Recreating Japanese Men

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Anime, Masculinity, and the Future

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On 22 October 2008 a Japanese man by the name of Takashita Taichi set up an online petition to call for legal recognition of the right to marry an anime character. He offered the following explanation: "Nowadays, we have no interest in the three-dimensional world. If it were possible, I think I'd rather live in a two-dimensional world. But this doesn't seem likely with today's technology. So can't we at least have marriage to a two-dimensional character legally recognized? If that happens, my plan is to marry Asahina Mikuru."[1]

Within a week, roughly a thousand people had expressed their support for this unlikely project, and more than three thousand had done so by two months later. Many people mentioned the character they'd marry. Other signers took it as a curious joke. "I'd like to meet you distributing this petition in person," said one. A number of journalists and bloggers outside Japan picked up on the story, mostly with a tone of joking about "those wacky Japanese," but also with a hint of sociological wonderment. Given the tendency for young Japanese nowadays to delay marriage, doesn't this signify more trouble in the future? One online commentator even speculated on possible legal ramifications: "Will Mr. Takashita be paying royalties to comic book creators? Or does he consider copyright protection a form of 2D slavery?"[2]

The idea of developing relationships, or even falling in love, with characters in virtual worlds is not especially new, nor is it unique to anime (Japanese animated films and TV shows). Yet the debates surrounding Japan's obsessive fans, often identified as *otaku*, and their self-involved attachments are interesting for the ways they constitute a particular kind of argument about the future of masculinity and love. I am interested in the ways these debates revolve around a question of the value of private,

inconspicuous consumption as a legitimate expression of manhood. Might this also reframe the ways we envision the politics of working toward a better future?

Part of what gives the debate about Japanese men and anime characters cultural specificity is not only the strange category of men known as otaku but also the notion of *moe*, loosely, a term for affectionate longing for 2-D characters, or, more accurately, a reference to an internalized emotional response to something, generally with no hope for a reciprocal emotional response.[3] In discussions about the cultural significance of anime in Japan, the idea of *moe* is also associated with larger questions about the ways fans relate to virtual characters and worlds, and in turn about the power of media producers vis-à-vis consumers. As we will see, for some writers, *moe* constitutes a "love revolution," that is, an example of pure love and a logical extension of the shift from analog to digital technology. For another theorist, *moe* symbolizes a postmodern, "database" form of consumption, whereby today's otaku reject the experience of the larger stories of anime and favor instead the piecemeal sampling of elements of 2-D characters.

What I find most provocative about the notion of *moe* is the assertion of the value of an internalized consumption. In this chapter I will map some of the ways this value is described as a means to think about whether it might point toward a new kind of politics. It at least offers an intriguing alternative to a focus on productivity as the measure of a man. Otaku raise the question, what kind of value arises from consumption, especially if that consumption is immaterial, a kind of affective attachment, simply, in a word, love?

OTAKU VERSUS SALARYMAN

In some ways, the image of the Japanese otaku as a geeky, obsessive, socially inept, technologically fluent nerd represents the polar opposite of the image of the gregarious, socializing breadwinner, the salaryman. If the salaryman is measured by his productivity, then the loner otaku, with his comic book collections, expensive figurines, and encyclopedic knowledge of trivia, can be viewed as a puzzle of rampant, asocial consumerism. Anthropologists James Roberson and Nobue Suzuki argue that until recently the dominant image of men and masculinity has been the "middle-class, heterosexual, married salaryman considered as responsible for and representative of 'Japan.'"[4] Their volume aims to dislocate the taken-for-granted salaryman image of manhood by providing instead a variety of "ethnographically-based understandings, which are sensitive

to the reflexivities of the lived, constructed and embedded ... diversity of masculinities in contemporary Japan."[5] Arguably, otaku represent part of that diversity, all the more so with their widening presence as a stock figure in Japanese popular culture, as portrayed, for example, in the film *Otaku no Video* (1991), directed by Mori; in the TV series *Paranoia Agent* (2004), directed by Kon; and in the Train Man phenomenon. Yet the discourses around *moe* and otaku aim not only to illustrate variety but also to establish different grounds for evaluating masculinity.

In the United States, the word *otaku* is often used simply to mean "serious anime fan" (with a fairly positive connotation), but in Japan the term carries a more complex range of meanings. In general, the word indicates people with an obsession for "geeky" realms of knowledge and activity, such as cult anime, manga (comic books), computer games, and military trivia. Images of the otaku in Japan tend to oscillate between negative portrayals focusing on antisocial behavior and potentially dangerous habits on one hand, or, on the other, positive portrayals of future-oriented, postindustrial sensibilities that contribute to the global strength of "cool Japan" products in popular culture. Of course, delving below the surface reveals that the debates surrounding otaku for the past twenty years complicate such a simple binary opposition. Scholars in Japan distinguish sharp generational differences among otaku-type cultures, and there are gender differences as well. Indeed, even the word *otaku* is a slight misnomer in the sense that people who identify as these kinds of devoted fans today tend to self-identify using the shortened version "ota" (katakana "wo" and "ta"), in part as a way of distinguishing themselves from older generations of otaku. Moreover, though the stereotypical gender of an otaku is male, there are also female otaku, who are sometimes called *fujoshi* (literally, "rotten girls"), a term commonly used for the young women devotees of "boys love" comic books, which portray beautiful boys in romantic relationships with each other. A friend of mine who organizes a club event for women obsessed with eyeglasses *(megane moe)* uses another term, noting that she is too old to be a rotten *girl*, and so prefers the term *kifujin*, a pun on "aristocratic lady" with the "woman" *(fu)* kanji character replaced with "rotten."

Given these variations, anime scholar Thomas Lamarre cautions against looking at otaku as a "bounded culture, psychology, or identity" and proposes instead that it makes the most sense to look at otaku activities in terms of labor.[6] The question for him is not who is or is not an otaku, but rather, what types of activities do otaku do, and do these activities constitute a kind of labor that can subvert, or provide an alternative to, capitalist

control? In an analogous way, my look at discourses surrounding otaku is not meant to describe a bounded culture, identity, or psychology, but rather aims to explore the meanings of consuming the virtual and to see what this might reveal about how we tend to judge masculinity.

I would point out that many interpretations of otaku masculinity share a common assumption with salaryman masculinity, namely, that value (a man's worth) tends to be grounded in productivity. If we consider some examples of "bad otaku" and "good otaku," we can see that they are deemed significant because of what they produce. Some "bad otaku" are notable for producing violence or disturbing, sexualized media. In 1988, the term *otaku* gained notoriety after the arrest of a serial killer named Miyazaki Tsutomu, who was accused of being an avid consumer of slasher kiddie porn manga, though this turned out to be an exaggeration. Less extreme but more widespread are fans who produce their own comic books *(dōjinshi)*, many of which explore varieties of transgressive eroticism, as discussed by sociologist Sharon Kinsella.[7] More recently, in June 2008, a deranged twenty-five-year-old man attacked random people in the Akihabara section of Tokyo, killing seventeen, an act that, according to one commentator, "condenses the whole of the present" as a representative incident, in part because the murderer declared his intentions online prior to the act.[8]

In contrast, "good otaku" have been recuperated as leaders in the new information society, again because of what they produce. Self-proclaimed otaku Tajiri Satoshi, for example, developed the Pokémon handheld video game, which eventually led to a global media bonanza, including an animated TV series that airs in more than sixty countries and mountains of licensed merchandise.[9] As anthropologist Anne Allison describes, Tajiri's desire to use virtual worlds as a way to reconnect with other (living) people was part of what drove fascination with the Pokémon game, in which players could not complete their collections unless they communicated with others.[10] More recently, as Susan Napier discusses in this volume, the example of the Train Man *(Densha Otoko)* phenomenon shows how otaku can also be portrayed as sensitive diamonds in the rough, whose nerdiness can disguise a more generous manhood than that of drunken and emotionally distant salarymen. In each case, however, the measure of the man is his productivity: making a video game, producing animated films, or, in the case of Train Man, remaking himself. "Bad otaku," too, are evaluated based on what they make, whether it is violence or homemade media. Although a focus on otaku-type masculinities can help complicate the too-simple equation of manhood in Japan with the salaryman, we still

remain wedded to a notion of manhood centered around productivity. But, of course, what makes otaku interesting and distinctive is their approach to consumption. Currently, an important way of talking about otaku consumption is to focus on their attraction to virtual characters.

CHARACTER *MOE*

The debates surrounding anime and otaku often revolve around the elusive concept of the "character" (*kyarakutaa*) as something that exists beyond its particular media instantiations. Takashita, the petitioner above, for example, does not say he wishes to marry "anime characters" per se, but rather 2-D (*nijigen*) characters. This is partly because many of these characters move fluidly across media. For example, the character he mentions, Asahina Mikuru, was introduced in a serialized "light novel" (i.e., young adult fiction) called *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*, by Tanigawa Nagaru (2003), then remade as an anime TV series in 2006 by Kyoto Animation.

In other words, 2-D characters can originate in manga, anime, video games, light novels, drama CDs, toys, or figurines, then move across media over time; they tend not to be defined by a single medium. Characters not only move across media, but they also help explain the logic of a variety of activities related to anime. At anime conventions, many fans dress as their favorite characters in a practice known as "cosplay" (short for "costume play"). Fanzine artists reimagine their favorite characters in new, at times erotic, situations in their homemade works. In fact, Tokyo's fan-made manga convention called Comic Market is the largest annual event held in all of Japan, drawing almost half a million visitors over three days each August. Toy companies take advantage of the fans' love for characters by marketing all manner of figurines and other licensed merchandise. In short, characters move across media and even beyond media, and in this circulation they tend to develop an internal coherence despite being a fiction of virtuality. Anime as a cultural phenomenon derives much of its power from this circular motion of characters. In some ways, the concept of *moe* can be seen as an attempt to substantiate this reality of the virtual in terms of an emotional response.

Moe is the noun form of the verb *moeru*, "to burst into sprout, to bud," as a ripening green plant does as it develops into maturity. The kanji is written with the grass (*kusa*) radical on top and the character for "bright, cheerful" underneath (i.e., the sun and moon together). The kanji character thus acts as a visual reference to the fact that the *moe* attraction is

often bestowed upon 2-D characters who are on the verge of maturing into young women. *Moe* does not refer to girls per se, but to the yearning desire to care for, or nurture, them. In this sense it is also a pun on *moeru* ("to boil, to burn," written with a different kanji), which can be viewed as a reference to a heated sensual desire as well. The term *moe* is troubling to some in Japan, because it apparently centers on the inappropriate desire by relatively grown men for (imaginary) immature girls.[11]

Yet others argue that *moe* should be seen in terms of purity, and that the characters' youth evokes innocence, not depravity. As one Japanese college student explained to me, *moe* isn't about sex; rather, it's a light, warm, pleasant emotional response, "feeling strawberry," he proposed, using pseudo-English. Media studies professor Okuno Takuji describes it thus:

> Originally, *moe* referred to the affectionate feelings [*renjō*] that today's otaku held for female manga and anime characters. The objects of that affection were generally beautiful young girls [*bishōjo*], but the roots were in sisterlike characters, for example, Maetel in *Galaxy Express 999*, or Mine Fujiko from Monkey Punch's *Lupin III*. Although these characters were always intimates, their positions were quite separate, which meant that affection could not be expressed directly. *Moe*, then, was that hazy [*moyamoya*] feeling. Now, men with that *moe* feeling collect posters and doll figures as the object of their affection. In other words, they take that 2-D desire for the opposite sex and bring it into the 3-D world (or, sometimes, they confuse the two worlds).[12]

Okuno points to the complexity of yearnings even within the virtual worlds, such that attraction was often balanced with a sense that the characters needed to be protected and cared for. The group of otaku who founded the anime studio Gainax, for example, also produced a video game with precisely this theme of nurturing, whereby the goal of the game was to raise a young princess to maturity.[13] Yet I argue that the *moe* feeling should not be seen as a confusion of the virtual worlds and real worlds, but rather a questioning of the relationship between the two, or perhaps whether there really is a distinction between virtual and real.

A book called *Hating the Otaku Wave*, a published conversation between otaku defenders and detractors, extends the discussion of *moe* and love. In one section they debate the idea that what *moe* offers is "pure love" (*jun'ai*) that exceeds what can be experienced with a real woman. One skeptic notes that when you type *moe* into an Internet search engine, most of the hits are pornographic. Doesn't that mean that *moe* is mostly a euphemism for pornography? Otaku writer Uminekozawa Melon says no.

Even within pure love, can't there be an element of eroticism? . . . It's absolutely possible to feel pure love for a 2-D character. I've had 2-D characters that I'd think about, and like so much, that I couldn't escape from their spell. . . . Inside me, that character was god. I really believe that's true *moe*. I might even be considered a *moe* fundamentalist. . . . The feeling of *moe* is exactly the same as love *[koi]*.[14]

The writer justifies the legitimacy of this kind of love in terms of a deep inner feeling. In many ways this echoes a statement by the famed anime director Miyazaki Hayao, who recalled seeing the anime feature film *Legend of the White Serpent* in 1958, when he was a senior in high school.

I have to make an embarrassing confession. I fell in love with the heroine of a cartoon movie. My soul was moved. . . . Maybe I was in a depressed state of mind because of the [university] entrance exams, or [maybe the cause was] my undeveloped adolescence, or cheap melodrama—it's easy to analyze and dismiss it, but the meeting with *Legend of the White Serpent* left a strong impression on my immature self.[15]

Put this way, the desire for an animated character seems quite reasonable. Anime scholar Helen McCarthy, who translated Miyazaki's quotation above, even argues that this moment was instrumental in shifting the director's attention away from manga and toward anime. Yet we can also hear in Miyazaki an element of embarrassment. He fears he was "immature," his feeling may have been a symptom of a larger distress (depression), or perhaps it was simply something "cheap" and therefore superficial. Nevertheless, the feeling made a deep impression on him. If one's relationship with virtual characters is deeply moving, and if it can influence the course of people's careers, why should there be any prejudice against this kind of attachment? One reason is that it seems to propose a rejection of society and more traditional measures of manhood.

RADIOWAVE MAN (DENPA OTOKO)

A writer who uses the pen name Honda Tōru takes the idea of *moe* farther than most. He proclaims that *moe* represents nothing less than the dawning of a love revolution. Taking the title Radiowave Man (Denpa Otoko), he deliberately positions himself in contrast to the cultural phenomenon of Train Man, another popular image of contemporary otaku manhood. In the *Train Man* story, the otaku becomes a man by shedding his otaku awkwardness and getting the girl in real life. Honda argues in his book *Radiowave Man* that Train Man is a travesty.[16]

According to Honda, otaku should not be ashamed of their alternative standards of manhood. An otaku should be proud of his masculinity, even if he is enamored only of fictional 2-D characters with big eyes, beribboned hair, and short skirts. Indeed, Honda views young men's fascination with 2-D characters as the natural evolution of mankind. He even declares it a revolution comparable to that of the Meiji Restoration in 1868, when America's "black ships" forced the opening of Japan to foreign trade and led to the downfall of the military government and to the restoration of imperial rule.

For people who have grown up with the "common sense" that love equals the 3-D world, it may be impossible to convey the point I'd like to make: 3-D love is like the Edo era's shogunate government. Throughout that period, everyone thought that the shogunate would continue forever. It was almost impossible to imagine another kind of government, and floating in this vague understanding, all of a sudden, the black ships appeared. . . . Now, the love revolution *[ren'ai kakumei]* expanding in Japan is easiest to understand in terms of the Meiji Restoration. For a long time, everyone expected the commonsense belief that "love = 3-D world" would continue, but it has begun to be destroyed by the appearance of the *moe* phenomenon.[17]

Honda adds that people who do not fall for 2-D characters are behind the times. He makes his case by construing history as a linear evolution defined by technology—a point regarding otaku discourses that Lamarre notes as well.[18] According to Honda, digital technologies such as cameras and plasma screen TVs were initially regarded as lacking "warmth" and "reality"; professional photographers, for example, found fault with digital photos, and some nightclub DJs rejected CDs in favor of vinyl records. In the end, Honda reminds us, everyone came to embrace the digital, and, he says, the same thing will happen with love. Just as VCRs (analog) gave way to DVD players (digital), so too will men give up on the analog world of real women in favor of the digital world of characters. While it might be easy to dismiss such proclamations, I would argue that unpacking some of these notions of manliness may be helpful for seeing the contours of normative masculinity. Certainly, *moe* masculinity runs afoul of the society's standards of measuring men by their productivity, but *Radiowave Man* speaks to a broader concern among men generally.

FORGIVING UNSUCCESSFUL MEN

One way to read Radiowave Man's manifesto is not primarily as a rejection of relationships with real women, but perhaps more importantly as

a defense of failed men. This echoes what Michael Kimmel calls a "two-sided posture" necessary for masculinity studies: "One must engage masculinity critically as ideology, as institutionally embedded within a field of power, as a set of practices engaged in by groups of men. And yet given the contradictory locations experienced by most men, men not privileged by class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, physical abilities, one must also consider a certain forgiveness for actual embodied men as they attempt to construct lives of some coherence and integrity in a world of clashing and contradictory filaments of power and privilege."[19] This helps explain why so much otaku-oriented anime contains characters who suggest a problematization of masculinity, for example, the many troubled male protagonists who essentially reimagine the hero as vulnerable, conflicted, and anything but all-powerful. Susan Napier sees this in the fourteen-year-old character Shinji, a boy in the mid-1990s *mecha* (giant robot) TV series *Neon Genesis Evangelion*: "His conflict with his father, issues with women, and generally antiheroic attitude toward saving the Earth lead up to the rich portrait of full-fledged neurosis."[20] Ultimately, however, Shinji is the hero of the series, and his weaknesses prove instrumental in reshaping the destiny of mankind, partly through passive acquiescence, but also with a sense that developing a new future requires alternative styles of heroic action. Even passive, insecure, dubiously virile warriors have a place in saving the world in many anime series.

In other words, if the salaryman stood for one model of Japan's economic productivity, I would argue that otaku represent a new form of manhood through consumption that offers an alternative vision of value, one that can provide new insight into the contemporary era. For example, an otaku perspective on masculinity reminds us of the vulnerability experienced by many men who live outside the dominant ideal of male success. Not all men get the good education, the good job (and salary), the loving wife and children. What then? It makes sense to find alternative sources of value in one's life, to rationalize alternative modes of existence as engaged, rewarding, and meaningful. Otaku are by no means unique in this regard. In her book on Japan's military, Sabine Frühstück notes that for many male service members, "joining the Self-Defense Forces is marked by a sense of defeat in some area of their lives," a failed college entrance exam, a low-income background that precludes costly training at technical schools, a feeling of disappointment in one's job situation, or an inability to find meaningful work. Joining the SDF offers a new chance. But because SDF soldiers are prohibited from engaging in combat missions, the men are also closed off from a sense of accomplishment that might come with valor

on the battlefield, the traditional measure of value for the military man. Frühstück shows how, nevertheless, the service uses gender politics to create "true men" and a new kind of "postwarrior heroism" that does not depend on courageous action in battle, but rather places value in individual sacrifice and personal betterment through training.[21]

Similarly, otaku may be unsuccessful in the salaryman's world, but the public discussion of the legitimacy of love for anime characters also points to realms in which actively debating which character you would marry is of real value. The online petition created a space for many to make similar claims of love and commitment to virtual characters. Other online message boards facilitate a similar kind of community building around emotions evoked by 2-D characters. In other words, what makes the debate about otaku masculinity interesting is not only the expansion of varieties of manhood, but the challenge of rethinking how productivity and consumption offer alternative modes for evaluating contemporary men.

CONSUMING THE POSTMODERN DATABASE

We can extend our consideration of *moe* consumption through a look at philosopher Azuma Hiroki's claim that new otaku-type cultures (*otakukei bunka*) reflect a new orientation toward viewing the world as a large database. He contrasts his perspective with that of manga artist and critic Ōtsuka Eiji, who argues that what fans consume when they buy merchandise related to an anime or manga is a piece of "grand narrative" (*ōki na monogatari*).[22] According to Ōtsuka in 2004, revisiting an argument he made years earlier, stories have replaced ideologies in guiding our understanding of social action.[23] For Ōtsuka, the power of media arises from the productivity of creators, and when fans relate to characters they are engrossing themselves in pieces of a larger narrative world in which the characters live. Clearly, however, when otaku fans express a desire to marry the anime character they love, they are making a bid to recontextualize the worlds in which they exist. Azuma theorizes this as a shift away from consuming a "story" and toward dipping into a "database."

We might view this debate in terms of the different kinds of value that arise from productivity versus consumption. Ōtsuka recognizes the central place of characters in understanding contemporary anime fandom, but, as a writer himself, he emphasizes the critical judgment of producers in developing characters with a breath of life and stories that evoke a contemporary urgency. Azuma, by contrast, notes that otaku tend to be fascinated by small details, diverse elements of overall projects, regardless of

their connection to the internal logic of anime stories. Azuma offers a diagram to clarify the distinction between himself and Ōtsuka. For Ōtsuka, a "tree model" represents the relationship between original story and consumer. The deep level of the "grand narrative" can be expressed on the surface through a variety of media ("small stories," e.g., specific manga, anime, games, and novels) that leads to the consumer's eye. As Azuma says in the diagram, the subjectivity of the "I" is "determined by going through the story." This is similar to how Susan Napier uses the story of Evangelion as a way of grasping the leading male character Shinji's commentary on masculinity. Napier draws a conclusion about Shinji based on how he develops through the whole story in order to interpret the anime series' larger messages.

In contrast, Azuma proposes a "database model" of consumption, whereby individual consumers actively choose elements of the anime that they feel are most important, regardless of whether they are central to the overall "story" designed by the producers. Azuma views the subjectivity of the "I" (and eye) as determinant. "The 'I' extracts the story," he says, and the arrow of causality runs from the eye to the deeper database. In this regard, Azuma takes a different lesson from the anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. He says that the series was important not because of its narrative but because of the database of elements it presented.[24] His use of the term "database" is meant to highlight the diversity of elements that comprise the different characters (e.g., the neurotic and inarticulate Shinji, the brash and self-assertive Asuka, or the affectless but powerful Rei) and the world setting in which they interact. Audience members frustrated by the inconsistencies of the narrative may be missing the larger point, Azuma implies, by not focusing on the details and relating to them individually. As proof of this kind of consumption, which Azuma relates to *moe*, he describes the sensation that arose around another character that became popular before even having a story.

According to Azuma, the appearance of a character called DiGiCharat (Dejikyaratto) marked a symbolic moment in the development of the *moe* phenomenon; it exposed the new modes of masculinity arising from this database style of otaku consumption. The character's name combines "digital," "character," and "cat," though it is more commonly referred to as Dejiko.

Dejiko was created in 1998 to be the mascot for a video game magazine.[25] This character had absolutely no story and no background associated with it—I mean, her. Gradually, her popularity increased. She got her big break when she appeared in a TV commercial in 1999. By 2000 she had her own

anime series, and she later appeared in novels and merchandise. Azuma says that her character elements, not the story behind her, are what led to her popularity. The proof is that she grew popular before a story was created. Dejiko's elements include a maid outfit, cat ears, mittens, a tail, and bells in her hair. Azuma relates the rise of Dejiko to a larger phenomenon, that of otaku who compile online databases of imaginary characters from anime, manga, video games, and other media, using keywords to identify different elements of each character.

One thing that makes the *moe* debates about anime instructive is that they locate the value of characters not in the producer's intentions but in the consumers' uptake. The importance of understanding varieties of consumption, and the ways these interpretive fan practices may speak more broadly to gender, can be seen in a consideration of Judith Butler's notion of performativity. She says her notion of performativity grew from thinking about Franz Kafka's short story "Before the Law": "There the one who waits for the law, sits before the door of the law, attributes a certain force to the law for which one waits." Her point is that in this situation the law gains its force not from an external authority but from an internal anticipation. By extension she asks, "whether we do not labor under a similar expectation concerning gender, that it operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed, an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon it anticipates."[26] Performativity locates the source of power in gender relations at least partly in our suppositions about what the future might hold. This brings into focus the importance of subjective analytics, which through recursive actions reinforce (or subvert) gendered patterns. This offers one way of understanding the value of internalized consumption.

Yet Butler also draws attention to the need to link this internal anticipation back to the public world. We have to ask, how does this reframe the contexts in which we imagine social action? Azuma's database idea explains why DiGiCharat is a pivotal example for contemporary shifts in viewing masculinity and value in terms of consumption rather than production. DiGiCharat was created by combining elements of *moe*—cat ears, mittens, bells, maid outfit—in a way that drew attention, not to some underlying original story, but to a sense of attraction within the consumer. But the consequences for a performativity that acts in some way on the larger social world seems only weakly defined in Azuma's model. The consequences of consumption seem to vanish into a dark well of otaku emotionality, with little impact on the real world of women and men. This is related more broadly to otaku theorizing regarding the aesthetics of the anime image.

Thomas Lamarre offers a helpful discussion of Azuma's emphasis on image and information over narrative. In considering several otaku commentators, including the neo-pop artist Murakami Takashi, the Gainax founder Okada Toshio (the self-proclaimed "otaking"), Azuma, and others, Lamarre identifies common threads through what he calls the "Gainax discourse," such as a shared sense of the operation of the anime image and of anime aesthetics. When otaku go frame by frame to observe the jet trails of missiles or the space battles of giant robots, their obsessive attention to detail, with little regard to the overall story, is representative of a particular approach to aesthetics in which the anime image becomes "a non-hierarchized field of information": "In other words, the distributive visual field involves a breakdown in perceptual distance, which results in a purely affective relation to the image. Anime breaks out of its television frame, and the distance between viewer and image collapses into a moment of affect."[27] The Gainax discourse argues for a breakdown in the guiding power of the narrative, as well as a parallel breakdown in the hierarchy of producers (there is no single creator), a breakdown in the hierarchies between fan and producer, and a radical break with definable subject positions.[28] This relates to our original question about otaku and modes of masculinity by locating the power of the character not in the vision of the creators—that is, as arising from productivity—but rather in the ex post facto consumption by, and devotion of, fans. Yet this is where the emotion seems to end, namely, in the eye ("I") of the otaku interpreter. But if there is no connection back into the story, and the meaning of the character is embodied only in the feelings of individual otaku who have an affective response, we reach a theoretical dead end, a *moe* cul-de-sac.

REDISCOVERING SOCIAL CONTEXT

A path out of this emotional never-never land comes from attending to some of the ways the social context is present, but insufficiently attended to, by those who analyze *moe* as a purely internalized response. By explaining consumption in terms of a disembodied eye, Azuma loses sight of the embeddedness of the "database" in larger social worlds. Azuma might have a better argument about the radical subjectivity arising from otaku love for characters if otaku were to fall in love with characters they created themselves. But the objects of *moe* fascination are public, and usually well-known, characters, at least within particular communities of fans. Among those who signed the petition calling for the legal recognition of marriage to anime characters, the many people who mentioned the character they'd

marry drew from well-known examples. *Moe* is not just a feeling, it is also a way of talking about one's feelings, and, without having to give much explanation, sharing the glow of affection with others who might have similar feelings. So, too, with Dejiko. One could argue that she had a "story" of sorts before the development of her anime and manga serials. When fans became interested in Dejiko, they inserted her into their own personal histories of caring for, or at least being interested in, characters. The growth of her popularity is the story, the background, the lived presence that gives the *moe* feeling substance as a social phenomenon.

In addition, the theory of otaku consumption makes it easy to conclude that tuning in to the details of the anime results in tuning out society, whether in the form of real women or in the broader, shared narratives aimed for by producers. Takashita (the marriage petitioner) and Radiowave Man both give that impression by saying that they have no interest in the 3-D world and real women. This is the common image of the otaku as withdrawing from society into a world of affective consumption. But Takashita and Radiowave Man are also making their arguments publicly to a broader social world. Takashita did not only want to instigate a legal change; he wanted to announce the name of the character he would marry. (I suspect the latter motive was the greater impetus for his petition.) "Individual" *moe* feeling is debated in many online realms in which fans can discuss the merits of different characters. The message board 2channel (*nichan*, 2ch.net), the social networking site Mixi, and video sharing sites are just a few examples of places where various flavors of affective 2-D desire can be discussed. To say that this is somehow separate from the "3-D world" makes no sense.

Consider, for example, the video sharing site Nico Nico Dōga (www.nicovideo.jp), which in June 2008 was at the center of a minor *moe*-related scandal. Japan's Imperial Household Agency expressed dismay when a video clip showing fan-made images of the current seventeen-year-old princess Mako starting gaining attention online.[29] Amateur artists had transformed her into an anime character, complete with music videos. Significantly, what makes Nico Nico Dōga a huge phenomenon in Japan is that it combines the accessibility of YouTube with the public commentary of an online message board. Visitors can add their comments to low-resolution user-uploaded videos, and the comments scroll by as the video plays. The adoring messages posted by some users were then reported on in Japan as an example of "Princess Mako *moe*" (Mako-sama *moe*).

Although this can be read as creating a 2-D image detached from the real-world princess, one can find an alternative reading by attending to the

commentary that scrolls by as the *"moe* images" appear. At one point in the video, the user commentary scrolling by roughly translates as: "This is trouble for the Imperial Household Agency . . . A recommendation from Central Office of Moe . . . To the Emperor, banzai!" with ASCII art too (crying? laughing? both?). It is the urge toward public display among a community of peers who care that makes the *moe* phenomenon significant.

In sum, although the *moe* feeling may be internalized, it is connected to a broader range of politics and social settings. The arguments of Radiowave Man for his preference for 2-D characters over 3-D women and Azuma's emphasis on the radical immanence of the anime image can both be seen as gambits for encouraging society to respect the depth of otaku emotionality and to grant their consumption some respect. With the marriage petition as well, what may be most striking is not the desire to move into a 2-D world, but rather the desire to have love for 2-D characters *legally* recognized by broader society. After all, it is difficult to imagine that much would change in a relationship between an otaku and a 2-D character if they could somehow be married. What might change is that people who fall in love with characters could gain a measure of societal acceptance. This alters the way we should interpret the debates about otaku and masculinity. Rather than seeing the assertions of the value of *moe* affect as a rejection of real women and the 3-D world, we should view it instead as a plea for accepting a new kind of relationship between consumption as feeling (as love) and society. This gesture toward a new kind of politics may well extend beyond the world of otaku as well, as we will see in the final example.

MASCULINE CONSUMPTION IN *THE GIRL WHO LEAPT THROUGH TIME*

The anime director Hosoda Mamoru is not an otaku, nor does he make films aimed at otaku, yet one of his recent feature films offers a portrait of masculinity with intriguing parallels to the discourses surrounding *moe.* These parallels point toward the usefulness of seeing otaku discourses, and discourses about audiences more generally, as potentially revealing of larger trends in society. We can see this in Hosoda's rationale for reinterpreting a classic sci-fi story (and live-action film) as an anime for today's youth.

When I asked Hosoda what he thought of the discussions of *moe* and otaku sensibilities, he was dismissive. He viewed *moe* as a rationalization used by otaku to willfully misunderstand what a creator is aiming for and

to value instead their own misinterpretations.[30] He sees the storytelling of his films as the opposite of otaku "database" consumption. Even so, over the course of several interviews with Hosoda, I was struck by something. Although Hosoda rejects the value of *moe*, he nevertheless relies on a strikingly similar logic for understanding contemporary Japanese youth culture. This parallel logic outside the realm of otaku suggests that *moe* may reflect something characteristic of broader society. Specifically, when Hosoda updated and reinterpreted the sci-fi story from the 1960s, he altered the motivation of the leading male character in a way that depends on recognizing the value of a personal, internalized consumption. Yet the movie as a whole also works its way out of the *moe* cul-de-sac by balancing this urge toward consumption with a recognition of the importance of broader social relationships.

In an interview I conducted on 30 March 2006, at Madhouse anime studios not far from Ogikubo Station in Tokyo, Hosoda discussed his forthcoming film, *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time (Toki o kakeru shōjo)*. In particular he noted the challenges of reinterpreting a story that had already been remade seven times since the 1960s. The story originated as a novella by Tsutsui Yasutaka, one of the "three greats" in Japanese science fiction.[31] It revolves around three characters: a high school girl and her two male friends. The premise is this. While cleaning up the science lab after school, the girl hears a strange sound and then discovers a broken beaker. Suddenly, mysterious smoke causes her to lose consciousness. She awakes unharmed but soon notices a change. She finds herself leaping backward through time, reliving the previous day and its dangerous, though ultimately harmless, events (earthquake, fire, and car accident, for example). With the help of the two boys, she gradually unravels the mystery, discovering that one of her male friends is in fact a time traveler from the future who mistakenly gave her the power to leap through time. The 1967 short story, the well-known 1983 live-action film version, and Hosoda's 2006 anime version all share an emphasis on the anxieties associated with high school crushes, the love triangle between the girl and two boys, and the sadness surrounding the boy's inevitable return to the future.

How did Hosoda change the characters? In Tsutsui's original story, the boy from the future travels to the present to collect plants that no longer exist in his time and to help society as whole. We learn that although the boy is young, he is also a PhD scientist who needs the plants to make medicines. As such, the original character reflects early postwar Japan's anxieties concerning environmental degradation. By the late 1960s, the awareness of mercury poisoning in Minamata was just one example of the

ways economic growth seemed to be producing a variety of ecological and health threats.[32] Tsutsui's story portrays youth as instrumental in tackling societal problems. We can also note in the original story that manliness arises from the youth's productivity, specifically his creation of medicines from specific material resources.

What makes Hosoda's time traveling boy different is that he comes from the future not because he is on a quest to help society, but rather to consume something. This attitude has strong parallels to the otaku notion of *moe*. Hosoda constructs an alternative vision of the future, one that hinges on a different understanding of the sources of social change. Hosoda explained,

> My idea was this. For people like us, born in the '60s and '70s, the future was going to go on and improve, if not by us, then by people around us, like the Apollo Mission group. The idea of the tube going through the air is about infrastructure and the way an organized society is necessary to accomplish that. It is a picture of a big society working together, and how that will happen. But today, it's more like young people have individual pictures of the future, not collective visions of the future.
>
> If today's young people have much more individual pictures of the future, how would that affect the reason the boy came back? He won't come back for plants. I imagine that he will come back for a more individual reason, something to do with his inner self *[kokoro]*. So, in this version of *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time*, why did the boy from the future come back? To see a painting.

Intriguingly, the painting itself was not designed for public display, but rather was made as an object for personal reflection. In particular, Hosoda imagined the painting as a Buddhist picture painted "perhaps four hundred or five hundred years ago, say in the Muromachi period, though it really isn't specified in the film."

Such Buddhist paintings are not meant to be shown in public. Rather, their purpose is to be an object of meditative reflection, to soothe the heart during troubled times. Notably, in the Muromachi period, the country was torn by ongoing wars. "The boy comes back to see a painting as a way to overcome the horror of his times." What makes the boy in Hosoda's films a particular kind of man, and thereby a particular model of masculinity, is not that he produces something, but that he consumes something in a way that will make him a better person, more at ease in his heart, even though he faces a world filled with trouble. In some ways this seems a tragic way to view the future (and the present), because it implies that

there is no hope of making the world a better place. But perhaps there is another perspective.

Remember that the latter half of the twentieth century brought the triumph of technology in the moon shot missions, but also the potential for global nuclear annihilation. In addition, neoliberalism, which holds the free market as the best arbiter of value and productive efficiency, promises economic growth for all, yet it also explains away current suffering for an anticipated greater good. In both we can see a potentially dangerous paternalism in the desire to control society's future direction. In contrast, might it not make sense that each individual imagines his or her own future and seeks out those moments and spaces of aesthetic satisfaction that can calm the troubles within his or her own heart? I would argue that there is something potentially heroic in the conscientious consumer, such as the boy who travels to see a painting that can soothe his heart, because this consumer rejects a paternalistic, and potentially devastating, self-righteousness embedded in the desire to make the world as a whole a better place. If so, perhaps the masculine sensibility described by Hosoda, which from one perspective emphasizes a narcissistic worldview, might well entail a positive, even progressive, politics. At least we can note that this logic reframes the meaning of politics away from the top-down forces of governmental control toward a more distributed, self-guided notion of easing the heart's troubles as a means to making a better world. Even so—and this is an important point—for all the film's emphasis on finding one's own path and controlling one's own destiny, ultimately the boy from the future finds solace not in the painting but in the friendships he develops with the girl and the other boy. The enduring commitment to a community of peers soothes the pain in his heart and makes the trip to our present worthwhile. In this sense, Hosoda's film works its way out of the *moe* cul-de-sac by incorporating a logic of social context, and the value of social relationships with small groups of friends is part of what adds value to a kind of internalized, affective consumption.

It is easy to dismiss as ludicrous a petition calling on society to legally recognize marriage to an anime character. One can see it as a joke, as some signers did, or one might express concern for men who are so pathetic that they can only hope to have relationships with virtual characters. What is lost in such reactions, however, is a recognition that the range of discussions about otaku and *moe* attractions provides a perspective on thinking more generally about the impacts of virtual worlds and the value of an internalized, immaterial consumption. For one thing, we can observe how

evaluating masculinity tends to emphasize men's productive capacities rather than their consumer experiences. Even when we evaluate consumerism, we tend to emphasize the ways it may contribute to economic growth; our spending is seen as productive in the sense that it enables businesses to keep investing, furthering the cycle of market expansion. The online commenter who wondered whether marriage to a 2-D character would require royalties to be paid to its creator is a perfect example of the urge to translate immaterial, internalized consumption into something outwardly productive. This is just one of many examples of the ways the standards for evaluating manhood depend on a logic of productivity. Otaku may offer an alternative style of manhood compared to salarymen, yet both "good otaku" and "bad otaku" tend to be held up to standards of creating things, whether commodifiable goods or havoc. The idea of relating to anime primarily in terms of "love" can be aptly be viewed as a gesture toward a different basis for understanding value, consumerism, and media. So, too, the debate between Ōtsuka and Azuma can be interpreted as a way of wrestling with divergent understandings of how people should relate to media content. In some ways their debate reproduces this conflict between valuing producers' grand narratives and consumers' piecemeal sampling. Both, however, might be faulted for construing their conclusions too narrowly, that is, seeing them primarily as saying something about anime, manga, and otaku.

Hosoda's *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* shows that a larger process may be at work, and we can catch a glimpse of this process by considering the transformative power of art. Art's power is not aimed at building better bridges or rocket ships, but rather pointed inward to ease the conflicts within our hearts, and to overcome the horror of our times by giving us objects upon which to reflect. This is media as meditative tool, not potential investment. Put that way, we can see parallels between Radiowave Man, Azuma, and the boy Hosoda creates in his film. Their sense of themselves lacks a feeling—a *moe* "strawberry" feeling, perhaps— that might make them more whole. For us to recognize the varieties of masculinities, we may also need to recognize the varieties of masculine failures. In this respect, theories of otaku's emotional attachments to virtual objects are useful for proposing an alternative to thinking about manhood in terms of productivity.

But one of the things that makes looking at otaku important, even for those of us who do not consider ourselves otaku, is that it offers a means of seeing the variety of ways consumption of the "virtual" has real-world substance. It is the desire for public recognition and acceptance that is shared across Takashita, Radiowave Man, Azuma, and others. Quite

the opposite of a rejection of society, this is rather an affirmation of the importance of social acceptance. In this, our otaku brethren may not be so different from the rest of us. Or perhaps there is a little bit of otaku in all of us. In any case, the tendency to view otaku as separate, wacky, or simply weird tends to obfuscate the ways otaku attitudes can reveal ourselves. In our rush to ridicule those pathetic fans who would rather marry an anime character than go through the trouble of relating to real others, we risk reinforcing a too simple naturalness of social mores. In this respect, the workings of anime and masculinity can best be understood if we move beyond thinking of otaku as a bounded culture or identity, to think more deeply instead about the ways *moe* consumption may be part of a broader range of social transformations. More personal understanding of (possible) futures (rather than one future for us all) combined with a variety of proposals supporting the value of affective consumption as a legitimate expression of masculinity offer the chance to reframe political action away from centralized governance toward a more distributed and networked understanding of power and social change. To me, this is the fascinating lesson of the otaku love revolution.

NOTES

1. All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted. See "Nijigen kyara to no kekkon o hōteki ni mitomete kudasai—Shomei katsudō nara *'Shomei TV'"* (Please legally recognize marriage to a two-dimensional character—If it's a petition campaign, use "Shomei TV") at www.shomei.tv/project-213.html (accessed 3 December 2008). The Shomei TV website is designed to encourage people to set up online petitions for any kind of movement, and people can do so anonymously or with fictitious names.

2. Posted in English at www.news.com.au/comments/0,23600,24576437–5014239,00.html. Posted by TP, 30 October 2008 (accessed 8 December 2008).

3. The question of reciprocity in *moe* desire is complicated. At one level, people who feel a *moe* response to inanimate objects can hardly expect those objects to reciprocate. This is certainly the case with *moe* for industrial factories, for example, as evidenced in the publication of several "factory *moe*" *(kōjō moe)* photography books and websites (see, e.g., "Daily Factory Moe" at http://d.hatena.ne.jp/wami/ [accessed 17 December 2008]). But at a deeper level, I argue that *moe* implies a desire for reciprocity in the sense that those who feel *moe* hope for public recognition that such desires for inanimate or virtual objects are viewed as worthwhile. In other words, there is a desire for reciprocity in terms of a community response, though this is generally undertheorized by *otaku* commentators themselves.

4. Roberson and Suzuki 2002, p. 1.

5. Roberson and Suzuki 2002, p. 5.
6. Lamarre 2006.
7. Kinsella 1998.
8. Ōsawa 2008, p. v.
9. Allison 2006.
10. Allison 2006.
11. The term is used in many more innocuous ways as well, sometimes simply as a reference to anything related to manga or anime. The magazine *Pia*, a weekly entertainment guide, devotes the section of its website "MoePia" to a list of voice actor performances, theme song bands, and other live events related to anime (http://t.pia.co.jp/moe/moe.html [accessed 3 December 2007]).
12. Okuno 2007, p. 168.
13. Takeda 2005.
14. Nakahara et al. 2006, pp. 61–63.
15. McCarthy 1999, p. 28.
16. Honda 2005.
17. Honda 2005, p. 142.
18. Lamarre 2006.
19. Kimmel 2002.
20. Napier 2005, p. 123.
21. Frühstück 2007, p. 12.
22. Azuma 2001, pp. 42–52.
23. Ōtsuka 2004.
24. Azuma 2001, p. 62.
25. Azuma 2001, pp. 63–66.
26. Butler 1999, p. xv.
27. Lamarre 2006, p. 368.
28. Lamarre 2006.
29. Netallica 2008. The article, "'Princess Mako *Moe*' Is a Big Hit Online; Imperial Household Dismayed," prompted readers online to post comments questioning whether it was actually "a big hit," noting that adoring fans of the princess had emerged four years earlier, after pictures of her in a junior high school uniform appeared in the press. Regardless of its popularity level, it represents an example of *moe* as part of a public debate about proper manhood. The videos can be seen at www.nicovideo.jp if you search for "Mako sama" in Japanese (accessed 2 July 2008).
30. Interview with Hosoda Mamoru in July 2007.
31. Tsutsui 2003 [1967]; for a discussion, see Bolton et al. 2007.
32. George 2001.

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