Otaku Unmasked: The Life, Death and Rebirth of Japan's Pop Culture
November 30, 2005 at the Japan Society
Program transcript

Douglas McGray (DM): Thank you all for coming here tonight. I get the job of interviewing and introducing two very interesting panelists tonight. First, Dai Sato started as a runner for several of Tokyo Anime's leading stations before he became a famous TV-featured scriptwriter. (This isn't in his bio, but a fun fact: before he became a scriptwriter, he was paid in surplus game show prizes.) He set up a Tokyo-based indie label, *Frogman Records* as well as a tech/anime/fashion and game consultancy called *FrogNation*. He's an experienced journalist, and writes weekly and monthly columns in Tokyo's game and culture magazines. He's best known here in the U.S. for a number of critically and publicly-acclaimed cartoon shows; *Samurai Champloo*, *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex* and *Cowboy Beebop*, as well as the feature film *Casshern*.

Our second panelist is Hiroki Azuma. He's among the youngest and most influential philosophers and cultural critics. He holds a Ph.D. in Culture and Representation from Tokyo University. He is also an Executive Research Fellow and Professor at the Center for Global Communications (GLOCOM) and a Research Fellow at Stanford's Japan Center. He's published seven books. One of them, *Ontological Postal*, focuses on Jacques Derrida's oscillating relationship between philosophy and literature. With that he was the youngest winner ever to receive the Suntory Literary Prize, which is a big deal. He also wrote another, more popular book called *Animalizing Postmodernity*, which looks at the Japanese pop culture through a postmodern lens.

To start, otaku culture right now – Anime, games, manga, things like that – they rule American childhood, they influence Hollywood, they get big cable ratings with young adults, they even inspire big art exhibits. *Fortune Magazine* this week says it's also "big, big money," and I believe them. Within Europe, the US, and Asia, otaku culture has probably the largest global audience it's ever had. Does it feel like a Golden Age in Japan?

Dai Sato (DS): I think the idea of a "golden age" is overly exaggerated. It is true that "otaku" and

"Japanimation" are generic, comprehensible words that are comfortable to the ears. I believe the meaning behind our talk with Mr. Azuma here tonight, is that I am a creator and that Mr. Azuma is someone who verbalizes our work. That's why the theme of "Otaku Unmasked" is given here. That's my interpretation.

Hiroki Azuma (HA): As far as the "golden age" is concerned, it depends on what we mean by golden. Economically speaking, it is true that Japanese pop culture has never been this successful, but is it accepted as a "culture"? I disagree in two ways:

First of all, even domestically, anything related to "otaku" (this being tonight's theme, which covers manga, anime and video games) is recognized as an industry. But as a framework for analysis, and in terms of its cultural history, it is still underdeveloped. I've attempted such an analysis in my *Animalizing Postmodernity*, but there are very few other critiques. Even in Japan, where manga, anime, and games are successful as industries, it is doubtful that they are succeeding as a culture.

Indeed, what's more serious is my second point. Tonight we are gathered here, but from my observation, and looking past the U.S. alone, overseas demand for Japanese culture is very high. For example Sato-san is here, and many of his works are exported overseas. His works are viewed in this country, and I am sure that many of tonight's audience members have seen them.

But if we ask whether Dai Sato's works are appreciated domestically in Japan, we find that they come under harsh criticism, such as *Eureka Seven* for example. Why are they criticized? Why did Sato write *Eureka Seven* willingly, despite the foreseen criticism? Such contexts are almost never mentioned abroad.

From what I know, the Asian otaku, especially those from Korea and Taiwan, are knowledgeable about the Japanese domestic context and the kind of debates going on internally. But, unfortunately, demand for Japanese pop culture from Europe and the U.S. is based strictly on the image, the represented cultural product, and the contexts and debates that these products are involved in do not come across as easily. This makes it difficult to say simply that "Japanese pop culture is in its golden age."

DM: Mr. Sato, do you feel that way? Do you sense the difference when you are looking at your foreign fans, people who appreciate your work in Asia, as compared to the United States? As a creator, are you conscious of the difference?

DS: One thing I can say is that my work tends to enjoy a better reputation abroad than in Japan. This might be because the images of my work have, ironically, helped define "Japanimation" for non-Japanese audiences. If this is the case, it didn't happen consciously on my part. The particular works which have influenced *us* in turn, happened to come from cultures of Europe and the U.S. I don't think anybody here has seen *Eureka Seven*, but I applied dance music and subcultural references to the script, two things that are essential for me. This may sound trivial, but it is quite interesting that a kind of a debate between subculture and otaku exists in Japan. I feel like I've been positioned at the very center of this…so I feel awkward having my works walk on their own. I don't know if this answered the question…

HA: Hmm… I don't think that answers the question! The question is about the differences between the American, European and Asian audiences and what-not…

DS: In which case, I must say that we creators receive no feedback in regards to these differences. I hear things like, "it's interesting," "it's good," but nothing specific. A lot of people say, "I am your fan," but creators don't hear anything beyond that point, even from the Japanese audience.

An occasion like this, to speak with Mr. Azuma, causes me to realize that I am in a position to be more conscious of these matters. Maybe all of us feel this way. To be straightforward, the basic condition of anime scriptwriter in Japan is that we have no chance for such an exchange.

DM: Let me maybe twist the question a little bit, to look less at the audience's side and more towards the creator's side. We've talked about this before. I know that when you were working on *Cowboy Beebop*, it was more of a domestic product, and it ended up going abroad. When you were working on *Samurai Champloo*, I think you knew very early on that this was going to be a global show. Maybe you can tell me a little bit about how creating one versus the other is different.

DS: A simple explanation would be this: A director named Shinichiro Watanabe created *Animatrix* after *Cowboy Beebop*. He said *Cowboy Beebop* gave him many ideas for *Animatrix*. To make his animation, he used two credible themes: hip hop and samurai. He had planned to rely on foreign capital from the start, and his plan was to market it abroad. However, when I produced *Cowboy Beebop*, these things didn't matter. In *Samurai Champloo*, we started to become more conscious of how our works would be accepted. But until that point, we didn't have much of a conscious approach, to speak from a creator's point of view.

DM: When you see works, can you tell when you are looking at them, when you are appreciating them; whether they are done strategically, whether they are done with a global market in mind, whether something feels particularly Japanese? Do you see design, or do you see things spread more by accident? That's for both of you, from the critic's standpoint or the creator's.

DS: Strategically? Hmmm . . . let me think. This is very difficult to answer. If you see things from the business point of view, yes. It is true that many producers demand those things, and I'm sure you read these situations in magazines, etc. But as a creator and a scriptwriter, I never start off by imagining that; "Oh yes! This is going to be huge in the States or this might be popular in Europe!"

Having said this, when the illustrations are completed I somehow sense that they are not going to be popular among the Japanese. [laughs] This is because my projects don't involve things like cat's ears…Of course, this is an exaggerated example, but I've always made something that deviates from so-called symbol-driven animation, which is a theme for Mr. Azuma. For such reasons, when I see a completed work, I just know when it will draw criticism from the Japanese otaku scene.

DM: I'm curious if either of you think there is anything inherently, or *will always be* something inherently Japanese about anime or otaku culture. The reason I ask, is because right now you have a new show on the *Cartoon Network*, the *Boondocks*, which looks a lot like anime. And you have a feature film, *Aeon Flux*, which was made after an *MTV* cartoon which also looked a lot like anime. And a lot of the Japanese anime now, the technical work, the illustration, is done outside of Japan. In the same way that every year the U.S. owns hip-hop a little bit less, does Japan own anime a little bit less?

HA: What's the question?

DS: What's the question if you put it more simply?

DM: My question is, in ten years, will anime still be Japanese?

DS: That's short!

DM: Maybe that was too short. [laughs]

HA: I think it depends on what "inherently Japanese" means. For example, just because it sells in the global market doesn't mean you lose what is "Japanese." Mr. Sato's works may not be considered "otaku" in Japan, but there are some very "otaku," very "Japanese" works that *are* exported. The expressions that we think could only mean something within the local context of Japan are actually accepted abroad, especially in Korea and Taiwan. The inherently Japanese elements in pop culture do not necessarily prevent them from entering overseas markets or overseas imaginations.

Tonight's theme is Japanese otaku, but the word "otaku" in Japan carries highly ambivalent nuances. It can have good and bad connotations. The word "otaku" originated 20 years ago, but unlike most slang, we know of its origin. Not only do we know its origin, but we have a sense of the interpretation of the word. I suppose most of you wouldn't be familiar with this, but the difference between writing the word "otaku" in *hiragana* or *katakana* carries a tremendous ideological difference. I personally write it in *katakana*. And yet to do so may also be thought of as an affirmation of its exportation…by some, at least. Perhaps this example sounds petty, but it's actually very important.

This is due to the fact that starting a career as an anime/game/manga creator inevitably means to some extent the person is otaku, and they ask themselves what kind of otaku they are to find their place within otaku world. . .

The meaning of otaku, one's place within otaku world, in other words, how you interpret the concept of "otaku" are all important when watching Japanese works. This applies to Mr. Sato's works, too. There are works that only sell in the Japanese market, and Mr. Sato makes anime that sell globally… This sounds awfully simplistic, but in reality things are more complicated. Mr. Sato creates his works in Japan, and he communicates with various people within a Japanese context. The resulting works are *Samurai Champloo* and *Eureka Seven*. Complex concepts will be left behind if one just focuses on the resulted works and their images.

One thing I want you all to understand tonight is that we have a creator and somebody like me who is a critic, and Douglas McGray, an American who had recognized and introduced the importance of Japan and the Japanese anime creators. There exists a kind of orientalism, especially in Europe and the U.S., in their perspective towards Japanese pop culture. They consume images, but what is behind the image, such as ideologies, discourses and histories, are completely erased when they are exported overseas.

Some otaku in Japan accept this reality cynically and believe that it all amounts to money-making, so the message becomes, "just export more!" But there are also people who are increasingly frustrated by these attitudes and say; "No matter how much context and meaning we produce, only the images circulate. We are making more money, but is this what we want? This is meaningless." Having seen this, Japanese pop culture has become a product to be consumed globally, and it makes those who deal with money very happy. But it also creates a feeling of great ambivalence among the creators.

If pop culture is to be accepted as a culture, I want people to accept it with deeper understanding of its cultural ideologies and the historical conditions of whom created it. I suppose this is my wish. Yes, that's what I think. Specifically speaking, I don't want people to just buy and watch Mr. Sato's DVD's. I want people to watch them with an understanding of what kind of a person he is, what kind of opinions he has, and his position within the wider Japanese context surrounding the anime or the game creator.

On the other hand, although he is not at the center of our conversation today, there is a man who is famous for using the word "otaku" in the United States: Takashi Murakami. I have been interviewed a few times about him…

DM: Takashi Murakami, the painter and installation artist who had a big exhibition here earlier.

HA: Yes- Takashi Murakami is highly successful in the U.S., and he has used "otaku" as a key word. I have been interviewed a few times by the foreign press, and I've always told them: I want people to know that the Japanese otaku think Murakami's introduction of "otaku" is wrong. Murakami does this on purpose. He doesn't do this merely for the sake of his own success overseas. He has his own criticisms of the current state of otaku culture, and his own suggestions for its improvement. In this way, his strategic use of the word "otaku" is intricately related to the domestic condition of otaku themselves.

DM: I wanted to ask Sato-san a question as an artist: People probably don't realize how this industry is set up. If a series become a huge global hit, the directors, the writers and the animators, don't make any more money than if it is a domestic one. So, there actually aren't a whole lot of incentives for the creators to "sell out." I was wondering if, as businesses and even the government goes to market this otaku phenomena around the world, there is any frustration on the creators' side, that you are not really a part of that?

DS: To continue on with the story about Mr. Murakami, his works are sold for $6-700,000 (60 million to 70 million yen). Yet there are a great number of model sculptors in Japan who make similar figures. They sell their work for $20 to $30 (2000 yen to 3000 yen), but by simply injecting the word "art," Murakami can charge much more. It is easy for us (otaku in Japan) to think that Mr. Murakami simply changes everything with the word "otaku."

As Doug says, I'm speaking with a lot of people with the help of the Japan Society regarding this asymmetry between profit and sale. One thing I realized, and have been reflecting upon, is how ignorant we really were. Now I'm beginning to realize how we've failed to express ourselves and protect our original message. I feel this strongly.

And I also agree strongly with the kinds of things Mr. Azuma has been discussing. For me, it is strange that everyone here uses the word "otaku" positively. When I am in Japan, I actually don't like to be labeled as "otaku" because it doesn't have a positive ring at all.

Yet if it sells, there comes the responsibility on my part to think and listen more carefully to communication on the production level. We otaku are just as people imagine. We talk about and create within this village, and our works suddenly become big. We seem to be involved in lots of different businesses that we cannot relate ourselves with. It also seems like there are some folks who are making a lot of money out of this, so we ask ourselves: "Why are we at a place like this?" That's what I wanted to tell Doug.

Yet through meeting various individuals on this project, I've been changing slowly. I now think maybe it was us who were closing our minds. Many people knock on the door and show us money. At least, that's how it seemed to us. But maybe that's not how it was. If we become capable of asking, "what is it that you like about me?" when people knock on the door, then maybe I can change a bit. That's how I've been feeling, just in the last few days.

So, as to the question concerning getting financially rewarded for my product – that was the main reason for my coming here. And my response to it has been changing since I began speaking with different folks here. I hope this somehow answers Doug's question.

DM: The big business side of this has even attracted the attention of the Japanese government. They've actually convened all of these high-level, parliamentary discussions in order to figure out how to create a pop cultural policy. I half-imagine the Minister of Trade passing out DVD's at

comic conventions. I wonder what you think of that. Is this a good idea? Is it a crazy scheme? What's your own impression?

HA: It's very difficult to say whether this is a good or bad idea, if you ask me. An important point to note is that there are people who criticize it. Sato-san just mentioned how, from outsider perspectives, the only value associated with otaku culture is that of profit. By the same token, the Japanese government is now willing to fund pop culture. And this literally means money. Domestically, manga, anime and games are currently attracting a lot of attention, but they are all based on numbers; the market size and how many millions of otaku there are. No attention is paid as to whether the work itself is actually any good.

Moreover, just because the money is given, it doesn't mean that it is distributed to the creators. This a labor issue as well as a problem with the production system. Neither has been properly considered. In light of this neglect, an incredibly shallow discussion is taking place (at the government level). Many otaku are discontented with this, and I'm inclined to agree with them.

Now, this is rather complicated, but there are also people who are against the involvement of the government altogether. They believe that the anime and game industries are inherently anti-establishment. They are nothing but a subculture. They are an "under-culture" as well as a subculture, having always operated far from the mainstream media. They are proud of this. They feel it's wrong for them, who started from this oppositional perspective, to receive funds from the government and become college instructors just because right now the industry happens to be profiting. This point of view *fundamentally* opposes any government support for anime and manga.

My personal view is that it is okay to receive government support, but the way it is done now is wrong. There are also otaku who think that as long as money flows in, they shouldn't make such a hassle, and they should just rake it in now. Those are the three basic stances. I think that the middle position makes the most sense.

DS: In terms of government policies… Actually, for me to be even invited to a place like this was unthinkable. As Azuma-san mentioned earlier, we grew up according to educational system that told us not to watch and not to even think about making the kind of things we create. We used to hide from our parents and read manga, like this (gestures reading secretly). But if you look at how it is now, parents tell their kids to become manga writers! I do feel awkward about this. I sometimes think: "Boy, otaku today have it easy." I'm also very uncomfortable about getting

excited that way, like "Yes! Japan is acknowledging us!"?

I completely agree with Mr. Azuma's opinion, but to always remain in the middle is a very difficult task. It's so much clearer to position yourself at an extreme. As I mentioned earlier, the word "otaku" and "Japanimation" sound very simple and easy. I find it dangerous, and find it necessary for creators to think about the importance of staying in the middle. It's all too easy to get excited over money and to be agitated, wholeheartedly saying "it is too nationalistic!" These ways are easy, they communicate much better with people, and they make a better story. But we need to stay in the middle. Otherwise, the environment of the creators will be much worse. Either way, we end up toppling, I get a strong feeling that it will be bad for us.

HA: I think our discussion is becoming complicated again, so I will put it simply. I think it works this way: From a conventional standpoint, and we don't know why, it seems as though Japanese pop culture is creating something good. From what I imagine, this is the level of understanding abroad**.** "Creators must be happy because they sell. I hear that the government is supporting it too. How joyful it is! I don't see any problems there whatsoever."

But, that's not how it is at all. The reason why this isn't the case isn't because the otaku are twisted people, but simply because they have history.

DS: Exactly.

HA: What's at stake here is history. If one misinterprets this point, it just becomes a matter of saying, "boy, otaku are difficult people…"

Let me give an example. This incident took place at the Tokyo International Film Festival in Japan, and it relates to Mr. Sato, me and in some ways, even with Douglas McGray. In Japan, there's a famous critic named Eiji Otsuka. Interestingly, he is not only a critic, but a comic writer and a creator. His comic books sell several million copies. So he's successful as a creator, too. Some of his works are also available in English, so some of you may be familiar. On top of it all, he's also a leftist. So, we have someone like that in Japan. His manga are translated, but I believe his books are not. You could say that this symbolizes everything…

Initially, the Tokyo International Film Festival was going to invite Eiji Otsuka, Mr. Sato and one more person for their panel discussion. Prior to the event, there was a request not directly from the government but by some personnel (since this was a government-related event after all), not

to criticize Japanese government policies too strongly. Because of this request, all the panelists except for Mr. Sato, declined the offer.

So, somebody else suddenly had to fill the empty spots beside Sato-san, to enable the talk to go on. Even though he was no longer the panelist, Mr. Otsuka was still there as an audience member, and he started to get angry at the panelists for not clearly criticizing the policies. He stood up from the audience, asked questions, eventually got up on the stage, grabbed the microphone, talked incessantly and was literally pulled away. As you can imagine, this was a huge incident among otaku.

DM: What was he saying? Before they dragged him away?

HA: Oh. Mr. Otsuka has recently wrote a book titled *Why "Japanimation" Will Be Defeated*. His basic standpoint is an extreme one that I've explained earlier, that manga and anime have always had an anti-establishment color. Mr. Ostuka also researches postwar manga. According to him, the reason why graphic expression of Japanese manga is not "real" and, in other words favors a more symbol-driven expression over any form of realism, is its integral resistance to actual representations of the war. That's his theory. For those reasons, manga has *always* had an anti-war and anti-establishment quality. He therefore opposes seriously any government involvement with manga expression.

He followed this thinking in the book *Why "Japanimation" Will Be Defeated*, and he spoke along the same lines when he was kicked out of the hall.

So this incident took place, and as it implies, there are pronounced points of view in Japan not regarding how Japanese pop culture is accepted abroad, but *how to accept the way we are accepted* in Japan. Depending on which perspective gains the most adherence to the directions, and the ways in which Japanese anime and games are sent overseas will change dramatically.

An additional reason why I mentioned that Douglas McGray is involved with this, is because he is also mentioned in Mr. Otsuka's *Why "Japanimation" Will Be Defeated* for the research paper he'd written entitled, "Japan's Gross National Cool," which is very famous in Japan. Was that two years ago, three years ago?

DM: Four, I believe. I think it ran in 2002 and was translated in 2003.

HA: In any case, the paper has an enormous influence over the government's policy-making as to pop culture. In my view, policy makers in Japan understand neither who Douglas is, nor what was really written in the paper, and they made use of a very limited part of it. Mr. Otsuka thinks Douglas's paper became an important factor in steering Japanese pop culture policies. And to be fair, Mr. Otsuka criticizes not Douglas himself, but current situation created/foreseen by him.

Actually, Mr. Otsuka and I have worked closely together many times. We even started a magazine together. But we have a different understanding of "otaku." He writes it in hiragana, and I in katakana. This caused a falling-out, and we aren't currently in much of a condition to work together… But all aside, we do work from comparable places.

So, I did hear about Mr. Otsuka's incident from Mr. Sato. Doug is criticized, though indirectly, by Otsuka. Mr. Sato was a guest panelist of the incident, of course. In a way, all three of us here are related to that single incident.

I would like to direct a question back to Doug now that he's heard this story: What do you think?

DM: Well, I think it's totally surreal. The argument I made in that article was that Japan can benefit from its new-found role as a cultural power. It can benefit in a bunch of different ways; economically and culturally and may benefit more in the future.

A bunch of government officials saw that, and drew the conclusion that if all this good stuff is happening, shouldn't the government make it even better? Which isn't usually the case. So, I spent the last couple of years trying to discourage them from using my article this way, but it is a sort of a popular theme there. They think they can figure out a magic formula to harness the power of culture in a much managed way.

HA: I understand most likely, that wasn't what you wanted to promote by your paper. But nevertheless, Douglas McGray is a famous name in Japan. Mr. Sato and I are also somewhat known in Japanese otaku community. They know that we are holding an event like this in New York now, and from what I can tell, this is what they are thinking:

"Hiroki Azuma and Dai Sato are inflating themselves, being invited to the US, having a panel discussion moderated by Douglas McGray, saying stuff like: Oh yeah! Japanimation is on a roll! Leave it to us and it will be even bigger…"

DS: "Oh yeah, so cool! Go get it!"

HA: That's what's on their minds.

What I mean is that there is a certain power to this event to make them think that way. This is taking place in New York, with Doug as a moderator. On top of that, it's being organized by the Japan Society! What I want Doug to know, is that even if this wasn't your intention, your paper created a new condition in which there are certain people paying close attention to what you will say next. Otaku assume that your point of view runs with that of the Japanese government, so they'll most likely be critical. Then, what would be Doug's message to these otaku? I'd like to know.

DM: [laughs] I always try to keep my messages on paper because I'm a miserable talker. The Cultural Ministry invited me to talk last time I was in Tokyo, which I didn't really want to do. But then, I realized that it was an opportunity to go and say, "don't invite me to talk. Go and ask bunch of producers, writers and directors what the sticking points of the industries are. What would enable them to do the job better?" I know that everybody has a long laundry list of those things, and that was my message to them. So, I guess I'll recycle it.

Before it gets any late in the evening, I wanted to get a little bit more democratic and open up the floor to questions; on anything that has been talked about and on anything that is yet to be talked about. I'll just ask for people to wait for the microphone to come, so we can all hear you. The briefer the questions, the more people get to ask.

Q&A

Q: This will be a question for Sato-san. Not to be too discursive, but I really want to take this opportunity to ask: What has been your favorite episode of *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*, and why?

DS: Okay. It's hard to say which one is my favorite. This is because animation is never made by a single person. It is made by 200 to 300 people. It just so happens to be that my name is credited at the top, and that's the reason why I get asked these questions… Is it ok if I answer this question in terms of which one I had the most fun writing?

In that case, the ninth episode in the first season "The Darkness of the Net." This is because, out

of the entire twenty minutes, the main character does not make an appearance until the very last two or three minutes. It's just a bunch of people talking. I spoke with the director, Mr. Kamiyama (director of *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*) about the idea of having twelve crazy men in the episode. Intrinsically, the idea behind it was to incorporate the popular culture of "2-Channel," an online community in Japan. When writing it, I intended from the very beginning to seriously and fully incorporate that world. As worried as I was about getting this recognized, those who most appreciated it were the "2-Channelers." This made me very happy… Does this answer satisfy you? It's a delicate matter . . .

Q: I'd like to make two points. First, in response to Mr. McGray's point about the "inherently Japanese" nature of anime on the one hand, and the government involvement on the other hand: I see otaku as simply an evolution of Japanese art. Inasmuch as I find Japanese art to be extremely visual, I'll just take a quick example of famous Japanese screens, folding screens, I think you call them *byobu*. When you look at them in detail, it's exactly like an anime. You have lots of little episodes going on with lots of little figures, so it looks just like a manga in many ways. So, would you see manga, and for that matter, otaku, as part of this overall evolution, or is otaku a completely separate phenomenon?

And directly related to this, protest art and government involvement… Art has always been a protest in both Western culture as well as Japanese or other cultures. If one again looks in this overarching perspective, the protest art of otaku, becoming something very official, is a very normal evolution. If you go back to painters, even in Europe, they also became very popular and accepted by all forms of society. So firstly,: Would you consider otaku a separate phenomenon, a counter-culture and not part of the visual evolution of Japanese art over hundreds of years? And second: If it is part of this overall evolution, then the officialization of otaku is a very normal phenomenon.

HA: The second question depends on the first, so let me answer them in order. You're right to say that otaku expression is based on the traditional aesthetics of Japan. It's so obvious that there isn't much more to say. However, current Japanese pop culture is based on the Japanese adaptation of American pop culture. In this way, there is a tremendous influence of American pop culture over the latter half of the twentieth century. Moreover, it's important to remember that Japan, having lost the war to the U.S., was temporarily occupied. This is where its origin is located. Looking at this way, one cannot simply claim that the aesthetics of the Muromachi and Edo periods, which are often noted by Takashi Murakami, have naturally led to the creation of manga and anime.

Also, from my personal perspective, beyond the visual expression of anime and the otaku, the lifestyle which their consumption enables is intricately related to so-called consumerization and postmodernization, which took place globally   after the 60's. In this way, Japanese manga and anime are a twentieth century, postwar Japanese phenomenon. Though there is a connectivity, to look only at the visual elements of Japanese culture would be to ignore elements beyond and outside of it which are much greater, I'd say. This is my answer to the first question.

To continue on with the second question, there are various forms of art, such as *Noh* and *Kabuki*, which are protected by the government. What's being produced by otaku are not a simple extension of them. Manga and anime have complex origin, and it would not be easy to align them within the conventional framework of government funding. That is my answer to the second question.

Q: One comment, and then a question. I like to say that earlier in the conversation, it was mentioned that the creators are often concerned when anime and manga go overseas. The overseas audience only tends to concern themselves with the image, and they are not so concerned with the context going on in the background. But I'd like to say, that in my own experience and with people that I've met, that's not true. Mr. Sato, you can rest assured! I find that of the shows, particularly *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex* and *Samurai Champloo*, there's a lot of background and history-especially *Ghost in the Shell*! It is very political and I find that American kids, teenagers in high school, are learning about culture, learning about history, and current events. I think that's a positive sign. So although I wouldn't say it's mainstream right now, it *is* growing.

I'm seeing more anime that's been produced within the past few years that's becoming more and more an international taste. By that, I mean it's something that audiences outside of Japan can also relate to. I wonder how Azuma-san and Sato-san feel, when they create, when they write, when they critique certain pieces; are there certain obstacles represented by the fact that audiences around the world love the work, while some otaku in Japan say that you guys are selling out?

DM: National differences, commercial pressures and translational issues… Has your life just gotten a lot more complicated?

HA: Can I answer this question? I have been speaking provocatively today, so I had expected a question like this; but I haven't changed my mind. The person who had just asked the question is

speaking about the "politics" within the representation. But the case lies within the politics of production. For example, anybody in the world would probably notice that there *is* political content within *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*, because politics is portrayed quite obviously within the story.

But when I say "politics" I mean something else. For example, the contextual placement of the reader determines how the work is read. In some situations, this can function politically. Up until recently, the works of Japanese creators never had global audiences in mind. In other words, as Mr. Sato said earlier, Japanese works are created to function within the Japanese community. Therefore you cannot decipher the intentions behind the writers, such as why a director who produced one thing is making something different in a particular way next time. You need a significant degree of perspective regarding the places of these works in domestic contexts. This does not mean that anime and games can never be understood outside of Japan. This is not my point at all. Please don't misunderstand me here.

Artifacts can transcend the cultural contexts of the country where they are born, and attain new audiences in other countries quite autonomously. This is the potential of the artifact. I am completely fine with this. But I nevertheless want to emphasize tonight, that the domestic contexts do in fact *exist*. The appearance of an artifact can change quite dramatically, if you inject the element of Japanese context. This is something you cannot comprehend even if you watch the *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex* ten or twenty times.

There are things that you cannot understand just by the works themselves, and I am not saying anything extraordinary here. Just as when you read a novel, or listen to music… this is a common mode of critique when it comes to literature. So, instead of just buying a DVD, watching it over and over and being done with it, I want people to pay closer attention to the contextual position of the creators.

Q: First for Sato-san. I would just like to relay the previous point that your work, especially in *Samurai Champloo*, the characters, the way they relate to their backgrounds, they are an inspiration to us all! My question is for Azuma-san. How do you connect postmodernism to the anime culture in general? Does *Fooly Kooly* ring a bell to you within that subject? (I've been taking a course on that.)

HA: What's the question? What do I think of *Fooly Kooly*?

Okay. The main theme of my book, *Animalizing Postmodernity*, is the relationship between postmodernity and anime. I cannot summarize my entire book in one short answer. However one thing I can say is that my interest lies not in the visual expressionism, or story-telling. It lies, rather in how otaku expression is consumed *as a product*. What's been interesting for me tonight is to find how otaku expression is interpreted. The earlier questioner spoke of otaku culture in terms of visual expression, and another person addressed it as a narrative, as the carrier of a message. I want to know how otaku create their own communities using their own production, namely anime and games. What's valued in these communities? What I've done is so-called demand theory.

When I was about twenty-five, *Evangelion* became a huge phenomenon. I don't know if the questioner is familiar with this, but Japan has this thing called "Comic Market," which is where a tremendous number of *dojinshi*, or fan fictions are exchanged. So when *Evangelion* became a huge hit, many fans created their own version of *Evangelion* stories that used the characters of *Evangelion*, but developed stories that are completely different from the original. From my perspective, to understand *Evangelion* more thoroughly, we need to look at how people communicate using the artifact *Evangelion*, including the secondary productions, the simulacra, because in a way, the entirety of it is the *phenomenon* created by *Evangelion*.

The phenomenon of the dismantling of the narrative, ways in which the meaning of the narrative becomes lost and just the characters themselves circulate over and over in the consumer society…New *creators* emerge under these conditions too. I argue that the situation is highly postmodern. I'm oversimplifying my point here. Of course my actual argument is much more complex…

Therefore, the way I related postmodernism and anime is based neither on visual expression nor the narratives themselves, but the way in which they're consumed. What are otaku doing, getting saturated in anime? That's where I paid close attention and called it postmodern. Does this answer satisfy your question?

Let me add one more point. It is also true to say that the more postmodern the habits and patterns of consumption become, the more postmodern the artifacts and modes of expression themselves will be. The narratives become more and more fragmented and meta-fictive. So these elements are related, but my emphasis is primarily on the consumer behavior.

DS: This is where *"Fooly Kooly"* comes in, in a way.

HA: Yes, I was just going to say that.

Q: This is a question for Sato-san and Azuma-san. Many of the early most influential manga and anime creators' generation outlived World War II. Reiji Matsumoto, Osamu Tezuka were all influenced by the war and the early crises of modern Japan. But what about the recent crises that Japan's new generation faces, such as the sarin gas attack in 1995 and the Kobe earthquake? I wonder if these events have reshaped the otaku mentality, and the mentality of Japanese culture.

HA: This was also the thesis of my book, so it's very difficult to answer, but I'm happy to receive such sharp questions. 1995 was an incredibly important year for the Japanese society, and it drastically changed otaku mentality as well. From what I can tell, '95 marked what is now considered a split within otaku culture.

One was a return to realistic expression, instead of remaining in the abstract and artificial world of manga and anime. The other is to detach entirely from the "real," and to restrict themselves to more "artificial," or symbolic avenues of expression. Today, we see these two extremes. This is also related to tonight's theme, and Mr. Sato belongs to the former. However, there are also a significant number of otaku who want to write stories that are incredibly elaborate and sign-based, with absolutely no sense of reality. The shock of '95 contributed to this result.

In *Animalizing Postmodernity*, I focused on the latter case: of otaku who pursue fictitious, symbol-driven expressions. I'm going to digress a little bit, but because of this split, Mr. Sato and I never met until the Japan Society invited us here. Mr. Sato has read my book, and I am of course familiar and have seen Mr. Sato's works many times. Yet, since 95, we have been, respectively, a critic and scriptwriter belonging to opposite ideological poles within otaku culture. For this reason, no events have ever arranged for us to meet. A lot of you probably maintain a single image of anime culture. But in Japan, it is actually heavily split in two ways. This happened in 1995. It was the year when *Evangelion* was first released. This anime led the split, but it also carries both elements. On one side, it depicts the "real" emotional conflicts of a teenager, and battle scenes are also highly realistic. But on the other hand, it also expresses fictive quality of a symbolic imagination. This split is becoming deeper and deeper. That's my answer.

DS: I'd like to answer this question, of how to address social themes from the standpoint of a scriptwriter. 9/11 occurred during the production of *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*. In the first season, we followed incidents which took place throughout the history of postwar Japan.

The audience may not be familiar, but incidents such as *Guriko-Morinaga*, *Midori Seizai* and *Maruyama Vaccine* (poison/medical cases) are all things that anyone who has lived in Japan and read the news should remember one way or the other. The theme of the first season of the *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex* was to redevelop these incidents, and place them in a future.

However, 9/11 took place during the production, which led me to depict the cotemporary world in the second season, called the *Second Gig*. To borrow Eiji Otsuka's word, the "war scene" of everyday life: the images, key words, voices, words, and everything else that influence creators, regardless of whether or not they are conscious of them.

For example, this was never clearly mentioned in the show, but the second season ended up dealing with the issue of Japan's geographical isolation as an island, and the government's persistent diplomatic policy to reject refugees. Though it wasn't my intention, my work somehow led me to write the script on "what sort of a world might we be living in, if the government changes its policies, and Japan accepts the refugees?" In truth, I wanted to draw the question of: "how do we define humanity?" by using robots and robotified humans as characters of the season. That was the intended theme of *Stand Alone Complex* and *Ghost in the Shell*, but the story changed as one theme substituted itself for another. It's not what we intended. It happened largely due to what was happening around the world then.

As Mr. Azuma has said, the timing of the releases, as well as the feelings of both directors and creators as they were producing, can often become illuminating points of the work. I wasn't sure if everyone understood these elements, yet judging from people's comments tonight, I realize that I've communicated them. But again, as a creator, such elements are unintended, and this probably goes for Mr. Anno with his *Evangelion* too. Social conditions influence creators. After some filtering and processing, the works emerge.

HA: To add one small point: what basically I wanted to discuss in *Animalizing Postmodernity* was to show that it is nothing but the reality, which prompts twenty-first century otaku to produce (and take part in) a significant exchange in fictional semiotics. People use the word escapism, that otaku are escaping from reality, but then you must also recognize that *reality itself is what makes them want to escape*.

In any case, if you only look at what's produced… well, we did speak of Japanese pop culture in terms of "huge success" and "golden age" tonight, but to tell you the truth, as this is something we haven't said at all, but in Japan people have actually *given up* on the future and potential for

anime and games. This is because it has been ten years since *Evangelion*, and we still haven't had anything that exceeds it, to put it bluntly. Of course, *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex* is truly great and I mean it (!), but it's not easy to exceed *Evangelion*, right?

(Sato nods.)

HA: To put it simply, it is as if things have stopped for the last ten years. In the last decade, we've only accumulated more and more fictional, symbol-laden stories with lots of cute girls. What in the world is going on here? That's the general impression of otaku in Japan. At the same time, we know that there is something that makes this necessary.

You won't see these elements, no matter how many times you watch their works. What goes on in each piece is just a bunch of useless junk (laughs). But if you place this work in a certain context, and read it in a certain way, it begins to appear as a response to the reality. That's what I do as my job.

This may be a little different from what Sato-san said, but you can see different facets of reality by changing the way you read. You may not find them directly reflected in the artifacts themselves. It's actually a pretty challenging task to analyze the influences of '95 (sarin, Kobe earthquake) and '01 (9/11 attack) in Japanese anime. But I do think, that if you decipher with a certain method, you can observe the influences very clearly. That's my opinion.

Q: Do you think the growth of otaku represents alienation from the mainstream Japanese society? If so, does it represent any threat to the cohesiveness and homogeneity of Japanese society?

HA: Yes. I agree with you. Actually, I also wrote a little bit about this in my book. (laughs) Otaku has been discussed as a problem in close relation with another problem, which is social withdrawal. It is basically a refusal to enter the social sphere of adults, to stay home at all times, to keep reading lots of manga and playing lots of games. It depends on how the statistics are measured, but it is said that there are as many as one million kids like this in Japan.

Another highly common characteristic of younger generation is to be, beyond anti-social, completely *asocial.* Instead of rousing and expressing their discontent with society as a whole, they refuse *any* behavior involving any kind of participation in the social network at all. There is no doubt that the notion of social withdrawal as a conscious choice, and the expression itself, "otaku" are deeply connected. And on top of all that, Japan has been experiencing a very long

recession since the 90's. The entire Japanese society has lost a sense of purpose.

Japanese society is commonly described in terms of the word "wa," as a society that prides itself in being strongly cohesive. But in my opinion, it was a typical symptom during the high economic growth. After the burst of the bubble, and growing differences in the distribution of wealth, there is no longer the same sense of purpose to be found in the society. And, going to a good university no longer promises high income in the future. Under these conditions, the young generation distances themselves more and more from the harmony, and so-called unity of the society. It is true that otaku expression functions as a platform to construct an alternative media through alternative modes of communication. So the answer to the question of whether the collapse of the cohesiveness of Japanese society and the growth of otaku culture and expression are related is yes. Indeed, the two are absolutely related.

Q: This question is for Mr. Sato, about working with Yoko Kanno, and the music that she puts together. Does that really put a lot more spirit behind your work, and make it that much more powerful when it hits the other shores or even just in Japan itself? The different themes in *Cowboy Beebop* and the hip hop theme in *Samurai Champloo*… there are some similarities with those and in other anime, but it seems that the work has to do with music to me, from the musician's standpoint.

DS: It happens by chance, but I've had many opportunities to work with Yoko Kanno. I collaborated with her in *Cowboy Beebop* and *Wolf Train*. She truly is a wonderful person. The greatness of her as a musician and a composer is her capacity to absorb all genres of music, make them her own, and respond to the demands of the directors.

If you ask me what music means for me… we are conversing by words now, right? I also use words for my profession, but they are powerless. I wish that I could speak with you directly now, but my words do not live in the same world as yours. But music is different. I run a music label, and it is for dance music. I love techno, house and also hip hop. I believe in the powers they have. This is why the theme of the next anime, *Eureka Seven*, is the rise and fall of techno, starting from New Wave to Manchester. I wanted to write a story of youths who live in a world that has already ended; with recognition that the term "New Wave" is no longer "new." This is why I've chosen dance music, techno and house as a theme, instead of hip-hop this time.

Music is my identity, and something that I believe in. To tell the truth, I do not believe in words. My work requires me to use words, but I do not use music for my occupation. In that sense, I

work with words, but I believe in music. Sad music sounds sad for anybody in the world. Joyful music and danceable music lack borders. I believe in this strongly, and for this reason music is a significant element of my creative work. Did I satisfy your question?

DM: Unfortunately, that will have to be the last question. I just want to thank the Japan Society for hosting this event, and I'd like to encourage everyone to take a look at the events calendar because they do a lot of cool events here, and I'd like to say thanks for the two guests for coming all the way from Tokyo. You are welcome to linger around in the lobby, and thanks very much for coming.

[Program end]

Program Moderator bio: Douglas McGray writes about social and political issues, technology, and culture for such publications, such as *The New York Times Magazine, The New York Times, The Atlantic Monthly, Harper's, Wired, The New Republic, Mother Jones, Travel and Leisure* and *Foreign Policy*, where he is a contributing writer (and was previously a featured editor.) He will be a contributing writer at the new Los Angeles magazine when it launches in February 2006. The name for this magazine is *West*. He is California-based, and is a Fellow at the New American Foundation. His work has been profiled in the cover of *Time Asia* and in *the Year of Ideas Issue* by *The New York Times Magazine*. Doug was also a former Japan Society's Media Fellow as well as the advisor to Japan Society's US-Japan Innovator's Project, which is an ongoing dialogue among American and Japanese Innovators in business, civil society and culture.