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Coming of Age in the Multiverse What Japanese anime say about growing up amidst the chaos and the illogical

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in interest in multiverse storylines with the success of films like "Everything Everywhere All at Once" and "Spider-Man: Into the Spiderverse." These films deal with stories of characters that experience a world where multiple universes exist and where they must navigate the ins and outs of the abnormal world. What is interesting, is that many of these multiverse stories are ones that deal with the topic of coming of age — narratives of characters who are growing in an unnatural environment where multiple dimensions exist.

Anime possesses a special capability to convey multiverse narratives given its free and limitless nature. Here, I define "anime" as animation in terms of style within the cinematic medium and specifically refer to animation that are Japanese-coded and made in Japan by Japanese creators. Comparatively to live action works, anime can imagine and create worlds in a more convincing way at a lower cost. In addition, often, even in stories that feature the most outlandish settings and characters such as the apocalyptic anime or the multiverse anime, it reflects the societal issues and trend that are prevalent in Japanese society of the time.

With this in consideration, in my research, I focus on two anime shows created in the past two decades that deals with stories of Japanese adolescents coming of age in a multiverse world — "Sonny Boy" (2021) and "Tatami Galaxy" (2010) — in order to explore what multiverse stories about Japanese adolescents say about the experience of growing up in modern Japanese society. I aim to do so by analyzing the character arc of the protagonists in the two shows and by investigating how ideas about chaos and order and nihilism plays into these stories. Through this, I attempt to understand how the messaging of appreciating life as what it is and striving for

change despite the likelihood of its outcome is successfully conveyed to the cynical audiences of the current generation who are growing up in a turbulent and seemingly hopeless world.

Research Review

Review of prior works on multiverse narratives

Given that the popularity of multiverse narratives in media is a relatively recent phenomenon, there is yet to be expansive research on this topic. That said, there are few studies conducted by scholars that have offered interesting perspectives on multiverse narratives in films, the most recent and arguably the most relevant one being a study published by John C. Lynden in 2022. In "Life in the Multiverse: Bringing Chaos Out of Order?" he argues that the emergence of multiverse narratives in popular culture reflects the universal cultural belief that "everything is contingent and variable, that there is not a single of history that is predetermined, and that multiple possibilities for the world exists" (5). Referring to "Spider-Man: Into the Spiderverse" as well as other multiverse stories such as "Loki" and "What if?" from the Marvel/Disney universe, he states that these works are a response to the anxiety and chaos that comes from the death of the master narrative — the idea that there no longer exists a hegemonic narrative that is considered to be true for everyone. The reason for this disillusionment can be attributed to the culture of social media that allows us to live in a private world of self-chosen facts (6), as well as the divergence of political parties within various countries where it is evidently possible for large portions of the population to believe in completely different narratives (9).

Lynden also argues through his analysis of "Everything Everywhere All at Once (EEAO)" that multiverse stories like it depict the danger of nihilism. He illustrates how when

characters are faced with infinite possibilities, all of it ceases to have meaning since any individual act is insignificant and every single outcome of any given choice has already happened. The conclusion drawn in EEAO as response to this crisis is that when faced with this infinity of the universe, the best we can do is act in kindness and value the relationship and history that we are given in each scenario — in short, cherish what you have in front of you (18).

Lynden's study helps establish the fact that first and foremost, there is a preexisting dialogue on the emerging popularity and relevance of multiverse stories in contemporary media and offers a starting point to understanding why the current social and political climate has resulted in the popularity of such narratives. However, his work focuses solely on multiverse storylines in Hollywood movies and draws conclusions strictly about the western experience. In my research, I aim to build off what Lynden has begun to illustrate and use similar frameworks to apply it to anime shows to understand what it has to say specifically about Japanese society and culture by drawing on other media and culture study done by Akihiro Kitada and Marco René Olivier among others. In the process, I will also attempt to think beyond the local scale and strengthen Lynden's claim by proving that there is a universality to his theory and that there is a conclusion to be reached about multiverse narratives on a transnational level. Ultimately, by the protagonists achieving some coming-of-age or personal development through the multiverse experience, I will demonstrate how Sonny Boy and Tatami Galaxy arrive at similar conclusion to works like EEAAO and Spiderman: Into the Spiderverse, demonstrating that multiverse stories is thematically transnational in reaching the "return to self" conclusion.

Introducing Sonny Boy and Tatami Galaxy

In my research, I will attempt to draw conclusions about what multiverse narratives has to say about coming of age in Japanese society by conducting a case study on the two shows, “Sonny Boy” (2021) and “Tatami Galaxy” (2010). “Sonny Boy" is an original 12-episode anime series produced by Madhouse and written and directed by Shingo Natsume that follows the story of protagonist Nagara and his classmates who are all the sudden put in an alternate dimension when their middle school is engulfed in darkness. This new dimension has its own set of physics and rules where some students are given superpowers while others are not. The show explores philosophical dilemmas in an environment completely secluded from the rest of the world, in many ways portraying the middle school as a microcosm of society in its attempts to navigate the constantly altering set of rules of the different multiverse.

“The Tatami Galaxy” is an anime series also produced by Madhouse, directed by Masaaki Yuasa and based on a 2004 novel by Tomihiko Morimi. It is interesting to note here that both shows are produced by Madhouse, and Yuasa happens to be the mentor of Natsume, the former having enlisted the latter to work on an episode of “The Tatami Galaxy” under Madhouse prior to the production of Sonny Boy (Seraki). We cannot conclude much from this fact alone, but it is an indicator that Madhouse has a particular identity as a studio for experimental works.

The story of “The Tatami Galaxy” focuses on the unnamed protagonist who is a third-year student at Kyoto University, disillusioned with his less-than-ideal college life. It plays with the idea of multiple dimensions, with each episode of the series portraying a different universe in which the protagonist joins a different club that portrays all his “what-if” scenarios. It is later revealed in the series that all the episodes are different versions of himself in different dimensions which he is connected to through the small, weathered down apartment that he lives in. The show originally aired on “noitaminA” on Fuji TV, an experimental late-night

programming that targets female audiences in their twenties and thirties, famous for its creative uniqueness. Director Yuasa is often considered an "auteur," specializing in "infusing each scene with an anarchic energy that playfully kicks and screams against convention" (Jackson 130).

Both stories are an experimental art series with an adolescent protagonist that, by using the concept of multiverses, relays a message about coming of age in Japan. The scale and storyline of the shows are very different from each other — for example, Sonny Boy is set in middle school while The Tatami Galaxy is set in college — yet, both shows share the similarity of having passive, apathetic and cynical protagonist, a fact that will play into my analysis later. In an interview following the release of "Sonny Boy," Natsume stated that despite the complex and philosophical issues portrayed in the show, at its core, the series can be understood as a simple story about its protagonist, Nagara's growth (Tuka). I will apply this approach to Tatami Galaxy as well and attempt to understand the two shows' core messaging by paying close attention to the protagonists and investigate if my findings line up with what Lynden began to propose.

Analysis of the protagonists' character arc

Nagara, the protagonist of Sonny Boy and "Watashi" in Tatami Galaxy are seemingly very different individuals — for one, Nagara is in middle school and at least in the beginning of the series is more reserved with showing his feelings to the audience while Watashi is a third-year college students who in his rapid-fire internal monologues shares his every thought process. Yet, one clear similarity that they both share is the passive, apathetic and cynical view that they both have about life which I will go into detailed analysis about.

Nagara in Sonny Boy

In Sonny Boy, the main lead Nagara begins as a passive and cynical young man who appears too old to be in middle school, not because of his maturity but rather because of how jaded he is. A notable signifier of this is in the flashback scene from pre-drifting time — the time before his middle school "drifted" into the alternate universe surrounded in darkness. We see Nagara walking upon an injured bird in front of the school gates, stopping to witness its struggle, then walking past it. When Nozomi, who watched this all unravel right behind him, confronts him, he excuses himself saying "Well, I was in a hurry at the time. Besides, they say it's not good to do anything if you don't know what you're doing." ("Episode 2: Aliens" 11:34-12:07)

One possible reason behind Nagara's cynicism that the show alludes to throughout the series but never explores in detail is the negligence of his parents. In another flashback to pre-drifting time, we see Nagara sitting at a parent-teacher meeting without his mother present. It is made clear in his apology that this is the third time that his parent did not show up and his teacher appears understanding of him, telling him that he is there for him if he needed to talk about anything ("Episode 1: The Island at the Far End of Summer" 14:00-14:48). That said, there is an air of formality on both sides where his teacher appears to be making these remarks because he feels obligated to do so as his homeroom teacher and Nagara is clearly not expecting much help from him either. Nagara is apathetic, not asking much from his parents or from his teachers, indicating that he has stopped expecting anything from the adult figures in his life a long time ago. This has inevitably influenced Nagara into becoming apathetic towards everything in his life, always exerting the air that he doesn't care too much about anything because it would be stupid to care about things when none of it ends up mattering.

Nozomi is perceptive and immediately calls Nagara out on this apathetic stance in a scene after the flashback of the injured bird. She confronts him asking, "Is being abandoned by someone any reason for abandoning someone else?" ("Episode 2: Aliens" 12:21-12:30). This straightforwardness, unbound by other societal and hierarchical pressures, is what defines the character of Nozomi. It is this trait that makes her both the antithesis of Nagara's cynicism but simultaneously, it is also because of her positive attitude that Nagara is encouraged to depart from his deep-rooted cynicism. Even though they all stand equally powerless against the unchangeable state of the drift and the multiverse environment, Nozomi never gives up on the possibility of them being able to return to their original universe. This is reflected through her superpower that she is given in the multiverse — the "compass" — where she can "see the way out," of the darkness surrounding the school in the form of a light from "the place [they're] supposed to go home to." ("Episode 2: Aliens" 22:42 - 23:08).

It is through the friendship Nagara finds with her that drastically transforms his mindset from passively accepting things that come his way as just being the way things are, to becoming an unlikely hero that is willing to give everything a try, even if the outcome is known. We already see this transformation take place halfway through the series when the class is arguing about executing a plan that might allow them to escape from the universe. Nagara tells his classmate Hoshi who opposes his plans that "Even if the outcome is set in stone, I'm not going to run from it." (Episode 6: The Long Goodbye: 11:55 - 12:01). This change in Nagara's mindset is what fuels him throughout the rest of the show and is undeniably the fuel that drives him to fight against all odds to get back to the original world, even if no one else believes in it anymore and even after Nozomi's death later on in the series.

"Watashi" in Tatami Galaxy

Even from the fact that the protagonist is never named throughout the series and is only known as "Watashi," — the general Japanese term for "I" — one of the defining feature of the protagonist of Tatami Galaxy is that he is an overwhelmingly mediocre young man growing up in Japan. There is nothing that makes him stand out — he doesn't even have a name to go by. The difference between Nagara and him is that Watashi does not start off the show entirely cynical, in fact, he is consistently hopeful at the beginning of each episode — or each "universe" — convinced that as a "brand-spanking new freshman university student … countless doors to the mystical treasure that is known as that "rose-colored campus life" lay open before me." ("Episode 1: Tennis Circle Cupid" 5:09 - 5:24)

However, this illusion of a fulfilling and exciting college life surrounded by "raven-haired maidens" is broken immediately before the episodes can even hit the 7-minute mark. In each universe, regardless of what club he ends up joining, his plans of being a socially-adept, popular guy at the center of the club fails miserably because there is always something that doesn't work out in his favor. He then becomes a cynical and jaded college student bored with his own life, who spends the rest of the episode getting himself involved in shenanigans with his "enemy" Ozu as his sidekick, wishing only the worst for others around them that seem happy. Each episode ends with Watashi being caught in a predicament because of his own actions and lamenting how he could have had a better college life "if then I had chosen some other circle…" ("Episode 1: Tennis Circle Cupid" 21:27 - 21:31). Of course, this is where the next episode begins where unbeknownst to him, the audience watches him join a different circle but repeat the same cycle again.

It is in the universe of episode 10 that Watashi decides not to join any clubs and be a recluse inside his four and a half tatami room. He then for the first time is made aware of the various multiverses by accidentally getting stuck in a maze of infinite tatami rooms where each room holds the alternative college life that he had lived in a different universe. It is only when he is confronted with this abnormality of being stuck in this multiverse in solitude that he realizes that all the iteration of college life that he lamented was exactly the life that he had always dreamed of. He realizes Ozu, a peer that he had always viewed as an enemy who had consistently ruined his college life across all multiverses was the only true friend that he ever had. It is through these realizations that Watashi concludes that the "rose-colored" college life he always dreamed of was right in front of him all this time and that it was just his cynicism that was getting in the way of recognizing how everything he ever needed was all in front of him.

Ways of dealing with chaos and order

Desire for order in Sonny Boy

Lynden states that the rise in popularity of multiverse storylines is our cultural response to the death of the master narrative and the way we choose to deal with the chaos of our current world. The truth is, however, we never willingly choose chaos — if anything, we have the intrinsic desire to impose order in any situation since we are creatures that always prefer order over chaos (Lynden 10).

In Sonny Boy, all sense of order and normality is lost when the school drifts into the black void. More chaos ensues when some students are given special powers while others are not and as a response to this, even amongst middle school students, we quickly see the need to gain order. By the first episode, students quickly begin to build a hierarchy amongst themselves.

Initiated by the pre-existing leadership of the student council, a “Group Talk” invitation is sent to all students as a central mode for communication. There, the student council proposes that for the students to fulfill their obligations of keeping order within the school, everyone should have duties selected for them to do and also assign a leader to put those together. Hoshi suggests to “choose a leader among the 36 of us, and together, we will create the rules of This World.” (“Episode 1: The Island at the Far End of Summer" 5:05 - 6:34) Through how quickly the students agree to engage in this arbitrary hierarchy they set for themselves and follow the orders that have been given to them, we see how much people intrinsically desire to have order and leadership that they can blindly follow, especially in a time of crisis.

We see this idea explored further later in episode 7 where the entire story based around the community that Nagara finds himself in an “upside-down” universe within the drifted world. The other drifters, who have been there much longer than Nagara and his classmates, have created a community to build “down” the Tower of Babel. Thousands of workers are following simple orders to “take the blocks that get brought from the top and carry them down, nothing more,” without considering what it is that they are doing (“Episode 7: Road Book” 5:46 - 5:57). When Nagara questions why they are “carrying the blocks down” if they’re building a tower, his co-worker Futatsuboshi who had been there for long merely says: “that’s just the way it is … It’s been 200 years since I got here, and I’ve never wanted to know that.” (“Episode 7: Road Book” 8:29 - 9:02) This illustrates how majority of people, like Futatsuboshi, often prefer to blindly follow orders rather than to critically assess why or how it is that they must do what they are told to do.

This reflects how like Lynden said, in order to deal with the chaos that is brought on in society, people are attracted towards following orders and other leaders, rather than thinking for

yourself. I would argue that this is especially strong in Japanese culture where “less emphasis is placed on individual effort and in industry the society functions in a collective way.” (Kitada 40). This is because Japanese adolescents grow up in school system where being disciplined and following rules is the most important thing that you must adhere to in order to be accepted within the community. Students stick out like a sore thumb if they do not subscribe to this disciplined “norm,” and as we can see from how Nozomi is given a phone and forced to join the Group Talk despite her claiming that “I don’t want it …I don’t wish to participate,” (“Episode 1: The Island at the Far End of Summer" 10:33 - 10:59) people would do everything they can to assimilate or suppress those who aren’t “orderly.”

The chaos of college environment in The Tatami Galaxy

In Tatami Galaxy, chaos is introduced in the last two episodes of the series, when Watashi is stuck in the infinite maze of his four and a half tatami room that he cannot leave from. This inescapable tatami room is arguably the physical representation of the chaos that adolescents in Japan face from the feeling of isolation and solitude. Episode 11 begins with Watashi’s voiceover narrating how “in order to protect the purity of the 4.5 tatami room, I don iron the armor when venturing outside…I give no mercy to wretched souls running wild. However, the more I defeat the more this indescribable loneliness presses down upon me. Why?” (“Episode 11: The End of the 4½ Tatami Age” 0:00 - 0:25)

This a great summary of the struggle with loneliness that many young Japanese adolescents go through, struggling to find fulfillment while feeling pressured to put up the front that they are enjoying their college experience. Given the rigorousness of Japanese high schools, college is the first time in many Japanese adolescents’ life that they have the time and freedom to

truly explore various avenues of their life. This creates a high expectation for what college life should be like, however, this standard set for adolescents in Japan is often impossible to achieve amidst a society that is experiencing poor economic conditions and a dying population.

This is truly a chaotic environment in which the discrepancy between the ideal reality does not match up — and the multiverse in Tatami Galaxy is an embodiment of this frustration. The way order is regained is when Watashi escapes the maze of the multiverse, and it is then that he is finally able to come to the realization that the life he wanted was in front of him all along. This could be understood as a commentary on how we spend so much of our time attempting to fulfill unrealistic expectations of what college is supposed to be like; however, the only way to find order and make sense of it is to recognize what we have right in front of us.

The emergence of (optimistic) nihilism

In Sonny Boy, as I have stated in the character analysis, Nagara's initially reaction to the chaos of the multiverse was that there is nothing that can be done to solve it. Even when he realizes that his special power includes the ability to hop dimensions and his peers become hopeful that he would be the savior to them all, he is in denial stating, "I'm not even sure it's my power." ("Episode 4: The Great Monkey Baseball" 2:35 - 2:43)

Nagara has the mindset that there is no way that he would be able to do or change anything, speaking to the hopelessness that adolescents feel amidst the chaos that we live in. His approach to the aftermath of the drifting is quite nihilistic, believing that none of it matters since nothing that he or anyone does is going to be able to fix it, given that "it nothing more than simple coincidence" that the principal of their middle school happened to be the "God." ("Episode 6: The Long Goodbye" 13:58 - 14:05)

Nagara's stance that "It turns out we aren't able to change the world after all — So it's okay." ("Episode 2: Aliens" 20:08 - 20:20) is definitively nihilistic and may appear initially to be negative. However, as we track his journey throughout the show it quickly becomes clear that this may not be an entirely negative response to dealing with the unknown like the multiverse. There is undeniably a sense of reassurance in knowing that what you do is not going to change the world and it is not going to matter at the end of the day — and that therefore, you are free to do what you want to do. There is a sense of optimism in this approach and Nozomi adds on to this later in the show by saying "Don't give me the nonsense about the outcome already being decided. Isn't it up to youngsters like us to keep trying?" ("Episode 6: The Long Goodbye"4:45 - 4:54)

This is the core messaging on optimistic nihilism of this show — as we have established, much like the characters in the multiverse, Japanese adolescents are growing up amidst a chaotic world that they have no control over. However, the show argues that even then, it's still worth giving it a try. It is true that anything that we do may be futile considering that the odds are stacked against us and there are too many issues that are beyond the scope of our control, yet nothing changes if we do not try. If nothing that we do matters, and even if nothing we do can change anything, isn't it worth still trying just for the sake of trying?

In Tatami Galaxy, after escaping the multiverse, the realization Watashi reaches is similar conclusion. Living in an environment where he constantly experiences things that does not going his way, he has a nihilistic view of how whatever he does, does not matter. Yet it is through his realization by being stuck in the multiverse and observing the different reiteration of himself that he realizes that "all of them seemed to have led some gloriously wasted campus life" ("Episode 11: The End of the 4½ Tatami Age" 1:34 - 1:44). He realizes that the times he spent in all of the

different iterations of his life doing things that he thought were meaningless and pointless was what was giving meaning to his college life.

In a smaller and more relatable scale than Sonny Boy, this also drives the messaging of how even if what we do does not mean much, it's still worth doing it because those are the things that stick with you regardless. We also see through both shows that nihilism is not necessarily a negative thing, it can be in some way cathartic to accept the fact that nothing we do matters much in the grand scheme of things and because if that is the case, it allows for us to do what it is we want to and try the things we want without the weight of the world on our shoulders.

Conclusion

Sonny Boy and Tatami Galaxy deals with stories of different scale — Sonny Boy portrays the bigger picture of society over all while Tatami Galaxy focuses more within and illustrate one individual's progress — however, they are united in how by using the multiverse narrative they speak to the ways in which we as people deal with cynicism, chaos, and nihilism in our world. They both convey through its protagonists' character arc and the ways they deal with chaos in the stories how despite the pressure of Japan's collectivist, hierarchical culture and the loneliness that comes from living in a country riddled with uncertainties of the future, how there is hope that can be found through optimistic nihilism. They demonstrate how for one, a lot of the times, what we want is already in front of us and that we need a level of optimism to recognize this. Secondly, in this seemingly hopeless world, even if what we do does not mean anything and does not result to anything, it's still worth giving things a try because that is how we create meaning in our lives. Nihilism is not necessarily a negative thing, and taking your life

at face value and appreciating it for what it is all the while continuing to attempt to make a change, regardless of the outcome can be a liberating way to live in this current time and age.

I only touched on two shows in my analysis of the multiverse narrative, therefore, there is a lot more research that can be done in this field. The popularity of multiverse stories is a new concept, and I did not touch on specifics of what potential that this narrative form had to offer or the specific reason as to why such shows were popular in Japan. There is much more research that can be done and going forward, I would like to further this study by applying the same framework of analysis to other multiverse stories in Japan besides Sonny Boy and Tatami Galaxy to see if there is a universal messaging that can be said beyond just these two shows. This study should be understood as more of a starting point to understand multiverse anime, not the all-encompassing conclusion.

To conclude, I think it is important to note that these messaging of appreciating life for what it is and attempting to make change for a better world despite the likelihood of its outcome is nothing new or groundbreaking. In fact, it is a common idea that we have seen many coming-of-age stories over the years convey again and again. Yet, what makes these coming-of-age multiverse stories unique and appealing in recent years is because current audiences are — much like the protagonists of these shows — more cynical and critically aware. They are less likely to fall for traditional coming of age stories that displays these morals more upfront and are more likely to dismiss them as being on-the-nose and tacky. These multiverse narratives are arguably a more nuanced way to depict the age-old, transnational message to a new generation of audience that despite their cynicism and passivity can relate to and be moved by these stories. As Nagara in Sonny Boy says, “It turns out we aren’t able to change the world

after all — So it's okay." There is something universally reassuring and encouraging to know this that speaks to the generation growing up in the current turbulent times.

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