A Phenomenology of Americans and Anime: How Tropes Predict Experience

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Many American viewers "don't get," or feel uncomfortable with, anime. This is because of cultural differences between Americans and Japanese, which are demonstrated in their cultural product and manifest in a distinctly different phenomenological perception of anime by Westerners than by Japanese. Many Americans balk at anime because the viewer must cede control to the experience of the anime and accept the use of foreign tropes. Part of feeling in control of an experience is the ability of the experiencer to successfully predict certain aspects of the experience. Many anime are designed to withhold or even wrest the concept of control from the viewer, deliberately keeping the viewer in the dark. Moreover, the main characters are often out of control themselves and experiencing phenomena at the same time as the viewer. In American animation, the viewer is generally able to step back and be an observer, but in anime the viewer is instantiated in the phenomenon well into, and often throughout, the narrative. The viewer remains uncomfortable, often until near the end of the narrative, and is then allowed to experience catharsis, as opposed to merely witnessing the kind of resolution that occurs in most mainstream American animation. Indeed, anime viewers are often left without a resolution at all at the end of a film or series, left to seek catharsis through discussion, analysis, and even fan fiction that allows the viewer to create his/her own resolution/cathartic experience.

The Japanese culture embraces acceptance of ambiguity, or *aimai*, so the phenomenology of anime is different for Americans and Japanese—unless one becomes versed in the Japanese way of thinking. Kenzaburo Oe, in his 1994 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, talks about "the linguistic impossibility of telling the truth" that has imbued Japanese thought since – and perhaps before – the days of medieval Zen Buddhist monks. It is a tradition that, Oe claims, has resulted in the fact that "Japan cannot but be ambivalent" and also owes a great deal to Japan's modernization and post-WWII occupation. He calls Japan "a peripheral, marginal, off-center country" and sees himself as a mirror for his country at the same time that he tries through his

work to integrate that ambiguity.

Roland Barthes expresses the idea a little bit differently than Oe does. Barthes sees Japanese as a language that "articulates impressions, not affidavits" (7), leaving the interpretation of what is articulated to the person on the receiving end of the communication rather than up to the communicator. Journalist Andrew Hammond suggests that *aimai* is "hardwired into the nature of the Japanese people," manifesting most obviously when they gather in groups, although he also claims that the internet, along with globalization, is influencing young Japanese people to be more direct in their communication.

Such ambiguity and beating around the bush may seem worthless to the Western eye, but the Japanese have a very different take on it. They feel that "to express oneself distinctly carries the assumption that one's partner knows nothing" (Hammond), so clear expression can be considered impolite. McKinley suggests that Japanese writers are influenced by *aimai* and *haragei* and that these concepts are integral to the Japanese way of life. *Haragei*—literally the practice of coming from the gut—refers to "a visceral communication among Japanese" that bypasses Western logic (Matsumoto 18). Davies and Ikeno note that *haragei* is often used "as a kind of social lubricating oil to avoid arguments (103) and that it "leaves the speaker dependent on the sensitivity of the listener to 'read between the lines' in order to catch the real meaning of the message in conversation" (104).

One way that *haragei* practice in daily Japanese life manifests itself is in the average person's acceptance of long silences in conversation, something that makes most Westerners extremely uncomfortable. Matsumoto points out that "Western conversationalists listen to the words between the pauses, whereas Japanese *haragei* practitioners listen more attentively to the pauses between the words and gestures" (51). These practices encourage "the target party to inductively draw its own conclusions based on the context of the situation" (McKinley 198). Hinds refers to this convention using Noor's term "reader-responsible rhetoric," implying that the job of interpretation falls to the reader/viewer (qtd. in McKinley 199). However this depends on the familiarity of the reader/viewer with the target culture. Kubota reinforces this idea, pointing out that "Japanese texts do not generally require greater cognitive effort from readers for comprehension than English texts do, as long as the reader and the writer share the same cultural and linguistic knowledge" (Kubota, 1998 70).

The tropes with which Americans are familiar and comfortable are missing from many

anime. Some of the most significant of these tropes are: clear delineation between good and evil, verbal closure (verbal ambiguity is also often accompanied by long silences), the absence of discrete and uncomplicated beginnings and endings, and out of control characters. Since American viewers are generally not required to confront ambiguity (at least not for very long) in their viewing experience, watching anime becomes, for many, something they would rather not do, with just a few exceptions, such as anime created specifically for children and some of the *shonen* (young boy) adventure series like Naruto and Bleach, which privilege the idea of friendship and often feature the hero's journey motif, in addition, they are generally saturated with scenes of combat or training for combat.

Interestingly, the films of Hayao Miyazaki are also better accepted by American audiences, and it is precisely because they tend to mimic western tropes. His love of western children's literature shapes his storylines so that you as a viewer follow them and observe them, but you do not necessarily become a part of them. Miyazaki's stories are more straightforward and reward the viewer with that feeling of comfort and familiarity Americans seem to crave. It is, perhaps, one of the main reasons Miyazaki is one of the few Japanese animators whose work is recognizable to and appreciated by Western audiences. At the same time, however, his films also frequently employ traditional Japanese tropes that tend to defy the Western viewer's expectations.

Examining the Tropes:

a. Good and Evil

Anime antagonists are often challenging to American viewers because they are not depicted as totally good or irredeemably evil. While the choice of moral ambiguity may have multiple motivations, the way that characteristic is communicated can be tied to the concepts of *aimai* and *haragei*. The viewer is expected to interpret the behavior of the character without the express labelling of the author.

For instance, Miyazaki characters are never completely good or evil even though he otherwise makes use of Western narrative tropes: Kushana in *Nausicaä* (1984) is an antagonist, but the viewer discovers that she is a sympathetic character. Even as she does things that thwart Nausicaä's progress, her motives turn out to be understandable and even humanitarian. Her methods, though, and her desire for revenge contradict her more moral motives. Her character and motivations are depicted much more clearly in the manga than in the anime, but in the anime

the viewer does learn the source of her anger and pain and has the opportunity to make his/her own decision about her character.

Another example of moral ambiguity can be found in the 2002-2005 anime series *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*. In GITSAC, moral ambiguity is demonstrated through the character of Major Motoko Kusanagi. She is a high-ranking military official, ostensibly on the side of right, but as an officer, it is often necessary for her to do things that would otherwise be considered immoral, including killing, which she does without hesitation. In contrast, the character Kuze, the leader of a terrorist group called the Individual Eleven, is fueled by his desire to help the oppressed, powerless refugees. He is willing to kill without remorse for his cause. Moreover, the issue of moral ambiguity is complicated by the idea that both Kuze and Kusanagi are cyborgs; their bodies are advanced pieces of technology. Kusanagi's body literally belongs to Section 9, her employer. Furthermore, Kuze is a rogue soldier whose body was cyberized by the military. It could be argued that they are living weapons rather than human beings. In fact, in the original 1995 *Ghost in the Shell* movie, the plot is driven largely by Kusanagi's existential dilemma of determining whether or not she is a real person. Of course, anime/manga are filled with examples of protagonists and antagonists whose morality/humanity is questionable and whose character cannot be pigeonholed into a definition that clearly identifies with either good or evil in a satisfactory way. The viewer/reader is left to make his/her own decisions.

b. Verbal Resolution / Americans are Stupid Syndrome

McKinley explains that the concept of *kenkyo*, or modesty, is significant factor in the inductiveness of Japanese writing. Davies and Ikeno also touch on this when they discuss that "self-assertive" or forward behavior in the Japanese culture is perceived negatively in comparison to empathetic and considerate behavior. Even in everyday conversation, *kenkyo* informs the discourse. McKinley writes: "While addressing an individual of a higher rank or social status than themselves, native Japanese speakers will add softeners to their speech or let their sentences trail off in order to avoid being perceived as overly assertive" (McKinley 203). *Kenkyo* and *aimai* result in a level of communication in which silence is every bit as meaningful as explicit language. However, in American discourse forwardness and explicitness are privileged. The American discomfort with silence in Japanese works can be seen in the way silence in anime is often filled up with extra exposition or onomatopoeic sound in English translations and voice dubbing and can be seen particularly clearly when comparing the English

and Japanese versions of the films of Hayao Miyazaki, which are distributed by Disney.

Miyazaki most often employs *aimai* in his use of silence. Disney's adaptations of his films almost always fill that silence with explanatory dialogue or ambient sound/music. For example, Miyazaki makes use of silence in his films as not just the absence of sound, but as an essential element of the audio. Silence often sets the mood of the scene, or it might be used in contrast to subsequent loud noises or dialogue. Silence is employed in this manner during several scenes in the 1989 film *Kiki's Delivery Service*, particularly in scenes that occur in quiet early morning space when Kiki seems to be the only one awake. As doctoral candidate Alexandra Roedder points out in a presentation of part of her unpublished dissertation about the music in Ghibli films, one scene in particular demonstrates the different ways Studio Ghibli and Disney handle the idea of silence in a film. When she first awakens in her new home behind the bakery, Kiki has to use the bathroom, an outhouse which is down the stairs and across the yard from her room. In the Japanese version, the scene is played out in absolute silence; Kiki does not speak and the audience hears no background noises. In the Disney version, however, Kiki's trip down the stairs and into the outhouse is accompanied by a perky, cutesy soundtrack that follows her footsteps down and back up ("The Localization").

A Western audience, used to a soundtrack to tell its members how to respond in any number of scenarios, from sitcoms to dramas, has difficulty with silence, which forces one to remain open as to what is about to take place. Moreover, a potentially "embarrassing" scene of a thirteen year old girl needing to use the bathroom might be more uncomfortable for a U.S. audience than a Japanese one. This is quite similar to the use of silence in *My Neighbor Totoro*, where we hear the two young protagonists Mei and Setsuki discussing the things they see in nature in the Disney dub yet merely quietly observing their surroundings in the Japanese version (Scally 114-115).

c. **Discrete Beginnings and Endings**

Japanese rhetorical writing is said to be inductive, having an implicit rather than explicit thesis. Kubota and Hirose describe this as *ki-shou-ten-ketsu* where *ki* is the topic; *sho* represents a development of the topic; *ten* provides an added element in relation to the main topic; and *ketsu* would represent the thesis with its controlling idea. This pattern also extends to narrative, creating stories in which viewers must come to their own interpretations, a situation Kubota calls "reader-responsibility" (qtd. in McKinley). No clear conclusion is necessarily drawn in such a

rhetorical style. In this style of narrative, beginnings and endings may be unclear, leading to discomfort in an audience used to linear rhetorical structures. Anime provides a wealth of examples which require such reader responsibility, from the use of *ki-shou-ten-ketsu* or giving the viewer little to no context at all from which to create a working "thesis" or conclusion.

One strong example of an anime ending that does not provide closure for the viewer occurs in the 2003 Yoshitoshi Abe and Yasuyuki Ueda series *Texhnolyze*. The series opens with an episode that features no dialogue - just ambient sound. The viewer hears the buzzing of electric lights, the sound of footsteps descending stairs, the labored breathing of a victorious fighter - all presented without a context or a single word to explain what is going on. As the series progresses, the viewer finds out, among other information, that the inhabitants of the underground city of Lux are engaged in a brutal, bloody battle for control amongst all of the city's factions; by the end, nearly all of the inhabitants are dead. The final scene shows the protagonist, the fighter from Episode 1, slumped against a wall, and then the screen turns to snow. Does he die? Did the city's technological infrastructure stop working? The viewer is left with the responsibility of determining what actually happened and the discomfort of an ending that does not provide closure.

In *Serial Experiments Lain,* also by Abe and Ueda, the beginning and ending are similarly ambiguous. Instead of providing viewers with traditional exposition and conflict introduction, the narrative builds, presenting information in a manner much like bricolage; indeed, the episodes are called "layers." In "Layer 1: Weird," a young girl kills herself and then sends the title character, Lain, an email. Subsequent episodes depict drug use, computer games, more suicide, and mysterious connections to "the Wired" or the world of the internet. While a thread of rising action can be traced through these early episodes, it is unclear where the narrative is going. The end of the series is similarly ambiguous. When Lain realizes that she is the nexus between the internet and the real world, she makes the decision to delete herself, resetting the world as if she had never been there. The consequences of that act are clear in some ways and ambiguous in others. Though the world is "back to normal," Lain's identity remains in question and left to the viewer to interpret.

Another series with an ambiguous beginning and ending is 1999's *Big O.* The plot revolves around a man named Roger Smith, self-styled "Negotiator" and his efforts to determine what happened in his home of Paradigm City 40 years before the first episode. Whatever the

event, it caused the city's inhabitants to all lose their memories. The viewer only knows what Smith knows, which is very little, and the show keeps the viewer in a state of confusion, ending with two giant robots walking into each other and "re-setting" the city. Again, the viewer is responsible for shaping meaning from ambiguity.

A more recent example of the use of *aimai* in an anime series occurs in the 2013 series *Attack on Titan*, which is based on a manga of the same name by Hajime Isayama. The dystopic story begins with a huge humanoid being called a Titan breaking through the outer walls of a human city after 100 years of peace. The breach allows other Titans of various sizes to enter the city and begin to devour its inhabitants for no discernible reason. No explanation is given for the existence of these shuffling giant creatures, whose foolish, toothy grins as they eat the fleeing humans add to the surreal, disturbing quality of the events taking place. The Titans are not really put into context, and the humans don't seem to know why they are still even trying to survive, but the entire plotline revolves around their futile attempt to destroy the creatures before they get eaten themselves. The viewer receives a few tantalizing clues about the backstory, but the season ends without any clear explanation or closure.

d. Out of Control Characters and Characters Who Have No Control

The concepts of *ki-sho-ten-ketsu* and reader responsibility are inherent in anime in which characters lack control or are seemingly victims of an uncontrollable situation. In such narratives, characters and even viewers are thrown into a situation in which conflict may be established, but agency or direction is missing. Instead, information and context are added to the narrative in layers, building as the series progresses until the viewer may begin to infer meaning. The viewer is forced to reside in a state of uncertainty with the characters.

Ueda and Abe's *Serial Experiments Lain* maintains a narrative structure that reflects *ki-sho-ten-ketsu* in that the viewer must put together the elements of each episode "layer" in an attempt to understand what is happening. However, the viewer is not alone in this lack of control. Lain herself does not know who she really is or what her role is in the strange happenings around her. Both the character and the viewer are equally lost.

In Hajime Isayama's *Attack on Titan*, the main character, Eren, is a teen who survives a Titan attack and joins the military ranks to fight the beasts. Unlike that of the typical *shonen* manga plotline, the focus of *Attack on Titan* is often on the helplessness of the characters in an overwhelming situation. The human populace is unable to withstand Titan attacks, and Eren, the

heroic center of the piece, is similarly helpless and unable to control his emotions or power. The viewer must endure the anxiety of the unexpected attack or death with the characters, alongside the constant disquiet that comes from not knowing why the attacks are happening. At a point when an American audience would be expecting answers, or at least a clue, *Attack on Titan* leaves viewers with only more questions.

Hideaki Anno's revolutionary series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* presents one of the best examples of how the lack of control for the characters and for the viewer demands "reader responsibility" from the viewer. The main character, Shinji, is recruited to be a part of a mysterious organization called Nerv. He is called upon to pilot a giant mecha to fight creatures called "angels" who are responsible for the catastrophe which created the dystopian world of Tokyo-3. Shinji is thrown into a situation in which he must risk his life and safety without full understanding of what he is doing or why. His agency is restricted by his age, his troubled relationship with his father, his position in Nerv, and the Evangelion unit, a mecha that he ostensibly pilots but which seems to have its own agency, with which Shinji struggles. The series uses many religious signs from both Christianity and Shinto; however, the symbolism often seems to contradict common Western interpretations. The viewer's expectations are unmet and further complicated by ambiguities of good and evil. Both Shinji and the viewer engage in a struggle for understanding that is thwarted, even by the end of the series.

Conclusion:

American audiences are used to entertainment that is clear and easy to understand. Indiewire reports that foreign movie revenues have dropped by 61% in the last seven years. There could be several reasons for this: the economy, the impact of digital entertainment, industry competition. But one of the most popular reasons for disliking foreign media is that it is just too different, and for Americans, entertainment is about passively enjoying the familiar. Tyler Cowen, an economics professor at George Mason University in Virginia and author of "Creative Destruction: How Globalization is Changing the World's Cultures," argues that movies are about familiarity: "A feeling of comfort has to be there" for a movie to succeed, that is the reason that "Americans don't like foreign movies," (qtd. in Bhattacharya). While Americans are looking for certainty, the Japanese are accustomed to the idea of not knowing. They are not just comfortable with it—*aimai* and *haragei* are integral to the way the Japanese communicate. For that reason, many anime operate under the assumption that it would be impolite to the viewer to

explain everything. Instead, ambiguity is a resting state in the narrative for the viewer who has the familiarity with or who seeks to appreciate this cultural experience. But for the American viewer who seeks and is accustomed to linearity and dialectic, *aimai* and *haragei* are indeed unsettling specters.

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