Chris Goto-Jones

Japanimation and the Ani-nation

Graphic Revolution and Politics in the twenty-first Century

Techno cultural products have formed an increasingly visible and important part of the Japanese public sphere in the 1990s. Goto-Jones places the contemporary media forms anime and manga in a social and political context and argues that graphic media can be used as an important source of theoretical insight into processes at change in the twenty-first century.

Japanimation and the Ani-Nation

The 1990s-2000s saw an explosive growth of interest in Japanese *anime* (animated movies), *manga* (graphic fiction/sequential art), and video-games in the West as well as in Japan. Today the Japanese anime industry has revenues of 250 billion yen annually; the retail market for associated 'character goods' is 1.61 trillion yen; 60% of animation broadcast on TV worldwide is Japanese; Japanese companies Sony and Nintendo dominate the international games market, selling over 100 million units of each of the last generation of consoles; in 2004 revenues from Japanese videogames topped 8 billion dollar. The Pokemon franchise alone is worth over 250 billion dollar worldwide.[1] In the twenty-first century, the Japanese government has officially endorsed these media (grouped as 'techno-culture' or 'Japanimation') as amongst Japan's most important contributions to world culture; Japan is the 'Ani-Nation'.

These contemporary media-forms are now major cultural forces in East Asia, Europe and the USA, yet serious research into the social and political significance of these media is in its infancy, particularly in the West; the majority of work remains 'fan literature', uninformed by scholarly methodologies. The Western academy has tended to be dismissive of the value of these sources, finding them populist and childish. It should not be forgotten,

1   MOFA (2007), *Creative Japan*, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

however, that these media are incredibly diverse: they are media, not genres. In other words, whilst it is undeniably true that some (perhaps even most) products in these categories are simply pulp entertainment, it would be as ridiculous to place all techno-culture in that category as to argue that all movies or books are pulp (just because some are).

Indeed, the Japanese academy has been much less reticent about taking these media seriously, and sophisticated work in this field has been appearing throughout the postwar period and especially since the 1990s.[2] Some, such as Azuma Hiroki (2001,2007), even identify these media as the necessary forms of cultural and political expression of a postmodern society that has abandoned the myths of linear textuality and modernist grand narratives. Azuma identifies Anno Hideaki's 1995-6 *anime* masterpiece, *Shinseiki ebuangerion* (Neon-Genesis Evangelion), as a key turning point in postwar Japanese culture and social development. Indeed, the importance of this title (which is now a cross-medial franchise involving *anime*, *manga* and videogames) is emphasized and theorized by many other commentators from various perspectives, including philosophy and especially gender politics.[3]

In fact, Japan has a long history of utilizing graphic media to explore religious, philosophical and political issues; the modern forms of *anime* and *manga* arguably find their origins in the ukiyo-e prints of Hokusai (who is believed to have coined the term *manga* in 1815). In the twentieth century, *manga* artists have been implicated on all sides of the political spectrum, from the organization of the left-wing Proletarian Artists League in the 1920s, through the development of the New Manga Society in 1932 and then the nationalization of *manga* into the right-wing New Japan Manga Association at the height of the war in 1940. In the postwar period, *manga* and *anime* creators have been involved in a range of issues, from the progressive, leftist, avant-garde of Shirato Sanpei (creator of the classic series *Ninja bugeichô* and *Kamui-den*) and the magazine *Garo* in the 1950s and 1960s, through the icons of student radicalism in the late 1960s, such as *Ashita no Joe* (Tomorrow's Joe) published in Kôdansha's *Magazine*, to the right-wing historical revisionism of Kobayashi Yoshinori in the 1990s and 2000s.

---

2   For many commentators, the 1990s in Japan was a 'lost decade.' In particular, the significance of 1995 as a profound turning point in modern Japanese history is underlined by a cluster of shattering events, including the Aum Shinrikyô sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway and the Great Hanshin Earthquake in Kobe.

3   Mari Kotani, *Evangelion as the Immaculate Virgin* (Tokyo 1997).

Indeed, the 1990s were an interesting time for observers of this 'graphic revolution' in political expression. After the confidence and affluent conservatism of the 1980s, which was reflected in graphic media through the rise of family favorites by *anime* directors like Miyazaki Hayao, the 1990s was a period of social and political uncertainty in Japan. Reflecting this mood, the tone of *anime* and *manga* took a darker turn; their concerns became increasingly political as Japan sought to find a new role for itself in the post-bubble, post-Cold War world. Directors such as Ôtomo Katsuhiro broke through to international acclaim with visions of a dark, post-apocalyptic future in the *ani-manga* masterpiece *Akira*. Oshii Mamoru engaged directly with the question of Japan's ability to participate in international Peace Keeping Operations in the wake of the first Gulf War in the anime *Patlabor 2*, and Kawaguchi Kaiji's long-running manga series *Chinmoku no kantai* (Silent Service) narrated Japan's transition into the 1990s via a representation of its troubled relationship with the continuously evolving US-Japan Security Treaty. An advertisement for the series in the *Asahi Shimbun*, Japan's leading daily newspaper, claimed that 'with the help of *Silent Service*, Heisei Japan is finally awakened from its slumber by *manga*'.

In other words, especially since the 1990s, techno-cultural products have formed an increasingly visible and important part of the Japanese public sphere, and they have had an ever-broadening impact on societies worldwide. However, Western observers should avoid the 'techno-orientalist' temptation to see Japan as an 'exotic' or even 'quixotic' object of inquiry in this respect, rather it can and should be seen as an important source of theoretical insight into processes of social and political change in the twenty-first century. In many ways, Japanese society might be seen as the vanguard of a global, graphic revolution.

The politics of Japanimation in the 1990s

After the bursting of the economic bubble, the death of Emperor Hirohito and the end of the Cold War, the early 1990s saw Japan struggling with its identity and place in the world. An immediate issue, occasioned by the US-led war against Iraq in 1990-91, was the question of whether Japan could or should contribute military personnel under the mechanisms of international security. Since 1947, under the terms of Article 9 of the so-called 'Peace Constitution,' Japan had been officially forbidden from maintaining 'war potential' or engaging in the 'threat or use of force as a

means of settling international disputes.' In practice, this meant that Japan had been happily sheltered under the umbrella of the US-Japan Security Treaty since 1952, a treaty which alleviated the need for Japan to re-develop autonomous military capacity during the Cold War.

More than any other issue, this question of Japan's international responsibilities was central to the public discourse about politics and foreign policy in the early 1990s. It interleaved with long-standing issues of historical consciousness and the unresolved legacy of WWII, both within Japan and in the wider region. In the end, this complex of cultural, legal and political dilemmas resulted in Japan failing to respond to US calls for military or personnel contributions to the Persian Gulf, and instead it contributed 13 billion dollar. Shortly afterwards, in 1992, the Japanese government passed a law that permitted its forces to be dispatched on UN Peace Keeping Operations, but only under a series of tightly controlled conditions. In particular, Japanese forces should not be exposed to situations where they might be compelled employ the 'threat or use of force.' Their first mission (to Cambodia) came in the same year.

It is in this context that we should understand the contributions of techno-cultural products to the public discourse. In particular, Oshii Mamoru's intelligent and timely anime, *Kidô keisatsu patoreiba 2* (Patlabor 2) appeared in 1993 as a direct commentary on the implications of Japan's new security policies. The *anime* begins with a depiction of a Japanese military force on a UN mission in Southeast Asia (in 2002). The force, which is comprised of technological superior '*mecha*' (giant robot-suits that transform their pilots into walking tanks), comes under attack by vastly inferior forces and, because they are forbidden by Japanese law from returning fire, they are basically wiped out while waiting for Canadian support. The rest of the *anime* is a long and intricate meditation on the consequences of this disaster for Japanese politics and society: one of the mission's survivors makes it his personal mission to 'reawaken' Japan to the realities of war (through a series of machinations that bring the country to the brink of civil war), attempting to force them to think about the fact that their comfortable and peaceful existence rests entirely upon the wars of the past and the willingness of others to be constantly at war in the present. Japan's 'peace constitution' is represented as a symptom of luxury, decadence and an almost pathological denial about the realities of the international system (which is constantly unstable and warlike).

Oshii's agenda does not appear to be a remilitarization of Japan (as

advocated by some members of the political right-wing) and he is certainly not attempting an apology for Japan's aggressions in the twentieth century; rather, his goal appears to be to prevent the Japanese from shirking their international responsibilities by complacently sheltering behind their 'peace constitution.' Indeed, his anti-hero goes as far as to suggest that Japan's peace has been 'built on the corpses of war,' and that 'peace' is therefore a spoil of war – it is something that Japan won after WWII, as a reward for its aggression. In a sense, he sees this postwar peace (externally guaranteed by the USA) as privileged and even unjust. Hence, while he does not call on the Japanese to re-militarise for their own sake, he asks them to think about a key question: *Is an unjust peace better than a just war?*

At the same time, Kawaguchi Kaiji's acclaimed and long-running *manga* series, *Chinmoku no kantai* (Silent Service, 1988-1996) had been using the pages of Kôdansha's *Weekly Morning* magazine to discuss the politics of nuclear diplomacy and especially the implications of Japan's dependency on the US nuclear-umbrella. The series, which sees the Japanese crew of a US-Japanese nuclear submarine declare its independence from both nations and establish the 'Yamato' as an autonomous state, has been widely regarded as an extended piece of political speculation on the possible implications of Japan's 'non-nuclear' policy, which reflects its so-called 'nuclear allergy' in the wake of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. An underlying concern in the series, which is made into one of the principal foci of the 1996 *anime* by Takahashi Ryôsuke, is a distrust of US policy and power and hence a critique of Japan's apparent dependency relationship with the USA throughout the Cold War. A number of critics have seen this important *ani-manga* as a conservative or rightist call for Japan to build its own nuclear weapons in order to liberate it from the dominion of the USA. Many point out that 'Yamato' was the name of a famous WWII battleship, that it was also the ancient name of Japan itself, and that the islands of Japan were called an 'unsinkable aircraft carrier' by PM Nakasone in the 1980s. Some commentators have even likened Kawaguchi to the controversial novelist Mishima Yukio (who committed suicide by *seppuku* in 1970 out of despair at the atrophy of postwar Japan's martial spirit). However, both the *anime* and the *manga* walk delicate political lines between an anti-nuclear position and a pro-autonomy stance. Indeed, these two parameters remain important signposts in Japanese politics after the 1990s.

Like *Patlabor 2*, *Silent Service* speculates about how Japan's postwar constitution and its cultural aversion to the deployment of military power

impacts on its ability to act in the anarchical realm of international relations. For Oshii Mamoru, the international system is characterised by a Hobbesian 'state of nature,' in which all states should anticipate war at all times (and hence Japan's pacifism looks naïve or disingenuous); for Kawaguchi and Takahashi, the safety of all actors in the international sys-tem is endangered by the bipolarity of the Cold War and hence by the preponderance of power in the hands of the USA in the 1990s (and thus the Yamato's independent nuclear threat serves to prevent the USA from becoming arbitrary and tyrannical – significantly, this role could not be played by Japan itself).

Later in the 1990s, the discourse about Japan's identity and role continued in various parts of the public sphere. A powerful, right-wing voice came from the *manga-ka* Kobayashi Yoshinori, whose controversial *Sensô-ron* (Analects of War) appeared in 1998. *Sensô-ron*, which is part of Kobayashi's *shin-gômanizumu* (new arrogantism) manifesto, takes the form of a sustained, graphic argument about the moral collapse of postwar Japan. Kobayashi, who is part of a wider 'historical revisionist' movement that commenced in the mid-1990s, maintains that contemporary Japan is afflicted by moral indecency and cultural masochism. He argues that post-war Japan has been manipulated by the USA into believing that its history and traditions are flawed and that it must constantly strive to liberate itself from its own identity. In a notorious example, Kobayashi even suggests that the USA invented the 'Rape of Nanking' at the Tokyo War Crimes Trials: he argues that the atrocities perpetrated by the Japanese imperial army never happened, and that contemporary Japanese citizens should feel pride rather than shame about WWII. For Kobayashi, *manga* is the perfect medium to construct a new *Nihon jishin no rekishi-ishiki* (distinct Japanese historical consciousness), and he calls on the Japanese to recapture a 'willingness to die for Japan,' which he believes characterised the most glorious moments of Japanese history.

Kobayashi's attempts at a graphic revolution have been extremely controversial, but his *manga* have sold millions of copies in Japan, suggesting that his finger has found a real pulse in the body politic. His arguments imply that postwar Japan has fallen victim to some kind of schizophrenia – its identity has been split or repressed by the trauma of defeat and the US occupation (1945-52). In fact, this 'schizophrenia thesis' has been popular in the social discourse for the last several decades. As early as the 1970s the psychologist Kishida Shû theorized modern Japan's condition as schizophrenic. In the 1990s, contemporaneously with Kobayashi, the influential

intellectual Katô Norihiro 'diagnosed' Japan's postwar 'illness' as that of schizophrenia, arguing forcefully that Japan's 'personality' had been splintered into an inner and outer self by the contradictions inherent in the US occupation of Japan after the war. For him, postwar Japan was faced with an impossible paradox: while democracy was instituted in postwar Japan, it was actually imposed by the former enemy. The result of this bind, which he expresses in his famous book *Nihon no mushisô* (Japan's Thoughtlessness, 1999), is that the 'public Japan' accepted the desires and directives of the USA as its own (pacifism and democracy etc), whilst the 'private Japan' maintained a divergent and often contradictory nationalistic self-image with some elements of continuity with the imperial period.

It is in the context of this crisis of identity that we might locate epic *ani-manga*, *Shinseiki ebuangerion* (Neon-Genesis Evangelion), which is both a *manga* by Sadamoto Yoshiyuki (1994-) and a seminal *anime* series by Anno Hideaki (1995-6). On the face of things, *Evangelion* appears to engage directly with the tropes of '*mecha*' and war, following in the tradition of *Patlabor 2* and even *Silent Service*, set in the kind of post-Armageddon context familiar from other classics like *Akira*. Indeed, the concept of *Evangelion* is rather simple: in the future, after a catastrophic singularity, the Japanese develop a new type of high-tech weapon – a '*mecha*' known as an *Eva* – with which to battle the mysterious enemies and hence save the world from final destruction. However, one of the first twists employed by *Evangelion* is the fact that only specific children can pilot the *Eva*, and the would-be hero, Shinji, despises fighting and hates being called upon to do so. Moreover, fighting within the *Eva* actually causes him physical pain, since the machines of war transmit their violence directly to their pilots. Nonetheless, Shinji discovers a part of himself that delights in the power of the violence that resides within him, and this in itself is a source of constant horror for him.

Evangelion is riddled with anxieties and uncertainties. The characters and the narrative reveal deeply conflicted relationships with war, violence, technology, religion, and ultimately with the very concept of self-hood. All of the conventions of the genre are interrogated and exploded, and together with them the apparently schizophrenic conditions of 1990s Japan are laid bare. Critic Azuma Hiroki points out that the series works to radically undermine the kind of narrative coherence that underlines the idea of a unitary self in modernity. Like others, he observes that normal conventions of plot are abandoned after episode 18, when attention is turned towards

psychological explorations of the characters, and then all pretence at narrative or psychological coherence is abandoned after episode 24 (out of 26).[4] For Azuma, *Evangelion* represents the expression of the post-modernization of Japanese society in a period of intense psychological, social and political crisis. The series is one of the landmarks of *anime* and *manga*, and its popularity in Japan is unprecedented.

Gamic reality and new politics for the twenty-first century ani-nation

One of the implications of the techno-politics of the 1990s in Japan is what Azuma has called the 'animalization' or 'data-basification' of parts of the public sphere. He suggests that the 'lost decade' witnessed a transformation in the mechanisms of participation in social discourse. In particular, he argues that this social space is beginning to approximate a kind of 'gamic reality' in which social and political activity is guided by a new, digital and interactive process. At the most vulgar level, this argument raises a series of interesting questions about the ways in which videogames might join *anime* and *manga* as media of political expression.

Unlike the graphic media of *ani-manga*, the political force of videogames remains relatively under studied, even in Japan. Videogames require a radically new set of interrogative and compositional tools, as well as interactive skills, in order to access their meanings properly and hence to understand (or participate in) their role in the public sphere. In general, academics do not cultivate these skills. Indeed, the most specialized and skillful access to videogame content is often by members of youthful subcultures rather than academics, which inverts the traditional hierarchies of knowledge that society usually associates with access to textual forms of expression and hence with persuasion in the public sphere. In Japan, the cultural critic Okada Toshio has gone so far as to argue that the emergence of an '*otaku*' (geek?) subculture since the 1990s effectively represents the emergence of a 'new species' of super-information-processing-citizens (1996); the *otaku*, readily conversant in the grammar of techno-culture, has the power to dominate Japan's public sphere in the era of techno-politics precisely because the traditional intelligentsia is not literate in the required rhetorical devices. In this model, the techno-cultural transformation of the public sphere should

---

4   Azuma Hiroki, *The Animalizing Postmodern. Japanese Society as seen by the Otaku* (Tokyo 2001).

provide for radical voices in a traditionally conservative Japanese polity.

As new communication technologies develop, the dimensions of the public sphere (or spheres), and hence the criteria for inclusion in it, also change. Chief amongst these developments in the twentieth century was the advent of radio, movies, and television. These admixtures to the mass media changed the landscape of the public sphere in modern societies across the world. On the one hand, these broadcast media expanded the reach of discussions to those who may lack the necessary written literacy to participate in print media, but on the other hand the technological (and financial) barriers to active participation in (rather than critique or even merely passive consumption of) these new media were prohibitive to the vast majority.

Jean-Paul Sartre famously called on intellectuals to participate in radio and television – indeed, he suggested that it was their responsibility to do so in order to preserve the public sphere and to enjoin discussion with the forces of capital. His call was partly one for literacy in the devices and mechanisms of these media and their technologies (and hence a call for critique), but it was also partly a call for the appropriation of the productive technologies themselves by the wider public sphere. The political significance of the latter was contingent on the former: literacy in the conventions of radio and film were essential prerequisites to entering political debates via those media. Subsequently, we have seen a blossoming of political critique of radio and film but also of politically conscious and expressive broadcasting.

The medium of the videogame demands a new set of interrogative and compositional skills – the ability to intelligently read, criticize and compose politically conscious videogames – and its place in the public sphere has been largely neglected by the academy, which has focused its attentions on the Internet as the great technological revolution of our time. The twenty-first century analogy to Sartre's call for committed intellectuals to involve themselves in film and radio might be a call for intellectuals to involve themselves in videogames, both as critics and as programmers. Unlike the internet, which facilitates the distribution of other expressive forms, videogames are themselves a medium of expression that give rise to new and original expressive potentials that are not present in text, radio or film.

The expressive (or even persuasive) force of videogames is a constant source of media speculation, with a particular focus on the possible effects of interactive violence on the development of children.[5] Indeed, there is a

5   Craig A. Anderson, Douglas A. Gentile, Katherine E. Buckley ed., *Violent Videogame on Children and Adolescents: Theory, Research, and Public Policy* (Oxford 2007).

real 'moral panic' emerging around the question of violence in videogames,[6] fuelled in the West by events such as the Virginia Tech shootings (April 2007) or in Japan by the Akihabara stabbings (June 2008). A number of prefectures in Japan have even banned the sale of *Grand Theft Auto* in response, and the National Police Agency has set up a task force to study the effects of violent games on Japanese citizens. In many ways, concern over videogames has replaced the so-called '*otaku* panic' of the 1990s in Japan,[7] which revolved around the allegedly anti-social effect of *anime* and *manga* fandom, especially following the Miyazaki Tsutomu Incident of 1989.[8]

If it's the case that videogames might exert the kinds of dramatic influence over their players that their critics claim (e.g causing children to shoot their classmates at school), then surely it is plausible and even inevitable that they also exert a series of more subtle influences on their consumers. Indeed, part of the 'moral panic' about Japanese techno-culture has been in the form of American parents' concerns about the ethical content of Pokemon.[9]

Conclusion

Whilst sequential art has been employed in Japan for philosophical, political and religious expression for centuries (ranging from the twelfth century Zen-classic 'ox herding' sequence[10] to the official political *manga* and *anime* of the Japanese government in the late twentieth century,[11] these media have less of a 'serious' political tradition in the West, where (with a number of important exceptions) graphic representations have been largely limited

6   Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (London 1972).
7   Sharon Kinsella, 'Amateur Manga Subculture and the Otaku Panic', *Journal of Japanese Studies* (1998).
8   Between 1988 and 1989, Miyazaki kidnapped, mutilated and killed four young girls. The press emphasised that his house was full of *anime* and *manga*, and he became known as 'the *otaku* murderer.' The link between his interest in these media and his crimes was never formally established. He was executed on 17 June 2008, just nine days after the so-called Akihabara Massacre, which saw a series of stabbings and murders take place in the video-game/*ani-manga* centre of Tokyo.
9   Christine Yano, 'Panic Attacks: Anti-Pokemon voices in Global Markets' in: Tobin, Joseph ed., *Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon* (Durham 2004).
10   Yamada Mumon, *A 10 step process to Zen enlightenment: the ox-herding pictures* (Tokyo 1985).
11   Sharon Kinsella, *Adult Manga: Culture and Power in Contemporary Japan* (Routledge 2000).

to satire. In Japan, certain types of *ani-manga* are deliberately produced and read as political treaties (eg. Kobayashi 1995 or Rachi.go.jp 2008), and they discourse with an audience (including the intelligentsia) that is already literate in (and participate in) their conventions and practices.

In the specific case of videogames the problem of literacy is greater, both within Japan and in the West. Videogames require a radically new set of interrogative and compositional tools, as well as interactive skills, in order to access their meanings properly and hence to understand (or participate in) their role in the public sphere. In general, academics do not cultivate these skills. Indeed, the most specialized and skillful access to videogame content is often by members of youthful subcultures rather than academics, which inverts the traditional hierarchies of knowledge that society usually associates with access to textual forms of expression and hence with persuasion in the public sphere.

In some ways, Japan might be seen as the proverbial 'canary in the coal mine' when it comes to the technologies of political innovation. Its techno-cultural revolution is now a global phenomenon, and *anime*, *manga* and Japanese videogames are now pervasive presences in most homes in Asia, Europe and the USA. Is the 'Ani-Nation' the origin of a global, graphic revolution in political expression?