

## CYBERPUNK SCHIZOIDS AND PIERCING SILENCES: INCESSANT CONSUMER FETISHISM AND POSTMODERN SYMPHONIES OF TRAUMA

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper endeavors to explore the many strands of melodrama that persist within the kaleidoscopic world of Japanese anime. The purpose is to identify the subtle and often obvious deployments of the melodramatic mode used within these dynamic narratives and their respective treatments. The paper divulges into a detailed chronology of the animation industry within Japan, keeping in mind the country's traumatic past, and focusing on the ways anime has represented the profound horrors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings of 1945. It examines the various ways the melodramatic mode is used to deal with traumatic histories, and how, through the ages, we are able to see stark traces of historical amnesia, resulting in the revival of a mythic Japanese pastoral past. It seeks to offer a decidedly specific reading of the Otaku (Japanese manga and anime fans), linking their commodity fetishism to these melodramatic texts, and the proliferation of the Otaku as the Young Girl in the transmedia and transgeneric world.*

In 14<sup>th</sup> century Japan, the Emishi tribe (banished by the emperor from the west of Japan) is under attack from Nago-no-Mori, the boar god and leader of the Boar clan. Prince Ashitaka's forearm gets infected in the battle against Nago-no-Mori, who dies, but not before cursing them, "*Disgusting little creatures, soon all of you will feel my hate and suffer as I have suffered*", the last prince of the Emishi clan must seek out a cure from the deer-God Ahishigami. In his quest, he stumbles upon two unconscious, wounded men. He decides to get them help and, guided by the Kodama (forest spirits attached to the trees); he takes them to a forbidden forest where the magical water from the running stream cures the men. Ashitaka drops them off at Irontown, their village, where Ashitaka is welcomed by Lady Eboshi, the mistress of the village. Our prince is given a place to stay and served a sumptuous dinner to thank him for saving the men's lives. Here, Ashitaka finds out that Lady Eboshi is getting the village to dig out all the iron from the lands they inhabit. She had attempted to dig some out of the mountain too and got the men to clear the forest to commence digging. Nago-

no-Mori was angered by this and retaliated. Alas, he was met with Lady Eboshi's army, equipped with rifles. They shot at the boar, and that's what turned him into a demon – the demon that attacked the Emishi village. Ashitaka is aghast and confronts Lady Eboshi, who takes him to a workshop where she manufactures her ammunition. Ashitaka realizes that she's making even deadlier weapons. The curse on his arm pulsates and forces him to unsheathe his sword, but his true self stops him from doing so. Lady Eboshi eggs him on a little when a man, bandaged from head to toe (on account of being afflicted with leprosy), and lying on a bed of hay, implores Ashitaka not to take her life since she had given these men and women a home and a life with dignity. He says to him that he understands his rage and that "*life is suffering. It is hard. The world is cursed, but still, you find reasons to keep living.*" This is how Hayao Miyazaki chooses to begin his 1997 *Mononoke Hime* or *Princess Mononoke*. The film works as an allegorical critique of modernization and overdevelopment. It barely employs any dialogue, and hence, the use of gesture to articulate

emotions that Peter Brooks talks about becomes incredibly important. Brooks tells us that melodramatic texts illustrate extreme forms of despair and the virtue that the characters exhibit is that of their ability to endure suffering? What is *Princess Mononoke* if not a sordid tale of the earth's suffering. The purpose of this paper is to locate the various modes of melodrama employed in Japanese anime and examine how the use of the melodramatic mode creates an intense affective impact upon the spectators, specifically the Otaku, leading to the creation and proliferation of consumer fetishism within the globalized world.

Before delving into the story of melodrama in Japanese anime, let us understand why the paper specifically focuses on animation. In its most basic definition, animation refers to still figures that are manipulated to look like moving images. And the world which we inhabit is replete with animated characters, dancing across our screens (in cinemas, phones, gaming consoles, advertisements, as brand mascots). It cannot be denied that in this transmedia, multicultural, globalized, digitalized world, animation has become ubiquitous. Raz Greenberg tells us that, unlike a genre, animation extends across contents and styles. It is the epitome of the dream of convergence culture. Teri Silvio tells us that the psychological model that animation would most likely pick up would be the object-relations theory. According to D.W. Winnicott's notion of the "transitional object", children are often attached to what he calls a "transitional object" (often a blanket or stuffed toy) for a period of time. He tells us that the "introjection of the m/other into the self and the projection of the self into the m/other are virtually indistinguishable." So, for the child, his transitional object is both "me" and "not me". These objects comfort the child as he realizes that "the mother and the world "the mother brings to the child" are independent of the child's own desire". Through such a theory, we can understand how objects create and offer affective experiences for the viewer. Even Kracauer tells us that in cinema, objects acquire a life of their own and can convey a character's psyche. With animation, this whole

process takes a big leap further since the objects within their world do in fact acquire a life of their own; life is so to say breathed into the object. The object being a sketch on a piece of paper or in Photoshop. John Halas and Joy Batchelor, British animation producers, are of the view that animation is interested in the metaphysical reality of the world. It is not so much concerned with how it looks but rather, with what it conveys. It is quite literally the painterly form of cinema at its best.

In Japan, we see the advent of animation from about 1917 onwards – the era of silent films – with Jun'ichi Kouchi's *Namakura Gatana* (1917), (which was 2 minutes long). Animators used cut-out techniques (using paper). But before production could find any stable ground, Tokyo and its surroundings were hit by the Great Kanto earthquake of 1923. The anime industry had to begin all over again. However, with war in the offing, funds to develop the industry were unavailable. This is when Mitsuyo Seo wrote, shot, and directed *Momotaro: Umi No Shinpei*, or *Momotaro's Divine Sea Warriors* (1945). A propagandist film meant to boost morale, released just before the end of the war. The war, of course, ended with disastrous consequences. Japan Animated Film, or the Toei film company was founded in 1948 and brought the first feature-length animated film to Japan – *Hakujaden* or *The Tale of the White Serpent* (1959). Around the 1950s, another name was coming to be popular – Osamu Tezuka (often called "the god of manga" today). Tezuka started at Toei, then left to start his own studio, Mushi Pro. He later left even Mushi Pro in 1968 and founded Tezuka Productions. The cost of production for anime was higher than the cost of animation production in the west. This posed problems since television channels would find it difficult to afford such productions. So, Tezuka slashed costs and told his team to opt for limited anime and not go for full animation. This developed into the style of anime that exists today – opposite to the 'realistic' animation style of the Toei studios.

It would be difficult to talk about anime and not mention manga. Manga are graphic novels from Japan that were influenced by the medieval art of

emakimono (illustrated handscrolls). It targets an adult audience due to its mature themes, including violence and sex. Anime is basically concise manga in motion. Anime is the “harbinger of Manga in the global arena before Manga arrives to the world as a printed media.” The Otaku (fans of anime and manga) usually first encounter the anime and then develop an interest in the manga. Kiyomitsy Yui tells us that the world is able to accept manga so quickly due to the existence of an already postmodern disposition within them. Features such as fragmented time and space, a highly aestheticized lifestyle, a decentralized self, and a blurring of borders between high and low culture are characteristic of a postmodern condition. These same features find illustration in the way anime and manga are constructed. And for this, we can give credit to Japanese syncretism. Japan adopted a short-term catch-up strategy where acceptance and adaptation were its main concerns. Therefore, it may be said that Japan’s modernizing project post WWII already involved certain aspects of postmodernity.

Speaking of postmodernity and anime, it would be remiss not to mention the greatest postmodern anime to have ever been made – Katsuhiro Otomo’s *Akira* (1988). The film takes place in “Neo Tokyo” in the year 2019, 31 years post the destruction of “Old Tokyo” in WWII. The Tokyo Otomo creates is filled with anti-government groups, religious fanatics, and disillusioned youth finding community in biker gangs. We follow the story of Tetsuo and Kaneda – our two protagonists. Within their gang, Kaneda is higher up in the hierarchy. The film begins with the two boys chasing a rival biker gang on the streets. Amidst this chaos, Tetsuo crashes into a pale-faced boy who has escaped from a government facility. The military swiftly sweeps in at this moment and take the pale-faced boy away. However, Tetsuo’s clash with the boy leads to Tetsuo developing supernatural abilities. And soon enough, he too is taken by the government and injected with “medicine” that would suppress his new abilities. Here, Tetsuo learns about Akira, who was the cause of the catastrophic explosion 31 years ago. Dead set on finding him, he embarks upon a quest, only to

find that Akira has been long dead and lives on only as organ specimens inside glass jars. After this, he is met with military response, but at this point, Tetsuo’s powers are beyond his own control. He transforms into a gigantic blob, engulfing everything in his path. The three wizened pale-faced children, who are part of the experiment resurrect Akira who explodes with energy dissipating the wizened children and Tetsuo. The burst of energy transforms into a small ball of light that floats into Kaneda’s hands. The screen fades to white, and we hear “I am Tetsuo” before the credits begin to roll.

The narrative itself is exploding with potential for melodrama. The film is also overtly evocative of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing of 1945. Post the bombing, Japan’s population began increasing at high speeds. The country quickly westernized, and its escalating economic growth led to the development of futuristic cities with neon lights and bustling streets. The Tokyo of the future in *Akira* and other popular anime and manga was usually constructed as a metaphor for everything that was wrong with post-war Tokyo – warped national identities, disillusioned youth, rampant violence, and power-hungry officials. The scene in which Tetsuo learns about Akira’s death and loses control of his abilities is particularly impressive – both visually and emotionally. Tetsuo loses control and engulfs everything and everyone in his path, including Kei, Kaori, and Kaneda. His body engorges and blubbers and bubbles devouring anything and everything. Tetsuo cries out in pain and screams for Kaneda to save him. But Tetsuo is beyond saving. Meanwhile, Akira’s body preserved within the glass jars, bursts out, and from it emerges another pale little boy – Akira. He creates a new universe – an orb of light and energy - to absorb Tetsuo and save the rest of the world. The three wise pale children willingly enter this universe to save Kaneda and to leave this current universe. The orb of light engulfs Tetsuo, Akira, and the kids and vanishes after obliterating everything in the city. Again, another atomic explosion. In this sequence alone, we see the potential humanity contains for both good and evil. The nightmare is over, and a new day has dawned.

The melodramatic mode works here in a dialectic of action and pathos. Vibrations of fear and terror emanate from the very body of the characters and engulf the world around them. Melodrama here works as a formal mode for the creation of the apocalyptic affect. Through *Akira*, we see an emotionalizing of history, the desolate portrayal of Neo-Tokyo is evidently reminiscent of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing of 1945. The traumas experienced during the bombing have been accessed and represented as personal and apocalyptic through the melodramatic mode. The film obviously creates anxiety and boosts adrenaline, but it also makes you think, the ethical dilemmas are stark, and the relationships are infused with complexities. A melodramatic text pushes you to the limit, and the virtues of the protagonists include suffering and the ability to endure extreme despair. Tetsuo's despair is evident, from having grown up in the chaotic, disillusioned streets of Tokyo, having been robbed of a childhood, to unwittingly and unwillingly been granted these extreme superpowers, to finally being devoured by the very superpowers you were granted and being transported over into an entirely new universe where again, he is completely alone. Its sheer hyperbole and rhetorical excess in such a narrative and Otomo's representation of it visually, as a postmodern, schizophrenic, cyberpunk, melodramatic saga is what gives *Akira* its cult status.

Another film that deals directly with the traumas endured during the second world war is Mori Masaki's *Hadashi no Gen* or *Barefoot Gen* (1983). Originally a manga series written by Keiji Nakazawa, the film tells us the story of Gen and his family surviving the Hiroshima bombing. Told through the perspective of little Gen, it gives us an account of their struggles to rebuild their life. The film opens on a rather optimistic note. Gen lives with his parents (Daikichi and Kimie), his younger brother (Shinji), his elder sister (Eiko), and two elder brothers (Akira and Koji). Daikichi is an antiwar activist. Kimie is pregnant with another baby. The family struggles to survive in the war-struck country, and as food dwindles, the family faces starvation. Masaki begins his film with a heartwarming portrayal of the

intricate family dynamics and depicts their optimistic attitude. All this comes crashing down, only 20 minutes into the film, with the catastrophic bombing. Gen is on his way to school and meets a friend on the way. He's fiddling with a stone in his hand when they spot an American aircraft in the air and try to identify its make. They ponder over why the aircraft is flying all alone and speculate over whether it was a spy craft. The scene is intercut with shots from inside the American aircraft – carrying three officers who are betting over whether or not the missile they're about to drop is a blank one or not. They drop the missile, and we see it float on down toward the unassuming city below. The moment of impact is intercut with Gen's perspective of the explosion. The stone he was fiddling with falls to the ground as the bomb hits. With an explosion of white light, the entire world seems stunned, frozen. Gen survives the attack, having been protected by a stone wall, and scrams to find his family in the rubble. He spots his mother and rushes over to her. Kimie is trying to push the wreckage away to save her husband and children (the elder brothers and the sister) stuck under the rubble. Gen's father begs for them to save themselves and makes Gen promise to take care of the family. Gen pulls his hysterically crying mother away from the wreckage – through the burnt city. The film makes heavy use of the melodramatic mode to articulate that which cannot be articulated. The excesses are siphoned off into the mise-en-scene as music and silence. The dialogue is hyperbolic, and the bodies react with extreme hysteria in moments of intense trauma. The way Masaki has sketched the scene of the bombing and storyboarded it is truly a work of art and most definitely adds another layer of hyperbole to the already melodramatic text. The notion of the family as a source of hope is a central theme in the film. They rely on each other to survive.

In one particular scene, post the bombing, and after the birth of Kimie's fifth baby – a baby girl they named Tomoko, Gen and his little brother Shinji return with several cans of milk to feed the starving baby. As they enter their house and exclaim, they are met with a sullen environment. Kimie is sitting in

the dark with Tomoko in her arms, with light only coming in through the slits in the windows, giving the scene the aesthetics of what you could only call noir. The background is bare – black, with only the characters visible in the dimly lit room. Kimie stares at her children, her eyes are open wide, unblinking. She begins to cry, and we cut to a shot of a pale open-mouthed baby. Kimie softly utters, “*It’s too late*”, as the cans of milk in Gen’s hands drop to the floor. He walks over to his mother and takes Tomoko in his own arms and exclaims, “*couldn’t you wait a little longer*” as a melancholic melody cues in. The three weep in each other’s company as the film cuts to the cremation scene where, in the flames of Tomoko’s pyre, Gen sees the images of his father and siblings, as he apologizes to his father for being unable to make good on his promise to him. The use of the music and the construction of the mise-en-scene creates an excess that can only be described as melodramatic. In the cremation scene, we see how past traumas return to haunt the viewer. This is what Cathy Carruth calls traumatic neurosis, the process in which the survivor has to work through recurring reenactments of past events that they cannot leave behind. Freud calls traumas the “wounds of the mind”. For him, it is the story of the wound that cries out, a double retelling oscillating between the story of the unbearable nature of the event and the unbearable nature of its survival.

Other films that deal with the aftermath of the bombing or the devastation of war-torn Japan include the widely famous *Hotaru no Haka* or *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) by Isao Takahata from the world-renowned Studio Ghibli. The story follows a young adolescent boy, Seita, and his sister of about 5, Setsuko, as they flee their bombed-out city (in lieu of the American fire-bombing rampant at the time wherein they’d bomb out entire cities and villages with napalm bombs). Their father, a naval officer, is posted overseas, while their mother has passed away in the bombing. For a little while, the children’s aunt takes them in but is unremittingly cruel to them. Seita decides to leave this place and finds a small cave under a hill where he takes Setsuko with him. The children struggle to survive and Seita finds

it harder and harder to find jobs that pay him enough money – money he needs to feed his starving sister. The anime is drawn in a largely neo-realist manner. There are no fantastical elements attached to this world – it’s all real. And yet, it employs the melodramatic mode in certain moments which gives the film’s terrible melancholia a lyrical and poetic style. In one specific scene, right after the death of their mother, which Seita keeps from his 5-year-old sister to protect her from the pain, he walks over to her to offer her some snacks that an aunt brought them. Setsuko declines and stares at the ground. Seita, who is already beside himself having bid his mother adieu, walks over to the background and sits on the floor. The scene cuts from a mid-long to a close-up of Setsuko’s face, sniffing and frowning. Her body begins to shiver, and she hunches into a fetal position and begins to weep, tears streaming down her face. Seita hears his weeping sister from the back of his head and starts fooling around with an exercise pole in front of him to distract her. He says, “*watch me, I’m good at this!*” and starts going round and round around the pole as a melancholic melody begins to play. Again, the excess of melancholia siphoned off from the narrative and exploding in the mise-en-scene, literally and metaphorically.

Post the devastation caused by the war, around the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Japanese manga and anime started focusing on themes related to posthuman technological fantasies centering around immortal beings fused with machines. These narratives came to be categorized under the term ‘mecha’ – which loosely translates to robot or shonen - which translates to ‘adolescent action stories’. The mecha genre has been largely interpreted as offering a metaphor for modernized Japan. Hayao Miyazaki (co-founder of Studio Ghibli, along with Isao Takahata) too dabbles into this mecha aesthetic with his *Kaze Tachino* or *The Wind Rises* (2014). The film traverses through the various “mechanized bodies” existing within the Japanese nation-state “through a retelling of the prewar Showa period.” Through most of his films, Miyazaki offers a critique of overdevelopment and views

Japanese modernity as a totalitarian technocracy replete with imperialist militarism. Such narratives, however, are different from the kind produced by Otomo's *Akira*. *Akira* is mecha cyberpunk at its very best. Thomas LaMarre tells us that mecha as a genre is largely popular among men – both in the west as well as in Japan. The fascination for this genre arose from the convergence of the mechanical and the human or biological. This dialectic is what forms mechaphilia, which is like technophilia but directed toward the mechanical. The mecha mode “dwells on narratives of engineer lads turned intergalactic fighter pilots, with a thirst to transcend the shackles of humanity by willing to overpower the universe in their tricked-out nuclear-loaded rigs.” – clearly evocative of the post-war Japanese trauma manifesting itself in the action-pathos dialectic, producing an effect similar to Tom Gunning's “*Cinema of Attractions*”. The mecha genre is also linked pretty heavily to the cyberpunk aesthetic that came into vogue in the 60s and 70s as part of the New Wave science fiction movement. The aesthetic is characterised using by unconventional styles to create dystopian realities where big corporations are ruling technocratic cities. It is where the darkness of sci-fi resides - with sentient A.I. and rampant and unchecked consumerist capitalism. The aesthetic combines sort of 40s film noir, gothic 90s fashion, and military gear together to create a cyberpunk feel. The best way to describe it is through the popular phrase ‘high-tech and low-life’.

However, with the advent of globalisation, we begin to see the decimation of the mecha genre from public imagination. This space was substituted by fantasy narratives evocative of a transcultural past. These narratives were heavily doused with nostalgia for a freer Japan. This was in stark opposition to the mecha craze of the 80s and 90s. Some of the series doing exceedingly well at this time included Masashi Kishimoto's ninja fairy-tale *Naruto* (1999-2015), or Eiichiro Oda's pirate story told through magical realism, *One Piece* (1977-present), or Akira Toriyama's truly worldwide phenomenon *Dragon Ball Z* (1986-present). All three series attempt to undermine Japan's ideology of

progress and modernity while drawing from a freer world of the past. It depicts Japan as hungering for modernity but also yearning for a lost Japan from long ago. Such nostalgia may be real or imagined. This response to the mecha genre is what is called yokai (ghost) or the supernatural genre like Kubo's *Bleach*, Hideaki Anno's *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1994), or Masamune Shirow's *Ghost in the Shell* (1989). These series deal with the notion of deconstructing human experiences. Steeped in the intersubjective and psychological modes, the series offers an examination of existential experiences that manifest themselves in psychedelic and hallucinatory forms. We see a shift from the postmodern Japanese icon of the mecha genre to the premodern icons of the yokai. Michael Dylan Foster warns us that such nostalgic depictions of a semi-imagined, semi-mythic Japanese past are characteristic of historical amnesia. The yokai are the most preferred icon of a glorious Japanese past and are easier to remember and bring up rather than the horrific memories of the Hiroshima bombing or a colonialist and imperialist past. In such a context, several Japanese artists find inspiration in demilitarization and isolationism.

In this globalized world where Japan chose to reinvent its identity with the yokai tradition, one particular series becomes extremely important, and that is Akira Toriyama's *Dragon Ball Z*. The series follows Son Goku, a warrior, protector, and guardian of justice must save Earth from the wrath of the warlord Frieza. For this, Goku teams up with his nemesis Piccolo to save the ones he loves. It would be difficult to briefly summarize the series that has been ongoing since 1986. So, for the purpose of this paper, we will only be focusing on a couple of characters relevant to the scene we will be discussing. Goku - or Son Goku is a male Saiyan and the protagonist of our story. Vegeta – the prince of a fallen Saiyan race, and the eldest son of King Vegeta, and Goku's long-time nemesis turned best friend. Frieza – the emperor of the universe who had an entire imperial army at his disposal. Piccolo – Goku's long-time nemesis turned ally, and Krillin – Goku's long-time best friend. The scene we are analysing

comes from episode 86 of the series when Vegeta teams up with Krillin and Gohan (Goku's son) to defeat the Ginyu force. However, Frieza lands up in the scene and what follows is an intense battle between the two. Frieza however lands a killing blow on Vegeta, just before Goku's arrival in the scene. A dying Vegeta tells Goku that Frieza had killed his father and destroyed his entire planet and Goku must stop Frieza to prevent him from causing further pain – one must understand that Vegeta and Goku and archnemesis, and Vegeta's emotional unloading, at this juncture, offers the plot a melodramatic angle. As Vegeta utters his dying words, an orchestra plays a melancholic yet powerful ballad. This, seen with the wide shot encompassing all the characters witnessing the scene of his death, intercut with close-ups of Vegeta's scrunched up, dying face, with streams of blood rushing down his eyes and a stream of tears rolling down his face, creates a poesis of trauma that can only come about with the use of the melodramatic mode. This series works itself into the yokai genre with its supernatural, glorious, past, and is characteristic of historical amnesia, reacting to an "overdeveloped, post-industrial, consumer-capitalist Japan...without a soul"

All this talk of a consumer-capitalist Japan brings finally to the Otaku and their consumer fetishism. The Otaku culture is one of the most popular subcultures in Japan. The Otaku are people obsessed with pop culture and specifically manga and anime. They are obsessively attached to the figures or merchandise emerging from their favourite anime such as DVDs, figurines, other merchandise such as fashion accessories and even utilities such as water bottles and mugs, and even underwear. The Otaku deconstruct the characters into elements and begin to collect such objects obsessively. The object they desire comes from the desire-producing machine, that is, anime and manga. These objects of desire could include say, Kiki's headband from *Kiki's Delivery Service*, or the marbles in the candy canister from *The Grave of the fireflies*, or more popularly Goku's entire outfit from *Dragon Ball Z*, special belts etc., and even special edition figurines of the characters from the series. The

Otaku would want to collect them all. So, it's interesting that a form of art that is expressing a critique of overdevelopment and increasing consumer capitalism is also reinforcing and giving it space to grow through its appropriation in the market by companies selling goods such as electronics, real estate, snack foods, gas companies, etc. Also interesting is the way that the Otaku not only obsess over these material possessions, but also seem to wish to identify completely with the character, adopting their mannerisms and even at times, their diction. Their obsession with the characters can be linked to the affect that is experienced by them due to the invocation of the melodramatic mode in these animated sagas. The characters within their favourite anime endure truly painful feats and emerge either victorious, peaceful, content, or beginning new lives altogether. In Henry Jenkins's convergence culture, the transmedia sphere is overflowing with mediums and messages, and devices and therefore the Otaku seems to be developing into a ubiquitous entity across the globe. An entity that can only be described as the Young Girl – a non-gender specific entity morphing itself into a new identity every day, pushing the consumer capitalist dream to its extent and numbing and isolating themselves from the harsh realities and overwhelming obscurity of the transmedia sphere.

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