

A Stroll Down the Dark Side:
Ultraviolent Japanese Animation's Roots in Postwar Japan, Globalization, and Western
Consumption

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Brian Graham Roberts

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Introduction

A young woman lies on a reclined dental exam chair. The bespectacled dentist is dressed in all white with a mask pulled over his mouth and nose. Doctor Mizunokuchi wipes his brow as he drills away, becoming visibly sweaty. The patient squirms and lets out gasps of pain which drive the dentist's ecstasy wild. Bulges start moving around on the dentist's back as the young woman flails and the drill whirs. Arachnid-like appendages burst out of Mizunokuchi's back, each with a dental drill or pick at the end. The menacing appendages hover momentarily before simultaneously thrusting into the patient's mouth. Blood flies as do short shrieks; the young woman's left hand raises slightly and clenches in a fist before falling limp as the buzzing of a dozen drills drown out all sound. Two henchmen enter to retrieve the doctor as they have to usher him along to a dirty job that requires his unique talents, indicating that this session with the young woman was his payment.¹

This scene from the recent anime show *Speed Grapher* is a fairly typical representation of the violent, often dark forms of animated media that have been imported into the United States from Japan since the 1980s. This type of gory animated entertainment continues to grow in popularity among Americans, particularly those born since the 1970s. Over the last thirty years anime has been getting more explicit and the subject material has gotten much darker. What would cause Japanese artists to produce such violent, grim animated shows and why are they so popular in the United States?

¹ *Speed Grapher Episode 7: The Big Picture*, DVD, directed by Kunishisa Sugishima (2005; Flower Mound, TX: Funimation, 2008).

In searching for the answer to this question I have come across several works of scholarship on anime. Steven Brown's work focuses on the multidimensional aspects that make up anime and how we view it with an assembled collection of essays from noted authorities on the subject of anime, highlighted with his personal insight.² Brown chooses to start off with the heaviest hitter in the game by featuring an essay by Susan Napier. Her essay, entitled "Excuse Me, Who Are You?": Performance, the Gaze, and the Female in the works of Ken Satoshi."³ In this essay, Napier focuses largely on Satoshi's films *Perfect Blue* and *Magnetic Rose*, comparing him to Hitchcock in levels of suspense but honing in on the depictions of women and his use of facial expressions in anime. One other specifically noteworthy essay in Brown's book comes from Sharalyn Orbaugh entitled "Frankenstein and the Cyborg Metropolis: The Evolution of Body and City in Science Fiction Narratives."⁴ Orbaugh explores the role of the city as a metropolitan jungle and people's depicted reality of their interconnectedness with technology versus how they had thought it would ideally be, something more resembling *The Jetsons* with technology and robots serving their every need.

Patrick Drazen analyses what makes anime different from other forms of animation from plot forms to sexual content and technology.⁵ Roland Kelts looks at anime from the production and consumption of anime and what brought it to the United

² Steven T Brown, ed. *Cinema Anime* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

³ Susan Napier, "Excuse Me, Who Are You?": Performance, the Gaze, and the Female in the Works of Ken Satoshi" in *Cinema Anime* ed. Steven T Brown, 23.

⁴ Sharalyn Orbaugh, "Frankenstein and the Cyborg Metropolis: The Evolution of Body and City in Science Fiction Narratives" in *Cinema Anime* ed. Steven T Brown, 81.

⁵ Patrick Drazen, *Anime Explosion: The What Why & Wow of Japanese Animation* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2003).

States to begin with.⁶ His arguments are more business-based than my arguments but provide valuable insight into what drives the heart of the anime industry.

The most prominent author on the subject, as mentioned above, is Susan Napier who takes a more sociocultural approach to her research on why Americans are drawn to anime.⁷ She delves in deeper into anime, with its uncompromising nature full of sex and violence and looks piece by piece at specific works and argues the merits of anime as an art form. Napier goes in depth to highlight all aspects of anime and I find myself agreeing with the points she makes. When it comes to the darker aspects, she does a great job with description and pointing out important elements of the works in question. However, the questions of why such works were made the way they were or why they're so popular with Americans remain unasked or answered.

These other researchers have much to say about what makes anime unique and attractive to westerners but fail to address the social or cultural reasons for such evil gore being produced. Shows such as *Ergo Proxy*, *Speed Grapher*, *DeathNote*, *Fullmetal Alchemist* and others are exposing American youth to sensationalized violence, themes of despair, and apocalypse. I feel that it is important to know why such shows are being produced in Japan and what it is about them that makes them so appealing both to Americans and Japanese youth.

Japan was crippled economically following the end of World War 2 yet between the 1960s and 1980s, Japan became an economic powerhouse on the world market. The Japanese were producing high quality goods such as electronics and automobiles

⁶ Roland Kelta, *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture Has Invaded the U.S.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

⁷ Susan Napier, *Anime: From Akira to Howl's Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

for less than their foreign competitors bringing massive cash flow into Japan.⁸ By the mid-1990s the Japanese economic boom was more illusion than reality. Riches turned to ruin and the outlook for the youth of Japan turned grim. In response to the bleak future seen by Japan's youth, many lock themselves away at home, afraid of society⁹ or turning to Japan's stratified levels of organized crime.¹⁰ The structure that Japanese youth grow up in is rigorously strict and anti-individualistic¹¹, intended to benefit the whole of Japan as opposed to the individual. It is my belief that this harsh structured life combined with the bleak outlook and economic turmoil are the root causes of such dark anime being produced in Japan.

Japanese animation started being imported into the United States in the 1980s, when Japanese culture was becoming globalized in its own right. Steven Brown reports that anime now comprises roughly 60 percent of all animation worldwide, with a 4 billion dollar a year business in the United States alone.¹² Companies such as Nintendo, Sony, and Toyota were on top of the business world and this was when shows such as *Robotech* burst through American mainstream television and had kids like me running home to catch every episode after school. I am of the opinion that the Japanese had a unique approach to both animation and stylings and storytelling that American writers

⁸ Susan Napier, *From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 91.

⁹ Michael Zielenziger, *Shutting Out the Sun: How Japan Created Its Own Lost Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 12.

¹⁰ Karl Taro Greenfeld, *Speed Tribes: Days and Nights With Japan's Next Generation* (New York: HarperCollins Books, 1994).

¹¹ Steven Wardell, *Rising Sons and Daughters: Life Among Japan's New Young* (Cambridge: Plympton Press International, 1995).

¹² Brown, 6.

could not compete with. I also believe that the Japanese cartoons, laden with foreign culture and mythology, brought a reverse blast of globalization into American living rooms, a unique appeal which western cartoons were failing to address.

American cartoons over the last 30 years have been 22-minute self-concealed conflict-resolutions without any soul. Roland Kelts cites a critic who states that between 1955 and 1975 there was an animation gap where virtually no new animators were hired by studios leaving no new students and no teachers for the next generation to eventually come.¹³ This kind of gap left the brilliance of the old *Tom & Jerry* and *Looney Tunes* lost on the animators of the late 1970s and 1980s as there were no old hands to give instruction and guidance; thus, the shows to come suffered in my opinion. Shows such as *He-man*, *Scooby Doo*, and most anything outside of *The Simpsons* and other adult-oriented animated comedies, have been mindless shows that are there to entertain a child without challenging any mental faculties. When Japanese animation showed up on American televisions, kids were slammed with complex plots, technologies, story-lines which link episode to episode, and a technical quality of animation largely lacking in America.

The explanation for why Japan is producing such gory violent animation and why it is so popular with American youth lies in Japan's economic bubble expansion and collapse of the 1980s and the lasting effects on its people, the phenomena of globalization, and the lack of gripping American animation in the last 40 years.

¹³ Kelts, 70.

Darkness Steeped in Japanese Youth Culture

In the wake of Japan's defeat of World War 2 and the subsequent American occupation, the island nation had to rethink its policies and figure out how to rebuild. The atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki left its population decimated and demoralized. What resulted was a strict restructuring of every facet of Japanese life and culture. In the wake of the defeat, the United States shaped the rebuilding process to create a stable manufacturing and exporting nation with America as the intended importer. The collective was supposed to work for the good of the whole. Standing out became a punishable offense as it was more important to blend in and serve as a cog for the state machine. Bullying and beatings, known as *ijime*, are fostered within the Japanese school system to keep those children who stand out in line.¹⁴ Michael Zielenziger even interviewed a former member of the Japanese Health Ministry who was subjected to *ijime* by his colleagues for standing out and not agreeing with their policies.¹⁵

Streamlined efficiency and devotion to family, work, and country would see the rise of manufacturing giants such as Honda, Toyota, Sony, Nintendo, and more. Japan became known as the producer of smaller, more efficient, and reliable automobiles, electronics, and so forth. To create this industrial juggernaut, Japan had to transform a nation of people into a nation of cogs, not that unlike their prewar militarism.

From the early days of school life Japanese children are made to serve their purpose and not stand out. Steven Wardell experienced this firsthand while sitting in

¹⁴ Zielenziger, 51.

¹⁵ Zielenziger, 53.

with school children in a Japanese school: “A girl in a short ponytail was called upon to read from the text. She spoke softly, not wanting to attract anyone’s attention...a girl in the front row didn’t move at all period: her head was hunched down low and her notebook was clasped tightly to her chest. She seemed paralyzed with fear of being called on or standing out.”¹⁶

Western culture fosters individuality to a much greater extent than Japan, yet to watch anime, it would be easy to assume that Japanese culture would also. Japanese animation, or anime, is full of individuals, heroes, stand-out characters often with unique powers. One glimpse at the show *Fullmetal Alchemist* gives us the main character Edward Elric, a short blonde-haired hotheaded kid who can transform anything metal into anything he thinks up. The show is chock-full of various characters who each have unique abilities, such as Ed’s brother Alfonse, who lost his body in an alchemy accident and has his soul attached to a suit of armor and still manipulates the elements, or Colonel Mustang the “flame alchemist”, who can conjure fire from his fingertips and control it at will.¹⁷

This kind of individualized characterization being produced in Japan is very indicative of a deep-seated yearning for individualism, yet as Steven Wardell points out “...there is a ‘society of shame’ in Japan, meaning that the group is more important than the individual, and people are highly conscious of what society thinks of them. Shame is considered the worst fate, so people become very careful, modest, and sometimes

¹⁶ Wardell, 33.

¹⁷ *Fullmetal Alchemist*, DVD, produced by Gen and Cindy Fukunaga (2004, Flower Mound, TX: Funimation Entertainment, 2004).

averse to standing out.”¹⁸ This leads me to believe that anime reflects the inner desires of the Japanese wanting to be something that their society wont allow.

When one looks at this anti-individualistic society and adds in the collapse of Japan’s bubble economy of the 1990s, the plight of the younger Japanese citizens looks even bleaker. Japan’s decades of restructuring came to fruition in the early 1980s when Japanese products started making serious inroads on the international markets. As Masao Miyoshi states in *Japan After Japan*, “During the 1980s Japan nearly dreamed about unseating the United States as the world’s economic hegemon.”¹⁹ Over the course of the 1980s the Japanese stock market would continue to rise, eventually peaking in December of 1989 at 39,915.87 only to plummet by 40% by mid-1991.²⁰

The big question which comes to mind is what kind of effect would this massive expanse and subsequent collapse have on the Japanese people? Japan is a nation which went from ruins to riches only to slump into a major depression. The hardest hit by this turnaround was the youth in Japan, who are facing a bleak prospect of their future. When things started looking grim in Japan, students started pulling themselves out of school, fearing the schools were failing them and that there was nothing waiting for them when they would graduate.²¹

This withdrawing of children from school would eventually become a troubling phenomena in Japan known as *hikikomori*. *The basic* definition of *hikikomori* as given

¹⁸ Wardell, 58.

¹⁹ Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian, *Japan After Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the recessionary 1990s to the Present* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 63.

²⁰ Greenfeld, xi.

²¹ Zielenziger, 80.

by Michael Zielenziger is seen in “the young men who lock themselves in their rooms and find little solace in the larger society.”²² This definition says everything and says nothing at the same time about this epidemic facing Japan today. The young men locking themselves in their rooms is, in essence, the heart of the matter, yet says nothing about the magnitude of the problem or the reasoning behind it.

There are more than a million Japanese youth (from adolescents to young adults), mostly male, today who are shut away in their rooms and rarely leave their rooms let alone their house.²³ *Hikikomori* have appeared in the eyes of popular culture, as some of these youth reach out to the world via the internet. William Gibson’s novel *Idoru* presents the reader with the character Masahiko, a *hikikomori* who essentially lives in the world of the internet. Gibson describes his room as “its floor and ledge-like bed long vanished beneath unwashed clothes, ramen-wrappers, Japanese magazine covers. A tower of empty foam ramen bowls in one corner...”²⁴ Masahiko gets fed by meals slid under his door and is the master of a special sub-set of the internet in the novel.

This idea was carried even further with the character Lain in the anime series *Serial Experiments: Lain*. Lain is a middle school student whose father sets her up with a new *navi* (a computer very resemblant to an iMac at the time) and thus her bizarre experiences on “the wired” (the internet) begin.²⁵ Steven Brown doesn’t focus on Lain’s

²² Zielenziger, 12.

²³ Zielenziger, 11.

²⁴ William Gibson, *Idoru* (New York: Berkeley Books, 1997), 159.

²⁵ *Serial Experiments: Lain*, DVD, Directed by Ryutaro Nakamura (1998, USA: Geneon Universal Entertainment, 2005), Episode 1: *Weird*.

withdrawal from society and immersion in the internet, but I feel he has a pretty succinct summary of what Lain becomes. Brown says, “Enframing the figure of the cyborg Lain, who is transformed into a ‘mechonic junkie’ during the course of the thirteen-episode series-entwined from head to toe in electrical cables, with computer-generated holographs superimposed over her entire body, her perception almost completely mediated by the internet.”²⁶

The combination of the societal restructuring and economic collapse certainly led to the rise of the *hikikomori* crisis in Japan, but it also led to the rise of a youth rebellion culture. Many Japanese youth became dissatisfied with what their future and their culture had in store for them and took the opposite path of the *hikikomori*. Rather than withdraw from Japanese society, a large portion of youth in the 1990s chose to rebel.

Motorcycle/ hot-rod gangs, porn actors, drug dealers, sexually free club hoppers rebelling against parents, thieves, and mobsters all become a new culture unto themselves after the burst of the bubble-economy. Many Japanese youth are dropping out of high-school and joining gangs, aspiring to get in with the lowest dregs of the Yakuza.²⁷ With school being so restrictive and the economy being so rough and the job market so slim, youth would find it easier to locate alternative ways to make a living. Karl Taro Greenfeld interviewed a teenage boy named Naoya who had discovered how to make a living on the stolen motorcycle parts market. Naoya had found a scooter with the keys still in it and drove it home. His brother informed him that his boss would pay

²⁶ Brown, 4.

²⁷ Greenfeld, 7.

him 20 thousand yen for the parts from it (roughly 130 US dollars),²⁸ thus beginning his career on the edge of society.

Perhaps the most iconic image in all of anime is that of motorcycle gang leader Shotaro Kaneda on his bright red souped-up motorcycle from the feature film *Akira*. This is a futuristic science fiction work wherein the gang gets swept up in the military's hunt for an escaped psychic child with superpowers with Tetsuo, one of the gang members, gaining much greater powers than the military had seen before. In the end, Kaneda battles Tetsuo and the military uses satellite lasers trying to blow Tetsuo up to save the world.²⁹ Although the psychic children are pure works of fantasy, the motorcycle gangs are very real.

Tats, a member of the *Midnight Angels* motorcycle and hot rod gang of Tokyo, confided in Karl Taro Greenfeld that *Akira* was his favorite comic book and it inspired him to join the gang, one of hundreds of such *boso-zoku*, or speed tribes in Japan today.³⁰ Like the Yakuza, the speed tribes are highly organized and stratified and efficient at means of organized crime, just on a lesser level than the mafia. Through Tats we can see Japanese youth culture imitating anime and vice versa.

When one looks at the state of the young people in Japan especially during the 1990s, one can clearly see a generation in crisis. These children and young adults were coming of age in a time when the previous generations had failed to secure a future for them. The school systems were molding them into cogs for an outdated and obsolete machine which broke at the end of the 1980s. Japanese firms over-specified and

²⁸ Greenfeld, 58.

²⁹ *Akira*, DVD, Directed by Katsuhiro Otomo (1988, Japan: 2001, Geneon Pioneer),

³⁰ Greenfeld, 24.

over-extended themselves during the 1980s. Prices of everything skyrocketed in Tokyo during the 1980s and hundreds of billions of dollars flowed overseas in exchange for lavish luxuries. As Karo Taro Greenfeld points out; “a three-bedroom house on a twentieth of an acre an hour’s ride from Tokyo, which sold for \$100,000 in 1979, sold for \$1.5 million in 1989.”³¹

Art provides alternative ways of imagining life, and I feel that it was the collapse of this Japanese market, combined with the repression of individualism amongst the youth which led to the creation of the truly dark anime. If one examines the anime series *Death Note* we see a high school senior named Light Yagami who gains possession of a notebook belonging to a god of death. Whomever’s name is written in the notebook dies and the owner of the book can determine how and when the person dies.³² Light proceeds to kill of the criminal population of Japan, cleaning up the country. When a second notebook shows up, intrigue ensues and it ends up being an evil corporation, the *Yotsuba Group*, possessing one and they use it to kill off all competition.³³

I see this empowering of an about-to-graduate high school student and killing off of evil-doers and showing the corruption of an evil corporation which gets taken-down eventually as pure symbolism of the desires of the youth of Japan to lash out at the culture which has squandered their future. With corporations such as Sony having so much control over Japan, I think the use of the Yotsuba Group in *Death Note* is a pretty clear message aimed at expressing the general feelings of the youth culture towards the conglomerates.

³¹ Greenfeld, x.

³² *Death Note*, DVD, Directed by Tetsuro Araki, 2006, Japan: Viz Media, 2008. Episode 1, “*Confrontation*.”

³³ *Death Note*. Episode 20, “*Makeshift*.”

I also see a huge expression of deep desires and anti-elitist protest of Japanese society in the series *Speed Grapher*. The plot-line of *Speed Grapher* concerns Tatsumi Saiga, a photojournalist who uncovers the heart of the corrupt Japanese government via an elitist club. At the club, Saiga is exposed to a genetic catalyst which has been used on select club members to unleash super powers connected to their deepest desires.³⁴ Over the course of the series, Saiga fights and exposes the corruptness of Japanese society, which I feel is another example of Japan's youth culture lashing out at the society which has failed them.

Speed Grapher goes further with the head corporation that is controlling the government, the Tenozu Group. Prominent families are preyed upon by the Tenozu Group and the government alike, gobbling up the assets of the people and taking treating them as commodities. In the end it is revealed that Suitangu, the head man of the group, was the child of a man who was in debt to the Tenozu Group and sold to the military and their land seized. Over the course of the series Suitangu works the angles and slowly gains control of the Tenozu Group. This whole cycle of events is one big statement about how the young generation was ruined by the rich reconstruction barons. Suitangu says, "Blood, Sweat & Tears: the unmistakable stench of money: the putrid stink of people trading their souls for scraps of paper."³⁵ This view of capitalistic Japan's electronics conglomerates ruining the next generation's future rings loud and clear.

³⁴ *Speed Grapher*. Episode 2, "Goddess of Greed."

³⁵ *Speed Grapher* "Episode 14 *The Wedding Photographer*."

Suitangu's final act in the show is taking every yen the company ever wrestled from Japan and stockpiling it in the corporation's headquarters building which gets blown up, ruining Japan's economy in a symbolic gesture of what Japan had done to his father as a child.³⁶ I think this demolition of Japan's riches in a corporate building is how the youth feel the bubble market buildup and collapse treated them. The corporation hustled them for all their money and exploded, destroying the money (economy) forever.

The other thing of note in *Speed Grapher* is that Saiga and all of the enemies he battles have unique abilities and powers, such as Doctor Mizunokuchi whom I mentioned in the introduction. I feel that this aspect of unique abilities in anime (it is a common feature among anime shows) is probably the most widespread virtual or cultural protest of the youth culture in Japan against their society. I feel that the commonality of unique abilities amongst characters is a direct reflection of the repression of individualism by Japanese society. When one adds all of these protests represented in anime and the deep yearning for autonomy and power with the general condition of the youth culture after the bubble-economy's burst, I feel that it all adds up to the creation of the dark and twisted forms of anime that have become commonplace over the last twenty years.

³⁶ *Speed Grapher*. Episode 24, "The Roppongi Crisis."

Cultural Invasion

In the 1980s, Globalization was in full force around the world. Over the next thirty years Pizza Huts, McDonald's, and many other American brand names would pop up on every corner of the planet. In the United States, however, globalization was not a one-way street. Japanese products were flooding American stores and tipping the balance of economic power. At the same time, Japanese animated shows were slowly becoming more prevalent on American televisions and symbiotically driving the associated toy market higher and higher.

In the decades that followed the end of World War Two, the Japanese restructuring of the country saw an industrial sector refocused on pride in quality and ever-improvement of itself. The Japanese were quick to capitalize on ideas they could get their hands on in order to improve and market globally. Koichi Iwabuchi points out "VCR's were originally invented by an American company, but it was Sony, Matsushita, and JVC that, with many original ideas, refined them and made them suitable for the consumer market."³⁷

The Prime Minister went so far as to incorporate the major businessmen in charge of large corporations in a council aimed at restructuring the Japanese educational system.³⁸ This kind of involvement of big business in governmental policy would lead to the kinds of symbolism seen in anime series such as *Speed Grapher* with corrupt government, the evils of capitalism, and such. Whether involving big business in

³⁷ Iwabuchi, 449.

³⁸ Yoda and Harootunian, 63.

the affairs of the government was successful or not, one can't argue with the kind of technological innovation seen in Japan throughout the 1980s.

Walkmans, televisions, fuel-efficient smaller cars which were more reliable, video game systems, cameras, and more flooded American markets. As Koichi Iwabuchi states; "from a Japanese point of view, Japan's increasing confidence in its dominant position in the world economy generated its aggressive assertion of Japanese cultural power through technological excellence."³⁹ Japan may have been defeated and decimated after World War Two, but economics was a battle the Japanese government was determined to win. Soon, cultural content would join this long list of exports created largely with American markets in mind.

Koichi Iwabuchi makes the claim that Hollywood did not start to take serious notice of Japan until the late 1980s after the success of such high-profile features such as *Akira*.⁴⁰ I would say that although his claim has merit, especially in light of such noteworthy series as *Pokemon* and *Sailor Moon* which would appear on American television soon after *Akira* made its splash, I have to disagree somewhat. I would say Japanese anime shows had already made an earlier mainstream impact years before *Akira*'s appearance and the Japanese corporate buyout of Hollywood studios.

Akira, which was released in 1988, was certainly one of the most successful and widely accepted anime feature films here in the United States, but years before that appeared here, shows such as *Robotech* had seen widespread syndication and success throughout North and South America. *Robotech* was picked up in 1984 as an

³⁹ Iwabuchi, 450.

⁴⁰ Iwabuchi, 541.

experiment by Harmony Gold, a Hollywood distribution company which was focused largely on foreign programs to syndicate domestically.

Regardless of when Hollywood officially took notice of Japanese animation, something new was happening wherein Japan had consciously started stereotyping itself for foreign distribution. As Iwabuchi states; “unless Japanese products embody a clearly articulated Japanese identity and sensitivity, they will not reach a global standard.”⁴¹ By overstating the “Japaneseness” of products and characters in the case of anime, the Japanese were buying into American stereotypes and making a huge profit in the process. This explicit Japaneseness can be best described as a stereotypical “Made in Japan” stamp in anime wherein the large eyes, exaggerated gestures, and everything else is intended to connect the viewer with the culture and peoples that created it and hopefully entice them to embrace and celebrate it.

The supreme example of this purposeful-Japaneseness for profit can be seen with the hit series *Pokemon*. Having gone through countless seasons and movies, this series, which was created for television after having first been a successful video game, stormed American televisions in the mid-1990s and is widely the most recognizable franchise in existence. In a survey I conducted of Cal Poly’s *Minna No Anime* club and the board members of the annual *Fanime* expo held in San Jose, *Pokemon* and *Sailor Moon* were the first anime shows consumed by over 85% of respondents under age 25. Of those over age 25, almost 75% reported being introduced to the genre by *Robotech*.⁴²

⁴¹ Iwabuchi, 435.

⁴² Brian Roberts, Interviews conducted 11/20/2010, 12/14/2010.

It is fair to assess that this Japanese self-stereotyping was very successful in spreading not only the product(s) themselves, but also spreading Japanese culture itself. Iwabuchi cites Japanese scholars who observe young American Pokemon fans regarding Japan as “a cool nation capable of producing wonderful characters, imaginaries, and commodities.”⁴³ This kind of response from youth was jokingly parodied by *South Park* in their third season’s infamous Chinpokomon episode. In said show, the four boys are captivated by the Chinpokomon fad, which has some new “have-to-have” component of it every day and they are buying some new toy each day. Eventually the boys attend a Chinpokomon camp, where they are brainwashed by the Japanese into bombing Pearl Harbor and overthrowing the American government.⁴⁴ The plot is foiled and this is obviously a spoof, however the Japanese almost had this kind of cultural and commercial influence over kids by the mid-1990s.

One of the most interesting hypothesis I have encountered on what it is about *Pokemon* that sets it apart from other animated concepts was posed by Roland Kelts. He says that unlike Disney or Hanna Barbara, *Pokemon’s* marketed poster-child, Pikachu, is not any kind of recognizable species from this world.⁴⁵ To me it makes perfect sense that this kind of ambiguity gives a child’s imagination free reign to run wild. I feel that this kind of approach to allow the viewers to decide what to make of the characters would prove to be instrumental in the fan base of shows such as *Pokemon* going on to embrace more sophisticated and risqué forms of anime as they grew older.

⁴³ Iwabuchi, 453.

⁴⁴ *South Park*, DVD, Season 3, 1999, Episode 41, “*Chinpokomon*.”

⁴⁵ Kelts, 17.

The way in which *South Park* spoofed the Pokemon fad may not be that big of a stretch. As mentioned, the overwhelmingly large proportion of anime fans I interviewed were hooked after having started out on *Pokemon* or *Sailor Moon*. Many of the stories heard echo the words of Anne Allison when she says “what is appealing to American youth about Japanese cool today is its utter sense of difference . . . knowing that this all comes from a real place: from a Japan that actually exists, which inspires some fans at least into learning about Japanese culture, language, or history.”⁴⁶ I’m not suggesting that children ran straight to the library after seeing Pokemon, however it does appear to have served as a gateway, introducing young viewers to a whole new form of cartoons.

I have focused on American consumption as that is the aim of my paper, however it is not the case that the United States was the only market or consumer of Japanese Animation. In the mid 1980s, as Harmony Gold was releasing *Robotech* in the United States, they also released it throughout Canada and South America, the latter re-recorded in Spanish. In my interview with Michael Bradley, who worked on the show as a musician, I found out just how big of a hit *Robotech* was in South America. “All of the English speaking voice actors were re-cast with Spanish speaking ones, but I was very fortunate to have been the only original voice left on the South American release” he told me. “They left my original songs completely intact and I just got back from the 25th anniversary tour of South America and these shows were completely off the hook with so many Spanish-speaking people singing my songs in English with such intensity. It was amazing.”⁴⁷ I received an email notification about a year ago notifying me that

⁴⁶ Anne Allison, “The Japan Fad in Global Youth Culture and Millennial Capitalism”, *Mechademia*, Vol 1, 2006, p. 16.

⁴⁷ Michael Bradley interview 12/13/2010.

Robotech was being re-aired in its entirety on the Canadian CBC network, which just goes to show the staying power and universal popularity of the show.

The Japanese “attacked” American youth via a full multimedia barrage of marketing beginning in the 1980s. Anime television shows, movies, video games, comic books, and toys were all marketed relentlessly to young consumers. Growing up in the 1980s as a huge *Robotech* Fan, I would run home from school every day to watch the show. I also purchased every toy I could afford associated with the show (or begged my parents to buy them for me). I also collected comic books of the series and eventually had the entire series in novel form as well. The only things *Robotech* didn’t have were a trading card game and a video game, which *Pokemon* would later introduce to complete the full saturation of the market.

One big distinction I should make here is that *Robotech* was an American re-making of three separate Japanese short series. As such, I was bombarded by Americans who were marketing Japanese culture with the only actual Japanese products I clamored for being the toys. Incidentally, there are still *Robotech* toys being produced twenty five years later. However, in terms of marketing dominance, nothing can even come close to the financial success of *Pokemon*. Anne Allison reports that the multi-media giant had made fifteen billion dollars in global revenues in its first seven years in existence.⁴⁸ Going well beyond *Robotech*’s marketing span, *Pokemon* went so much further with board games, trading cards, bed sheets, pajamas, underwear, and even one of the most popular Halloween costumes of the 1990s.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 236.

⁴⁹ Allison, 252.

It was sheer genius the way that Japan made its global comeback in the 1980s, gaining prestige and a reputation for the new quality and reliability of its products. The massive marketing of its culture which followed would bring drastic change to the American youth who gobbled it up quite readily. It is my firm belief that children in the United States were ready for a change in regards to entertainment, as American cartoon studios had grown stagnant and out of touch with their target audience. Japanese studios had laid the groundwork in the 1980s and early 1990s with shows like *Robotech* and *Pokemon*, all they had to do was wait for their audience to grow older to embrace the vast array of what anime had to offer.

American Reception

In the United States in the 1980s, cartoons being produced domestically were lacking in depth and didn't challenge the minds of their viewers. When anime burst on the scene, it presented viewers with a very unique and engaging form of animation, the likes of which they had never encountered. What resulted was a gradual invasion of Japanese anime cartoons slowly coming to dominate the American television market. Prior to this Japanese invasion, the only Japanese visual media American viewers had likely seen was the likes of *Godzilla* and various Japanese monster movies which fed off of the Japanese fascination with post-apocalyptic ramifications.

American-produced cartoons of the 1980s and 1990s in general followed a basic recipe: 20-22 minutes of a self-contained plot, wherein there is some kind of problem or crisis which arises, there is some kind of battle or conflict, and there is a resolution. Whether it be *The Smurfs*, *Scooby Doo*, *G.I. Joe*, or any of the other countless shows

popular in the 1980s, they all followed this basic premise. They were the kind of shows that I don't recall really caring if I missed an episode or two because there wouldn't be anything vital I was missing. It is as if there was an assumption of no real intelligence among the American youth audience and thus no real effort was made to challenge the viewer. Then *Robotech* appeared in 1985 and everything changed.

I was 8 years old when the series *Robotech* started airing on a Los Angeles station, KTLA. Here was something that came on before *He-Man* and I recall being disappointed when each show ended because the stuff that followed was always awful in comparison. Here was a science fiction show with a believable plot line, believable characters I cared about, much better quality animation, and amazing technological ideas. Stylistically it was like nothing I had ever seen before, and it would have a profound impact on me.

As to what set anime apart from American-made shows at the time, I think Roland Kelts has a nice summary. He says "the characters looked different and fresh. The animation sometimes emphasized racier parts of the human body. Their modes of transport had sleek yet believable shapes. And when the characters fought, they didn't just zap one another, as in most American cartoons. They grappled, hand to hand."⁵⁰ I should note that Kelts is referring to an earlier show than *Robotech*, he is speaking about the first anime show he watched, *Star Blazers*, which appeared in the late 1970s in the United States, yet didn't see the kind of success *Robotech* had. I feel that this reaction of his still rings true today, as anime is very pure in its form and is much more realistic than general American-made cartoons.

⁵⁰ Kelts, 15.

When I surveyed the Cal Poly anime club members in late 2010, the general consensus as to what sets anime apart from American-produced animation were an arcing continuous plot-line, technical superiority of animation, believable characters who are relatable, challenge to the viewers' intellect, and depth of the range of topics anime covers.⁵¹ Most of the respondents were willing to concede merits to some American shows, such as *The Simpsons*, but were quick to point out that *The Simpsons* is pretty much in a genre of its own, and shows such as *Family Guy* or *South Park*, which mimic *The Simpsons'* formatting, are vastly different from the kinds of shows in question.⁵²

Roland Kelts cites a twenty year gap between 1955 and 1975 where “ old studios were closing down, and for some reason Disney didn't hire anyone new . . . this country suffered from a gap where almost everyone in animation was over 65 or under 35. Teachers were lost. A whole generation didn't receive the education.”⁵³ This explanation makes perfect sense to me by just examining the evolution of *Tom & Jerry* and how it went from original to standard to not very funny over the course of the 1960s and 1970s. I feel that it can also be seen very clearly in most everything animated put out in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s.

Before *Robotech*, *G.I. Joe* was the staple American cartoon in the mid-1980s, and the animation was fairly generic. The main thing that sticks out, is that for an action-packed cartoon, every time one of the C*O*B*R*A* guys got shot down from their planes they always fell to earth safely in their parachute. This is a prime example of American cartoonists not giving their target audience any credit for understanding the

⁵¹ Roberts, interview.

⁵² Roberts, interview.

⁵³ Kelts, 70.

impact of a missile impacting an aircraft. Here was a very military cartoon full of explosions and guns and evil guys trying to take over the world, yet nobody was killed and there was always an inane moral lesson taught at the end of each episode. Then *Robotech* appeared and from the very start, devastation and death are brought right onto the television screen to confront the viewer and make them face the realities of war. In the very first episode the viewer is enveloped in dramatic images of a world enveloped in war. When the aliens from the other side of the universe invaded, the viewer saw an up-close view of a human pilot being disintegrated by an alien “battle pod’s” cannons.⁵⁴

Throughout the course of the show I was confronted with the deaths of prominent characters I had grown and loved, and even cried when fighter ace “Roy Fokker” bled to death after having been wounded in his fighter.⁵⁵ This imagery was troubling as an eight-year-old who had grown up on simple American cartoons. Roland Kelts refers to *Robotech* as the “watershed in the history of anime imports” and credits it to the fact that it made it to the airwaves “largely without the meddling of Sandy Frank or the whitewashing of U.S. censors.”⁵⁶ Frank was a 1970s American television producer who found it necessary to severely chop and edit Japanese animation to make it presentable to American audiences. Kelts explains that Sandy Frank tried to keep American viewers from seeing the “darker undercurrents in Japanese animation” in the series *Battle of the Planets* in the late 1970s.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ *Robotech: The Macross Saga*, DVD, Produced by Carl Macek, 1985. Episode 1, “Boobytrap.”

⁵⁵ *Robotech*. Episode 18, “Farewell, Big Brother.”

⁵⁶ Kelts, 184.

⁵⁷ Kelts, 14.

These new aspects of death and real violence weren't the only things which *Robotech* introduced to American viewers. Like all good anime, it had a deep, continuous arcing plot which keeps the viewer coming back day after day. The characters of *Robotech* were in themselves something never seen in American cartoons, and their lives intertwined into an ever-evolving plot which made the viewer care about the characters and fully engage the show.

The aforementioned Roy Fokker was a dashing blonde-haired fighter pilot who had been like an older brother to the main protagonist, Rick Hunter. To the shock and awe of most viewers, Roy was the lover of Claudia Grant, an African-American officer of the SDF-1, the battlefortress which served as the main centerpiece of the show's plot. To have an interracial couple prominently displayed to children in 1985 was certainly a bold move by producers. In another interesting twist, we have a long drawn-out love triangle between the previously mentioned Rick Hunter, a fighter pilot, and Lisa Hayes, the SDF-1's first-officer, and Lynn Minmei, a young singer. I should also mention that *Robotech* was another first by combining the action of a true science-fiction masterpiece with something more attractive to girl viewers, with many prominent female characters holding positions of power on the show.

Cartoons in the 1980s were very gender-specific with the exception of *The Smurfs*, which were more ambiguous. There were *Rainbow Bright*, *The Care Bears*, *My Little Pony*, *Strawberry Shortcake*, and such for the female audience, while boys had *He-Man*, *G.I. Joe*, *Thundercats*, *Transformers*, and the like. The "boy" shows always made very little attempt at reaching out to the female audience, just having one female

member of the cast. When *Robotech* came on the scene, viewers of both genders had enough content to get truly pulled into the show and care about the characters.

One other aspect which *Robotech* opened up American audiences to was sexuality / gender. In the *New Generation* portion of the show, the character of Lancer was a cross-dressing singer / freedom fighter. In my interview with singer / song writer Michael Bradley, who was the singing voice of Lancer, he informed me that when he was recording the songs he had not been made aware of Lancer's sexual ambiguity. "Had I been told, I would have femmed-up my voice some or at least worn a dress in the studio," he quipped.⁵⁸ He informed me that it was not until years later when he caught a glimpse of his character on television that he learned of Lancer's cross-dressing. One of the most notable blatant references to his sexuality is when Lancer is sunbathing in just underwear on a rock and he is mistaken for a woman, hit over the head and drug off to be a bride, to the later embarrassment of the abductor.⁵⁹

Anime has a much broader inclusion of much in the way of sexual ambiguity that American cartoons. The concept of Lancer's cross-dressing is a pretty mild example, however in the years that followed *Robotech's* release in the United States, many new series would continue to push the boundary of sexuality. The year after *Robotech's* release, *Ranma 1/2* appeared, presenting the viewer with a sex-switching teenager who gets entwined in love affairs and engagements with members of both sexes throughout the series. As Patrick Drazen states; "Ranma is a girl. Rather sometimes he's a girl, sometimes he's a boy . . . this kind of setup could easily be fodder for any number of

⁵⁸ Michael Bradley, interview, 12/13/2010.

⁵⁹ *Robotech* Episode 74. "Annie's Wedding."

erotic (or downright sleazy) variations. (The director) however has chosen to play it strictly for laughs.”⁶⁰ *Ranma* was another eye-opening series which helped lay the groundwork for the darker anime which would make its way to the West but expanding what was acceptable in the eyes of viewers.

I feel that it was this kind of systematic opening up of American viewers eyes to a little bit more with each show in the 1980s that had them primed and ready for *Akira*'s arrival in the United States in 1990. Susan Napier credits *Akira* as the “critical and cult hit that can be seen as the film that started the anime boom in the west.”⁶¹ Although I agree with her as to the importance of this film, I take issue with her notable lack of mention to the part *Robotech* played in implanting the anime seed in the minds of American audiences years before *Akira* came to the United States. As Fred Patten cites, *Robotech* was rated the top development in anime between 1985 and 1999 by *Animation Magazine* in 1999 for bringing the American public's attention to the genre.⁶² I feel that *Akira* is pretty intense and over-the-top for a first-time viewer of anime. Having seen *Robotech*, with its Zentraedi “rain of death, which decimated the surface of Earth in apocalyptic fashion”⁶³ and the likes enabled me to be a little better prepared for what Susan Napier dubs “the telekinetic holocaust” of *Akira*.⁶⁴

One important thing *Akira* emphasizes which makes anime distinct is the Japanese culture from which it comes. At no time does the viewer not know the story is

⁶⁰ Drazen, 50-51.

⁶¹ Napier, 41.

⁶² Fred Patten, *Watching Anime, Reading Manga: 25 Years of Essays and Reviews* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2004), 122.

⁶³ *Robotech*. Episode 27 “*Force of Arms*”.

⁶⁴ Napier, 251.

unfolding in Tokyo, which is a central location for many anime features. The Japanese culture and mythology are both central aspects to anime's appeal and identity. I feel that it is this distinct "foreignness" about anime to those in the western world which attracts them to it. Susan Napier states that "anime increasingly exists at a nexus point in global culture, allowing it to inhabit an amorphous new media territory that crosses and even intermingles national boundaries"⁶⁵

Speed Grapher, *Wicked City*, *Death Note*, and *Akira* are all highly imaginative story lines of apocalyptic destruction and science fiction take the viewer to very different places, yet the viewer is very aware that they are in Tokyo. I think that it is this place very few westerners have ever been, though know is real that combines to giving an air of believability to anime. I feel Tokyo still keeps anime exotic by being a faraway location for western viewers. Susan Napier feels that it was the likes of Jack Kerouac in the period after World War Two who started to rouse American interest in Japan with his writings on Buddhism and the Eastern Philosophy in his works such as *The Dharma Bums*.⁶⁶ I feel in terms of the "anime generation", credit for interest in Japan lies more in popular culture and the rise of Japanese products in American markets. One other huge aspect of Japanese culture which draws in the western viewers is Japanese mythology and history. The western world has been fascinated with the Japanese concepts of the samurai and ninjas as they present an exciting and different method of fighting from the western norm. Many anime films bring the likes of samurai fighting to a sophisticated level that only this form can, delighting the viewer with spectacular fight scenes.

⁶⁵ Napier, 22-23.

⁶⁶ Susan Napier, *From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 82-83.

Ninja Scroll was one of the earlier samurai action anime films to reach the United States and took the viewer a few steps further than *Akira* did a few years earlier down a dark path to blood and gore, while vastly improving the quality of animation. Teaming with brutal sexual depravity and hyper-violence, *Ninja Scroll* was my first exposure to what I would consider truly “dark” anime, and I liked it. Patrick Drazen mentions that the main character, Jubei, is based on a historical Japanese warrior, and is invoked often in Japanese manga as well as anime.⁶⁷ This kind of use of historical characters serves dual purposes, both as a point of interest and reference for Japanese viewers and as a point of intrigue for western viewers who have this reference to Japanese historical lore to investigate and follow. Susan Napier points out *Ninja Scroll*'s “horrific and fantastic” battle scenes and its similarities to historical kabuki theater.⁶⁸

Full of decapitations, disembowelments, and various deaths that Hollywood would have a hard time producing in a live-action film, *Ninja Scroll* became a kind of benchmark for me when it came to gory anime.⁶⁹ One common thread which *Ninja Scroll* utilizes that is common amongst the ultraviolent dark anime genre is that the “bad guys” are demons. Demons make for the ideal destructive enemy in anime, as they can be made to appear and do virtually anything the animator can imagine. *Wicked City* and *Fullmetal Alchemist* are two examples of just how far this concept can go.

Tapping into historical Japanese demon mythology such as the demon gods and goddesses of legends, *Wicked City* pitches Taki, a human guardian and Makie, a demon woman as a team against demon assassins. The demons are trying to kill

⁶⁷ Drazen, 106.

⁶⁸ Napier, *Anime*, 215.

⁶⁹ *Ninja Scroll*, DVD, Directed by Yoshiaki Kawajiri, 1993, Manga Entertainment, 1998.

Giuseppi Mayart, a diplomat who is set to speak at a conference about a treaty between the human world and the black (demon) world.⁷⁰ Extreme perversion, violence, and gore abound in *Wicked City* as the demon assassins take on every form from a serpent to an evil figure who comes and goes through the shadows.

The most memorable demon, as Susan Napier says, comes in “the film’s famous opening sequence, which revolves around the seduction of the human agent Taki by a woman from the black world who turns out to possess both spiderlike properties and a literal vagina dentata. In the middle of sexual intercourse the woman’s black-stockinged and gartered legs suddenly elongate, insectlike, around the hapless Taki, binding him to her.”⁷¹

This sequence is one that doesn’t leave one’s mind after one views it, with Taki being saved on the verge of death by his new partner who takes that moment to introduce herself.⁷²

In a very similar concept to Demons, *Fullmetal Alchemist* has several “homunculi” encountered throughout the Eleric brothers encounter throughout their travels. Homunculi are beings created by trying to resurrect the dead and they all contain special abilities to do many horrific things. Whether shape-shifting, devouring all living creatures encountered, turning fingers into missile-like swords, or becoming a monstrous beastly blob of the souls of all lives it has ever taken, the homunculi are very

⁷⁰ *Wicked City*, Digital Media, Directed by Yoshiaki Kawajiri, 1987.

⁷¹ Napier, *Anime*, 69.

⁷² *Wicked City*.

demon-esque and are able to do pretty much any horrible thing the animators wish.⁷³

These beastly beings can represent a multitude of things, with the one blob amassing the lives of all he encounters, expressing the kind of pessimistic view that many people have about how their country controls them.

Somewhat similar to the demon-concept is the series *Ergo Proxy*, a newer series of a futuristic post-apocalyptic world of isolated domed cities, which I feel is a representation of Japanese isolationism. It is poisonous to venture out beyond the dome and citizens have to meet criteria in absolute devotion to the state in order to be allowed in/ to stay. The citizens are drones controlled by a decrepit few who are removed from the people in a tall tower and the heads of the various departments all scheme and vie for power at the expense of the masses.⁷⁴ This futuristic dystopian view of society is a clear example of the cynicism described earlier, how many Japanese people feel about their society by the early 21st century.

“Proxies” are demon-like creatures which are scantily known in this world, and the protagonist Vincent Law, is the “ergo proxy” the death god. Initially getting blamed for murders, Vincent goes on the run and eventually discovers he is the death god and brutally battles other proxies, killing them in this fantastic tale where each of the proxies is a different kind of demon god.⁷⁵ Not as blatantly gory as some of the aforementioned shows, *Ergo Proxy* is nonetheless a very dark series, presenting a grim future of humanity that certainly engages the viewer and does not leave an impression of fluffy bunnies and cotton candy.

⁷³ *Fullmetal Alchemist*.

⁷⁴ *Ergo Proxy*, DVD, Directed by Shukou Murase, 2006.

⁷⁵ *Ergo Proxy*.

There is an overabundance of various forms of this dark, gory anime with a flavor for virtually any taste. Be it brutal sexuality, monsters, swords, or guns, there is something for everyone, and I feel that this says volumes about what people think about their government and society. Contemporary society, as I see it is full of neuroticism and distaste for authority, and dark anime serves to fulfill the viewer's deep-seated desires to lash out against the world's injustices.

Since the 1970s, the United States has been unable to produce any gripping animation to compete with the Japanese animation being imported. American networks have been continually airing more anime due to the massive draw that it has on young audiences. This massive appeal is due to the ingenious cross-media marketing, technical mastery of anime, and its relatable arcing plots, characters. American youth have found anime captivating and intellectually stimulating, continuing to watch it long after they've grown up.

Conclusion

Japan has had a traumatic last half-century full of ups and downs since the end of World War Two. Reconstruction saw a decimated island nation rebuilt to suit the needs of the United States. Japan turned inward and sacrificed the needs of the individual for the needs of the country as a whole. People became cogs for the Japanese industrial giant and individualism was suppressed in favor of the good of the nation. A "lost generation" developed in Japan as the massive bubble expansion of the economy flourished in the 1980s and collapsed. Youth culture was shattered in Japan in the 1990s leaving a generation in crisis.

Japanese animation came to reflect much of the wrongs in the contemporary society. Angst, fears, depression, and politics can all be seen in the gory anime produced in Japan in the last thirty years. The wonders of globalization brought this gory anime to the United States through Japan's efforts to reach out and remain globally relevant. Tremendous cross-marketing blitzes by the Japanese saw anime reaching American youth via videos, television, movies, video games, manga comics, books, and all manners of children's products. The Japanese would capitalize on their Japaneseness, stereotyping their depictions in shows such as *Pokemon* to get their western viewers hooked on not only their shows but the idea that Japanese animation came from an exotic and exciting place.

When exposed to anime, American viewers encountered a whole new kind of cartoon that dealt with many topics and concepts that were completely new and amazing. Believable characters were engaged in real conflict in engaging plots which made the viewer never want to miss an episode. The animation was technically superior and drew from Japanese culture and mythology, exposing the western audience to a whole new depth which they never knew animation could encompass. The gore and violence of some anime became appealing to viewers as they grew older.

Japan has produced a very wide variety of gory / violent anime series and features, covering a wide spectrum of topics. Similarities amongst these gory shows arise with the common threads of apocalypse and demons, which is attributed to the Japanese preoccupation with the post atomic bombing fallout after World War Two. Many westerners have fallen in love with these violent anime shows often fulfilling the

needs of deep-rooted cynicism and distrust of the evils of government corruption and our hypocritical society.

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