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How the Densha Otoko Embraces and Disarms Critics of Otaku Culture

Murakami Shosuke’s *Densha Otoko* tackles the supposedly true story of a man who, like many others like him, struggled to be a “socially functioning” person of society. This type of person, called the *otaku*, was sculpted out of a sequence of events, and is most notably associated with the mainstream birth of technology, anime, and manga. Though seen in a negative light for most of its early years, the otaku gained popularity after mass distribution of the *Densha Otoko* franchise in the form of novel, film, and TV show.

The otaku persona arose as one of the many substitutes for the dying postwar salaryman due to the entrance of the newer post-bubble society (Napier 164-165). However, the otaku was not well-received initially due to the lack of utilitarianism and embodiment of difference characterized by the idea of the otaku. This clash against the *nihonjinron’s* homogeneity was a display of social immaturity (Roger Goodman 60). Such a disruption to the silky thread of Japan’s *wa*, or harmony, would undoubtedly draw uneasy eyes from those who pride themselves in upholding the tradition of being a working piece in Japanese society.

In addition to this deeper utilitarian reason, there was a traumatically horrid event that brought further disgust and fervor against the otaku in the same flavor as discrimination. In the years 1988 and 1989, a 26-year-old man, Miyazaki Tsutomu, was responsible for the inhumane brutal murders of four young girls. The image of this murderer was brought under public light as a full-fledged otaku, with news outlets illustrating his room and its contents: thousands of video tapes featuring anime, pornography, and Sci-Fi movies. As the public digested these horrible crimes, the general consensus was that the otaku was dangerous by association, as they are drawn into a fantasy world that was indistinguishable from reality (Morikawa 8).

In the film, the main protagonist, whom we shall call “Densha,” is the typical otaku who struggles with interpersonal relationships, which the audience sees in his interactions with his coworkers, people on the train, and his normative romantic interest, dubbed “Hermes.” However comedic and painfully awkward it is, Densha’s character plays a decent role representing the image of the otaku as seen by more conventional members of society. Densha is not alone in that image – many of his “online friends” paint self-portraits as well, including the militant-focused trio of geeks who occasionally appear as soldiers as a way to represent the “love is war, especially for the otaku” mentality.

It is true that many who identify as otaku are associated with *hikikomori*, individuals who are a “willful non-normative subject” challenging the heteronormative family-based *ie* national characteristics of Japan (Overell 209). As a rebel against the institutionalized hierarchical *ie* system, the hikikomori willfully sets themself up for failure since it is expected that those in Japanese society pledge loyalty to their *ie* in return for financial security (Goodman 63). Hikikomori are notorious for their refusal to leave their rooms for extended periods of time, truly embracing the virtual world over real in-person experiences out of hopelessness for the world created by the previous generation and the 1990s bubble burst. Such is the case for one of Densha’s online friends. Played by Eita Nagayama, the hikikomori in the film has a glass half-empty mentality, oftentimes directing Densha to not think of Hermes’s gestures as romantic advances, which can be explained by the low morale of a hikikomori. However, his character is not static, as he finds hope through Densha’s story and begins exploring the outside world at the end of the film. While the film doesn’t dive too deep into the specific case of the hikikomori, it is quite interesting and insightful that the audience receives several different types of otaku and other nonnormative personas in the story, since those who previously found the otaku repulsive can understand their thought processes from a first-person point of view, as those friends gave advice to Densha over the course of his experiences with Hermes. The entire ensemble of characters fashioned an image that contrasted with the “stereotypical creepy *otaku* type” and were “rendered as totally unthreatening,” as Susan Napier perfectly words in her article (Napier 166).

It’s through these disclaimed true accounts that the audience is able to find that the otaku and hikikomori type personalities are harmless and, at their cores, sweet and humane, though reinforcing the preconceived notion that they lack the normative masculinity characterized by the previous male model, the salaryman. Throughout the film, for example, Densha wears a high-pitched, and oftentimes, stammering voice. Before his haircut, he brushes his long hair past his eyes in a highly feminine manner as we see in his first call with Hermes (17:00).

The film also furthers the dichotomic personas of the otaku and salaryman in favor of the former by portraying the man on the train as an uncomfortable source of disharmony, as he drunkenly harasses the other passengers in the beginning of the film. This choice allows the viewers to categorize Densha as the hero who stands up to the antagonist in the same fashion as a fearless and honorable samurai – a clever move since the otaku had lacked necessary preexisting inherent proponents prior to the film. There is an irony here considering the samurai was the original participator in the *ie* system in the Tokugawa period (Goodman 63). However, it must be noted that the film makes sure not to completely villainize non-otakus since one of Densha’s online supporters was portrayed to be a cold businessman in a failing marriage with another online supporter of Densha. Throughout the movie, he patches things up with his wife with various romantic gestures.

The “Densha Otoko” both beautifully and painfully reveals to the rest of Japanese society that the otaku persona is not a source of danger, which was the previous mass misconception due to the Miyazaki crimes. Instead, the audience witnessed the sweet and harmless nature of the otaku and other deviants of Japanese society as Densha tried his hardest to be with Hermes, an unmistakably orthodox member of society. The outcome of the film involves the attempt to reconstruct Japanese society from a dichotomic society involving the normal and abnormal to one that empowers the deviants, without tearing down those who are identified as more normal.

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