
Magical Girls and Atomic Bomb Sperm: Japanese Animation in America

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Annalee Newitz

Magical Girls and Atomic Bomb Sperm

Japanese Animation in America



In the past few years, there has been a noticeable escalation in the availability of Japanese animated films in America. At my local Blockbuster video store, a new “animation” section was created several months ago which is largely comprised of Japanese animation: one can rent everything from movies like the highly acclaimed *Akira* to a series of videos from popular animated TV shows aired in America such as *Robotech* and *Speed Racer*. Known to fans as *anime*, Japanese animation is available mostly on videocassette or laserdisc, and it is far more than just cartoons for children. Often graphically violent and sexual, *anime* range from comic romances about high school students to pornographic tales of demons whose penises are larger than skyscrapers. *Anime* can be feature films, OVA (original video animation, or “straight to video” releases), or Japanese television series collected on video. A “Japanese animation festival” on the cable “Sci Fi Channel” introduced American viewers all over the country to popular *anime* such as the satirical film *Project A-ko* and the science fiction series *Dominion: Tank Police*. Furthermore, the past seven years have seen a massive expansion and organization of American fans of Japanese animation; clubs, conventions, and fanzines

dedicated to *anime* and its fan culture have sprung up on college campuses and in large cities all over the United States.¹

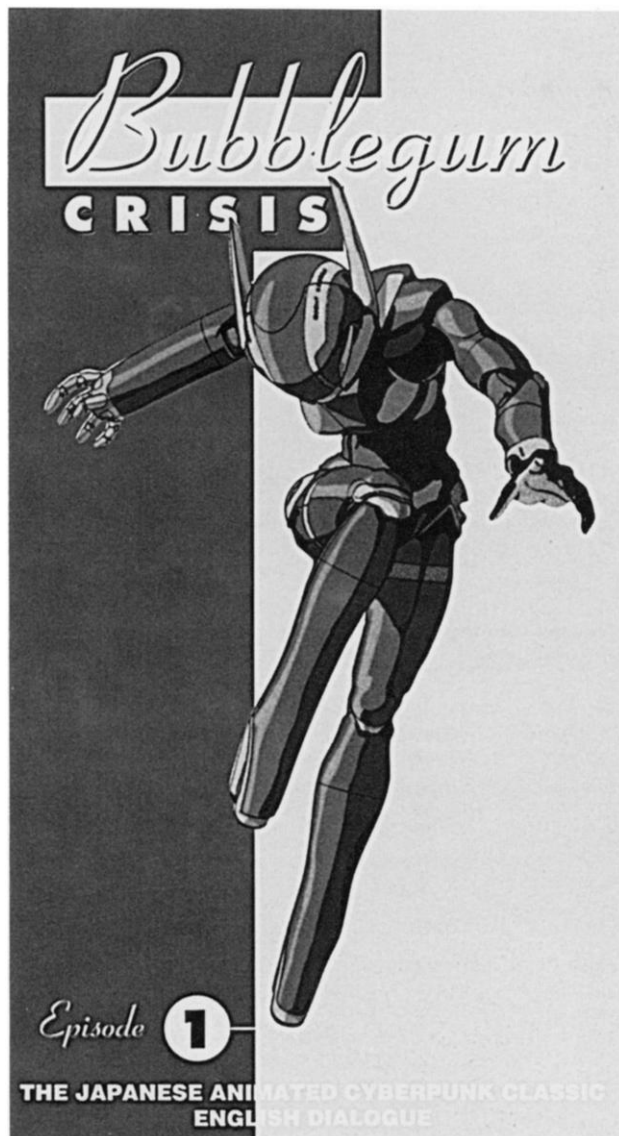
Small distribution companies in the United States will sometimes make *anime* available to fans who shop at specialty video stores or through catalogues. More often than not, fans get their *anime* from each other: there are networks of fans who use home multimedia technology to subtitle *anime* brought from Japan. Using a software program designed for this purpose, fans transfer *anime* from laserdisc to videotape, editing in the subtitles. Many of the *anime* contain this edited-in subtitle: "Subtitled for fans by fans. Not for sale or rent." I found this on bootlegged tapes and on tapes I rented from a local specialty video store. With a few exceptions, such as the kinds of mainstream videos one can find at Blockbuster or on American television, *anime* are circulated through fan communities, either at conventions or fan clubs. Fans of *anime* in the United States are engaging in what critics such as John Fiske or Constance Penley might call "appropriation."² That is, they are transforming Japanese culture for their own uses, which are somewhat different from the uses to which it might be put in Japan. Whereas *anime* are mainstream culture in Japan, in America they are still "alternative culture," particularly when we start talking about the hard-to-find videos. For this reason, American fans enjoy *anime* partly because it allows them to feel as if they have specialized knowledge ordinary Americans do not. On another level, the fans' appropriation of *anime* involves translating and duplicating it so that it is accessible to a wider audience in the West. This allows them to convert a Japanese product into a uniquely American one. What might be satisfying for Americans about this is that it essentially allows them to "steal" Japanese culture away from Japan. Perhaps this is some form of revenge on a consumer culture which seems to have surpassed their own in its power and complexity?

Animation could be described as just another lucrative Japanese export commodity—like high technology or cars—which is consumed avidly by Americans who often feel it is unlike anything avail-



Bubblegum Crisis: A "Magical Girl" patrolling Mega Tokyo in A.D. 2033 (opposite page); Hayakawa, an *otaku* pinup girl, in *Kimagure Orange Road* (above)

able in the West. In 1980-81, exports of Japanese television shows were led by animated programs, which accounted for 56% of total television exports.³ But what kinds of social issues are involved in the sudden popularity of *anime* in America? Certainly, there is a strong possibility that this popularity might be both a result of and a cause for American anxieties about the potency of its national culture in the world. We can look at this anxiety through several critical lenses: by considering how gendered and sexual relations get represented in *anime*, by examining what it means to be a fan of another country's mass culture, and in theorizing how America understands itself in relation to Japanese cultural imperialism. Most importantly, watching *anime* gives Americans a chance to reflect on their own (national) culture in displaced form. Although *anime* does often strike us as utterly different, or "other," it also quite noticeably resembles—and is influenced by—American mass culture and generic narratives. That Americans might be interested in looking at their own culture through Japanese eyes tells us that Americans' feelings about their own culture are deeply bound up with America's evolving relationship with Japan.



Bubblegum Crisis: The ambiguously gendered, high-tech *anime* crime fighter

Otaku in Love

Otaku is the Japanese slang term for people who become particularly loyal fans of a subculture. It is somewhat insulting to be called *otaku*, and it gets translated into English as “fanboy.” *Otaku* is a term often used to describe a fan of *anime* subcultures, and he is usually understood to be obsessive, socially inept, or pathetic. I use the pronoun “he” for a reason—while quite racially mixed as a group, *otaku* are overwhelmingly male, particularly in the U.S.⁴ For this reason, it is important to understand that what is at

stake for Americans watching *anime* is certainly bound up with gender identity, especially masculine identity. What is striking for the scholar of gender and film in the United States, and more generally in the West, is that some genres avidly consumed by American *otaku* are often conceived of as “women’s genres” in the West. For instance, one of the most popular *anime* genres is the romantic comedy,⁵ which features male point-of-view characters. Aside from the romantic comedy genre, the kinds of generic narratives popular with American fans are more in line with Western expectations about gendered taste preferences: *otaku* enjoy *mecha* (a term used to designate science-fiction or action narratives which focus mostly on technology) and various shades of fantasy-horror. Looking at these three (sometimes overlapping) genres,⁶ we can form a fairly complete analysis of gendered and sexual representations in *anime*.

The romantic comedy genre can be characterized by one of its chief subgenres: “magical girls.” Magical girls appear in a number of romantic comedies such as *Video Girl Ai*, *Urusei Yatsura*, *Tenchi Muyo*, and *Oh! My Goddess!* All feature young men who have romantic, but non-sexual, relationships with women who possess superhuman powers. These powers might range from preternatural strength to psychic abilities and interdimensional traveling. *Ai* comes to life out of a videocassette, Lum in *Urusei Yatsura* is an alien, the women in *Tenchi Muyo* are spirits, and Belldandy in *Oh! My Goddess!* is a goddess. Keiichi (the college student protagonist) accidentally orders over the phone from the “Goddess Relief Agency.” Like American sitcoms of the 1960s such as *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie*, the magical girl genre features women who are simultaneously powerful and traditionally feminine. Often, jokes center around the mishaps involved in the magical girl’s effort to hide her powers so that she may appear demure. The men in these *anime* are young, bewildered, and sexually inexperienced—they are, as one *anime* fan put it to me, the kind of “nice guy” we hope can win the heart of a “special girl” (or a magical girl).

Relationships between characters in the magical girl genre are characterized by slapstick-style encounters which are sexy but innocent, and realistic but fantastical. In *Oh! My Goddess!*, for example, Keiichi is a fairly “realistic” cartoon figure, drawn to appear like an ordinary college freshman. His daily experiences, as well as his friends, are also believable, intended to evoke the kinds of feelings and situations a young adult audience might encounter. Keiichi lives in his college dorm and tries desperately to fit in with

a group of slightly older students who mock him about his lack of experience with women. Like an ordinary young man, he studies frantically for exams, goes to the beach, and loves to race his motorcycle. His magical girl Belldandy (the goddess) even arrives in his life in a ludicrously pedestrian manner: trying to order take-out food over the phone, Keiichi accidentally orders a goddess instead. Belldandy is the one “fantastical” animated figure in the show. She floats; her hair is impossibly long and fluffy; her eyes sparkle constantly; and her body is so perfectly proportioned we cannot help but remember that we are, after all, watching a cartoon. When Belldandy offers Keiichi one wish, he makes the mistake of asking that she remain with him always. This magical stipulation, then, becomes the joke and the romance at the heart of *Oh! My Goddess!* Belldandy, the flagrantly magical figure, must accompany Keiichi everywhere in his incredibly normal life. After getting him kicked out of his (all male) dormitory, Belldandy must find a way to make herself a part of Keiichi’s world, and he must do the same for her. Usually they do this by trying—humorously and often unsuccessfully—to hide Belldandy’s true nature.

The magical girl subgenre, based upon the idea that women should conceal their power, would probably not get produced in the United States at this point in history, particularly since the advent of feminism and the women’s rights movement. Even Disney, a notoriously conservative corporation, attempted to respond (albeit minimally) to feminist issues in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) by de-emphasizing Beauty’s breast size and turning her into a more assertive and intelligent character. In Japan, feminist issues are less openly recognized as legitimate social concerns, and their popular culture reflects this tradition. When American fans consume magical girl *anime*, partly what they enjoy about the genre is its historical incongruence with American mainstream culture. Or, to put it another way: they are enjoying depictions of women which take for granted that women are subordinate to men. Magical girls exercise their power, like Jeannie in *I Dream of Jeannie*, largely in the home or in their private relationship with a young man—they do not, for example, ordinarily use their power to get work or influence outside the domestic realm. Furthermore, the idea that a powerful woman would have to be “magical” in the first place is an indication that magical girl *anime* place female power itself in the realm of fantasy. In America, female public authority is an undeniable—if contested—social reality; hence, I believe, Americans consume magical girl *anime* as a

form of nostalgia for the kind of social situations made possible by traditional gender roles. That these *anime* are often comic is in some ways a form of “cover” for the American fan of magical girl *anime*. He is able to have his nostalgia and laugh it off all at once, thus propping up and denying what is essentially his enjoyment of male-dominated gender hierarchy.

But the American *otaku*’s pleasure in romantic comedy *anime* goes beyond simply experiencing nostalgia for male domination. While traditional gender roles in America are associated with various kinds of social oppression and prejudice, they are also linked to an idealized notion of romance. This idealized romance is common in romantic comedy *anime*, particularly outside the slapstick magical girl genre. Male heterosexual fans might enjoy romantic comedy *anime* not just because they wish they could dominate women, but also to experience an “old-fashioned” romantic story. A “good” romance in this vein is made possible to a certain degree by the Japanese practice of segregating girls and boys in public situations and placing a strong taboo on sexuality. As a result, relationships between young men and women in romantic *anime* are based upon sexual innuendo and deferral—that is, they are about fantasized expectations, rather than sexual consummation and its aftermath (a common theme in contemporary American romance). In *anime*, romantic love is possible precisely because overt sexuality is not. This sets up, for American audiences, what might appear to be a more “innocent” and intensely passionate series of encounters between the characters. Ultimately, the romantic comedy offers the American *otaku* representations of male sexual passivity (or non-sexual eroticism) which are simultaneously seductive and terrifying.

The TV series *Kimagure Orange Road*, which is one of the most popular romantic comedy *anime* with American fans, is a soap opera-type narrative which offers us a glimpse of masculine desire American men see very little of in their own mass culture. Its male point-of-view character wants to fall in love, rather than simply experience sex. Like the magical girl subgenre, many of its basic themes are, for an American audience, somewhat anachronistic. *Kimagure Orange Road* is the story of a “magical boy,”⁷ a high-school student named Kyousuke who has telekinetic powers (he comes from a family of telekinetics). He falls in love with a young woman named Madoka, who is not magical, but nevertheless is so physically strong that she routinely beats up whole groups of men. Clearly, both characters are slightly fantastical, and this aspect of the narrative is enhanced by the fact that

Kyousuke continually has fanciful romantic dreams about wooing, kissing, or simply being near Madoka. He imagines himself with her on the beach at sunset, or watching her play the saxophone. Indeed, the clichéd image of a lonely Madoka playing sad saxophone music is an important, recurring romantic motif in *Kimagure Orange Road*, and sets the tone for much of Kyousuke's romantic longings. In a scene to which fans often refer as a perfect *Kimagure Orange Road* moment, Kyousuke hides while Madoka—who is portrayed as a kind of social outcast—plays the blues on her sax in an empty classroom. It is enough for him simply to be with her, even if she does not realize he is there.

That Kyousuke should be so excited, bashful, and embarrassed by his desire to date Madoka might be a source of amusement for American fans, but Kyousuke's emotions are also the source of this *anime*'s potency as a romance. In the United States, young men (and, increasingly, young women) are encouraged by their popular youth culture to experience their romantic feelings as overtly sexual. Romantic comedies in America are frequently sex comedies, not stories about emotions and wishes. I think one reason young American men become fans of romantic comedy *anime* is because these narratives represent a form of heterosexual masculinity which is not rooted in sexual prowess, but romantic feelings. *Anime* offer to the post-sexual revolution generation stories which suggest that young men and women do not need to have sex in order to experience love. Admittedly, the kind of love recommended by these *anime* is often based on social values American feminism has done right to condemn. But the Americans who consume them are also responding to—and perhaps attempting to escape—the hypersexuality of their own media culture by reimagining romance as a relationship which goes beyond the purely sexual. In particular, *Kimagure Orange Road* offers young men a chance to identify with a character who “gets the girl” because he loves and admires her from afar—passively.

Like *Kimagure Orange Road*, the TV series *Ranma 1/2* is very popular with American fans. However, *Ranma 1/2* is not romantic like *Kimagure Orange Road*, and overtly treats sexual themes bound to arouse heterosexual male discomfort. It concerns another magical boy, Ranma, whose special power is actually called a “curse”: when splashed with cold water, he turns into a beautiful, curvaceous girl. His father Genma suffers a similar curse which turns him into a giant panda when he is splashed with cold water.

Both return to their “normal” bodies when splashed with hot water. Unlike most romantic comedy *anime*, *Ranma 1/2* features a good deal of nudity and sexualized encounters between Ranma and nearly everyone he knows. A frequent joke revolves around someone squeezing Ranma's breasts in order to “believe” that he has transformed into a female. Ultimately, there is really only one difference between Ranma-the-male and Ranma-the-female besides their gendered bodies: female Ranma has red hair, and male Ranma has black hair. Both wear the same clothes, and both are martial arts experts. But it is clear that becoming female is a problem for Ranma. He is perpetually trying to hide his female half at school; and many of the slapstick routines in the series depict his efforts to avoid being splashed with cold water in public (although at home, Genma is constantly throwing him into a handy pool of water outside).

Ranma 1/2 betrays a number of male fears at the heart of the comedy romance genre, which emerge full-blown in the *mecha* and horror-fantasy *anime* I will discuss in a moment. Quite simply, *Ranma 1/2* demonstrates to the young man who enjoys romantic comedy *anime* that he is constantly in danger of becoming a girl. Because women are associated in these *anime* with passivity, a character like Ranma stands in for male anxieties about losing power or being ridiculed. Indeed, Genma uses Ranma's transformative ability as a way of humiliating and punishing him. “I am so ashamed of you!” Genma yells at one point after turning Ranma into a girl by throwing him in the pool. Like Ranma, the male *anime* fan has a “feminine half” who enjoys passively consuming animated fantasies about love. His attachment to non-sexual romance might be said to feminize him. Especially for the heterosexual male fan who watches *anime* in an American context, this fear would be particularly acute, since American romantic comedies are aimed at a largely female audience. But the American *otaku*'s worries about gender transposition, solicited humorously in *Ranma 1/2*, go beyond a fear that he might be enjoying “women's culture” too much. He is, more importantly, enjoying this culture with other men. American fans consume and discuss *anime* in heavily male-dominated environments.

One of Ranma's biggest problems in the series is Kuno, a young man who has fallen in love with Ranma's female half and constantly asks her out on dates. Ranma-the-male has a nightmare about Kuno kissing him, and is clearly alarmed by Kuno's desire (which is not properly homosexual, since he desires

The Overfiend: The uncontrollable, monstrous human body of anime



Ranma-the-female, but Ranma nevertheless understands it as such). Furthermore, Ranma's only love interest is the tomboyish Akane, who can beat up all the boys in their high school without batting an eyelid. Akane is an ambiguously gendered character who seems more like a young man than anything else—in fact, Ranma jokes with her that his breasts are larger than hers when he is female. Clearly, one of the issues for young heterosexual men enjoying depictions of male sexual passivity is a fear of becoming bisexual, or even homosexual.⁸ Hence, enjoying these *anime* with other men might also be a source of discomfort. Interestingly enough, one of the most popular depictions of Ranma on fan T-shirts and posters is of Ranma-the-female being emphatically feminine in a skimpy bikini, which she rarely (if ever) wears in the show. That is, even within the straight male *otaku* culture, Ranma is consumed as a sex object. Fans are thus put into the unwanted position of identifying with the ambiguous sexual orientation of a character like Kuno, and are therefore understandably nervous about Ranma's male half—precisely because they are somehow attracted to his female half. Keeping Ranma as female as possible in fan culture would certainly help alleviate this nervousness. But however you look at him/her, Ranma represents a kink in the heterosexual *otaku*'s desire.

Multicultural Sexuality

While sexuality and explicit representations of intercourse are not the focus of most romantic comedy *anime*, they are foregrounded in the *mecha* and fantasy-horror genres. Often, however, sexuality is coded in certain ways,⁹ specifically in the *mecha anime*. A perfect example of this kind of coding occurs in the highly surrealistic live-action film, *Tetsuo the Iron Man*, which has achieved cult status both in Japan and in the United States. While not specifically an *anime*, it deals with a number of *anime* themes, particularly what happens to people who enjoy fan culture too intensely. *Tetsuo the Iron Man* is the story of a *mecha otaku*, a young man named Tetsuo who is gradually converted into a heap of machine parts during the course of the film. His transformation begins when he is hit by a cab, although clearly there is supposed to be a connection between his *otaku*-style obsession with machines and his transformation. The most graphic portions of the film come when he begins turning into "iron man"—he discovers that the flesh of his leg has been torn open by a thick metal cable which originates inside his body. Later, when large portions of his body have been converted into machine parts, his penis turns into a huge industrial drill which he uses to penetrate and kill his girlfriend.

Once he has done that, his transformation is complete, and the rest of the film is caught up in a final fight scene between Tetsuo and another iron man. *Tetsuo the Iron Man* is an ironic meditation on popular culture and its *otaku* which tries to make a connection between consuming popular culture and being physically transformed by it: Tetsuo the *mecha otaku* becomes *mecha*. His masculine sexuality is clearly important to this transformation, since his drill penis is nearly the last part of his body to go *mecha*, and performs quite spectacularly when it does. Looking at

evaporates. While men who come into contact with this guyver armor experience agony as it first penetrates their bodies, the women who don guyver armor are penetrated vaginally by its metal tentacles, stripped naked, and given what appear to be orgasms as the armor envelops them. Put simply, what hurts men about this human-*mecha* fusion is a source of pleasure and gratification for women.

Furthermore, in terms of female representation, *mecha* is treading the same ground as romantic comedy. There is a subgenre of *mecha* which closely par-

Oh My Goddess!:
Adolescent sexuality—one
of the recurring motifs of
Japanese animation



these images, we have to ask: What kind of sexuality is Tetsuo acting out here? There are really two answers to this question, one having to do with sexuality specifically, and another having to do with why fans consume popular culture.

In the *mecha anime*, *Guyver: Bio-Booster Armor*,¹⁰ we find another example of Tetsuo's form of sexuality. After encountering a piece of alien technology, the young male protagonist in *Guyver* finds himself enveloped in a huge, high-tech suit of armor. While it greatly enhances his physical strength and stature, the "guyver armor" also fuses with him at a biological level: it penetrates his face and body with metal tentacles and causes him excruciating pain. This scene is highly reminiscent of Tetsuo's discovery of the metal cable in his leg. The guyver armor helps its wearer to defeat a monstrous mutant "bionoid," then

allels the "magical girl" subgenre. These *mecha*, such as *Bubblegum Crisis*, *Dominion: Tank Police*, *Iczer-1*, and *Appleseed*, feature women or female mutants who use guyver-like armor or high-tech ships and motorcycles to fight crime, corruption, or monsters of various types (especially bionoids, which appear in *Bubblegum Crisis* and its spin-off, *AD Police*). Unlike magical girls, however, these women use their power openly, but tend to hide their gender in one way or another. Especially in the series *Bubblegum Crisis*, the team of women are so heavily armored that occasionally a character will marvel, "You're women under there?" What these *anime* demonstrate is the way male and female bodies are largely indistinguishable once wedded to *mecha* technologies.

But at the same time, the male body appears to put up more resistance to *mecha* conversion: after all,

Tetsuo's penis is the last part of his body to be mechanized, and the guyver armor suits women far better than men (at least when they merge with it). This brings me back to my original question: What kind of sexuality is this? First of all, this is a kind of sexuality which allows for the creation of new beings. Tetsuo becomes the "iron man"; people in the guyver armor become half-human, half-technological; and the group of women in *Bubblegum Crisis* go from jobs as office girls, shop clerks, and singers to being vigilante cyborg cops chasing down bionoids in Mega-Tokyo. Bodies manipulated by *mecha* science are merged with pieces of technology in order to "give birth" to new creatures. In *All-Purpose Cultural Cat Girl Nuku Nuku*, for example, the main character Ryunosuke gains a "new sister" when his father, the scientist, creates Nuku Nuku out of the body of a robot and the brain of a cat. This is an instance in which childbearing is equated specifically with the merging of technology and biology. Female bodies and sexuality are therefore "best suited" to *mecha*—and male bodies and sexuality are disfigured by it—precisely because it is related to reproduction and giving birth.

Mecha reproduction also involves the co-dependence or synthesis of two radically different orders of being: human and machine. While visible gender difference in *mecha* is downplayed—men and women look the same in armor or spaceships—the differences between human bodies and *mecha* are quite stark. Clearly, these *anime* are telling a story about a very specific form of reproduction, one in which offspring are hybrid beings rather than duplicates of their "parents." This kind of reproduction, which we find in horror-fantasy *anime* as well, often ends up serving as an allegory for the horrors of miscegenation—and, implicitly, the horrors of multiculturalism. Miscegenation is, after all, one sexual corollary to American multiculturalism.

In Japan, a country with a history of isolationism and racism, miscegenation is a source of shame and anxiety.¹¹ Although miscegenation is also a problem for Americans, United States history is fraught with both miscegenation and its offspring: hence, Americans are at least more familiar (and perhaps slightly more comfortable) with the idea that their culture is a "multiculture." Japanese political and cultural leaders, in general, do not wish to define their culture as "multi" in any way. Multiculturalism is a concept quite alien to Japanese society, in which non-Japanese people—such as Koreans—face intense discrimination and contempt. Not surprisingly, then, horror-fantasy *anime* tend to represent the merging of separate

cultures, realms, or species as socially disruptive. The movie *Vampire Hunter D*, for instance, centers upon a half-vampire character whose goodness is confirmed when he battles to preserve the boundaries between the supernatural and human realms. Although he is himself the product of a vampire-human union, he nevertheless proves his honor by keeping the worlds which produced him as separate as possible.

3 X 3 Eyes is another fantasy-horror series about the chaos that ensues after separate species come together: the series is about Pai, a non-human girl from Tibet, and her relationship with a young human man named Yakomo.¹² Pursued by mutants and spirits which interfere with Yakomo's social life as a high school student, Pai eats Yakomo's soul and forces him to help her on her quest to become human. No matter how much she wishes to do good, Pai cannot help but destroy those around her precisely because she is trying to bridge the gap between historically separate social groups. There is little room for "multiculturalism" in these *anime*, for all "others" are monsters, and all monsters are out to destroy human society. To the extent that the Japanese associate multiculturalism with America, it becomes a double source of dread. While multiculturalism is at odds with Japanese monoculturalism, it is more importantly connected to the United States, which invaded and occupied Japan for decades after violently defeating them in World War II. Ultimately, narratives which raise issues of multiculturalism in Japan—however covertly—may depict horror and violation because they are associated with a historical period when Japan was invaded by another, very different culture and was powerless to stop it.

The OVA series *The Overfiend* offers the most coherent instance of an anti-multicultural bent in *anime*. The Overfiend is a being who has the power to unite the human world with "the demon world" and "the man-beast world," and we discover early on that this power is dangerous because it will lead to chaos, death, and—most horrifically—miscegenation between beings from each world. In fact, one character's vision of the post-Overfiend future depicts a burning city filled with humans copulating quite graphically with beasts and demons. When the Overfiend begins to manifest himself, we discover his power is directly linked to sexual reproduction. Nagumo, the Overfiend's father, first experiences his supernatural powers when engaged in intercourse. His penis becomes so large that it causes his partner's body to explode; then it grows to the point where it bursts out of the roof of the building he is in and destroys the city in a

flaming blast of sperm. Watching this animated image, it is clear that his penis has become some kind of atomic bomb. This “atomic blast” sets the stage for the birth of the Overfiend, who will allow the human realm to be invaded by demons and man-beasts.

We might understand *The Overfiend* to refer allegorically to American intervention in Japan during and after World War II. Since the American occupation of Japan did begin with an atomic blast, and did cause the intermingling of Japanese and American cultures, it is hard to dismiss the possibility of this interpretation. *The Overfiend* is associated with hypersexuality and a post-multicultural world (the world after the realms come together). Moreover, as the Overfiend’s power begins to spread, a number of men affected by it find their penises growing enormous, or by contrast, mutating into other kinds of organs such as eyes, tongues, or tentacles. Sometimes, penises become detached and are passed between characters as if they were magic wands or weapons. That is, the penis in *The Overfiend* is quite clearly metaphorical; but rather than standing in for “power” or “force,” penises literally become dangerous and destructive objects associated with masculine sexuality. What *The Overfiend*’s gigantic, mutated penises and sperm grotesquely caricature, I would suggest, is American imperialism in Japan.

The American occupation of Japan is a topic which has also been treated in “serious” *manga* (the Japanese word for comic books) such as *Barefoot Gen* and dramatic *anime* films such as *Grave of the Fireflies*. That is, the occupation is still a topic very much alive in Japanese popular culture, as both a manifest and a repressed theme. Interestingly, American influence on Japanese culture during the occupation is in many ways responsible for both the look and generic narrative qualities of *anime* in Japan. Frederik Schodt, in his book *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics*, writes that Japanese styles of animation are heavily influenced both by Western political cartoons and Disney animation.¹³ Famous *anime* director/illustrator Hayao Miyazaki (*Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Kiki’s Delivery Service*) is open about his admiration for Disney’s animation style. In other words, *anime* is itself a product of the American influence on Japanese everyday life, especially after World War II. Therefore, we might understand Tetsuo’s hideous transformation, for example, to be a comment specifically upon the way Japanese society has so eagerly consumed American-influenced mass culture. Tetsuo’s adoring consumption of American popular culture in several scenes is equated

with his later deterioration. Specifically, his penis, the mark of his (masculine) strength, is converted into a machine part. In other words, this movie offers a connection between consuming American mass culture and a problem with regulating the “source” of one’s strength. Tetsuo’s sexuality, like that of the Overfiend, represents both the physical and the cultural alterations we associate with cross-national—and multicultural—relations. That this representation is both ironic and ugly drives home the point that what we have here is a series of critical looks at American culture.

American *anime* fans—of all racial backgrounds—may be getting pleasure from *anime*’s negative representations of miscegenation and American multiculturalism for reasons surprisingly similar to those of the Japanese audience. That is, Americans may enjoy Japanese *anime* precisely because it criticizes American culture. A fan suggested to me that American audiences are tired of being blamed for the oppression of various minority groups and nations in the world, and respond to these *anime* as a respite from “political correctness” guilt so often talked about in United States mass media.¹⁴ Racist or nationalist sentiment in *anime* might seem refreshing to *anime* fans because it harks back to a less complicated (although more oppressive) series of relations in United States culture. I would also add that *mecha* and horror-fantasy *anime* are probably reassuring to American audiences precisely because they offer representations of traditional masculinity and male culture which are recognizable as such to a Western audience. In the United States, audiences are used to the idea that men enjoy—and are target markets for—movies about “action hero” men, machines, and gory special effects. This is in contrast to the romantic comedy, which is generally seen as a woman’s genre in the West. That is, both the gendered and racial implications of these *anime* might elicit the approval of an American audience unhappy with contemporary progressive changes in representations of American identity. Finally, because Japanese *anime* rarely disparage American culture overtly—or unequivocally—American fans can also consume them without necessarily acknowledging their negative American stereotypes.¹⁵

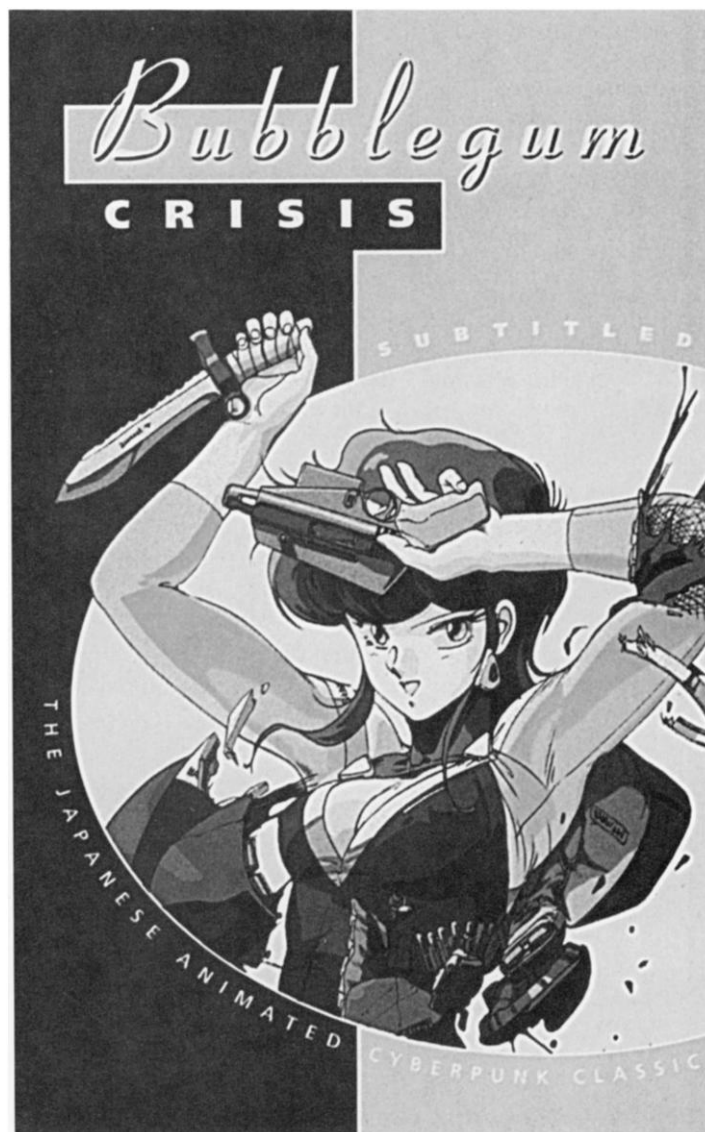
Textual Dependence

What I have been describing, in part, is the way Japanese *anime* take issue with past and present American cultural imperialism in Japan. Allegorical

representations of America, and Japanese people who consume American-influenced culture, are often frightening or heavily satiric. What is therefore ironic about Japanese animation fans in America is that they are, in many ways, the first generation of United States citizens to experience cultural imperialism in reverse: that is, they are being colonized by Japanese pop culture, rather than the other way around. One specific instance of this kind of cultural imperialist role-reversal in action came when Disney's "original story" for 1994's *The Lion King* was rumored to be a rip-off of the Japanese animated television series (shown in the U.S. during the early 1960s) called *Simba the White Lion*.¹⁶ Osamu Tezuka, the creator of *Simba* and *Astroboy*, is Japan's equivalent of Walt Disney, and his work was in fact inspired by Disney animation. But these days it appears that Disney is taking its inspiration from Japanese animation—certainly a sign that cultural influences are now traveling both ways (if not in a wholly opposite direction).

While we are used to understanding American media culture as imperialist, particularly through its dissemination in the Third World, Jeremy Tunstall has noted that Japan has always been an exception to the rule of what he calls American "media imperialism." Through setting up their own media monopoly and regulating American advertising and entertainment programming imports, Japanese media have remained largely insulated.¹⁷ Looking at the reception of Japanese animation in America, it seems possible that Japanese culture might become a "colonizing" force in other countries, particularly the United States. I make this comment strictly as an observation of what American culture seems to be experiencing, not as an attack on Japanese culture per se.

Gendered and sexual anxieties common to the romantic comedy, *mecha*, and horror-fantasy genres can tell us something about the structure of Japanese cultural imperialism—as an American fantasy and as an economic reality. I suggested before that what makes the romantic comedy *Ranma 1/2* notable is the way it deals explicitly with male fears about becoming feminized *otaku*—particularly in the United States, where romantic comedy is a "woman's genre." This anxiety, however, must be understood in the context of *The Overfiend*'s allegorical representations of miscegenation and imperialism. To explain why the *otaku* is feminized for consuming Japanese animation, and the *Overfiend* is hypermasculinized because he is associated with imperialism, we must deploy a widely accepted theorem of multicultural feminism: relationships in which women are subordinate to men often



Bubblegum Crisis: An anime mercenary, battling androids controlled by corporate bad guys

stand in for or mirror imperialist relationships in which one country is subordinate to the other.¹⁸ This theorem certainly helps to explain why *Ranma* is not only feminized, but also associated with China, a country invaded and occupied by Japanese imperialist forces several times during the 20th century. *Ranma*'s "curse" is in fact a Chinese curse, which he got during martial arts training with Genma in China. Moreover, *Ranma* wears his hair in a queue and his clothing is Chinese; at school, the students often refer to him as "the one in Chinese clothing." *Ranma*'s feminization, in other words, is bound up with his Chinese identification. On the other hand, the *Overfiend*'s ability to cause separate realms to colonize one another—to be an imperialist power—is associated with the deploy-



Ranma 1/2: The two faces of Ranma—the young boy who turns into a beautiful girl

ment of (American) atomic bombs from his penis. One might say that he literally penetrates a Japanese city with his erection, later blowing it up with his ejaculate. What matters here is that these figures bring together feminization with colonization, and masculinity with a colonizing country.

When Americans are *anime otaku*, they are, in a sense, being colonized by Japanese pop culture. Even if they are from Asian racial backgrounds, they are still Americans, and they are rejecting their national culture in favor of another national culture. Furthermore, the act of doing so seems to threaten them with feminization. Here, “feminization” is a way of figuring the kind of disempowerment and dependence a nation experiences when it is colonized. Albert

Memmi, in his *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, explains that the attempt to take on or enjoy a colonizing nation’s culture is one important way in which the colonized cope with their subordinate status. While he is speaking of direct and coercive forms of colonization, I think we can understand how his points might work within the context of cultural imperialism. Describing the psychology of the colonized, he writes:

A product manufactured by the colonizer is accepted with confidence. His habits, clothing, food, architecture are closely copied, even if inappropriate. . . . This fit of passion for the colonizer’s values would not be suspect, however, if it did not involve such a negative side. . . . The crushing of the colonized is included among the colonizer’s values. As soon as the colonized adopts those values, he similarly adopts his own condemnation.¹⁹

This description reminds us of the way fan culture works, particularly when something about the status of “fan” threatens feminization and disempowerment. The American *anime* fan is deliberately choosing to enjoy a foreign culture which—in this case—often ridicules and belittles his native culture. Elsewhere, Memmi suggests that the relationship between colonizer and colonized is one of dependence—this point goes back to Hegel’s famous dialectic of master and slave. I would point out that American fans of Japanese animation are in many ways dependent upon Japan not just for material commodities, but for stories. They are, in other words, dependent upon Japanese culture itself. One might say the American fan has a kind of textual dependence on Japanese culture, the only country which has the power to give him what he wants—a good story. And often, these stories are critical of the fan’s national culture as well as threatening to the fan’s sense of his own (masculine) power.

American fans of Japanese animation might be said to engage, consciously or unconsciously, in an imperialist relationship where Japan is dominant. Granted, it is a long way from influencing Americans’ imaginations through popular culture to controlling American national interests outright. But I would note that *anime* is growing in popularity just as Japanese systems of business management and Japanese corporations are replacing American ones all over the United States. Furthermore, the Japanese themselves are quite comfortable understanding America as a possible colony of Japan. In the Japanese bestselling

manga entitled *Japan, Inc.*, Shotaro Ishinomori has drawn and written a story about a Japanese automobile manufacturer to accompany economics lessons based on *Zeminaru Nihon keizai nyumon*, an introductory economics text put out by the prestigious *Nihon Keizai shimbun* (the Japanese equivalent of the *Wall Street Journal*). This *manga* at one point asserts:

Half of all US exports to Japan are foodstuffs and raw materials; the US imports mainly machinery and vehicle parts from Japan. This pattern is typical of trade between developing and advanced nations—with the US playing the part of the developing nation.²⁰

Here we see the combination of an animated story (in fact, *anime* are often based on *manga*) with an explicit lesson about American economic subordination to Japan.

Bearing this in mind, I want to return briefly to the popularity of *anime* romantic comedies, which American fans find so potent because they are based upon gender roles Americans associate with the 1950s and 60s. This period of time, the postwar period, was also when America exerted its greatest influence over Japan. In fact, this is when American troops occupied Japan. In other words, American nostalgia for previous forms of gender relations in America is linked to nostalgia for earlier versions of imperialist relationships as well. Romantic comedy *anime* remind Americans of a time when the Japanese were firmly under American control. It is interesting to note that by 1963–64, American TV series running on Japanese television reached their peak saturation at fifty-four shows.²¹ Hence, American control over Japan consisted of a combination of military and cultural imperialism. When fans nostalgically recollect “the old days” of rigid gender roles and passionate romance, they may also be recollecting the days when America occupied the dominant position in an imperialist relationship with Japan. Ultimately, it would seem that Japanese *anime* translate so well into American contexts because both nations have produced cultures dedicated to imperialism.

Throughout this analysis I have been referring to “culture,” and how it generates relationships between individuals and nations. One way culture does this is through ideology, which Louis Althusser has described as the “unity of the real relation and the imaginary relation between [people] and their real conditions of existence.”²² In other words, ideology is one way that people make reality change to suit their

imaginings. Let me close with a final example of the way Japanese animation works as a form of ideology specifically aimed at influencing a Western audience. *Anime* feature multiracial casts of characters, many—if not most—of whom are clearly Western. Often lead characters, especially women, have blonde hair and big blue eyes. Some *anime*, such as *Riding Bean*, take place in America—although Bean himself is supposed to be a combination of all the “best races” in the world (what this means is unclear). *Bubblegum Crisis*, with its team of Asian and Caucasian women, takes place in “Mega-Tokyo,” a city of the future²³ populated by people of all races in what appear to be equal numbers (unlike contemporary Tokyo). What these *anime* act out is a fantasy in which people of all races and Japanese people are interchangeable. They are imaginary versions of East-West relations which might exist someday, but do not exist yet. While this kind of ideology might seem satisfying and “right” to Americans raised in a multicultural, we must also remember that the Japanese are not multicultural. The ideological implications of these representations are more complex than something like “racial harmony.” This multicultural fantasy takes place largely in Japan, and all the races are speaking and being Japanese. What these *anime* suggest is that a very American-looking multicultural is in fact Japanese. And it also suggests that the Japanese are quite aware that part of their target audience for this *anime* is outside Japan, in multicultural America. In a way, these *anime* want to imply that Americans are Japanese. If Americans are already Japanese, then it should be no surprise to any American that Japan, economically speaking, already owns a large portion of the United States.

However, I would not want to end here, without acknowledging that there are implications to the ideology of *anime* which go beyond national interests. In fact, the production and consumption of *anime* within Japan are dramatized in *Otaku no video*, the partly-fictionalized *anime* story of Gainax corporation, a huge *anime* producer in Japan. *Otaku no video* is the tale of two college student *otaku* who form a lucrative company which manufactures “garage kits” (a form of model) related to *anime*. Often, these characters—based on Gainax’s employees—are drawn as zany superheroes who call themselves *otakings* and fly. Interspersed throughout this story are live-action “interviews” with Japanese *otaku*, supplemented with fake statistics and graphs about *otaku* culture in Japan. The *otaku* are all “nerds,” or people who have no social life. They have office jobs. Often they are supposed to appear slightly crazy, obsessed as they are

with taping every new animated show on TV, or dressing up like a favorite *anime* character. One “statistic,” which gets elaborated upon in many interviews, claims that 100% of *otaku* are virgins. The young men who form a company to manufacture *otaku* products are animated superheroes (rather than virginal, office worker nerds) precisely because they are producers and not consumers. The Japanese *otaku* consumers here are just as feminized and disempowered as I postulate American *otaku* fear they might be. In other words, the relationship of textual dependency is not necessarily one of colonizing country to colonized country. It is also the relationship of one class to another: wealthy capitalists to lower middle-class consumers.

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Notes

I would like to thank Kathleen Moran and Jillian Sandell for reading early drafts, and offering helpful suggestions. Thanks and credit should also go to the officers and members of the Japanese animation fan club, Cal Animage Alpha at UC Berkeley, who filled out questionnaires and talked to me about *anime*. Finally, I want to thank Ed Korthof, who introduced me to *anime* fan culture and helped to shape this article in immeasurable ways.

1. See Annalee Newitz, “*Anime Otaku: Japanese Animation Fans Outside Japan*,” *Bad Subjects*, April 1994, pp. 13-20, for more information on the composition and history of Japanese animation fan culture in the United States. In that article, I discuss the results of a survey I conducted among fans at a local fan club and fans on an Internet newsgroup, rec.arts.anime. I surveyed 100 (mostly American, with about 10% European) fans. Based on information I gathered from officers of a local UC Berkeley campus fan club (Cal Animage, Alpha Chapter), interest in Japanese animation among Americans has grown exponentially in the past 6 years. Cal Animage began as a club 7 years ago with about 20 members. In 1995, their membership had reached 300 officially, and their free weekly screenings of *anime* from members’ private collections and the club’s video library generally attract over 400 people, only some of whom are official fan club members.
2. See, for example, John Fiske’s *Reading the Popular* (Cambridge: Unwin Hyman, 1989) and Constance Penley’s work on K/S fan culture, “Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture,” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, et al. (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 479–500. Although American fans of Japanese animation who subtitle *anime* are not utterly changing the product or generating new narratives, they are certainly altering the way these narratives are consumed—particularly because fan-subtitled *anime* become “priceless” in the sense that they are not supposed to be sold, only traded or shown in the context of fan clubs.
3. Figures taken from Bruce Stonach, “Japanese Television,” in *The Handbook of Japanese Popular Culture*, ed. Richard Gid Powers and Hidetoshi Kato (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), p. 144.
4. In a typical *anime* fan club on the UC Berkeley campus, female membership hovers around 14%. When I surveyed fans over the Internet, my respondents were also roughly 14% female. There are no statistics available on fans in Japan, but certainly stereotypical *otaku* are male in the *anime* themselves. I would add, however, that in the *manga* (comic book) fan culture, there are many *manga* aimed specifically at women and girls. The vast majority of fans (roughly 90%) are between the ages of 15 and 25. Racial composition of fans is highly mixed, with nearly equal proportions European-American and Asian-American; about 10% of fans I surveyed were from other racial or ethnic backgrounds.
5. For a complete discussion of the romance as “women’s genre,” see Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance* (New York: Routledge, 1982), in which she explains how American mass-produced romance novels cater to a specifically female demographic by soliciting female anxieties and desire. Many of the romantic comedy *anime* share more with the romance genre than with comedy—particularly the soap opera-style romantic comedies.
6. For an excellent analysis of the problems applying Western (feminist) ideas about gender and sexuality to Japanese *manga* culture, see Anne Allison, *A Male Gaze in Japanese Children’s Cartoons, or Are Naked Female Bodies Always Sexual?* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, Asian/Pacific Studies Institute, 1993). In Allison’s brilliant discussion of masculinity, business relationships, and Japanese children’s cartoons in contemporary Japan, she argues that, for Japanese audiences, naked women are not necessarily sexual in the ways I will be arguing they are for Western audiences. Thus it is plausible to say that Japanese men, watching these *anime*, would not understand their gendered and sexual content in the way American men might.
7. I would add that Kyousuke’s status as a magical boy also places him in a passive position, particularly when we consider that most of the magical characters in this genre are girls.
8. When I attended the *anime* showings of a local fan club, one young man who was a “regular” used to come occasionally dressed up as Ranma-chan (the female Ranma). His presence clearly alarmed a number of the male fans, and his open identification with this gender-ambiguous character was a source of amusement and panic. One fan said to me openly, when I interviewed him, “That Ranma guy [the fan in Ranma drag] is really weird. We’re not all like that.”
9. Even in explicitly pornographic *anime*, sometimes sexuality is represented in visual code. For a discussion of how this works, see Sandra Buckley, “‘Penguin in Bondage’: A Graphic Tale of Japanese Comic Books,” in *Technoculture*, ed. Andrew Ross and Constance Penley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 186-188. Buckley explains that sex acts in *manga* are

sometimes converted into images of various objects which the reader understands to mean, for example, vaginal penetration, beatings, sucking, etc.

10. Later made into a low-budget U.S./Japanese-produced science-fiction live-action movie called *The Guyver* (1992), which stars Mark Hamill.
11. In Hiroshi Wagatsuma, "The Social Perception of Skin Color in Japan," in *Modern Japan*, ed. Irwin Scheiner (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1974), the author writes that the Japanese still tend to view whites—and especially blacks—as inferior races based on their skin quality or color. While the Japanese greatly admire white skin, Caucasian skin is sometimes derided as "transparent" rather than "white," or somehow more blemished and wrinkled than Japanese skin. Dark skin is largely undesirable, and indicates animality—hence the Japanese distaste for black or dark-skinned people. The children of mixed marriages are viewed critically, and certain combinations of features in mixed-race children are considered quite abhorrent.
12. When Pai meets Yakomo he is dressed as a woman so he can work as a hostess. In other words, the alliance between separate species also disrupts gender roles.
13. Frederik L. Schodt, *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics* (New York: Kodansha America, 1983), pp. 38-60.
14. Indeed, many fans I surveyed described their enjoyment of *anime* as stemming from its lack of attention to political correctness. One wrote that he enjoyed *anime* precisely because it is made by "a culture not utterly poisoned by political correctness."
15. For a more complete discussion of how this structure of disavowal works, see Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 9-34. Jameson argues that it is possible for a mass cultural text to work simultaneously as a critique and reinscription of a given ideology.
16. A detailed story about the possibility that Disney animators were influenced by Tezuka's work appeared in Charles Burrell, "Disney—'Lion' is Original," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 July 1994: D1. Animators interviewed for the article acknowledged that they might have been thinking of *Simba* when they designed *The Lion King*. Both narratives feature young lions whose fathers are killed by jealous brothers (named Claw in *Simba*, and Scar in *Lion King*). Both also feature hyenas as the "bad guys" and scenes in which their heroes see giant images of their fathers in the sky, urging them to take back their kingdoms.
17. Jeremy Tunstall, *The Media Are American: American Media in the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977) 39, pp. 160-163.
18. See, for example, Chandra Mahanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). While I have reduced the theses of this diverse branch of feminism in my account here, certainly one of the underlying principles of this avenue of inquiry is that there is a significant relationship between women and the status of "the colonized." Suffice to say that this relationship is problematic, and not always uniform in all its manifestations.

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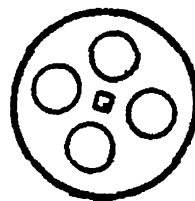
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19. Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p. 121.
20. Shotaro Ishinomori, *Japan, Inc.*, trans. Betsey Scheiner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 10.
21. Stronach, p. 138.
22. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 127-186.
23. *Mega Tokyo* is, by the way, quite self-consciously modeled on LA as portrayed in Ridley Scott's movie *Blade Runner* (1982). The main character in *Bubblegum Crisis* is named Priss, and heads a rock band called "Priss and the Replicants." Priss is also the name of one of the synthesized humans (called Replicants) in *Blade Runner*, played by Darryl Hannah.