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## An Introduction to Otaku Movement

### Introduction: Pure Immanence

In his discussion of the transnational movement of *Pokémon*, Joseph Tobin signals that “official” networks, that is, corporate-planned and corporate-directed processes of “glocalization,” were only part of its success. He mentions the importance of “unofficial consumption networks”—“just months after the television series was first aired in Japan, pirated versions were being sold and otherwise exchanged hand to hand, by mail, and over the Internet by *anime otaku* (Japanese animation fans) in various locations outside Japan.”<sup>1</sup> In other accounts of the diffusion of Japanese animation, one finds reference to unofficial networks and pirate editions, which come prior to the corporate regulation of markets, product distribution and profits. In her discussion of the development of a market for *Doraemon*

activity of so-called otaku, seems to precede the corporate regulation, standardisation and homogenisation of the market. On the one hand, this “otaku movement” of anime images seems to spur or facilitate the emergence of official markets. Tobin argues, for instance, that “these informal and in some instances illegal routes of introducing *Pokémon* and other Japanese cultural products abroad did more to facilitate than to interfere with Nintendo’s global marketing mission.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, on the other hand, otaku seem to remain somehow autonomous of the official markets and corporate regulation. Tobin also suggests that “otaku are too loyal and too satisfied to suit the pace of contemporary capitalist corporations that depend on consumer restlessness, boredom, and disappointment.”<sup>5</sup>

entirely. Something of labour's power always exceeds the grasp of abstract labour. Thus, for Hardt and Negri, labour is one way to think of the "constituent power" of pure immanence, an uncontainable power, infinitely protean and continually creative.<sup>7</sup> Constituent power ontologically precedes and exceeds constitutive power—for it is pure immanence.

Interestingly enough, discussions of anime and otaku in Japan in the 1990s began to emphasise something like pure immanence, precisely at the time when anime became quite prominent in the global market. Attracted to the commercial ascent of anime, commentators started to write of the powers of anime and otaku, with an emphasis on the ways in which these broke with prior modes of organisation, production, reception, and distribution—socially, historically, and aesthetically. Anime and otaku became indicators of something radically new and different, and many commentators gravitated to explanations that evoked something like pure immanence. In many ways, speculations about Super Flat art provided the definitive statement about radical immanence in the context of the anime image.

In 2000, artist Murakami Takashi organised an exhibition entitled *Superflat* in Shibuya, Tokyo, in which he explored traits common to traditional Japanese arts and contemporary arts such as manga and anime. In this exhibition, Murakami played with what he sees as a "very typically Japanese engagement with the visual sense that wants resolutely to remain planar."<sup>8</sup> In particular he called attention to a tendency toward two-dimensionality in Japanese art, animation, graphic design and fashion, which flatness he traced back to certain Japanese artists of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that is the early modern or Edo period. In the book *Superflat* published in



otaku, which in turn opens up possibilities for critical thinking. It may not offer a theory of immanence for anime and otaku but it points in that direction.

### **The Gainax Discourse**

Certain statements about anime in Japan show a surprising degree of regularity. I have already suggested that the works of Okada Toshio, founder of Gainax Studios and promoter of otaku culture, constitute one site of formation of a discourse on anime and otaku, together with the works of Gainax Studios, especially the animated series and films of Anno Hideaki. The success of Gainax began with an animated film *Ooritsu ūchūgun Oneamise no tsubasa* (*Wings of Honneamise*, 1987), followed by two series directed by Anno, *Toppu wo nerae!* (*Gunbuster*, 1988) and *Fushigi na umi no Nadia* (*Nadia: the Secret of Blue Waters*, 1990). These anime prepared the way for *Otaku no video*, a two-part OVA (Original Video Animation). This “mockumentary” of otaku and the foundation of Gainax Studios will be discussed in greater detail subsequently, as will the series often deemed the culmination of Gainax’s success: Anno’s *Shin seiki Evangerion* (*Neon Genesis Evangelion*, 1995).

Somewhat idiosyncratically, but for reasons that I hope to make clear, I also include in the Gainax discourse the “Super Flat” concept of artist Murakami Takashi and the discussions with cultural theorist Azuma Hiroki. Azuma Hiroki’s major publications begin with a rethinking of Derrida in relation to Japanese popular culture: *Sonzaiteki, yubinteki: Jacques Derrida ni tsuite* (*Ontological, Postal: On Jacques Derrida*, 1998). Azuma further established the basis for his thinking about anime and otaku in *Fukashina mono no sekai* (*On Overvisualized World*, 2000) and *Dôubutsuka suru posutomodan:*

*otaku kara mita Nihon shakai* (*Animalising Postmodern: Otaku and Postmodern Japanese Society*, 2001). His contribution to the catalogue for Murakami Takashi's *Superflat* exhibition makes important connections between Murakami's art and his theories.

Despite some obvious differences in emphasis, Murakami and Azuma show a common understanding of what anime is, and how it works—much of it consonant with Okada and Gainax, and sometimes clearly derivative from them. Generally, the theoretical emphasis of Azuma's work draws out many of the implications of what I call the "Gainax discourse." The regularity of such statements about anime and otaku is such that one might even speak of a "discourse" on anime in the Foucauldian sense, insofar as such statements do seem to imply some relation to the institutional regulation of anime entertainment.<sup>10</sup> My goal, however, is not to trace the origins of the Gainax discourse on anime and otaku. Nor is a full treatment of the ways in which these discussions connect to other discourses in Japan within the scope of this paper. What interests me about these different discussions of anime is the emergence of a common sense of how the anime image works, particularly in relation to the formation of a specific kind of cult fan, the otaku. Central to this discourse is the identification of a "distributive visual function," a sort of constituent power of anime as a visual field. But let me begin by sketching some ideas about anime common to Azuma Hiroki, Murakami Takashi, Okada Toshio and Anno Hideaki.

First, these discussions share a sense of the genealogy of anime. They try to define anime in a narrower sense, locating its origins in the Japanese styles of limited

adaptation of his manga series to television. It was only in the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, that various transformations of the limited animation style established the distinctive look and feel of anime, with such television series as *Uchû senkan Yamato* (*Space Battleship Yamato*, 1974), *Ginga tetsudô 999* (*Galaxy Express 999*, 1979), *Kidô senshi Gandamu* (*Mobile Suit Gundam*, 1979) and

of the end of narrative. Indeed, in *Animalising Postmodern*, Azuma introduces a general opposition between narrative and database structures. Apparently, the Gainax discourse feels it necessary to eschew history and narrative because it conflates history with grand teleological narratives of modernity. Ironically, however, when these commentators make historical statements, they refer largely to the progressive emergence of new technologies—from television to VCR to computer. History returns as media history, but in its grandest form: linear evolution.

It is for such reasons that I see these discussions more as discourse than theory. Their theoretical paradigms appear less to address fundamental questions than to define a historical moment, promote a set of objects, or establish an identity. Nonetheless this discourse identifies something of theoretical interest—a distributive function at the heart of anime aesthetics and otaku culture, which functions as a constituent power. This distributive function is defined primarily



information, rather than reading a story (whence perhaps Azuma's thoughts about the end of narrative structures and the rise of database structures). In effect, what was peripheral becomes central; or rather there is a breakdown in the visual ordering of central and peripheral that results in a non-hierarchical visual field of information. Azuma identifies something analogous with his concepts of an "over-visualized world" or "database structure." In their attention to the dense, non-hierarchical visual space, Okada and Azuma discover (and invent) what might be called a distributive function, much like that evoked in theories of emergent properties.

Theories of emergence look at the emergence of patterns from a simple, almost minimal network of elements interconnected in a distributive fashion, based on the self-organising capacities implicit in the system.<sup>14</sup> While there is no unified formal theory of emergent properties, observation and experimentation suggest that it is difficult for any densely connected aggregate to escape emergent properties. Internal coherences arise that are not predictable on the basis of the elements. What happens is a function of what all the components are doing; yet the global coherence does not resemble the elements. A pattern emerges. One might also think of this self-organising capacity in terms of constituent power: it is possible to quantify, organise, or otherwise work with patterns, but there is a heteronomous and autonomous power that eludes, exceeds or escapes rationalisation. This is also a cooperative system insofar as thaoecat6ct, at

emerges a pattern or patterns. Yet the pattern is not predictable on the basis of the elements. It is in its discussions of the otaku that the Gainax discourse introduces something like the cooperative system. In other words, the distributive function implicit in the idea of a non-hierarchical visual field does not only allow for emergent visual coherence. It also suggests a cooperative system, which is the third shared concern of this discourse.

Third then, related to this breakdown of visual hierarchies is a sense of a breakdown of the hierarchy of producers. In his superflat lineage of (primarily) Japanese art, for instance, Murakami Takashi singles out scenes from *Ginga tetsudô 999* (the movies) by animator/designer Kanada Yoshinori.<sup>15</sup> He thus calls attention to art production that might seem peripheral or marginal to the import of the series. But there are no peripheral producers in this non-hierarchical visual field. The Gainax discourse insists on the fact that “true” anime viewers (otaku) devote as much attention to the work of character designers and animators as to directors, producers or writers. Okada argues, for instance, that anime series are the work of many different creators, and so there is no single story. This follows from Okada’s discussion of the otaku fan’s attention to inconsistencies as a new aesthetic and new form of reception—what might appear as stylistic inconsistency to non-ot

founders, they are so active in consumption that consumption becomes akin to production—as if fans had become co-producers or co-operators. This cooperative system seems to emerge unpredictably as a result of internal coherence arising from the dense packing of information elements. Consequently, the otaku co-operator “works” in an extended field of activity that is more like a theatre of operations than a site of production. But what kind of cooperation is this? The discourse on anime tends to characterise the fan’s reception as an ineluctable and obsessive cooperation with the anime world. Is it possible to think about difference, distance or conflict within this discourse? Or does it merely re-invent the “old” ideologies of Japan as a harmonious, cooperative society, that is, Japan Inc.?

To address such questions, one confronts the problem of the subject, which is a fifth topic on which these different commentators tend to agree. Basically, they all see a radical break with definable subject positions. The distributive function of the anime visually entails a non-perspectival field that prevents the formation of viewing positions and therefore forecloses a manageable or controlled relation to the visual field. In other words, the distributive visual field involves a breakdown in perceptual distance, which results in a purely affective relation to the image.<sup>16</sup> Anime breaks out of its television frame, and the distance between viewer and image collapses into a moment of affect. Characteristically, it breaks its frame into an expanded immersive anime world centred on anime figures—in the form of “cosplay” (costume play, that is, dressing as anime characters) or model kits of anime characters that fans can mould or assemble themselves, with personal touches. Morikawa Kaiichirô suggests that the anime first colonises personal space. The bedroom or the studio apartment becomes a shrine to

certain anime series and characters. Then the private room begins to permeate the city with its tastes or *shûmi*. The result is the “personapolis,” which continues to break down prior spatial and urban hierarchies, making the cityscape into a visual field of unprecedented density.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the entire city becomes a distributive field of visual information, and the end of definable subject positions results in a mass subject based on what appears to be massist aesthetics.

In sum, what I call the Gainax discourse discovers a distributive function at work in the anime image, which it uses to speak of the end of all manner of received hierarchies or organisations—such as historical relations, organisation of labour in anime production, and producer/consumer hierarchies. Somewhat predictably, it remains perplexed and ambivalent about sexual hierarchies, with its passively passionate male fans and potent girl images. The Gainax discourse does not announce the end of heterosexuality. It does, however, insist on its perversion. I will return to this, for it is in perversion that a historical relation appears, in fantastical form. Suffice it to say at this juncture, the Gainax discourse evokes the distributive visual field of anime to make claims for the end of all hierarchies—those of history, of modernity, and of the subject. Its discovery of a non-hierarchical visual field implies a theory of emergence. But in the absence of a theorisation of emergence, this discourse sees a cooperative system, which becomes a space without conflict or difference. Thus the Gainax discourse verges on a fascist ideology of massist (non)organization. Insofar as it limits its claims to a subculture (otaku), however, it is more like what Deleuze and Guattari call “microfascism.”<sup>18</sup> Consequently, the otaku difference becomes crucial. Are these otaku truly a subculture, or are they the mainstream? For it is only insofar as otaku differ from the mainstream or

from Japan that one can detect in the Gainax discourse a movement of difference within Japan. Otherwise, the discourse on anime simply becomes a discourse on the nation, and the Gainax discourse might inspire an especially potent brand of nationalism.

This is surely why the Gainax discourse not only evokes the subculture status of otaku but also insists on the detachment of the otaku—his distance and thus his difference from the mainstream as well as other otaku and even from his objects. The term otaku itself derives from a form of address with connotations of detachment and isolation: “you” as “your residence.” To refer to someone as “your residence” implies a distanced, highly formalised relation. To be otaku thus implies formal, potentially empty relations. Thus, while the collapse of visual and social hierarchies imparts a sense of the unbearable proximity of the image (pure affect without perceptual distances, relations and positions), the anime image is also construed, rather paradoxically, as a new kind of distance. Okada Toshio and Ootsuka Eiji stress the discernment of the otaku, for instance. As a connoisseur of distributive fields without centre or periphery, the otaku commands specific, highly refined visual skills. They see parallels between otaku and Buddhist-inflected notions of expenditure associated with the “floating world” of early modern urban life—the world of discerning players.<sup>19</sup> Or, with a nod to Kojève, Azuma has extended his thoughts on this world in the direction of posthistorical snobbery—a detached discrimination that separates man from his barbaric materialistic relations—the animalising postmodern. Discernment and snobbery are two ways of sustaining some sense of difference within the discourse on anime and otaku—some sense of the autonomy of otaku from Japanese mass culture in general.



otaking. Should one read his heartfelt defence of the otaku as facetious, as tongue in cheek? With his “otakuology,” Okada has fashioned a sort of “play discipline” or “disciplinary play,” which oscillates between a disciplinisation of knowledge about anime and otaku, and an anti-disciplinary conceit.

Okada penned the script for the two-part OVA series entitled *Otaku no Video 1982 & 1985* (same title in English), which Gainax released in 1992. One of the first concerted efforts to portray and evaluate the otaku, *Otaku no Video* not only presents Okada’s angle on the otaku but also establishes the lineage of animation to which Gainax Studios become the legitimate heir.

is, in effect, Okada’s foundation story about Gainax as the brainchild of anime otaku. It alternates between animation and “mockumentary.” Animated segments tell the story of two friends whose passion for anime leads them to

the story of the foundation of Gainax Studios, but told in a fantastical form. While it spins a yarn about the triumph of youthful passion, it is full of references that construct a space of knowledge, one that apparently demands great efforts to master.

A series of mockumentary interviews called “portraits of an otaku” alternate with the animated story. In these portraits, *Otaku no Video* presents a series of different sorts of otaku who became obsessed with anime in different ways and at different times of their life. A respectably ordinary businessman tells of his passion in college for *dôjinshi* (fan-authored manga, sometimes translated as “fanzines,” which introduce new stories involving established characters or entirely new characters and stories). The businessman sees his otaku days in retrospect as the best time of his life. Other otaku are obsessed with pornography, with weapons, garage kits, games, collecting, or piracy. There is even an American fan obsessed with Japan as the land of anime. In other words, the otaku is not a unitary type that can be defined on the basis of any action or belief other than obsession with anime. All are men, and there is a general homosocial bias (to which I will return), but theirs is such an unqualified masculinity that it appears pathetic—in both senses of the term in English. They are passionate and helpless. Their passion makes them helpless, for it subjects them to anime, body and soul; and the emphasis on youthful passion or youthfulness serves to highlight a childlike subjection to the anime image.

Crucial is the move to transform discipline into self-cultivation. *Otaku no video* strives to move away from disciplinary formations and subjection toward cultivation of the self. The animated storra991; Tw.39 0 TD0(r)v24 0 TD-0.0001 Tc0.0091 Tc[(str-10(anref7.6(9)2.7(r)4(.).



otaku demands not only great effort but also supreme discipline. As it constructs a space of knowledge, this otakuology verges on a disciplinary formation, which implies subjection. Yet, as the nostalgia of the businessman for his school days as an otaku suggests, otaku work is not like school or the corporation. There is, in other words, a strategy of refusal—a resistance to labour organised in received ways. Is otaku work an alternative space of work and knowledge production that resists modern, disciplinary society? Or is it a desire for a postmodernised society in which otaku skills would reign supreme—a desire to succeed in what Deleuze calls the “society of control” in which disciplinary boundaries give way to constant learning and endlessly transforming subjects?<sup>21</sup>

*Otaku no video* stages the tension between two modes of otaku production. On the one hand, with their emphasis on other kinds of networks mediated through new technologies, otaku activities seem to refuse received ways of organising and quantifying labour power. In fact, otaku activities are exceeding difficult to discuss sociologically and quantitatively. It is easier to track corporate strategies and markets. Otaku movement is very difficult to define and discuss because its boundaries are fluid and porous.

Apparently, it occurs everywhere there is anime, but how does one draw the line between anime viewers and otaku? The difference between an anime viewer and an anime otaku is one of intensity and duration—a level of interest, a degree of engagement, or a quality of passion. Such differences resist quantification. In this respect, the work done by otaku cannot ever be thoroughly mastered, commercially or intellectgh sugge(f)]004 Tc0.76

Mario Tronti calls a “strategy of refusal.”<sup>22</sup> The non-quantifiable work of otaku poses a challenge to received organisations of labour. When faced with their inability to direct or harness otaku movement, corporations call it theft or piracy.

On the other hand, the kinds of work associated with otaku seem already subject to constitutive power in the workplace. Collecting, exchanging, translating manga and anime, which commonly entails downloading, posting, converting files—aren’t these sorts of activities already codified in the workplace, as a form of communicative labour? In this respect, otaku movement appears as part of a general postmodernisation of society, as part of those transformations in the labour process that have been discussed in such terms as post-Fordism, flexible accumulation or cultural economy. “Essentially,” to quote John Kraniauskas, such changes in processes of production “involve the technological harnessing of the superstructure by the economic base, a ‘cultural turn’ in production putting entertainment, the symbols

modern disciplinisation everywhere). It also gives the impression that this is not disciplinisation. Rather, their work as otaku allows these men to know and cultivate themselves. There is, for instance, the self-conscious tone of the otaku telling their stories. They apparently understand their innermost mechanisms of desire. They may not be able to resist the lure of anime. They cannot prevent their enslavement to its buxom, potent girl figures. But they see this passion lucidly, knowingly, and almost rationally. In other words, in *Otaku no Video*, anime appears, on the one hand, as a subjective technology—literally associated with the most recent technologies of vision—that constructs subject positions. Yet, on the other hand, *Otaku no Video* evokes a space of play, in which the subjection to new technologies affords what Foucault called techniques of the self or a care of the self.<sup>24</sup>

In the animated story of *Otaku no Video*, techniques of self-cultivation often take the form of an overcoming. Self-cultivation appears as a way of transcending disciplinary formations via play. For instance, the ultimate triumph of Kubo and Tanaka with the foundation of their anime studio reinforces the idea that, if one is true to one's youthful passions, one will finally succeed. Young fa

simplistically in either of these possibilities. Its bid for a space of play that is not automatically recuperable as ideology or discipline also suggests a refusal of work, and evokes the power of labour.

In this respect, the emphasis in the Gainax discourse on image and information over narrative provides a useful lead. After all, the experience of watching *Otaku no video* is not only that of the narrative of commercial triumph. It is equally an experience of information—the charts, graphs, and interviews. At the level of information, *Otaku no video* strives to transform communicative labour into constituent power. While the otaku's work with various visual and information technologies might well mesh with new modes of rationalisation of the workplace, *Otaku no video* presents this communicative labour as borderless and uncontainable. This labour is communicative, much as a disease is communicable—it spreads incessantly, relentlessly, without regard for hierarchies, like an airborne retrovirus; or like laughter.<sup>25</sup> Thus *Otaku no video* presents the work of otaku as a constituent power, as labour *power*. And the question posed earlier returns anew: what is the difference between an otaku

create zones of autonomy within consumerism? Can you escape capitalism from within, by practising it differently? Or is this sense of autonomy precisely the oldest trick in the book, simply manufacturing more active forms of enslavement to the commodity? How can submission to the anime image, however self-abusively aware, enable the construction of autonomous self? Isn't this just the illusion of autonomy, the ultimate reification of freedom?

These are, needless to say, problems that Adorno transmitted to fan culture analysis. When, as early as 1938, Adorno speaks of the fetishism of music, for instance, its "counterpart" is a regression in listening. And he remarks,

If indeed individuals today no longer belong to themselves, then that also means that they can no longer be "influenced." The opposing points of production and consumption are at any given time closely co-ordinated, but not dependent on each other in isolation. Their mediation itself does not in any case escape theoretical conjecture.<sup>26</sup>

Adorno gives us an image of listeners who may well be wise to the close coordination of production and consumption but who do not for all that belong to themselves. Fan knowledge may be copious, even voluminous, yet remains regressive and unenlightened for Adorno. Famously, Adorno's perspective on the culture industry comes of his engagement with what might be dubbed high modernism. Yet even high modernism does not afford a truly autonomous realm of knowledge for Adorno. It is in its way as reified as mass culture. Consequently, the relation between mass culture and high modernism does not afford a simple ethical decision—to choose high culture over mass culture. Ultimately, their relation does not allow for dialectical movement but only for stultifying contradiction—a world moving at once forward and backward, at once avant-garde and

regressive, a world full of activities and cultural movement but effectively at a standstill. Is this what otaku movement does?

Fan culture analysis has taken issue with Adorno's recourse to high modernism (his elitism) and with his sense of the passivity of the receiver of mass culture. In contrast, fan culture analysis has proposed to follow fandom closely and seriously, to explore the activity of fans, without what is seen as Adorno's bias against mass culture. Crucial to this shift are fans like the otaku—so-called cult fans. Matt Hills, for instance, distinguishes between fandom and cult fandom: while fandom and cult fandom appear to overlap, cult fandom does seem to imply an identity that is at least partially distinct from the general fan—which is to say, not all viewers who like a certain TV series become cult fans of it. Hills suggests that this distinction between fans and cult fans “relates not to the intensity, social organization or semiotic/material productivity of the fandom concerned, but rather to its duration, especially in the absence of ‘new’ or official material in the originating medium.”<sup>27</sup> Which is to say, cult fandom perseveres in the absence of official production. If the cult fan demonstrates a kind of autonomy, it is because the cult fan's activity continues independently of the industry rather than simply following it actively. Hills' work is indicative of a turn in fan culture analysis that looks to the ways in which the cult fan becomes akin to a producer of culture and thus somewhat autonomous of official production—of the culture industry, as it were.

As a cult fan film about cult fans (otaku), *Otaku no Video* poses the question of autonomy within consumerism in a new way. Naturally, as a cult fan film about cult fans, it does risk the self-referential reification, even as it claims to transform the consumer into a co-producer of culture. Yet *Otaku no Video* raises the intensity (and duration) of



If Kubo and Tanaka succeed, it is because of their youthful passion for anime—which may happen to any man at any age anywhere. Their triumph provides one positive image of difference. Nonetheless, as the stark visual difference between the mockumentary and animated segments suggests, these two kinds of self-differentiation remain in dialectical tension—one cannot overcome the other, but neither can one work without the other.

The dialectical tension in *Otaku no Video* becomes condensed into the problems of autoeroticism and fetishism. Its emphasis on play over disciplinary knowledge enables self-cultivation, but this way of knowing one's



force—autonomous of women. Yet images of women remain essential to the fantasy of masculine autonomy.

In sum, in playing with himself, in distancing himself from actual women, the otaku apparently refuses certain forms of disciplinisation and rationalisation—especially that of the corporate man and the nuclear family. Thus the otaku strives toward a new kind of man. Yet insofar as the otaku's images of women are palatable to the corporate man (and may historically derive from the corporate culture), the otaku does not necessarily present a radical break from received socio-sexual formations (the homosocial workplace, normative heterosexuality, and the sex industry, for instance). Rather, otakuology perversely re-inscribes received gender roles. In other words, the dialectical tension implicit in the otaku's negative and positive self-differentiation does not result in a stultifying contraction. It moves. Its movement is that of perversion.

Perversion is an especially difficult form of movement to assess, in its difference from regression and progression, or from subversion and inversion. Of course, as movement, it creates zones of autonomy, yet it is not obvious that one can track and bound these zones. Surely, to those who would see this otaku perversion purely as a Japanese phenomenon, due to the allegedly rigid or authoritarian structures of Japanese society that foreclose self-expression, I must add that otakudom is not purely Japanese. The popularity of anime, and the current internet boom in *hentai anime* (or perverse animation), serves as a reminder that this is a transnational rather than a national movement, whose origins cannot be attributed to an isolated, self-identical Japan. Otaku perversion originates in a transnational Japan; that is, a nation already in relation to the world, internally and externally.

### **Coda: Transnational Movement**

By way of conclusion, let me summarise the points that I have made thus far about the Gainax discourse's imagination of otaku movement. I will lay it out stepwise, but with the understanding that all these things happen in concert.

The theoretical stuff of the Gainax discourse lies in the idea of a distributive visual field—a non-hierarchical field layered with dense interconnections. The distributive field is a purely a-subjective formation immanent in the anime image, which is associated with new media and new technologies. Murakami calls it superflat (or Super Flat), and Azuma refers to an overvisualised world and data structures, while Okada describes it in terms of an attention to peripheral details that undermines the hierarchy of centre and periphery in the visual field. As a moment (and then an experience) of pure immanence, the distributive field promises to break prior hierarchies, identities and organisations, and to open new possibilities. At this level, the distributive is but a promise of movement—a material capture of something that opens into the future (an experience without a subject).

At the next level, the Gainax discourse deals with the emergence of patterns from the distributive visual field. Here it presents two figures—the otaku (co-operator) and the anime girl image (attractor). It tries to avoid transforming the constituent power of this radical visual immanence into a constitutive power—into a new identity, a new order, or a discourse. At this level, the Gainax discourse continues to evoke the immanence of the distributive field to challenge received norms for socio-sexual development. In particular, it strives to locate itself at a site of constituent power in relation of knowledge production



overcoming. I am thinking especially of Azuma Hiroki's idea of anime otaku as posthistorical.

A theory of emergence should spur thinking about how something new (say, the

supposedly naïve gaze by means of which American otaku stare back at Japan, fascinated by its authenticity. Thus Okada stresses how proud American otaku are to be otaku—re-inventing what it means to be an otaku. Okada discovers an origin that Japan has lost but may perceive in the foreigner’s enthusiasm for Japan. “Looking at them,” Okada concludes, “reminded me of how I was once infatuated with the United States of America, land of ‘freedom,’ ‘science,’ ‘democracy.’”<sup>29</sup> In sum, the enthusiastic gaze of American otaku confirms the identity and authenticity of Japanese otaku.

Zizek’s point is to show how a national identity appears to come out of nowhere. An identity emerges from an imagined threat to, or an imagined loss of, something that never was. The threat of loss gives that past an aura of reality. This is precisely what Okada does. He follows a well-established pattern of complicity between Western Orientalism and Japanese auto-orientalism. The Western Orientalist gaze thus becomes a source of self-identity for the non-Western position, which is made subject in its relation to that gaze.<sup>30</sup> Yet isn’t this precisely what the distributive field challenges? The distributive field, devoid of perspective and hierarchy, should not allow for the establishment of positional identity on the basis of the gaze. In fact, in his discussion of the art of Murakami Takashi, Azuma works with Derrida’s critique of the Lacanian gaze. The proliferating, multiplying eyes and surfaces in Murakami’s art objects suggest to Azuma an actualised state of deconstruction. Murakami’s anime-inspired series of figures such as those devoted to his invented anime-like character dubbed “D.O.B.” do not use perspective, visual ordering or visual hierarchisation—this distributive visual field undermines any recourse to stable viewing positions. So why should the gaze return at another level?

Part of the problem is that Azuma sees in Murakami's art and in anime the arrival of the postmodern—via a complete rupture with the modern Western gaze. Unfortunately, by establishing such a historical and geopolitical rupture, Azuma recuperates the very gaze that he wishes to challenge.<sup>31</sup> Thus he speaks comfortably in terms that establish Japanese identity. Similarly, Murakami has recently begun to speak of his art to date as not really Japanese. He claims to have invented this new superflat lineage within Japanese art for the purposes of international recognition, which would allow him to return to Japan to pursue his real interests. Not only does he claim to manipulate the Western gaze but also he suggests that it is only possible to do so by recourse to something authentic. Thus the re-invention of anime becomes a re-invention of Japaneseness. Indeed, by the late 1990s, there were signs of a nostalgia movement in the anime industry—remakes of classic series such as *Astro Boy*, *Galaxy Express 999* and others, precisely those that the Gainax discourse sees as central to the definition of anime—in conjunction with the establishment of anime as national culture.

A similar movement is afoot in North America, in the academy. The field of Japan Studies has become enthralled with its new object, anime, which promises to refresh the study of Japan.<sup>32</sup> Anime draws students into the classroom in great numbers, where (ideally) the professor would then teach them about Japan society and history—via anime. Moreover, many of the introductory books on anime read it in terms of national identity or national allegory. In the words of one author, “anime is, after all, Japan talking directly to itself, reinforcing its cultural myths and preferred modes of behaviour.”<sup>33</sup> Another commentator establishes that “the ‘culture’ to which anime belongs is at present a ‘popular’ or ‘mass’ culture in Japan, and in America it exists as a ‘sub’ culture.”<sup>34</sup> In









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### Acknowledgements

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Tobin, "Conclusion: the Rise and Fall of the Pokémon Empire," in Joseph Tobin, ed., *Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 269.

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observation. Exploration of such a discursive construction would surely have to address the regulations of the internet in relation to prior attempts to police circulation.

<sup>11</sup> Murakami Takashi, *Superflat* (Tokyo: MADRA, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> The lineage of *dôjinshi* or amateur manga artists, whose works are most visible at the yearly Comiket (comic market), is crucial to the definition of the anime image. It was the work of women artists writing girls' manga that caught the attention of many a budding otaku—laying the basis for the Lolita complex (*rorikon*) manga for men, whose images intersect with the model kits and anime heroines more generally.

<sup>13</sup> The question of movement within the image (internal montage or the multiplanar image) seems to me particularly important, especially in relation to narrative movement. I have discussed this in “From animation to anime” (*Japan Forum* 14.2, 2002). The turn to distributive image in these commentators at once raises and ignores the issue of movement within the image. For they tend to ignore the relation of movement within the image to the movement between images, and thus to narrative. Azuma, for instance, opposes “narrative” to “database.” Yet what is needed is a better approach to narrative. In this context, perversion emerges as a quasi-narrative movement by default.

<sup>14</sup> Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 86-96. The discussion in this book is especially appropriate insofar as Varela *et al.* wish to present an alternative way of thinking the self, as an emergent property, and in relation to Buddhism.

<sup>15</sup> In addition to his work on the *Galaxy Express 999* movies, Kanada Yoshinori worked as key animation supervisor for a number of Miyazaki Hayao's films: *Tenkû shiro no Raputa* (Castle in the Sky, 1986), *Majo no takkûbin* (1989), *Tonari no Totoro* (1988), and *Mononoke hime* (1997), as well as the *Fushigi yûgi* TV series (1975). It is interesting to consider how Kanada, the paradigm of anime aesthetics for Murakami and others, impacts such allegedly non-anime films as Miyazaki's.

<sup>16</sup> As a moment of pure affect, this collapse in distance between viewer and image recalls discussions of the close-up in film theory of the 1910s and 1920s. Indeed, discussions of anime as new media often echo or repeat discussions of cinema as new media. At stake is grappling with the relation between new material

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<sup>20</sup> The liner notes to the English video release (available on line) do a fine job tracing the references, imparting a good sense of this information-dense field.

<sup>21</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies," in *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York:

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Japanese Postmodernity” at [http://www.hirokiazuma.com/en/texts/superflat\\_en2.html](http://www.hirokiazuma.com/en/texts/superflat_en2.html). Nonetheless, this hybrid postmodern field acts in a unified manner, such that he can also speak of “otaku nationalism.” Again, the problem seems to derive from his tendency to posit a historical and geopolitical break, which is then negotiated (or disavowed) through statements about hybridity and impurity.

<sup>32</sup> When I presented an earlier version of this essay, Brett de Bary spoke persuasively of this use of anime to renew Japan area studies, which led me to rethink the fascination of Japan Studies for anime.

<sup>33</sup> Patrick Drazen, *Anime Explosion: The What? Why? and Wow! of Japanese Animation* (Berkeley, CA: