aware* – is very Japanese. This visual tradition involves falling sakura petals, rain, snow, flowers damasking and the like. This aesthetic hails from ancient Japanese art and is represented in anime as transforming characters. Goku from *Dragon Ball Z* transforms once, twice, three-four-five times just in the first season. He turns into a monkey, into a red-aura-ed fighter, a golden haired warrior, and then again and again and again. He does not stay the same, thus embodying the transient nature so characteristic of the Japanese *mono no aware*.

In addition but not contrary to this, anime is subversive in nature. While some traditional values are propagandized, others are undermined in entirety. The grandfather-figure – one supposedly demanding utmost respect – is reduced to a perverted dwarf, as seen in *Ranma ½*. Delinquents become heroes in the social sphere, as seen in *Great Teacher Onizuka*. Some characters depart entirely from gender roles as they change sexes at random times, as seen in *Gacha Gacha*. Traditional gender and social roles become malleable as anime toys with them on every level. In this normative-yet-subversive manner, anime becomes a complex art form that is revolutionizing story-telling on a global level. As I will cover at a later point in this paper, the *shoujo* (young girl) figure is particularly interesting because she is forced into the space traditional for Japanese women on one level, and on the other, she challenges everything Japanese patriarchy preaches.

This is not to suggest that anime is grounded in reality. It affects, reflects, and undermines reality, but it is not based in reality. It is here that anime differs from other forms of animation. Japanese anime is of an "anime world" as it breaches cultural boundaries and invites people, regardless of nationality, to become citizens. Oftentimes, anime has no distinctive cultural bearing other than that the aesthetic style has come to be classified as Japanese. The term, *mukokuseki* translates to 'statelessness' and describes the Japanese-less quality of the anime world. At a glance, the characters are not Japanese. They have big eyes, unrealistic proportions, and exaggerated expressions that are distinctly different from those of the Japanese people.

For example, older anime such as *Astro Boy* do not exemplify Japanese cultural norms. At a glance, it does not appear to take place in Japan. It does not have clearly Japanese characters. This series does not embody Japaneseness. Series such as this one are as culturally odorless as the imaginary worlds they inhabit.

Newer anime like *Ouran High School Host Club* do not appear Japanese. The aesthetic is Japanese – as seen in the constant use of grids in shadows, windows, and so on as well as the *mono no aware* transience – but the atmosphere is Western. The art is European. The manners are European. An unknowing viewer might mistake it for a British satire and not a Japanese export because it is odorless.

This draw toward odorless-ness is not surprising given the time of anime's birth and the post-World War Two stigma toward the Japanese. Following the war, distinctly Japanese products did not sell well internationally. Combined with post-war questions about Japaneseness and the Japanese identity, anime became an odorless entity that neither promoted the identity of old Japan, nor knew the identity of new Japan.

Anime is thus not based on outside reality. On one level it promotes Japanese norms, and on another level it subverts them. At the same time, it occupies an ‘anime space’ that is culturally odorless. If this was not complex enough, anime is still Japanese. It is stateless in that it does not appear distinctly Japanese at a glance, but Japanese influences lurk beneath the surface. One thing remains: anime is a complex storytelling medium that is exploding on a global scale: it is therapeutic, and it is toxic.

Figure 2: Traditional Japanese Monk portrayed in Inuyasha

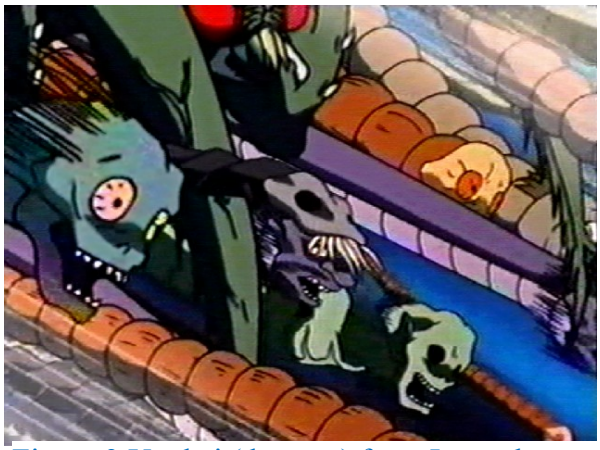

Figure 3 Youkai (demons) from Inuyasha

Figure 4: Traditional Japanese Miko

CHAPTER 2

Worldwide Consumption[2]

The modern sense of temporality – or lack thereof – between international consumers of pop culture is of particular interest to my research. According to Beng Huat Chua, sociologist at the National University of Singapore, the effect of pop culture resides in its power to be received (14). It is a product; it is a lifestyle; it is a method by which close cultural proximity emerges (Chua 14). Chua notes an example in which the Taiwanese (after consuming Japanese pop culture) described a feeling of close cultural proximity with Japanese culture; by comparison, the Japanese felt distant from the Taiwanese and perceived the same pop culture phenomenon as a melancholic journey through the roots of Japanese higher culture (Chua 11). In this manner, pop culture is both intimate and disaffiliated. Pop culture thus is an amorphous entity that is perceived in a variety of ways on a global spectrum.

Pop culture is the culture of the masses. Culture is the manifestation of a society's intellectual and artistic proclivities. Pop culture is the same, and it further functions as a vehicle by which additional, miniature cultures form. Furthermore, it is an informal consensus of culture consumed by the majority. It is a mass entertainment consumer product. Something does not need to be purchased, sold, or traded to be within the vein of pop culture: it only needs to be known by a majority.

Koichi Iwabuchi, professor of media and cultural studies at Monash University, argues that a pop culture export is a terrifying thing because it functions as pseudo-propaganda due to its tendency to enrapture the citizens of foreign cultures (Iwabuchi 27). Even countries that claim cultural neutrality of exports cannot free themselves from this quandary (Iwabuchi 26). As

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[2] **Summary of Chapter 2:**
Pop culture effectively establishes close cultural proximities on a global scale. Anime is particularly effective in accomplishing this result.

Iwabuchi argues, the cultural effect of a pop culture export "has more to do with widely disseminated symbolic images of the country of origin" (27). Pop culture abroad functions as a stereotypical lens by which consumers garner an interest – or lack thereof – in a foreign way of life.

These perceptions of a culture garnered from pop culture references are often skewed by the lens of stereotype. Pop culture does not necessarily reflect a country's ethos. As a fan of hermeneutics I must add a caveat that something must be understood within the exigent circumstances of its birth in order to be understood at all. Ultimately, the question that we need to ask is this: How does pop culture inform culture, and vice versa?

The effect of pop culture on foreign communities informs global culture. Obviously. No surprises there. Its greatest international effect is not accurately portraying its nation's culture. Its greatest international effect is making foreign viewers want to study in the country of the pop culture's origin.

Pop culture becomes an opening through which an individual seeks knowledge of the exporting culture. Pop culture thus functions as a window to globalization. The remaining question: Why? What about anime in particular is so effective on a global spectrum? I believe that this effect comes from the 'fairy tale effect' that I will enumerate in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3

The Fairy Tale Effect[3]

According to fairy tale scholar, Jack Zipes, fairy tales belong to everyone (360-361). He claims, "Fairy tales are supposed to depict or prescribe for us what is true, as well as what forms of behavior are typical , normal and acceptable," and furthermore, "[Fairy tales] confine and limit us, narrowing our views of reality while allegedly giving us greater insight into the other, into ourselves, or into humanity… We all claim fairy tales in every individual act of telling and reading" (360-361). The fairy tale belongs to the creator, the teller, and the listener. Everyone who participates in a fairy tale claims it as his own. Anime functions in a similar way. It allows viewers to claim it, to live it, to recreate it.

Bruno Bettelheim, fairy tale psychoanalyst, claims, "Fairy stories do not pretend to describe the world as it is, nor do they advise what one ought to do… The fairy tale is therapeutic because the patient finds his *own* solutions, through contemplating what the story seems to imply about him and his inner conflicts at this moment in his life" (Bettelheim 25). Anime, with its disconnect from reality, functions in the same way, as I will enumerate through analysis of each genre within the medium starting with that of *shoujo*.

The shoujo megagenre propagandizes Japanese traditional gender norms while simultaneously subverting them. The shoujo or "young girl" maintains balance in the home. She sustains the civil structure and is the ruler over the events within the domestic sphere. Just as Hera is the goddess of the hearth in classic Greek mythology, the woman is also the hearth or 'the back of the house' in Japanese culture. The shoujo subgenre is further disposed to display

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[3] **Summary of Chapter 3:**
Anime is therapeutic because it is a modern fairy tale genre. Fairy tales are therapeutic because they become the property of readers and tellers and thus allow these participants to find their own solutions to problems. As a medium, anime contains several traits commonly found in fairy tales and thus functions as a modern fairy tale genre. This fairy tale effect allows anime to become a safe space in which a viewer can deal with the harshness of reality.

the protagonist as ordinary, cute, and in a tumultuous state within the domestic world. The character thus becomes a mirror by which the viewer can see herself. Anime becomes a medium that shows a young Japanese girl the events yet to occur in her future. The protagonist – often clumsy, plain and unfit to work as either a mother or wife – finds true love and becomes gentle, meek, and apt in the household. Whereas shounen anime – anime targeting young boys – focuses on quests and battles for the fate of the world, shoujo anime instead revolves around finding one's place in the home space. It celebrates passive power and service to the community, family, and significant other.

Furthermore, there are a number of distinctly fairy tale tropes present in this megagenre: groups of five, absence of mother, 'princess scenarios,' mystical animal helpers, and magic items. This all-to common 'group of five' resembles the personification of a segmented personality found in tales such as Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*.

These 'groups of five' are often composed by members who are respectively smart, clumsy, tough, tomboyish, and charismatic, though the specific characteristics of each member differ depending on interpretation. Regardless, the groups consist of five characters that are stereotypes of five respective emotional/character archetypes. This fragmentation of character is strikingly similar to that of the seven dwarves in Disney's *Snow White*.[4]

The dwarves that take care of the young princess in Disney's film are aptly named: Doc, Dopey, Bashful, Grumpy, Sneezy, Sleepy, and Happy. Seven characteristics that, when combined, form one fully functional personality. The same is true of the members of the 'group of five.' Separate, the character function as a means for comic relief. They are flat as can be and relatable in some capacity to all viewers. Together, however, they form one cohesive group. One

[4] Although some may argue that Disney does not effectively characterize fairy tale tropes, as far as this discussion is concerned an analysis of Disney's characters is still pertinent as Disney is a worldwide pop culture powerhouse. Therefore, true to fairy tale or not, it is important to my research to note the comparisons between it and anime.

body that functions in every propensity as a high-functioning member of society, able not only to protect the domestic sphere (as is characteristic of the Japanese female) but independent and self-satisfied as well.

As stated earlier, shounen anime focuses on action, quests, and trials with the fate of the world hanging in the balance. It is a megagenre rife with sex and battle fantasies (Napier 196). As shounen anime are primarily intended for male audiences ages ten to eighteen, power trips are natural. At what point is a male in the least control of his life? Adolescence, when even the freedom over his own body is stripped from him by the ravages of puberty. At this point in his life, the boy must not only contend with the pressures of school and increasing familial responsibility, but also the effects of puberty that strip him of even his most fundamental freedom – that of his body.

Shounen anime thus reflect and subvert images of adolescent boys with increasingly prevalent battle and sex fantasies characterized by multiple series of transformations. The boy is changing (puberty) and thus the characters change, transform, and evolve.

The protagonists of shounen anime go to school. They are almost always good at heart and, despite their often rowdy, delinquent natures, they are reformed or redeemed. Girls are otherworldly creatures, and the most beautiful of them fall in love with the most ordinary, the most clumsy, the most underpowered male characters (Napier 196). Shounen anime tell the viewer that everything will be okay. They will transform, they will fall in love, they will be redeemed and they will succeed. Anime – shounen especially – allows the naïve protagonist a space in which he can safely come of age. As Bettelheim argues, "[the fairy tale] projects the relief of all pressures and not only offers ways to solve problems but promises a 'happy' solution will be found" (Bettelheim 36). Anime relieves pressure just as fairy tales do. Furthermore,

Napier articulates that "As scholar Lynn Spigel says of the suburban sitcom during the 1960s in America, 'the fantasy sit-com provided a cultural space in which the anxieties about everyday life could be addressed, albeit through a series of displacements and distortions"' and shounen anime functions very much to this effect as I have already enumerated (Napier 196).

In the realm of fantasy fulfillment, the fantasy subgenre of anime is perhaps the least fantastical of all. Commonplace fantasy anime spotlight a normal human boy or girl who is sucked into a fantasy realm. It is here that the character – often a social reject in their home world – finds his/her place as a hero. In the same manner that a viewer is sucked into the anime he views, the characters are sucked into these strange new worlds where they not only survive, but thrive. It is not uncommon for these protagonists to become super-powered. The weakest human on earth suddenly is 'the chosen one' and inherits powers unrivaled. Similarly with the fan: real life people sucked into anime are incredibly powerful as they are the ones in control of the industry.

Figure 5: Sword Art Online

Recently popular series, *Sword Art Online* (shown in Figure 5), contains a similar notion. *Sword Art Online* began as a light novel – a Japanese story written with simple words and the occasional picture – and, after becoming extremely popular, was adapted into an anime that achieved incredible commercial success.

The story revolves around a Virtual Reality Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing (VRMMORPG) game called "Sword Art Online." The players within this virtual game suddenly lose the ability to log-out and are thus trapped within the virtual space. In order to escape, they

must beat the game and, should their avatars die, they perish in reality. The protagonist, a player named Kirito, quickly becomes one of the game's highest-ranking players.

In this manner, *Sword Art Online* reflects the modern anime fanbase. Even as the characters vanish into this horrific death game, there is a present atmosphere of wonder and even jealousy. How cool would it be to be inside a fantasy video game! Would it not be wonderful to have to play a video game, especially when no one could force you to do any differently or criticize you for doing so? *Sword Art Online* offers a potential means by which viewers can achieve their dreams.

Moving from fantasy genres to the more realistic, Slice of Life anime (anime revolving around modern, day-to-day events) often portray the same thing: school life. There is studying, romance, class trips, uniforms and so on. It is a means by which a viewer can vicariously experience a satisfying school life. It promotes Japanese normative procedures such as respect for elders and diligence in homework, but it further acts as a fairy tale by telling the viewer 'it is okay not to be the greatest so long as you do your best!'

Slice of Life protagonists are often delinquents or idiots. They are the misunderstood members of society that have neither the luxury nor privilege of enjoying school. At the same, these delinquents, misfits, and oddballs find a place in society through their school life, as seen in *The Melancholy of Suzumiya Haruhi* when Haruhi, a strange girl, enters the school with the proclamation that she only wants to be friends with time travelers, aliens, and espers. As it turns out, Haruhi is God. Her wish comes true and she finds her place in the school. This show in particular makes the high school student God and master over his domain. Just as Haruhi affects her will on her school situation, this anime tells its viewers that they too can have their high school wishes fulfilled.

In one way, these Slice of Life anime are more fantastical than fantasy anime. Whereas fantasy anime functions as a literal fantasy realm, the Slice of Life subgenre articulates a fantasy world almost identical to the real one. This is not to say, however, that they are the most fantastical. In actuality, the 'fairy tale effect' is seen most evident in the works of Hayao Miyazaki. As I have explained the shoujo figure to some extent, it is here that I will focus in my discussion of Miyazaki.

His shoujos do not fall into the typical Japanese trope. His females are anything but soft-spoken, submissive, or *moe* – inspiring a feeling in the audience that they must be protected. Instead, they are independent, denying the Japanese normalized space in the domestic sphere and instead embarking on journeys of their own volition. Napier notes: "It is not surprising that virtually all his *shoujo* characters are strongly associated with flight because it is in images of flying that the possibilities of escape (from the past, from tradition) are most clearly realized" (Napier 156). These characters, within his fairy tale space, are able to escape Japan's normalizing forces and can do so effectively because Miyazaki writes fairy tales and it is in the fairy tale space that this effect can be realized.

Figure 6: San from Princess Mononoke

Similarly, Napier claims "in the alternate realities created by Miyazaki, these [peaceful, quiet, nature-loving girls] girls can and do exist, inspiring many viewers to identify with them as role models if not as surrogate identities" (Napier 156). As I claimed earlier, anime characters are identifiable. They function as tabula rasa onto which the viewer can write himself or herself. In a

fairy tale, readers identify with the characters if they do not become them entirely. This same fairy tale effect is clearly present in anime, specifically in the works of Hayao Miyazaki.

One example of this effect is seen in the character of San in his film *Princess Mononoke.* I must preface my discussion of San by first clarifying that fairy tales – specifically those from the Brothers Grimm and Perrault– are rarely gentle. They are brutal. People are dismembered, family members are consumed, incestuous undertones abound, and violence is as common as the happy ending. The works of Miyazaki often represent this brutality. He paints brutal pictures with his films. Patrick Drazen, author of "Anime Explosion! The What, Why, & Wow! of Japanese Animation" points out, the first image the audience gets of San in Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* is bloody, vicious, and more animalistic than human (Drazen 119).

She is a female, but first she is a person. San does is not the focal point around which any domestic sphere revolves. Quite the opposite, in fact. Drazen's argument that San becomes otherwise domesticated due to the redemptive power of "a boy her own age" ignores her space in the animal world (119). She does not become *yasashii* or meek in the sense that Drazen argues, because she does not enter into the domestic sphere, neither does she become "gentle, meek or kindly" in any capacity (117). The near propagandizing force of Japanese anime does not affect Miyazaki's heroines, because of the 'fairy tale effect.' Miyazaki writes fairy tales first, anime second. His stories are rife with more fairy tale tropes (missing mother, young protagonist, search of self in fantastic world, magic items, animal guardians, spirits, etc.) than anime tropes.

This is not to say that they are not Japanese. Quite the contrary is true. Japanese folklore drips from his films as spirits run amidst forests (*Princess Mononoke)*, historical Japanese buildings decorate the cityscapes (*Spirited Away*), and even modern day Japanese landmarks pop

up without warning (*The Whisper of the Heart*). In his most recent film, *The Wind Rises,* Miyzaki takes his viewers through the life of Japan's most influential aero-naught.

Miyazaki has made his contempt for the current-day anime market widely known, and perhaps that is one reason why his films differ so drastically from many of those tropes. It cannot be said, however, that his works are not teeming with Japanese flavor. Using the anime medium, Hayao Miyazaki creates fairy tale films.

One film in particular that encapsulates Miyazaki's fairy tale propensity is *My Neighbor Totoro.* Immediate fairy tale tropes emerge: loss of family, illness of mother, protagonist's leaving home at age of thirteen (Napier 157). As Napier describes, the mystical world discovered by the two protagonists is "either supernatural or an expression of their own imaginations" (Napier 157). This fantasy, fairy tale world reflects the imaginations of the viewers, just as the anime medium does.

Anime thus emerges as a modern fairy tale genre. It allows the viewers a safe space in which their fantasies can be realized. Furthermore, it becomes the property of each subsequent viewer that he might articulate, disarticulate, and rearticulate it according to his own prerogatives. What then of the fans? Are they merely passive consumers of this fantasy world? Not at all. The term otaku pertains to a dozen different types of people in multitudes of different sphere both inside and outside the fandom, and it is here that I must begin my discussion.

Figure 7: Traditional Japanese Archetecture in Spirited Away

Figure 8: Mystic creatures from My Neighbor Totoro

Figure 9: Spirits in Princess Mononoke

CHAPTER 4

Otaku Characterizations[5]

I must begin my discussion of otaku with perhaps the most difficult part: clarifying what I mean by the term. Connotations of the term vary greatly depending on who uses it, and even more depending on to whom it is referring. Mizuko Ito, Japanese cultural anthropologist at the Humanities Research Institute at UCI, describes two connotations:

> For some [the term 'otaku'] evokes images of sociopathic shut-ins out of touch with reality. For others, and increasingly, it suggest a distinctive style of geek chic: a post-modernist sensibility expressed through arcane knowledge of pop and cyber culture and striking technology fluency. (Ito XI)

When I refer to otaku, I mean an avid fan of Japanese pop culture, specifically anime and manga. In Japan, these fans were first identified as disempowered and furthermore as Others by non-Otaku, much like Star Trek and Dungeon and Dragons 'nerds' in the united states (Gray et al. 2, 3). Okada Toshio – the founder of Gainax, popularizer of the term 'otaku,' and the man once known as the King of Otaku, or Otaking – says on the subject, "An otaku is someone who is smarter than average people but chooses to divert their mental ability to childish hobbies… They understand high culture such as fine art but nonetheless insist that anime and manga are better, that is otaku" (176). In the same interview about the term, Toshio notes the shift between Japanese otaku and simple fans:

> In the beginning, otaku were interested in various genres. For example, I like manga, but I also know about anime. In other words, otaku weren't limited to just one genre

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[5] **Summary of Chapter 4:**
There is no consensus as to what an 'otaku' is. For the sake of discussion I define the term as: an avid fan of Japanese anime and manga. Otaku come together in a transnational fandom united by their common appreciation for anime and manga. In this manner, otaku bond in an 'otaku-nation.'

> but had a set of knowledge that was shared among all otaku. But now the number of anime, manga, and games has drastically increased, and appears to be specifically aimed at otaku. It used to be stuff for kids that could be enjoyed by adults, but over time the software and content were tuned so that otaku could enjoy it more and more. For example, cute characters, what are known as moékyara, have appeared. Normal people have stopped watching. Only otaku enjoy this stuff and discuss moé with one another. More and more the things that were shared among older otaku, those things that made us aware of a connection, are gone, and we think, 'I can't understand these otaku. They're different from us. (Galbraith 176-177)

The thing that allowed Otaku stake in a shared fan culture has disappeared. Nowadays, otaku do not exist in Japan in that same way. They are instead outcasts due to the nature of their fandom and the products that they consume. This has resulted in a manner of 'otaku-nationality' in which international otaku (not merely Japanese otaku) enter into a transnational citizenship with other avid fans.

Otaku are rapidly an expanding "meganiche," as Ito calls it. In entering into this internet perpetuated, culturally cross-pollinated fandom, otaku become neither Western nor Eastern but instead members of an 'otaku-nation.' This transnational identity exists insofar as the fans enjoy the same products (namely anime and manga) and engage in dialectic forums with other fans. This otaku-nation is separate from outside judgments because it is in the nature of otaku to resist totalizing global narratives such as nationalism (Ito XVIII). They are a nation of fans unified in their passion toward Japanese pop culture.

Regarding the creation of this otaku-nationality, Ito notes that Cool Japan (Japan's use of culture as an export utilizing not coercion but instead attraction) played a significant role

overseas, claiming "…today's interests in otaku culture and the branding of cool Japan bring a new twist to the ongoing projects of national identity production and transnational flows as they are intertwined with the growing influence of pop culture and online peer-to-peer networks" (Ito XVII). This otaku-nationality exists in a liminal space between cultures. It is a fan-driven, online community that thrives in forum discussions. Furthermore, it perpetuates a notion of the term 'otaku' as a label for people within this transnational community of fans.

Along the vein of anime as a separate world, Napier claims that Anime is of another world that is created by animators who "do not possess a real '*furosato'* or hometown" (Napier 25). This longing of furosato (hometown) manifests in otaku who implicitly renounce ties to the outside world in favor of the anime one, at least insofar as they are at conventions, in online forums, or engaging in their hobby outside of their professional lives.

There is nothing wrong with being a fan. In fact, avid fans of anything are so in tune with the product of their fascination that they become experts in it, as is seen with increasingly prevalent anime scholars.

CHAPTER 5

Otaku Scholars and Heroes[6]

Well known Susan Napier and Patrick Galbraith are just two of the dozens of emerging anime scholars. Fans of anime have a striking propensity towards scholarly discourse, as is seen by the growing base of academic works on the medium as a whole as well as specific series within it.

Figure 10: Scene from Kill La Kill

These fans are deeply analytic. For example, in one episode of the recent anime *Kill La Kill*, a series of numbers flashed by during a scene with a calculator (seen in Figure 12). Fans paused the scene, flipped the image, and inverted it to reveal what they assumed to be the hidden message "21 I DIE". These fans surmised that the character with the calculator would die in episode twenty one. In this manner, fans took a seemingly meaningless moment and analyzed it to the extreme. Within hours of the episode's airing, message boards were flooded with speculation on this particular event. This is to say that fans are anything but unintelligent. As I quoted from the Otaking, Okada Toshio, earlier, otaku are intelligent people who focus their attention on childish hobbies.

According to fandom scholar, Dr. Bertha Chin, there are implications of a "complex social network of fans who do not only exhaustively discuss the texts and the meanings they might derive from the characters and the texts but also go on to make use of these texts

[6] **Summary of Chapter 5:**
Otaku are disposed to scholarship. They tend to be intelligent and discourse in online forums reflects it. Otaku have a propensity to be deeply analytic and are consistently middle-class citizens due to the cost of affording their hobby.

creatively, participating in what Fiske terms fan 'textual productivity'" (Chin 212). These fans engage critically with the anime that they watch, as seen in the *Kill La Kill* example above. These are not mindless consumers but instead educated, intelligent individuals. Furthermore, Lawrence Eng, scholar of otaku culture, argues that this fan culture is one of resistance based on traditional understandings of subculture (Eng 99). Otaku are networking and production powerhouses and "Japanese fan culture and anime provided a set of referents that mobilized a unique subcultural imagination in diverse locations around the world" (Eng 100-102). They subsist in the middle-classes due to the cost of keeping up with their hobbies (mainly buying anime, manga, figures, convention costs, cosplay costs, and so on) and, as noted by Galbraith, "the acceptance of anime overseas led the Japanese government to start actively promoting anime, manga, and video games. Research firms ran the numbers and found otaku are ultra-consumers whose enthusiastic spending on hobbies did not decline during the recession. Otaku were suddenly a bright spot for recessionary Japan" (173).

On another level, the anime medium has inspired non-Japanese people to research Japanese culture. These people (popularly coined 'Japanophiles') become pseudo-experts in Japanese culture. Antonia Levi, author of anime studies book, *Samurai from Outer Space,* articulates "…their threads include not only discussion about Japanese customs, language, and fandoms, but also literary, artistic, political and sexual debates that, although intellectual in nature, are not particularly focused on Japan" (Levi 58). This is not to suggest that all fans engage with anime in this way. According to Levi, some instead appreciate anime in a much more childish, less articulate manner: "Today, however, the majority of anime and manga Web sites are devoted to fannish appreciations of series, characters or story lines that seem almost deliberately to ignore the possibility to learning anything about Japan from its popular culture"

(Levi 59). My thought on this is that anime is not a strictly fantasy world for viewers because of its resonating popularity with global audiences. Anime is not a one and done pop culture phenomenon: it is persistently growing as both a field of study and as a hobby for the childish. But this is not all. It would be foolish to presume that there are just two ways of engaging with anime. As example, I will look next at three additional ways: conventions, cosplay, and fanfics.

CHAPTER 6

Conventions, Fanfiction, and Cosplay[7]

Murakami Takashi, Japanese contemporary artist influenced by otaku aesthetics, a man internationally famous for his "Superflat" exhibitions, said in an interview: "Otaku are like hippies. In some ways, they're probably a social problem, but American hippy culture encouraged the development of music and computer science. People who desire independence struggle with themselves, but I think they have the power to change the world" (Galbraith 182).

Figure 11: Anime Expo

Otaku can change the world so long as they are part of it, and they engage in a number of prominent pop culture activities including attending conventions, creating fanfiction, and cosplaying. Each brings to the otaku-scene a unique aspect and, when enjoyed without a hyper-obsessive tendency, these aspects allow the fan to enjoy anime without fear of upsetting any natural balance.

On one level, a convention becomes the furosato (hometown) that the fan longs for. It occurs in a space that is by nature separate from reality. A convention is not an extension of a fan's normal life. Furthermore, the going-ons in a convention cannot be used as a basis to judge the day-to-day lives of attending fans. Conventions function as vacations from reality. They are

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[7] **Summary of Chapter 6:**
Conventions, fanfiction, and cosplay represent unique aspects of otaku and are further therapeutic in nature. Conventions function as spaces separate from reality and thus allow otaku to engage in the object of their appreciation in profound ways. Fanfiction tends to be less about reality and more about fulfilling a fan's fantasies. Cosplay allows a fan to become a character in a vicarious way. Anime is thus effectively therapeutic through each of these methods.

spaces that fans can engage in what would otherwise be hyper-obsessive activities. Once the convention is over, the fans can return to their normal lives.

Before I begin to discuss fan fiction, I first want to recount an incident in my own experience at a convention. It was the 2012 Anime Expo held at the Los Angeles Convention Center. At the same time as the convention, the X Games were held on the adjacent street. Fights abounded as X Games fans clashed with anime fans. I recall my experience at a restaurant when rowdy X Games fans attempted to start a fight by making fun of a group of cosplaying fans. The X Gamers attempted to pass judgment on the fans based on the object of their affection as well as their tendencies within the convention space and the fans took none too kindly to that. The incident was finally resolved when police officers arrived on the scene. Conventions do not exist in spaces within reality and thus cannot be used as a means of passing judgment on fans. The same can be said of fanfiction.

Fanfiction is an incredibly prominent and growing phenomenon in the pop culture world, especially pertaining to Japanese anime and manga. Fans use fanfiction to engage with the subject material in a creative, subjective way. Antonia Levi notes that fanfiction is not about Japan, nor the canon anime. It is instead a means for the writers to fulfill fantasies:

> But many do not seem to care and, indeed, do not even seem to have noticed the difference when watching the original. Many anime fanfics assume, for example, that Japanese begin their school term in the fall and get a three-month summer vacation when, in fact, they begin the school term in April, run for three terms with short breaks in spring and winter, and a longer one in August…

> …her focus is on the things she identifies with, the love, the angst, the friendships, and the hurts. She is dealing with the material not as an artifact of Japanese culture, but as a part of her own life. (Levi 53)

There is danger to drawn fanfiction, however. Writing is a different phenomenon because it is still ephemeral, separate from reality with no innate visual element. A writer must understand on some level the consequences of what they are writing. The same comprehension is absent from drawn fanfiction. An artist can effectively become the god and master over his fantasies in a way that is distinctly physical due to its visual nature. It is for this reason that anime and manga fanfiction have abounded to such an extent, specifically in regards to *doujinshi*.

A *doujinshi* is an amateur, self-published work that often contains the characters or plots from another manga or anime series. Commonly, doujinshis are fanfictions that explore a new scene, event, or pairing between characters not covered in the original series. Doujinshis are commonly romantic in nature and Hentai doujinshis that pair characters in a sexual and romantic way not quite achieved in their original series, are prevalent. Because anime and manga characters are so shallow, it is easy for these amateur fan-fictions to create entirely plausible events and sexual pairings between them without upsetting or destroying the nature of the characters.

This subjectivity allows for a viewer to vicariously engage with the viewed in a profound way. Animation becomes an outlet for any and all fantasies to be played out without fear of upsetting any natural or underlying balance. The viewers become the characters and, even more interesting, the characters become real people.

I want to briefly enumerate upon this character subjectivity while on the topic of viewer-character engagement. The power of anime is in its emphasis on the subjective. The characters in most Anime and Manga series are one-dimensional, shallow characters and therefore the viewers and readers are able to effectively map themselves onto the characters. Anime characters specifically exist as blank slates on which a viewer can write himself: "[a character] exists as a *tabula rasa* that can be essentially as alluring or repulsive as we want it to be, and this can have a direct phenomenological impact on our responses" (Ortega-Brena 28).

These characters are objective templates onto which each person can write himself through his imagination. As Plato might have described it, Hentai characters are both forms and particulars. Plato theorized the existences of things called forms and particulars – the forms being objective, immaterial essences and particulars being reflections of those forms in the physical realm. Plato described translation between languages is possible because each word has a form associated with it and all what translation does is change the particular expression of each word from one language particular to another. Plato hypothesized, were it not for forms and particulars, no one could know what anyone else was writing or saying because everything would be subjective and without an objective existence to refer to. (Plato, *Republic* 240-48).

Just as two viewers can interpret a character the same way, two people can watch an anime and understand the same character in completely different ways. One can see the protagonist as a kindhearted, selfless individual whereas another viewer might interpret that same protagonist as selfish and vile at heart.

If that character did not exist as a form, two viewers could not have different perceptions of the same character, because that "character" would exist only insofar as each viewer subjectively viewed it. There could be no discourse about a character because characters would

be subjective entities relative only to those who perceive them with no standard or objective rule by which to compare them.

While they are not entirely subjective, the subjective nature is important because the power of fictional characters – especially those in anime – is in their ability to be projected upon by their viewers.

A character is able to produce an effect from its viewers because it allows them to cast themselves onto it. The character is a template or a *tabula rasa* on which the viewer can write himself. Furthermore it exists as an objective template – in order that a multitude of people can see the same character – and as a subjective existence/particular because its effectiveness lies in the aspect that each viewer writes himself/herself onto it. Anime characters are both objective forms that are viewed and engaged by everyone and at the same time subjective existences relative directly to each viewer as he/she imagines.

This transformation from character to person is not one-sided, however. Fanfictions turn characters into real people, and cosplay turns real people into characters.

Figure 8: Cosplayer Ayakawa Yunmao

Cosplaying involves dressing up as a fictional character. Cosplayers become the characters that they cosplay. Ayakawa Yunmao, cosplayer, director of National Main Cooperative, and published author, journalist, and TV star said in an interview:

[Why are you so serious about cosplay?]

"Because I can become the characters I love. When you cosplay, there's a sense that you're taking the character into you. It's like being at one with the character" (55) … "you feel something for a character and get something from him or her by cosplaying" (56).

Cosplay becomes a therapeutic endeavor for fans because it allows them to momentarily leave their lives – just as do fanfictions and conventions – and participate in the characters that they love.

These real-world anime phenomenon all have this in common: they allows fans to momentarily separate themselves from their real world lives and participate therapeutically in the anime realm. This is not to say that these people are dislocated, however, because they return to their lives. A dislocated person is one who does not, cannot, and will not return from the convention, from his cosplay, and from his fanfiction. It is these people that garner animosity from all ends of the spectrum – from casual to avid fans and nonfans alike – and who are the subject of the final chapter of my argument.

CHAPTER 7

Dislocated People[8]

What makes someone dislocated as opposed to merely a fan? I would argue that a dislocated fan is one who no longer associates with the real world apart from an entrenched, cynical viewpoint regarding everything contrary to the object of his obsession. Now, I am not suggesting that the dislocated person does not participate in reality. As I mentioned earlier, a fan needs a certain income to afford his hobby and the products of that, namely anime and manga, figurines, cosplay, art, video games, and conventions. A hyper-obsessed fan needs to have some form of regular income to stay a hyper-obsessed fan; they must thus work to some degree. They also participate in reality in that they are perpetual consumers. In this manner, a hyper-obsessed fan participates in reality fiscally. Furthermore, a hyper-obsessed fan is likely to be one of the people most inclined to provide critical commentary within the pop culture sphere as it holds the most weight with them. Out of everyone, it is these fans who are most affected by the canon and critical theory pertaining to their hobbies because it is not a mere hobby – it is a lifestyle.

Figure 9: Miyazaki Tsutomo

Based on what I have enumerated thus far, the hyper-obsessed fan is one who is both critical and economically productive. What then is the origin of the permeating negative stereotype that I covered in my introduction?

This stigma did not being against 'otaku,' per se, but it began against fans of any kind. The Miyazaki Tsutomu

[8] **Summary of Chapter 7:**
Otaku were originally discriminated against because of two main incidents: the Miyazaki Tsutomo Incident, and the Akihabara Massacre. This stigma has crossed cultural boundaries and caused three main effects within the fandoms. First, some otaku abandon association with the term and instead use it to label fans that are actually hyper-obsessed. Second, fans adopt the term as a means to identify themselves as parts of the transnational otaku-nation discussed in Chapter 4. Third, otaku have invented a new term, Weeaboo, to describe fans who are disassociated from reality and from the object of their affection (Japan) and thus shift the stigma away from themselves.

Incident between 1988 and 1989 started it. Miyazaki Tsutomu was a serial killer, cannibal, and necrophile who abducted and murdered four Japanese girls. When he was apprehended, his room held a vast collection of movies, games, and pornography, many of them related to anime. He was thus labeled "The Otaku Murderer." This label lead many people to rally against fans as, clearly, they were possible murders and criminals.

Figure 10: After the Akihabara Massacre

This stigma against anime fans lasted for years, and it was again highlighted in 2008 when a man drove his car into the Akihabara shopping district and, after crashing, began stabbing the passerby in what was later named "The Akihabara Massacre." Similarly with the Miyazaki Tsutomu Incident, the perpetrator was labeled an otaku and further disseminated the stigma against anime subculture groups.

The otaku subculture has endeavored to distance itself from these stereotypes. As I described before, the term 'otaku' has thus been contested, at least up until recently with this new wave of otaku culture. Furthermore this stigma against otaku has been changing, and I will describe now the new wave of specifically American "otaku" in the obsessive sense.

I must note with some frustration that there is no consensus as to how the spectrum of otaku functions. There is no clear-cut definition what an otaku is, so it becomes increasingly difficult to pin them down. The Japanese notion of Otaku is different and in a state of change even as I write this. The subculture does not like to be pinned down and is effective as such. According to American nonfans, the stereotypical otaku in the United States of America is one who is socially deficient, unhealthily obese, concerned only with childish things, poor of hygiene, and hopelessly introverted (Eng 92). According to Eng, they are perceived as "loud,

obnoxious, and brazenly outgoing about their hobbies, interests, and fetishes – so much so that they are seen as invading the comfort zone and personal space of others" (92).

In America, fan resistance to the term is decreasing. As of late it has instead been used more often as a title of a person within a community to, as Eng claims, "bolster self-identity and the communities to which they belong" (94).

The stigma against American hyper-obsessed fans is just that: a stigma against specifically hyper-obsessed fans. The term otaku changes so much with every passing year and in every context that it becomes all but impossible to pin it down. At the same time, many fans who would otherwise be named otaku for their love of Japanese pop culture without obsessive tendencies choose instead to not adopt it. This choice occurs primarily because many negative stereotypes still exist as far as the majority of nonfans are concerned.

Figure 11: Pictures illustrating Otaku-pride

Furthermore, people not only wish to not be labeled as otaku despite their hobby, but they instead, as Eng notes, "reserve that word for those fans they have encountered who exhibit stereotypically negative traits" (Eng 95). At the same time, pictures such as those in Figure 15 pervade anime-related forums and picture sharing sites. In this context, the term has become a title of identity. Fans within the fan sphere – that is to say at conventions or in online forums – use the term as a means of identifying themselves as members of the fan community, or instead use it as a term to label these stereotypical, hyper-obsessed fans with whom they do not want to associate. If this was not inconsistent enough, a new demeaning term is rapidly growing: *weeaboo*.

A weeaboo is a stereotypical otaku but worse as they are effectively hyper-obsessed fans with no appreciation or understanding of Japanese culture. They are distinctly non-Japanese but with dangerous obsessions of Japanese culture, obsessions founded not in reality but instead in anime. In this manner these weeaboo become doubly dislocated, first from reality as they reside solely in the anime world, and second as they lack even a fundamental understanding of the culture they profess as superior. The picture shown to the right belays a common disposition toward otaku and weeaboo.

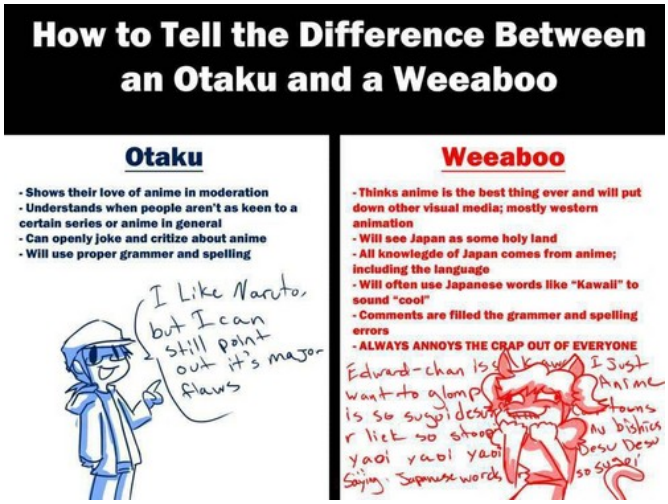

Figure 12: Picture taken from online showing perceived differences between Otaku and Weeaboo

The otaku, socially acceptable, shows love in moderation. He understands when people are not as keen to a certain series or anime in general and will openly joke and criticize anime. This is contrary to the weeaboo who believes that anime is best thing ever and that Japan is the holy land while only holding knowledge of it through his experiences with anime. This is not a Japanophile. He is disassociated from reality and from Japan, the object of his obsession.

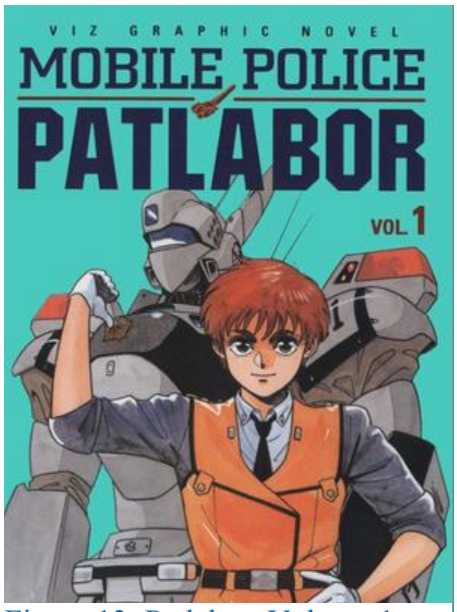

Figure 13: Patlabor, Volume 1

Notably these characterizations come from a fan who identifies as an otaku insofar as he is a fan that is a member of the global fan-community. He is one who wishes to preserve the new image of otaku as an acceptable title for a member of this global fan-community as opposed to the stereotypical views of otaku held by nonfans. At the same

he is forcing these nonfan perceptions of otaku onto this new kind of fan, the weaaboo.

No subgenre of anime does a better job at encapsulating the hyper-obsessive fan's situation than that of Mecha. Mecha pilots view the world through a series of monitors within their giant metal robot. They do not interact with the real world, but rather affect it through their robot with visuals provided by these screens. This interaction mirrors that of the obsessive viewer: just as the pilot sees the world through computer screens, so too does the obsessive viewer see the world through his computer screen. It must be noted, however, that the mecha pilot has a life outside of his suit. Series such as *Patlabor, Evangelion* and *Gundam* have episodes during which the pilots attend school, goof off with friends, and so on. The obsessive viewer by comparison does none of these things. He has no life outside of his room. He has no involvement in reality. He is a piece of the anime world, entirely disassociated from reality.

CHAPTER 8

Anime: Fortress of Solitude or Kryptonite[9]

Anime is a complex medium that is expanding at a rapid rate on a global scale. It inspires fandoms, some of which unbelievably tenacious. It is a globalizing force that spans cultural and geographical boundaries and forms an anime-nation that is home to any fan.

It functions as a modern fairy tale genre due to its ability to allow a viewer to vicariously experience life through it. It is furthermore rife with fairy tale tropes and, as argued by Jack Zipes, belongs to anyone who partakes in it.

Anime inspires a distinct group of fans in a new-age chic of scholarship, identity, and transnationalism. Fans spread effects of Cool Japan around the world and partake in an anime tradition of no small pedigree or impact.

Despite the few hyper-obsessed fans about whom stigmas against regular forms, the majority of consumers are neither dislocated nor disassociated. Anime is therapeutic and toxic. It is stateless and yet a furosato for any that needs it. It is a fairy tale genre that is subversive yet distinctly reflective. It is a fan's Fortress of Solitude, but one that he must remain wary of as the walls just might be lined with Kryptonite.

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[9] **Summary of Chapter 8:** Anime is simultaneously therapeutic and toxic. It is therapeutic in its function as a stronghold into which a viewer can flee the cruelties of reality; it is toxic in its propensity to lure those same viewers into a state of disassociation from reality. It is a fan's Fortress of Solitude, but one that he must remain wary of as the walls just might be lined with Kryptonite.

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