

**A Preliminary History**  
**of**  
**American Anime Fandom**

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I must preface this work with a few brief comments. First, I am a member of the community known as anime fandom<sup>1</sup>, so my presentation on this group will necessarily be colored thereby. Further, I am not an anime<sup>2</sup> fan myself, at least not by traditional in-group standards, even though my interaction with fandom has been prolonged and personal. This does not preclude me from giving the topic at hand, which is not anime itself, but rather its American fandom, a balanced presentation. What it better enables me to do is to see several different perspectives on the area of study at once, as well as the ability to look at fandom's many facets which an outsider might miss entirely or, worse still, confuse into one undifferentiated mass which is representative neither of fandom as a whole nor of its constituent groups. Even defining what the groups are is difficult because they overlap and interact to such a degree that a technical description of fan "speciation" is nigh impossible. With that said, there are definite trends that can be seen in fandom, but they must be treated as interacting currents in the same flow.

Second, my association with fandom has allowed me access to certain sources and well-known professional personages within the fandom community that I otherwise would not have had. Indeed, this work can be seen as a study of how those people went from secondary fandom groups at science fiction conventions showing illegal copies of a foreign media product in the 1970's and early 1980's to fully functional and independent groups of professional and amateur fans that are the backbone of a multi-billion dollar per year industry today. It is this process of transformation, and the meaning derived from it by a fan, that is the main focus of this work.

Third, I must state that anime is not an American or European cultural product, however, anime

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<sup>1</sup> Fandom, as defined by wikipedia.org, is a "community of keen aficionados who share a common interest." The Oxford Unabridged Dictionary traces the word back to 1903.

<sup>2</sup> Anime should be treated as a cinematic medium rather than a single genre because it covers a wide range of story-telling topics and methods. The only commonalities shared by its various genres are that they are all animated and they tend to stem from the Japanese animation tradition. Further, anime, and live-action cinema as well, are treated as extensions of theatre in Japan, not of photography as they are in the West.

fandom is almost entirely a Euro-American popular culture phenomenon in the States, therefore the study of the fandom rather than its object is well within the scope of American studies. It has been noted that the Euro-American component is so nigh universal in the States, that some believe that Japanese-Americans have been deliberately excluded from fandom's development.<sup>3</sup> The level of fandom and the types of active fan participation seen in Euro-American circles would be considered not merely unusual in Japan, but as abnormal or obscene. Further, the intimate interaction had between Western fandom and the medium's producers and presenters is unheard of in Japan. Such co-mingling would almost certainly be grounds for the dismissal of the executives involved. In the States and Europe, this is far from the case. Many of the original versions of various anime movies, such as *The Whale*, and series were intentionally leaked to Western fan groups by Japanese executives when they visited the West Coast or went to European film festivals. From there, various fans made pirated copies and sent them to friends further east, who did the same, and so on. This was not seen as any kind of loss because those same executives believed that the potential for an American market was nonexistent. In the early days, one had to cooperate and share the anime tapes that they had in order to be part of the community. Those who did not share were simply excluded in the next round of distributions. It eventually got to the point that an adept could tell the difference between a fifth generation copy and a ninth generation copy.<sup>4</sup> In some extreme cases, twentieth generation VHS copies have been reported.

It is my intention to give a brief history of American anime fandom from its roots in science fiction fen<sup>5</sup> in the late 1970's up to the present day. Information is necessarily scanty prior to 1992 due to a social stigmatization and marginalization of the associated art form and its devotees up to that

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<sup>3</sup> Brent Allison, "Fans, Copyright, and Subcultural Change: A Review of Sean Leonard's 'Progress Against the Law,'" *Synoptique 10*, 1 August 2005 <[http://www.synoptique.ca/core/en/articles/allison\\_anime](http://www.synoptique.ca/core/en/articles/allison_anime)> (1 April 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Dean D. Davis, interview by author, Plano, Texas, 2 February 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Fen, optional plural of fan, used almost exclusively in science fiction circles.

point, but through the use of personal interviews and records, this early section can be pieced together. From 1993 onward, however, my researches have suffered from an overabundance of information rather than from a lack. I hope that I have brought together the pertinent data from the early period and sifted through the errata of the later one in a manner which successfully provides a comprehensive picture of the development and normalization of American anime fandom. Despite popular depictions of fans as dangerous in mainstream American cinema (especially *The Fan* in 1981 and *Misery* in 1990) that show them as obsessing over their object of fandom to the point of turning violent toward that object, or toward others for the benefit of that object, few real-world examples exist to corroborate this hypothesized pattern of obsession.<sup>6</sup>

An initial problem lies in defining what anime is. It is animation that follows Japanese tropes of presentation and interpretation. That is all that the various examples of the medium have in common. As such, it is entirely possible to have bizarre comedy coinciding with personal revelation; or a rape scene being the moment of introspection for the victim (or even for the perpetrator). Naomi Kasa best describes what anime is and what it means when she says:

Anime does not attempt to emulate reality – it knows its own limits – instead it offers an alternative that became very acceptable to young American viewers. Perhaps... it is the flatness, the surreal framework of anime's style that allows American viewers to so easily project their own cultural and experiential likenesses onto anime.<sup>7</sup>

One of the initial factors that drew American fans toward anime was its realistic depictions of everyday events and interactions, even if they were set in a fantastic past or a science fiction based future. Subjects have ranged from everyday life of housewives to vast interstellar wars involving

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<sup>6</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 14. John Hinckley, Jr., and his obsession with Jodie Foster which led him to attempt the assassination of Pres. Ronald Reagan, and Yolanda Saldívar, murderer of Selena and her quondam fan club president, are the only notable examples.

<sup>7</sup> Naomi Kasa, "Constructing Animerica: History, Style, and Spectatorship of Anime in the United States" (MA thesis, Regent University, 16 March 2005), 140.

enormous robots.<sup>8</sup> The realistic depictions of violence, sex, and demonic forces, as well as the actual consequences of interaction with these elements of life, have been a source of criticism and even fear in some circles. Some parents fear the effects of the medium on their children as something that may encourage violence. Others see it as a healthy method for children and teens to test the limits of a society in which they may feel alienated or disenfranchised.<sup>9</sup> This limited interpretation does not do justice to the art form, and is insulting to many fans. Insinuating that the violence of anime increases the propensity toward violence in its viewers by increasingly desensitizing them to it is to ignore the fact that these same depictions show the consequences of violent acts and the sometimes heart-wrenching necessity which drove the characters to act as they did. Western media often ignore consequences of any sort, good or bad, and use it just as often as any other culture's product.<sup>10</sup> Violence, both in anime itself and among most fans, is never a first solution and is usually seen as a temporary solution at best, a necessary evil, which always leads to further problems in the future. To denigrate an entire fan group because of an unjustified fear or an intentional misrepresentation of a medium is premature and inappropriate. Anime fans span quite literally the entire social spectrum, and vary from six-year-old girls watching *Pokémon* to NASA programmers debating the astrogation<sup>11</sup> methods of *Starblazers*. Time and again studies confirm that "as with other forms of media, there has yet to be a clear case made regarding anime and its direct effect on school violence."<sup>12</sup> Further, a British study conducted in 1994 concluded that television and movie viewing habits of violently

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<sup>8</sup> Such robots and their associated anime are called mecha to denote the mechanical nature of the main protagonist, or the tools that they use regularly. Mecha are more or less humaniform, and may range from space-traveling behemoths (see *Voltron*) or even be as simple as skin-armor for the characters (see *BubbleGum Crisis*).

<sup>9</sup> Kimberly A. McCabe & Gregory M. Martin, *School Violence, the Media, & Criminal Justice Responses* (New York: Peter Long Publishing, Inc., 2005), 77.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *The Works of the Brothers Grimm*.

<sup>11</sup> Astrogation is a neologism coined by Gene Roddenberry to be a stand in for navigation in interstellar travel in his *Star Trek* conceptual universe.

<sup>12</sup> McCabe and Martin, 78.

offending youth are not significantly different from those of the general population.<sup>13</sup> Kim Ryle, a former teacher who has had several students who lived their lives through anime and manga told me that, “If a child has good loving parent(s)/ guardian(s) who talk to the kids about what's going on in their world and how they should deal with their feelings in an appropriate manner, then chances are what they are reading or seeing won't have any negative impact upon their lives. They'll take everything they see and read read with a proverbial grain of salt and grow up to be perfectly ‘normal’ adults.”<sup>14</sup> One young man, who recently turned his hobby of drawing comics based on a university anime club to which he once belonged into a web-based comic has taken his love of texts to an extreme level and is one of the restorers of the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>15</sup> Parents should not fear anime or its fans, but rather see them as the first animated community seeking answers to what violence, love, pain, redemption, and life in general, really means.

Other negative views of anime fans have been a problem because some early distributors intentionally presented their product as violent, deviant, or pornographic in order to sensationalize their product and increase sales and social awareness.<sup>16</sup> This has done over twenty-five years of disservice to the medium as a whole because these limited genres have been taken are over-arching representations. As such, initial media presentation of anime as an idea, event, or product was crucial because “it was the form that most people received their pictures of both deviance and disasters. Reaction [took] place on the basis of these processed or coded images.”<sup>17</sup> This specifically set aside a mental image of anime as somehow dangerous to children and that it should therefore not be watched by anyone. Despite the fact that many parents in the early 1980's had been watching anime

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<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Thompson, *Moral Panics* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 104.

<sup>14</sup> Kim Ryle, “Anime Research,” 4 February 2006, personal email (4 February 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Lucanus Morgan, *Dub This! Anime Fandom at its Worst*, 10 April 2005 <<http://www.dubthis.net>> (21 March 2006).

<sup>16</sup> Fred Patten, “Anime in the United States,” in *Animation in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. John A. Lent (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 65.

<sup>17</sup> Thompson, 32.

unknowingly for years,<sup>18</sup> some saw this “new” animated phenomenon as a threat to “family values.” These media outlets, along with some news agencies, specifically exaggerated the case as if it were normative for the medium, when this was and remains a blatant untruth. However, parents were worried over anime, as they were over role-playing games and other fringe groups because “[n]o age group is more associated with risk in the public imagination than that of ‘youth.’ Youth can be seen as both a source and an object of risk, depending on the circumstance. The marginal nature of ‘not a child, not an adult’ only complicates this situation.”<sup>19</sup> While it is admirable that parents will be concerned about their children’s welfare and activities, it has been noted that many concerned parents had never actually watched the shows in question. Alarmism of this sort is just one of the many plagues that marginalized and stigmatized the fan in the late 1970’s and early ‘80’s. It should also be noted that mainstream mass media outlets seldom, if ever, depict the graphic violence or sexuality portrayed in an admittedly tiny subgenre of the anime medium as exceptional or in any way other than normative.<sup>20</sup> Negative stereotyping of subcultures or alternative lifestyles, or even of political views, is a sad commonplace in America. From the McCarthy witch-hunts to the banning of movies, it is a simple fact that US culture has repeatedly reacted in fear and misunderstanding even to its own cultural and subcultural products, much less those of other nations. Rather than the unhealthy suppression of a desire for individuality and personal meaning, fans exalt in personal responsibility for their self-defined difference. To be a fan is to be different and to flout normative practices intentionally without regard for the consequences or “what the neighbors will think.” Being a fan is in many ways the first step toward a healthy, holistic realization of the self as a being with meaning independent of the social group.

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<sup>18</sup> References to Japanese culture, including signs and standard jokes, were edited out of the products before they were released to American audiences. In some cases, entire plot arcs were destroyed in this editing process, much to the chagrin of later purists. The eventual release of the unexpurgated versions of many series, such as *Starblazers* and *Speed Racer* were met with both popular and critical acclaim in the US and in Europe.

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, 43.

<sup>20</sup> Thompson, 97.

There are many examples of politicians pandering to these views, not least of which was when Tipper Gore, former Second Lady of the United States, adamantly stated her opposition to role-playing games as a form of devil-worship and Satanism.<sup>21</sup> She even went so far as to blame these and other pop culture items for more than fifty suicides. No such connection has ever been proven. However, politicians have repeatedly come out against various pop culture genres or media as examples of moral infamy, and have even attempted to suppress or ban some areas.<sup>22</sup>

Let us now move on to the actual fans, not merely the popular perceptions thereof. The creation of the American otaku<sup>23</sup> has been called the “most significant event of the post-Cold War period.”<sup>24</sup> To most US audiences of the 1970’s and since, animated fare was believed to be suited only for children. Anime is a special case of “common knowledge” being proven grossly incorrect. The many social and psychological tropes treated in anime give a little something for everyone across the board. Many of the men in anime are romantic and heroic, while simultaneously being sexually non-threatening to their female counterparts in the story or in the audience.<sup>25</sup> Others, especially in the full-length features, present a sense of *mono no aware*, which can be translated as “the sadness of things,” which results from the inherent transience of beauty and happiness. Appreciation of this short-lived nature of things merely adds to the joy of the experience and the heartbreak of losing it.<sup>26</sup> Another item that distinguishes anime from American animation is that the heroes and villains tend to be ambiguous in nature. Rarely are there any true villains in the Western sense of the word. All heroes have flaws, and all villains have some redeeming trait of humanity. In truth, it is frequently commented that both sides

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<sup>21</sup> Tipper Gore, *Raising PG-Kids in an X-Rated Society* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987), 118.

<sup>22</sup> Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2005), 53.

<sup>23</sup> Otaku (both singular and plural) indicates a fan of anime in American circles. The term is much debated, and is used here with caution. In Japan, the word indicates a level of fannish attachment that is obsessive and mentally unhealthy. The Western usage was coined in 1983 by Nakamori Akio in his work “Otaku no Kenkyu.”

<sup>24</sup> Antonia Levi, *Samurai from Outer Space: Understanding Japanese Anime* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1996), 2.

<sup>25</sup> Levi, *Samurai*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Levi, *Samurai*, 24.



of the conflict have their heroes, and that no one side is ever entirely in the right.<sup>27</sup> Anime exposes the audience to the idea that one can be loyal, even to the death, to a leader who is unworthy or to a cause that is questionable, and that such loyalty is still noble in its own way. “Fighting for the wrong cause does not affect the heroism of those doing the fighting provided that their dedication is sincere.”<sup>28</sup> Yes, sometimes evil wins in anime, but that only happens when a good person does what he does for all the wrong reasons.

How many times have we heard stories of fathers forced to work back-breaking jobs to send their children to school, or of mothers selling their bodies that their children might have food on the table? Yes, these are great evils but they are intended toward the greater good. Anime, like all mature media, acknowledges that sometimes life requires its little evils for the overall good to be realized. Buddhists remind us that the prettiest lotus blossoms grow only in the deepest mud. Without this suffering, the beauty of life is cheapened and people start to take it for granted. Anime presents scenes so painfully beautiful, so horribly miraculous, that the heart is moved and tears stream from the eyes. To see death as a beauty because it reminds you how precious life is, and all the more so for its transient nature, is the goal of a mature cinematic medium.

This so-called problem of amorality is considered a threat in some conservative religious communities in America because an equivocal or amoral conceptual universe may lead to the idea of an amoral creation in the real world, and thus to the belief in deific indifference or even nonexistence, which simply cannot be tolerated within a Christian culture. Further danger is seen in the propensity either for amorality to run rampant in anime, or in its encouragement to find one’s own system of values and beliefs and stick to them, no matter what. Such heterodox approaches countermand the dominant power structures of American society. The conservative opinion is buttressed by mainstream

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<sup>27</sup> Levi, *Samurai*, 70.

<sup>28</sup> Antonia Levi, “New Myths for the Millennium: Japanese Animation,” in *Animation in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. John A. Lent (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 36.

US television codes of broadcasting, and certain standards in actor contracts that have been in place since the 1940's. Their main objection seems to be that right and wrong are defined in terms of purely human relationships and have no connection to some overriding universal moral principle.<sup>29</sup> Oddly enough, their objections are well-founded and meaningful precisely because most anime, at least that which is directed at older audiences, does exactly what these critics have claimed. This allows for an appeal which transcends culture and time and encourages people to find their own place in society, or to remake society in what they view as a better mold. Good and evil are thus exposed as being culturally defined and therefore arbitrary. This is the danger to groups who cling to subjective religious or cultural principles while insisting that they are universal, timeless, and defined by directives from on high. This same problem of morality, a good and loyal man suddenly discovering the evil nature of the cause he has worked for, or the separation and estrangement of young lovers, or the pain of needing to kill oneself to save others, is the main point of criticism by conservative Christian groups. Despite the fact that their New Testament says "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends,"<sup>30</sup> this trope toward personal sacrifice, embodied in its most extreme form as suicide or martyrdom for the benefit of others, is denigrated as sinful, obscene, and meriting nothing but hellfire. The internal contradictions of the criticizing community render their commentary moot.

These are just some of the ideas that help define what the anime community sees in the world and in itself. The continuation of life is generally recognized as a good that is sometimes enjoyed and sometimes merely endured. Finding meaning in that life, both as an individual and as part of a society, is what anime encourages its viewers to do, and so they have. The entire concept of what a fan is, and what it means to be a fan, is at times directly opposed to the concepts of being a good American or a good Christian, or any number of other things. It is this sense of contradiction that leads fans to a sense

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<sup>29</sup> Levi, *Samurai*, 99.

<sup>30</sup> Gospel of St. John 15:13.

of *mono no aware* within their own lives and allows them to appreciate the products and ideals of their native culture all the more deeply via comparison and contrast. It has been said that “[t]o claim the identity of a ‘fan’ remains, in some sense, to claim an improper identity, a cultural identity based on one’s commitment to something as seemingly unimportant and ‘trivial’ as a film or TV series.”<sup>31</sup> It is this independent search for meaning that defines the fan as separate from the main body of society.

One popular view of fans holds that a fan is:

Somebody who is obsessed with a particular star, celebrity, film, TV programme, band; somebody who can produce reams of information on their object of fandom, and can quote their favoured lines or lyrics, chapter and verse. Fans are often highly articulate. Fans interpret media texts in a variety of interesting and perhaps unexpected ways. And fans participate in communal activities – they are not ‘socially atomised’ or isolated viewers/readers.”<sup>32</sup>

Hills intentionally defines what a fan is perceived to be only in order to show how it is both right and wrong, depending on the circumstances. This author does it in such a way that he incorporates popular notions along with the true basis for those opinions. Fandom, for Hills and for others, is inherently outside rational explanation, or even groups of explanations. It is all some internal limbic attachment that defies logic, but is no less real for its quixotic nature. Real studies have shown that fans critically engage with the texts of their fandom, whether in print or cinematic form, and are far from passive.<sup>33</sup>

They even go to the lengths of nonsense terms, such as “American manga” which just means “American comics” when English already has a perfectly good word for the product in question.<sup>34</sup>

Despite a fan’s self-identification and self-definition, which are both qualities inherent to fannishness, it supposedly becomes the academic’s privilege and prerogative to decide upon the political and social

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<sup>31</sup> Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), xii.

<sup>32</sup> Hills, *Fan Cultures*, ix.

<sup>33</sup> van Zoonen, 61.

<sup>34</sup> Helen McCarthy, “Research Questions,” 3 April 2006, personal email (3 April 2006).

worthiness of fan cultures and practices.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, some would insist that self-definition is the material component of both modern and postmodern objects.<sup>36</sup> “Media fans are consumers who also produce, readers who also write, and spectators who also participate.”<sup>37</sup> Fans are usually part of an interpretive community and a socially organized group of fellow fans, thus the term fandom. Calling this infatuation a form of psychological hedonism may go a bit far, but then some fans go a bit too far.<sup>38</sup> Further, these associations tend to be made by chance rather than by intent, and are often found when a fan-to-be encounters a genre or trope of which he was previously unaware.<sup>39</sup> The entire realms of fanfic, fanart, and fansubs<sup>40</sup> are proof that the fans are interactive with, and interpretive of, the object of their fandom. Fans and artists alike consider anime to be metafiction in that they play with and conflate notions of reality, and some artistically seek out the absurdity of logical extremes inherent in some shows.<sup>41</sup> *Urusei Yatsura* is the classic example of what happens when a loner boy gets too much of the thing he wants, a devoted girlfriend who it turns out is a magic demon who takes things a little too literally for her own good, or for anyone else's.<sup>42</sup> Fanfics are the essence of fan participation, and thrive on the fan's insistence on the ability to assert meaning for their favored texts, which means that “[t]he aesthetic relevance of fan texts, thus, lies not in any specific meanings but in their lack thereof as manifestation of a social and cultural status quo.”<sup>43</sup> The fan thereby sees the symbols of the anime, verbal or visual, and interprets them as he sees fit. This multiplicity of potential meanings, bordering

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<sup>35</sup> Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 13.

<sup>36</sup> Peter G. Stromberg, “The ‘I’ of Enthrallment,” *Ethos* 24, no. 4 (1999): 492.

<sup>37</sup> Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 30.

<sup>38</sup> Stromberg, 494.

<sup>39</sup> Matt Hills, “Patterns of Surprise: The ‘Aleatory Object’ in Psychoanalytic Ethnography and Cyclical Fandom,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 48, no. 7 (March 2005), 801.

<sup>40</sup> Fanfic is fan-produced fiction that uses established characters and/or conceptual universes. These may or may not follow canonical or orthodox understandings of the universe. These may range from filling in plot holes to hypothetical sexual liaisons. Fanart is fan-produced art that is inspired by favored shows or series. Fansubs are fan-produced subtitled versions of anime. While technically illegal, they are not usually banned or prosecuted by official producers and distributors, and constituted the basis of many early fan communities’ shared sense of purpose.

<sup>41</sup> Brian Ruh, *Stray Dog of Anime: The Films of Mamoru Oshii* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 12.

<sup>42</sup> Ruh, *Stray Dog*, 15.

<sup>43</sup> Cornel Sandvoss, “One-Dimensional Fan: Toward an Aesthetic of Fan Texts,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 48, no. 7 (March 2005): 822.

on the infinite in some cases, is a form of polysemy. This characteristic is unusual in modern mass media texts. Most mainstream media presentations insist in a hegemonic, orthodox interpretation of their products, but fans who adore even non-anime based objects reject this, at least unconsciously, and come up with their own feelings, beliefs, and understandings of the works presented. Of further importance is that the fans, in addition to not caring what the original producers think of their views, seldom if ever care what society thinks of their views or their fannishness.<sup>44</sup> While present to some extent in all fandoms, anime fandom is polysemic almost by definition.<sup>45</sup> It is well known that many anime artists intentionally avoid attaching meaning to their work, thus engaging in neutrosemy, and find satisfaction in how varied and multifold the fan interpretations are. In short, there is no single text for the fan to experience, rather there are as many texts as there are fans. In consequence, fans not only define what are and are not legitimate texts for their fandom, but they define what those texts are, and where the boundaries lie. Fanfic is thus a paratext based on the main text.<sup>46</sup> This is similar to the Judaic tradition of the mishnah as explanatory glosses for the main text. They can be used to fill in holes or to cover seeming internal contradictions. The ultimate goal of fanfic, like the mishnah, is to produce a new text seen as authoritative by other readers. No “correct” reading of a text is possible because,

[b]etween schematized views, there is a no-man's land of indeterminacy which results precisely from the determinacy of the sequence of each individual view. Gaps are bound to open up, and offer a free play of interpretation for the specific way in which the various views can be connected with one another. These gaps give the reader the chance to build his own bridges, relating to different aspects of the object which have thus far been revealed to him. It is quite impossible for the text itself to fill the gaps. In fact, the more a text tries to be precise... the greater will be the number of gaps between the views.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Jenkins, *Poachers*, 18.

<sup>45</sup> Sandvoss, 824.

<sup>46</sup> Sandvoss, 827.

<sup>47</sup> Sandvoss, 830.

The very humanness of otaku has been called into question, being called a *shinjinrui*, a new generation, or, a new species. One has to ask if fannishness is more a mode of being than a particular object or genre of interest. Otaku are seen by some as being on an eternal quest for self-definition, and they do so consciously and methodically from an early age.<sup>48</sup> It has been said that:

[i]n school children are taught to take in the world as data and information, in a fragmentary way, not systematically. The system is designed for cramming them with dates, names, and answers for multiple-choice exams. The scraps of information are never combined into a total view of the world. They don't have a knowledge value, but the character of a fetish.<sup>49</sup>

The consequence at first glance may appear to be social detachment, but by finding meaning for themselves, they find meaning for the society around them and ways of interacting with that society for the betterment, from the otaku perspective, of the group. The reverse of the above quote is true of otaku, as can be seen by their ability not only to recall arcane lore from their favorite series, but to be able to analyze that information and incorporate it into a systemic world-view, and to posit what-if style questions and reason out the logical consequences of their hypothetical premises, following their own internalized version of the Socratic method. Anime is but one arena for fans to confront

[t]he stresses and pressures of an education system, which... trains people to do little other than pass examinations, the increasingly competitive nature of a society which appears only to emphasize material values and appears spiritually sterile, the erosion, in the cities, of a sense of community and of widely shared values, the alienation and isolation of individuals within the city environment, the political weakness and lack of leadership within society and the perceived weakness of the older religions which have failed to provide moral guidance are all contributing factors.<sup>50</sup>

These are issues confronting society on a global level, and the ability to analyze them and deal with them thematically in a conceptual universe, namely that of anime, gives a safe-zone for those who

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<sup>48</sup> Volker Grassmuck, "I'm Alone But Not Lonely," *Mediamatic Magazine* 5, no. 4 (December 1990).

<sup>49</sup> Grassmuck.

<sup>50</sup> Susan J. Napier, *Anime From Akira to Princes Mononoke : Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (New York : Palgrave, 2000), 28.

would otherwise feel lost or completely disenfranchised in their societies. Mainstream US society “articulates social conflicts, contemporary fears, and utopian hopes” without making any attempt to deal with the realities or plausible what-if situations, thus making “attempts at ideological containment and reassurance.”<sup>51</sup> Anime and its fans refuse to ignore the unpleasant parts of life and try to better the world as best they can, realizing that they will fail but knowing that failure is no excuse for not trying. This honest appraisal of self-failure is just one more aspect of *mono no aware*. Fans’ hopes for the future are always predicated on their perceived losses and failures from the past. That which could be is always a mirror of that which one has lost.

The techniques of conceptual appropriation allows the fan to further identify with, and make sense of, the characters’ lives and actions and adds further meaning to the conceptual universe. Usually these fanfic productions are posted on-line or published in paper fanzines.<sup>52</sup> The movement from fanfic producer or “hobbyist to paid expert depends less on general processes of capital [in the Marxist sense] than upon specific leisure pursuits being reconstructed as niche markets.”<sup>53</sup> It is this movement that defines a fan’s progression through the hierarchy of fandom. As one accumulates more knowledge, both in terms of breadth and depth, one advances and acquires more subcultural capital. Fandom is not simply a community of interest, it is a group of people competing for more knowledge and information, thereby having greater access to their object of fandom, and therefore have a higher perceived status within the community.<sup>54</sup> With this in mind, we have to ask if the cultural capital of a traditional art historian is more valuable than that of a fan. In so doing, some have taken a Marxist parallel and compared the academic/fan dichotomy to that of the bourgeoisie/proletariat. There is a problem with this comparison. Subcultural capital is rarely translatable into economic capital; fanart sales being the

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<sup>51</sup> Napier, *Anime*, 33.

<sup>52</sup> Fanzines are fan-produced magazines, some on paper and some on-line, that produce nothing but fanfic and fanart, and allow other fans to comment on the authors’ work.

<sup>53</sup> Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 40.

<sup>54</sup> Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 46.

major exception to this rule. This nontransferability is largely the result of exclusion of this type of art, the entire anime medium, from classical educational curricula.<sup>55</sup> However, anime fandom, by self-defining as a subculture, has defined its knowledge as subcultural capital and therefore as extracurricular by necessity.<sup>56</sup> In short, the things that fandom has to teach cannot be learned in school, and the things taught would likely suffer from grave distortion if one attempted to normalize them into academic routine. A further definition of fandom is its tendency to return to the same object of fandom time and again, each time re-living old memories, or seeking out new fanfic presentations or professionally produced items that continue or fill-in the story that they hold so dear.<sup>57</sup> This tendency to reread old texts is regarded as unusual or even deviant by non-fans, and is generally tolerated only in children, old people, and professors.<sup>58</sup>

Many disputes and conflicts within fandom originate from the “narcissism of minor differences.”<sup>59</sup> Cultural proximity, or making up for the perceived failings of one’s own group, fosters enmity toward that group. One of the early controversies in the otaku community was that of subbing versus dubbing. Badly dubbed versions drove away many early would-be fans, but subs gave the medium a second chance.<sup>60</sup> Subtitles are considered by some to be preferable because they allow the viewer to get a better idea of what the original intent was, while the dubbed, or voice-over, version is forced to condense or even mutilate meaning in order to convey difficult or complex ideas in a short time. Conversely, advocates of dubbing cite the ease with which they can view their favorite shows and movies without having to read constantly. This also allows them to enjoy the artwork more and see facial expressions and read meaning into body language. However, this, like most other controversies, is ignored in all practical aspects because “the generation of a fan community depends

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<sup>55</sup> Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 52.

<sup>56</sup> Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 55.

<sup>57</sup> Hills, “Patterns of Surprise,” 816.

<sup>58</sup> Jenkins, *Poaching*, 67.

<sup>59</sup> Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 61.

<sup>60</sup> Brian Ruh, *Stray Dog*, ix.



on fans from different walks of life gathering together to share their fandoms.”<sup>61</sup> The debate was almost entirely an American and European phenomenon because the Japanese, up to about 1996, refused to believe that there could possibly be an international market for something that was intentionally designed for domestic consumption. The final stroke was had with the advent of DVD technology. Most discs today have the option for sub or dubbed version, or various combinations thereof, and so the point is mostly moot at this late date.<sup>62</sup> Fansubs, in all reality, were the gateway through which anime was introduced to the American otaku. Fan communities early on began a system of internal policing for their works of fansubbing. No mainstream fansubber ever made a profit from his work. It was a source of pride for many that they did their work for free because they loved the shows and wanted to share them with other fans. Those who charged for their fansub work were generally shunned and most are banned when found selling their wares at trade shows or cons.<sup>63</sup> However, as late as 2004, virtually every video store visited in a study conducted in Austin, Texas, had bootleg copies mixed in with legitimate ones. Many of these were notable for their bad English, having Japanese audio with Chinese subtitles, or all-region DVD capacity.<sup>64</sup>

Most Japanese companies tolerate this practice because they, like the fans, view it as a prelude to purchasing legitimate copies when they become available. Fans see this as a sort of “test drive” to see if they like a series or movie. Conversely, these same companies do not support the practice either.<sup>65</sup> There has only been one major test case in American law. In *Sony v. Universal*, the US Supreme Court ruled that home use recordings were legal, and they later added to this ruling by stating that sharing tape copies with close friends was also legal according to USC §§ 109 and 122. These

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<sup>61</sup> Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 63.

<sup>62</sup> Kasa, 85.

<sup>63</sup> Sean Leonard, “Celebrating Two Decades of Unlawful Progress: Fan Distribution, Proselytization Commons, and the Explosive Growth of Japanese Animation,” *UCLA Entertainment Law Review*, no. 189 (Spring 2005): 30.

<sup>64</sup> Brian Ruh, “From Here to Shinjuku: Of Bootlegs and Business,” *Pop Matters*, 7 July 2004 <<http://www.popmatters.com/columns/ruh/040707.shtml>> (13 March 2006).

<sup>65</sup> Henry Jenkins, “When Piracy Becomes Promotion,” *Technology Review*, 10 August 2004.

rulings also stated that national distribution, even by a non-profit organization like a fan club or university group, was illegal.<sup>66</sup> The long-term effect of this ruling was that it became effectively illegal to import any kind of foreign media product without the express permission of not only the owner of the rights but also the original author. Major media companies and individuals regularly ignore this ruling, and no one seems to mind so long as everyone that deserves payment has received it, and that no third-party garners illicit gains from the work of others.

The ultimate creations of fans are those gatherings known as cons.<sup>67</sup> The key form of pleasure for a fan is rooted in activities that allow the fan to further identify with the object of fandom, thus securing for them a place in the fan subcultural hierarchy. This meeting with other fans, and the taking on of roles in affective play, allows the fan to challenge the perceived walls between internal and external realities. The con allows for a safe environment in which this play can take place, and provides playmates of all varieties for experimentation with alternate storylines, new plot ideas, or even comparison of techniques for costume creation. These gatherings allow fans not only to investigate their own objects of fan culture and those of other fans, but also to help create the fan culture and to further the process of giving it meaning.<sup>68</sup> In short, conventions are proof positive that fandom is not simply people with overlapping interests, but a definite cohesive community with shared goals and desires. Much like a church or temple meeting, the con is seen by some as a semi-sacral arena of interaction. “The ‘sacred’ is a realm of public ritual in which social gatherings of co-present actors enact their belief systems and hence subordinate themselves to a powerful external force.”<sup>69</sup> In this case, the con is the tent-meeting, and the rituals are cosplay,<sup>70</sup> the dances, and hearing favorite music

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<sup>66</sup> Leonard, 42.

<sup>67</sup> Con is short for convention. While this is normally used only for anime conventions, it may apply to any sort of fan convention. The alternate usage “kon” refers specifically to Project: A-Kon, held in Dallas, Texas.

<sup>68</sup> Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 113. In other contexts, it has also been said that all experience, internal or external, only has meaning because someone assigned that meaning to it and, in effect, made it real.

<sup>69</sup> Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 125.

<sup>70</sup> Cosplay is costumed play. Fans make costumes, wigs, and make-up arrangements to appear like their favorite characters.

stars perform. One interviewee even specifically viewed the importance of cons in religious terms, calling them, “the teleological equivalent of fan churches. While not necessarily supportive of meaning in the sense of being a person or a good citizen, they do help the fan find meaning for himself as a fan.”<sup>71</sup> While seldom that cerebral, most fans do see cons as a sounding board for ideas and dreams, marketplaces for art of all forms, and a way to interact with fans that would otherwise be geographically isolated from them by hundreds if not thousands of miles.<sup>72</sup> The con is the embodiment of organized fandom, which is

[f]irst and foremost, an institution of theory and criticism, a semi-structured space where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated, and negotiated and where readers speculate about the nature of the mass media and their own relationship to it.<sup>73</sup>

It has been shown that fandom has a rather high sense of what is called “psychological sense of community.” This quality has four parts: belonging, fulfillment of needs, influence, and shared connections. The level of fannishness, by this definition, is a mix of how intensely does the fan identify with the community and how strongly the feeling is returned. The study of communities of interest is rather new, and can only take a few of its predicates from the study of communities of geographic nature.<sup>74</sup> This sense of fannish interaction dates back to the early science fiction pulps, especially *Amazing Stories* edited by Hugo Gernsback, which began printing in June 1926. It was his practice to print authors’ names and addresses so that interested parties could communicate both through the traditional “Letters to the Editor” section of the magazine while also doing so directly by

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These may range from simple dresses for Sailor Scout outfits to complex arrangements that are more duct tape and imagination than anything else.

<sup>71</sup> Paul Johnson, interview by author, Arlington, Texas, 10 March 2006.

<sup>72</sup> Project: A-Kon, of Dallas, Texas, has had attendees from all over the US, Japan, South Africa, Europe, and South America, and mainland Asia.

<sup>73</sup> Jenkins, *Poachers*, 86.

<sup>74</sup> Patricia Obst, Lucy Zinkiewicz, and Sandy G. Smith, “Sense of Community in Science Fiction Fandom, Part 1: Understanding Sense of Community in an International Community of Interest,” *Journal of Communal Psychology* 30, no. 1 (2002): 87. Fandom communities have few, if any, meaningful geographic limits.

mail.<sup>75</sup> Modern BBS, on-line forums, and email systems have allowed a greater speed and flexibility for this mutually reinforcing fan tendency to communicate and share ideas. It has even been conjectured that in today's anonymous urban environments, people are more likely to interact with almost complete strangers at great physical remove via email than they are with their actual neighbors in space. The long-term result of Gernsback's practice was a modern "Republic of Letters" that connected fans in the US, Japan, Australia, Europe, and South Africa and all over the world. This interaction and exchange of ideas is indeed worthy of its Enlightenment Era namesake, though some would say that the spontaneity of online communication potential has diluted the lasting and literary worth of the commentary and criticism offered. Further, the anonymity of such a system makes it easier to denigrate the work of another without simultaneously offering constructive criticism or suggestions for improvement.<sup>76</sup> Through a series of studies conducted by Patricia Obst and her associates, spanning several years and several continents, it has been shown that conscious awareness of group membership in a community of interest is active as compared to the relatively passive membership of geographic communities in modern urban settings. Present research shows that social centrifuge fears due to the internet depersonalization are unfounded, as internet access is in fact allowing whole new communities to grow which would previously have been impossible even to conceive, much less to actualize.<sup>77</sup> With that said, it must be realized that studies of any sort of fandom, much less anime fandom, are relatively new though the underlying social phenomenon is nigh universal in Western culture. To date, most studies of fandom have focused on science fiction, soap operas, or NASCAR racing. At present, I do not know of any systematic treatments of anime fandom, as such. It is usually considered a special case of fandom overall, or as a subgenre of science fiction fandom. While the two groups are closely related and do experience a high level of overlap, they are

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<sup>75</sup> Obst, et al., "Part 1," 92.

<sup>76</sup> Obst, et al., "Part 1," 93.

<sup>77</sup> Obst, et al., "Part 1," 99.

distinct in many other ways and should be treated as separate entities. The work done by Obst and her fellows correlates itself with the idea of global fandom identification as opposed to that of geographic communities. It should be noted that her research was performed in a biased setting, i.e.: that of an science fiction convention in Australia by a series of interviews and mail-in surveys, but the findings are in no way to be ignored and she specifically states that this initial work is a preface for further inquiry.<sup>78</sup>

No other imported medium has ever had such a heavy and lasting impact on American culture.<sup>79</sup> American fans of anime might be said to “engage, consciously or unconsciously, in an imperialist relationship where Japan is dominant... Furthermore, the Japanese themselves are quite comfortable understanding America as a possible colony of Japan.” Such an interpretation is unsupportable because of how the editing process occasionally reorganizes and even mutilates the cultural significance of many scenes and dialogs in anime. Kasa offers her own theory, saying that “[a]nime has its own unique culture, offering universal treatments that can be read identically by each viewer regardless of their own cultural background.”<sup>80</sup> The problem with this theory is based in her objection to the other theory. The very editing process she cites as destructive of the Japanese culture and evocative of the American one also presents a disjointed view of the original product to the US audience, and thus intensifies the individualistic nature of personal, polysemic interpretation. She does, however, posit anime as a myth-creation vehicle in a postmodern, postindustrial global culture, and she seems to be right on the surface. However, popular media relies on categorization of archetypes, the interpretation of which, if not the underlying reality, is based on cultural biases and objectives, as well as notions of difference. Even though the idea might be universal, the way it is used and is given meaning in society

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<sup>78</sup> Patricia Obst, Lucy Zinkiewicz, and Sandy G. Smith, “Sense of Community in Science Fiction Fandom, Part 2: Comparing Neighborhood and Interest Group Sense of Community,” *Journal of Community Psychology* 30, no. 1 (2002), 115.

<sup>79</sup> Kasa, 2.

<sup>80</sup> Kasa, 15.

varies across time and space, and can even evolve within a culture as it progresses. Myths are still important and useful in the postmodern world, and anime encourages that by giving the audience an invitation to engage the text and be active spectators.<sup>81</sup> For fans, “watching the series is the beginning, not the end, of the process of media consumption.”<sup>82</sup> *Akira* is the “poster child” for postmodern universals in anime cinema; in fact it is seemingly impossible to find any critique which explains its US popularity without recourse to postmodernism. It has also been suggested that this viewpoint allows critics to avoid the issue of how active fanship affects the popularity of a given work.<sup>83</sup> We continue to need symbols and myths because they are part of understanding ourselves. “In the myths, we find the messages” that are our lives.<sup>84</sup> These archetypal situations require the presentation and contemplation of their antitheses in order to be complete. In all settings, hell has its price, and transformation and transcendence are the only ways to escape from a hopeless situation.<sup>85</sup> Japanese dystopias concern a search for something lost, and this loss can lead to madness or a meaningless death if it is not rectified properly.<sup>86</sup> Mythic presentation plays out our own internal struggles and so art imitates life, the culmination of our own existence is the sum and more than the sum of “the lives of our past, the lessons of our present, and the goal, the prize of the future for which we all strive... an enlightenment that will bring us into transcendent consciousness.”<sup>87</sup> However, we should be wary of identifying too strongly with any archetype or myth because “a myth can only take you so far. Real endings must come from within.”<sup>88</sup>

Anime fandom as a distinct community has obscure beginnings. The first forays of anime into

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<sup>81</sup> Kasa, 17.

<sup>82</sup> Kasa, 18.

<sup>83</sup> Kasa, 142.

<sup>84</sup> Nathan R. Brown, “The Combative Trinity Concept: A Missing Link to the Gaps of Ancient Mythology” (Unpublished paper, Midwestern State University, 2002), 1.

<sup>85</sup> Brown, 9.

<sup>86</sup> Susan J. Napier, *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature: The Subversion of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 188.

<sup>87</sup> Brown, 12.

<sup>88</sup> Levi, “New Myths,” 44.

the American conceptual universe were when servicemen were stationed in Japan and they would bring back productions they enjoyed. Later, fans watched shows such as *AstroBoy*, released by NBC in the States in 1962, and *Kimba the White Lion*, also by NBC in 1965,<sup>89</sup> without realizing that they were Japanese in origin. Fred Ladd was NBC's principal operator in this. He spliced together 193 Japanese episodes into 104 US English-language episodes. The editing was done haphazardly and without any regard to the original story, and they never hired a translator for even rudimentary checks. Still, Tezuka Osamu, the original artist behind *AstroBoy*, thanked Ladd for his work and felt complimented that his art was good enough to inspire new rounds of story-telling.<sup>90</sup>

*Speed Racer*, originally airing as *Mach Go Go Go* in Japan and intentionally de-Japanified for American markets, was released in 1967. One of the main points of popularity here was the realistic presentations of automotive technology and how problems inherent in a racing situation were solved. This way of talking to the audience as if they knew what they were doing was seen as complimentary, whereas the fantastic methods used in *Batman* and other American shows were seen as too implausible given the setting. Another factor in *Speed Racer's* favor was the release of the first James Bond films immediately prior to its own release. The connected fascination with fast cars allowed the audience to have an interest in a cartoon without seeming childish.<sup>91</sup>

For Meri Davis, now a “professional fan” and founder of Project: A-Kon, it took several years to realize that there was anything that made anime stylistically or thematically different from mainstream American cartoon fare. In the 1970’s, shows such as *Starblazers* and *Battle of the Planets* were “the first soap operas for kids. It had a continuing story line, and you had to watch it from day to day to know what was going to unfold. But it was an adventure story. And I would watch that

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<sup>89</sup> Kasa, 49.

<sup>90</sup> Kasa, 61.

<sup>91</sup> Kasa, 65.

religiously growing up.”<sup>92</sup> Like *Speed Racer* before it, *Starblazers* intentionally rode the coattails of the *Star Trek* craze then in vogue due to the new movies being released. In this period, many of the older anime were taken off the air because they were seen as too violent for children, and even many American Looney Toons were edited or removed from play lists due to their violence or racist content.<sup>93</sup> The fans only saw this as one more challenge in a long string of them. Home video equipment was still expensive after the initial VCR release in 1975, but several fans would band together to purchase the apparatus and share the anime as well. The fan distribution networks that developed became a relatively open “proselytization commons” that any fan could use to expose potential fans to his favorite movie or series, or just to share some new product with fans that had missed something, or to inquire about new shows fresh from Japan.<sup>94</sup> Contrary to the isolationist myth that many have regarding anime fans, this early process required that fans socialize with one another in order to view their favorite shows. The first formally constituted fan club, specifically set up for the purpose of illegally copying and distributing fansubs (but done with tacit cooperation from Japanese executives who thought they had nothing to lose), was the Cartoon/Fantasy Organization (C/FO) by Fred Patten in May 1977. Tape trading was part of their operations from the start, and chapters quickly sprang up in Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia.<sup>95</sup> Their *FantaZine* is the first known fanzine to have enjoyed wide circulation. Patten and his colleagues started impromptu video showings in hotel rooms while attending science fiction cons. One such showing was informally sponsored by Toei Entertainment at WesterCon XXIII, in Los Angeles in 1978. Toei later used the San Diego ComiCon as a test market for its anime products in 1980, and Fred Patten ran the sales table for them. It was most unusual for Japanese executives to mingle in any fashion with the fans at this time, and only did

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<sup>92</sup> Meri K. Davis, interview by author, Plano, Texas, 2 February 2006.

<sup>93</sup> Kasa, 69.

<sup>94</sup> Leonard, 5.

<sup>95</sup> Leonard, 11.



so surreptitiously while visiting the West Coast. At first considered mere pandering to a fetishistic audience across the ocean, the studio quickly came to see this as free advertising in a market with virtually no competition.<sup>96</sup>

The common response to these activities, once they became generally known in the Japanese home offices, was what is known as “deliberate strategic ignorance” in the business world. They pretended that video piracy was not happening, knowing that by their silent enabling they were priming the market for legitimate releases of their products, even when the presentations went well beyond normal “fair use” guidelines.<sup>97</sup> Further, Japanese businesses saw this as a way of ingratiating themselves to domestic producers because if they were perceived as ineffectual at enforcing their own copyrights against amateurs, then they would similarly be impotent against the professionals. Following this strategy, most Japanese animation companies formally closed their US offices in 1982.<sup>98</sup>

Gradually, these clandestine showings became regularized attractions at science fiction cons and had their own dedicated subset of fans. It was in these arenas that the benshi became common of necessity, rather than as conscious imitation of the old Japanese practice of having a live narrator for silent films.<sup>99</sup> Science fiction cons had always had their cosplay contests, and here also anime quickly came to the fore. This was only a further example of admiration becoming emulation. Fan distribution was eased by the fact that Japan and the States used the same video format, NTSC, while Europe and the UK used the PAL system.

The connection between childhood fantasy and adult economic enterprise is startling. In 1990, Ms. Davis started Project: A-Kon, almost on a lark, and had an attendance of 380 people. Fred Patten

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<sup>96</sup> Leonard, 12.

<sup>97</sup> Leonard, 15.

<sup>98</sup> Leonard, 15.

<sup>99</sup> Kasa, 70.

called this experiment the “first significant anime convention.”<sup>100</sup> Since then, the convention has grown to international standing, bringing in both attendees and guests from as far away as Japan, Scandinavia, South Africa, Australia, and Ecuador, and is now the third largest fan-based con in the United States. Ms. Davis told another interviewer that “Back when we started, anime fans really felt like outcasts, and that’s what Project: A-Kon was all about, giving those people a place where they could feel connected to a community.”<sup>101</sup> Ms. Davis’s most recent convention as of this writing, A-Kon 16, reported a total of 10,771 total attendees.<sup>102</sup> This convention has repeatedly been the subject of academic investigation, most notably by Susan Napier of the University of Texas at Austin. She says of the fans at A-Kon 12 that fandom is an “übersubculture,” and that the fans as well as the cinema are “remarkable for [their] downbeat emotional tone, emphasizing painful complexity over easy closure, grief over gladness” while most US cinema-goers seek the “dynamics of reassurance.”<sup>103</sup>

Ms. Davis's first real interaction with the anime community was early in the 1980's at an event called Yamiko-Con. This event had a premier of a *Starblazers* movie which she had never seen. There were no dubs or subs of it yet, so a man in the front row had to perform the role of benshi for the audience. Because of the language barrier, almost no one in the US had ever seen it. She and her former husband ended up being the heads of the Earth Defense Council, a Dallas-based fan group for the show, which had chapters in twenty states by 1987. Each chapter was organized along the lines of the ships in the *Starblazers* universe, and the type of ship you were called depended on the size of the group. Each group was headed by a captain, who was effectively the local chapter president. This group began meeting in the 1970's, and Ms. Davis joined in 1982 and was quickly made “Chief

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<sup>100</sup> Patten, 63.

<sup>101</sup> Tom Maurstad, “All Anime, All the Time: Convention Offers Round-the-Clock Immersion in Japanese Animation,” *Dallas Morning News*, 30 May 2003, Weekend Guide Live, 35.

<sup>102</sup> Laura Morris, “Question,” 18 March 2006, personal email (18 March 2006). Update: Since this article was published, the figures for Project: A-Kon 17 have become available: 12,459 attendees, an increase of 15.7%. Projected growth for 2007 is equally optimistic.

<sup>103</sup> Susan J. Napier, “Peek-a-Boo Pikachu: Exporting an Asian Subculture,” *Harvard Asia Pacific Review* (Fall 2001): 14.

Publications Officer.” She was the one who typed, copied, and bound the group’s fanzine and newsletter, titled *Nova* and *Whispers from Iscandar*, respectively, for distribution. All this was done long before computers became common, or photocopying was inexpensive. Even after her divorce, she maintained her standing in the club. It was easy for her to do this because as she said, “He got the car and I got the fan club.” In the end, the group floundered in 1992 because the initial setup was too hierarchical and demanding for the freedom-loving fans.<sup>104</sup> Parallel organizations, such as the Star Blazers Fan Club and the Cartoon/Fantasy Organization (C/FO), based in New York City and Los Angeles, respectively, had similar fates. One problem cited with these early groups is that they were “closed proselytization commons” in that they determined what anime was available and to whom.<sup>105</sup> It should be noted, however, that the first authenticated fansub was sent to the C/FO-Rising Sun group, a branch of the club at an American military station in Japan, in 1986 by Roy Black, a midshipman from Blacksburg, Virginia, while stationed there.<sup>106</sup>

However, this breakup can be attributed in part to the ease which computers allowed in making fansubs. In particular, the introduction of the Commodore Amiga and the Apple Macintosh in 1989 meant that it no longer took specialized equipment to produce these, and thus the need for centralized circulation was no longer quite so acute.<sup>107</sup> Internal matters also helped the C/FO to lose its national status as a series of power struggles ensued after the Amiga destroyed an effective monopoly. Fred Patten maintains that he stepped down in order to write articles about anime and anime fandom for mainstream media sources, but some sources dispute this. The final fate of the C/FO was to return to a purely local fan club in July 1989, in Los Angeles, where it had all begun.<sup>108</sup> Anime communities had made their mark around the world by this time. Even in war-torn Bosnia, there were scenes from *Akira*

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<sup>104</sup> Meri Davis, “Question,” 19 April 2006, personal email (19 April 2006).

<sup>105</sup> Leonard, 20.

<sup>106</sup> Leonard, 21.

<sup>107</sup> Leonard, 8.

<sup>108</sup> Leonard, 21.

painted on walls in 1993 as a sign of political resistance during the worst parts of the fighting.<sup>109</sup>

Anime has also been used in the fight against hegemonic Americanization in Europe, and also a vehicle of de-Americanization of US youth. It is most unfortunate that the postapocalyptic epics such as *Akira* have been associated with doomsday cults such as Aum Shinrikyo, which set off deadly subway attacks in Tokyo in 1995.<sup>110</sup> *Akira* is so popular with these groups, and with more mainstream groups that merely wish to be individualistic in a cookie-cutter society, precisely because it rejects hierarchical, careerist, and conservative ideologies of the baby-boomer generation in favor of a sense of trying to find a family with which one can identify rather than the biological grouping into which one is born.<sup>111</sup> This modern concept of a “family of choice” is so important that the nuclear family is occasionally portrayed as under assault by alternative lifestyles that assert commonality of interest rather than genetics. In the postmodern world, the traditional family is frequently portrayed as dysfunctional and seldom seen as healthy for its members. It is possible that the family of choice will win out over time, but the concept is so new that analysis at this point would be conjectural at best and misleading at worst.

In 1992, Cartoon Network was launched.<sup>112</sup> It began carrying anime regularly in an afternoon block called “Toonami” in 1997. Their first productions were *Dragonball Z* and *Sailor Moon*.<sup>113</sup> Requests for other old anime favorites, such as *Voltron* and *ThunderCats*, came in almost daily via email. Though much maligned in some fan circles as gross stereotypes of several common genres, it was this network that began the mainstreaming of anime in the American marketplace. Some fans have come out in protest of this, and this trend is observed in the cosplay outfits tending to be more and

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<sup>109</sup> Napier, *Anime*, 5.

<sup>110</sup> Napier, *Anime*, 9.

<sup>111</sup> Napier, *The Fantastic*, 215.

<sup>112</sup> Jeff Harris, “The History of Toonami,” *The X-Bridge* <<http://www.thexbridge.com/tid1.html>> (9 March 2006).

<sup>113</sup> Kasa, 87.

more outrageous, according to Lee Martindale, who has observed anime fandom since 1994.<sup>114</sup> Other shows, such as *Pokémon* and other children's shows, are often gateways even for adults into more mentally demanding forms of anime. Like others before it, the US release was timed to match up with the game release of the same name by Nintendo. From 1998 to 2004, this one franchise alone earned over \$15 billion worldwide.<sup>115</sup> The adult cousin of Toonami, called “Adult Swim,” is focused on an audience comprised of men, 18-24 years old, and who like to stay up late at night when things that cannot be shown in primetime can be seen more readily, as their thematic material was considered to be inappropriate for children. Anime has also been shown on the SciFi Channel, TNT, Spike, G4 (formerly TechTV), TBS, and the USA networks. Turner Entertainment has recently released the Anime Network for satellite broadcast. By 2004, the US anime market had topped \$1 billion per year.<sup>116</sup>

By 2002, anime fandom had become so big that Big Apple Anime Fest 2002 and Anime Expo New York could be held simultaneously, in hotels across the street from one another, and neither suffered from low attendance numbers. If anything they had a much higher than expected turnout, and the events sold out quickly. Scalpers were on hand and made profit “hand over fist.”<sup>117</sup> The Saturday evening cosplay reportedly lasted over four hours in both venues, with contestants and spectators scurrying back and forth so as to take part in both competitions. In 1992 when the big fan clubs were breaking up into local groups, almost no one had heard of anime outside specialized fan circles. By 2002, there were specialized clubs in many high schools and almost all major universities, and it has since made headway into more mainstream areas of American culture. One interviewee told me of his early anime experiences with a high school group. It was his main method of socialization and most of

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<sup>114</sup> Lee Martindale, interview by author, Richardson, Texas, 25 February 2006.

<sup>115</sup> Kasa, 88.

<sup>116</sup> Kasa, 91.

<sup>117</sup> Jesse McKinley, “Anime Fans Gather, Loudly and Proudly Obsessed,” *New York Times*, 3 September 2002, Sec. E, p. 1.

his friends were also members. The club was mainly science fiction based, but they also showed *Star Blazers* and *Devil Hunter Yohko* as standard fare.<sup>118</sup> As early as 1992, many adults and children had grown tired of the “feel-good, bad guy loses, good guy gets the girl” sort of fare that Disney and other US production companies had been putting out since the mid-1970's. Even allowing for the adult nature of the original Warner Brothers cartoons with their racist overtones and war-themed images of the 1940s and '50's, the cartoons of the '90's were intended for children and that was their main audience.<sup>119</sup> Anime has always been treated as adult fare in Japan and as a fully-developed dramatic medium from its beginnings in the 1920's with Ofuji Noburo's<sup>120</sup> *The Whale*.<sup>121</sup> Three out of the four major anime production studios in the States are fan-run operations: US Renditions, US Manga Corps, and AnimEigo. The fourth major house, Streamline, tends to distance itself from the fan base and decline to comment on their reasoning. Through unofficial channels, the 1991 Japanese release of *Silent Möbius* had pirated English-language dubs in the US within a month. This pirate, like others, was more about sharing an anime that one enjoyed than it was about making a profit.<sup>122</sup> Other examples of underground fan activity can be seen in the appearances of allusions to anime in mainstream science fiction series such as *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. One episode has a reference to a pair of planets called “Kei” and “Yuri.” These two girls are the notorious “Dirty Pair” who are as likely to destroy a planet as to save it in their attempts to get their assignment completed on time. Another episode has the faux mineral “sonodinite” which is an homage to manga artist Kenichi Sonada.<sup>123</sup> In the episode “The Measure of a Man,” we learn that the character Data, an android member of the crew, has parts called the “Nausicaa valve” and the “Totoro interface,” both of which

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<sup>118</sup> R. Scott Wilson, interview by author, Beaumont, Texas, 16 March 2006.

<sup>119</sup> Jeff Yang, “Anime Rising,” *The Village Voice*, 17 November 1992, 56.

<sup>120</sup> Japanese names traditionally begin with the patronymic, which is the reverse of the Western practice. In this paper, Japanese conventions are followed where appropriate. Some more recent artists prefer the Western formulation.

<sup>121</sup> Kasa, 37.

<sup>122</sup> Yang, 57.

<sup>123</sup> Yang, 60.

are the names of anime characters. In “Icarus Factor,” wall scrolls can be seen that spell out *Urusei Yatsura* in hiragana.<sup>124</sup> These are just a few of the hundreds of modern pop culture references to anime series and characters.

Miyazaki Hayao's work *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and *Spirited Away* (2001) received critical acclaim and won several Academy Awards.<sup>125</sup> These two movies were the highest-grossing productions ever to come from Japan. Further, the 1997 release of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* was an attempt to fix what the fans referred to as a “disastrous misinterpretation” that was done in 1984 when an edited version was released, without Miyazaki-san's blessing, as *Warriors of the Wind*. This former release was portrayed as a children's epic when in fact it was an ecological statement that also included messianic overtones and statements about human love and self-sacrifice. The original release was almost universally hated in fan circles, and it was their years of agitation that finally convinced Disney to buy the rights for a proper US release. This is the only example of a distribution company for anime that is not run by fans. Even the ones that distance themselves personally from fandom are run by fans.<sup>126</sup>

According to AD Vision, the largest of the American anime distributors, anime marketing is an oxymoron. The product mostly sells itself, “you just have to put up with rabid fans.” Their major staging ground is at cons, the second largest of which is Otakon, in Baltimore, Maryland, which sold out with over twenty-two thousand tickets in 2005. The largest con, Anime Expo in Anaheim, California, had more than thirty-three thousand attendees the same year. The magazine *Cosmo Girl* now ends each edition with a small shojo<sup>127</sup> comicstrip on the back cover.<sup>128</sup> AD Vision's total output annually is greater than Warner Brothers and Paramount Pictures combined. According to Jerry Chu,

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<sup>124</sup> Danny Nadel, “TNG In-Jokes,” <<http://pages.prodigy.net/thenadels/injokes.htm>> (4 March 2006).

<sup>125</sup> Kasa, 56.

<sup>126</sup> Kasa, 78.

<sup>127</sup> Shojo is manga, a comic book form from Japan, intended for young girls. They generally cover relationship and domestic issues.

<sup>128</sup> Daniel Roth, “It's...Profitmón!” *Fortune* 152, no. 12 (12 December 2005).

Marketing Manager for Bandai Entertainment, “Project: A-Kon is the roots of the genre's popularity, it's the core fans. The people who come to a convention like this, they're the trend-setters.”<sup>129</sup> A-Kon was the first con in the States, and is the longest-running one in the world. What the con attendees ask for and buy is what television stations broadcast and production companies prepare for distribution. All four of the major houses are represented at A-Kon, and many have survey questions that they hand out with their sales items. AD Vision reports that 90% of their wholesale market comes from direct sales at anime conventions. With that in mind, over forty percent of the US population is still unaware of either manga<sup>130</sup> or anime, much less the breadth and depth of the media and what they have to offer even the casual reader or viewer.<sup>131</sup> In all, the American anime industry generated just over \$6.7 billion for the Japanese economy in the fiscal year ending in June 2005.<sup>132</sup> Worldwide, anime generates over \$18 billion annually. Japan's economy makes more on anime than it does on any other single exported product, including steel and automobiles.<sup>133</sup> Using Google, one of several on-line search engines, I recently did a search using “anime convention” as the string. It returned over 2.24 million results. A similar search on “anime fandom” returned 545 thousand results.<sup>134</sup> Manga accounts for approximately forty percent of the Japanese domestic publication industry.<sup>135</sup> In one survey done in 2004 in the States, there were over 2.85 million respondents who self-identified as otaku. Businesses have come to realize just how powerful the otaku purchasing power is and have noted that less than one percent of the American population accounts for over eleven percent of all DVD purchases in terms of

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<sup>129</sup> Maurstad, 35.

<sup>130</sup> Manga has been called the “Japanese comic book” but is more properly called a “graphic novel.” Many anime started their lives as manga, such as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, and there are many examples of the reverse taking place as well.

<sup>131</sup> Bill Kelvin, “Girl Power Through Japanese Comics,” *Chico Enterprise-Record*, 26 October 2005.

<sup>132</sup> Ben McEachen, “Celebration of Japanese Cult Empire Which Generates \$6.7 BN,” *The Advertiser*, 16 July 2005, Sec. News, 38.

<sup>133</sup> Leonard, 4.

<sup>134</sup> Google <<http://www.google.com>> (1 March 2006).

<sup>135</sup> Kasa, 47.



real dollars. That group is American anime fandom.<sup>136</sup> The major difference between otaku and other fan groups, as seen from a business perspective, is that they tend to focus their buying power all in one area and tend to do it all at once. Lump sum purchases are far more beneficial to businesses in the long-run because they know that such a consumer will be back often, and will recommend the product to his friends.<sup>137</sup>

Conventions are also places for people to meet up with on-line friends, and to meet new ones in the flesh. The American anime community regularly provides seventy-three cons annually. Similarly there are ten major ones in Canada, and twenty-one listed in other countries around the world.<sup>138</sup> In any event, it is unwise to speak to a fan and call a convention “just a convention.” Such things tend to raise emotions to unexpected levels, and Ms. Davis has said that such references,

in some fashion discounts the work and the sweat and blood and tears that many many people have invested over the years. It seems too dismissive. For some it is more than 'just' this or that. It's where they met their mate, got a job, found a friend, got married, decided not to kill themselves (yes, we've (kon crew) seen that firsthand more than once and PHYSICALLY stopped it once) and if it (the event, the show, the place where people go) had not been there, the world would be lessened somehow. When we get physical letters and emails telling us of the 'good' that happened to them because they were there, or saying 'if it wasn't for the fact that I was at A-Kon...(fill in the blank with something unpleasant)', it's impossible for some of us to say 'oh it's just an anime show' - it's a gathering place for people who often feel displaced in their lives, and that's an important thing. Yes it's a venue for anime display, but it's way more than 'just an anime show' for some people. No, I'm not being pie in the sky, I'm aware that not-so-good things happen there as well - breakups, fights, personal dramas, claims of rape, people being ripped off (cars broken into) etc. But over the years it's been more good than bad, as far as permanent, meaningful affecting of people. If a human life is saved by the show being in existence, then it's more than 'just a show'.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Ken Kitabayashi, “The Otaku Group from a Business Perspective: Revaluation of Enthusiastic Consumers,” *NRI Papers*, no. 84 (1 December 2004), 2.

<sup>137</sup> Kitabayashi, 4.

<sup>138</sup> “2006 Conventions,” *A Fan's View of Anime Conventions* (<http://www.fansview.com/consked.htm>) (16 March 2006).

<sup>139</sup> Meri Davis, “2 Things,” 4 April 2006 <[staff-heads@a-kon.com](mailto:staff-heads@a-kon.com)> (4 April 2006).

In short, the con is a way of life for fans. It is inseparable from the very meaning of what fandom is. Their spirit of fellowship, community, and trust is what makes the fandom a family of choice.

No matter where you search for information on anime fandom, you will keep coming back to the idea of family, and what it means to belong to a group when you have always been an outsider. Maybe you have outlandishly dyed hair, or multiple piercings and tattoos, or you love a partner of the same sex, and so you feel marginalized or even hated by those around you. Anime fandom does not care one whit about your appearance or your beliefs. Be good to the fans and they will be good to you. They only care that you find something of value in their fandom, and thus in your own fandom, whether it is the art or the people or the gatherings or the traditions or the songs or the billion and one other things that are wonderful about fans; finding something that matters to you is what matters to fans. “What is it that YOU think is important?” That is the question old fen will ask the “newbies.” If you have not yet decided, they will help you figure it out. If you think you have it decided, they may change your mind or reinforce your opinions. Fandom has babysitters, calculus tutors, cookie recipes, and all-night vigils with loved ones. Fandom is a family of the truest, noblest, most blessed kind. It transcends time and place, and puts grandmothers on an even footing with stumbling youths. You belong because you choose to belong, not because of what society or religion might say. Fandom is a choice. I have yet to hear of anyone regretting making it. Fans will share their favorite arcane shows and giggle along with you as you just get the joke from a closing sequence twenty minutes after you left the theatre because they remember being in your shoes.

Through the course of my research, fans from all across the world have sent in stories, shared suggestions on shows to watch, emailed me articles, and even loaned me tapes and DVDs so I could see for myself what they loved most in anime. I have annoyed old friends and made new ones. People I have seen for years at cons but never spoken to contacted me and shared their life stories, their anecdotes, their matzah ball recipes, and their love of anime. My only regret in presenting this paper is

that I was unable to include the literal gigabytes of information that has come streaming into my email inbox in the past few months. More than mere information, those bytes and bits are people's lives, loves, and sorrows. Most of all, they are learning experiences; both for the senders and for me. Too often, scholars are tempted to distance themselves from their human subjects, or even to examine them obliquely and through secondary foci. In studying fandom I was studying myself. I too was asked what I hold dear. Not in so many words, but the curiosity was always there. If anything, it was curiosity on my own behalf, hoping that I will eventually know what I hold close to my heart and truly appreciate it for what it is.

Such a study can never be completed. Fandom is too vast, too complex, and always growing more so. Knowing that I will fail in my ultimate goal of understanding fandom, I can rest assured in the knowledge that I have gleaned some insight into a small part of it, and thus have added my own little contribution to the fannish universe. This paper is my *mono no aware*. Knowing I will fail, I still know that I must try. The goals I stated in the first few pages are vain hopes, and I knew it when I wrote the words. The process of going from being a non-fan to a fan is its own end, if such a thing can be said to have one. It is the process itself that matters. It is sometimes slow, sometimes immediate, but it is always a glorious awakening into what it means to be a fan, and not giving a damn what anyone else thinks. Especially the other fans.

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