Exotic Geeks
Problematizing Japanese and Western Anime Otaku

Abstract

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Abstract: *Exotic Geeks* critically examines the history of the word "otaku", used to denote various ideas related to geeky fans, from the early 1980s to the present day. The aim is to provide a foundation for future use of the term to describe concepts in aid of understanding film culture. However, most uses of the word to describe Japanese geeks have been tinted by orientalism, by general tendencies to pathologize fans, and by the historical coincidence that the word was first popularized in a media panic over a series of murders. Westerners have generally conceived of "otaku" through the lens of that Japanese panic, exoticizing them as alien super-geeks, or else appropriating the term to celebrate or condemn Western fans of Japanese exports, particularly anime (Japanese animation). Several other mutually contradictory definitions are also dealt with, especially Murakami Takashi's idea that "otaku" are those who carried the torch in sublimating the memory of the Second World War and the contradictions of Japan's long postwar humiliation as art. Murakami's theory is tested through close reading of three anime titles: *Royal Space Force: The Wings of Honneamise* (1987), *Gunbuster* (1988) and *Otaku no Video* (1991). The titles are selected to make the test easy, yet analyses reveal that the target audience of only one title unambiguously shares the traits which Murakami attributes to otaku. It is the author's conclusion that no existing concept of "otaku" is clearly useful to Western academia.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Japanese animation exists as a popular culture at home and has made inroads throughout the West (as well as in many non-Western countries), where it is called *anime*, the Japanese word for animation in general. Its present status in the USA can accurately be described as "at least a marginal niche in the mainstream".[1] The recent anime of Miyazaki Hayao are among those that have enjoyed true mainstream success in much of the West following the elevation of *Pokémon*, a very commercial children's franchise with a substantial anime element, to the status of a household name in the late 1990s. According to the latest scholarly anthology, some anime studios earn as much as 35% of their revenue from foreign markets.[2] Animation is clearly part of Japan's transformation from economic to cultural superpower.[3]

By "the West" in this essay, I mean what is broadly called the Western world, basically composed of all nations whose dominant culture descends from (western) Europe. What anime offers those cultures is poorly understood; like Japanese live action, the country's animation is too diverse to constitute one genre. Research into the matter is likely to illuminate not only post-industrial psychology and sociology but also the possibilities of animation. Even though it effectively preceded live action in the history of cinema,[4] animation has been marginalized in the West. The Japan External Trade Organization reports that some 60% of worldwide animation broadcasts are anime today.[5] These Japanese products arguably combine variety with popularity better than any other country's animation at any time. This may eventually have far-reaching consequences for the hegemony of live action itself.

Pokémon alone has been marketed in over 140 countries, resulting in global profits of more than $15 billion as of August 2003.[6] This essay is about a Japanese term, *otaku*, which has been used to warn Western parents not to let their children get involved with *Pokémon*.[7] Concepts of otaku are quite important to the study of anime, and hence to an understanding of animation's growing role in global human culture and economy, yet the term "otaku" is nebulous and of questionable value to science.

The most basic literal meaning of "otaku" is "house". The prefix (*o*) marks it as a polite reference to the figurative house ("home", "household" etc.) of the addressed. Art critic Sawaragi Noi reports that the word was popularized as something like a second-person pronoun ("you", "your") among housewives boasting of their "growing material wealth" in the 1960s.[8] Two decades later, it was first applied to their children in a radically different sense, and it is that modern sense I will explore in this essay. Most sources describe a form of these modern otaku, in Japan and abroad, as a core audience of anime, and as similar to geeks. However, there is a great deal of confusion and

disagreement about the word and the real relationship, if any, between otaku and geeks. This essay represents an attempt to help clarify what "otaku" means and what, if anything, distinguishes so-called otaku as a special kind of fandom and audience. I hope thereby to illuminate how the term is really of use to film studies, which is to say what scholars should be aware of before they decide how to use it.

Plenty of literature in languages I understand mentions otaku. However, the relevant set of the word's meanings hinge on concepts of geeks and nerds, terms which I will be using interchangeably throughout this essay. Unfortunately, there is a surprising dearth of scholarly works on those groups. What I've found relates mainly to irrelevant contexts, predominantly education. I was looking for *geeky fans*, something like the British concept of "anoraks", or like the subjects of *Trekkies* (Roger Nygard, 1997) and of its less derogatory sequel *Trekkies 2* (Roger Nygard, 2004). Fortunately, there is a substantial literature on fans, including sections of fandom that are often termed geeky in my experience, and occasionally in the literature as well.

Overview of Sources

Matt Hills specializes on fans with his PhD in cultural studies. His *Fan Cultures* (2002)[9] uses "geeky" along with "sad" to describe a negative stereotype of fans.[10] I will not attempt to define "geek" exhaustively since there are no known extensive definitions on which to base one of my own with a degree of authority, but for the purposes of this essay, I definitely don't intend for "geek" (i.e. "geeky fan") to convey any pathos or insult anyone. Basically, "geek" is used here to mean an unusually intense fan of one or more approximately middlebrow topics outside the mainstream of entertainment, especially topics requiring only mental faculties rather than strenuous physical activity, particular physical prerequisites, or ample social connections. For example, fans of things like science fiction and anime are often geeky, whereas fans of sports or modern dance are unlikely to be geeky about those particular topics. Nonetheless, a sports fan who memorizes very large quantities of statistics about her favourite team is a geek.

The lack of a more extensive definition here may be a flaw, since I will be making crucial references to the concept, and since there is no perfect consensus about it. Consider for instance how the adjunct professor Matthew J. Pustz, while charting American comic book fandom in *Comic Book Culture* (1999),[11] claims that fans of comics are even more likely than other fans to challenge one another in trivia contests and the like.[12] I would consider the fans he describes to be obvious geeks,[13] but compare his description to that of Lawrence Eng in the research seminar paper *Otak-who?* (2002):[14] "otaku seek to develop reputations for themselves; to become 'more of an otaku' than the next guy is a serious concern that is not implicit to 'geekdom' in general."[15] There is

disagreement between these two sources, and I side with Pustz. In my view, competing to be recognized as more knowledgeable is indeed implicit to geekdom in general. This matches my personal experience, but the main reason why I disagree with Eng here is because it furthers my own agenda to do so. I think that otaku are not so different from other geeks as most sources would have you believe. In order to convince the reader of this, I deliberately favour descriptions of geeks that back my thesis, including descriptions for which I have no authoritative sources to cite. How much this weakens my argument is up to the reader to decide, but I do believe that my descriptions of geeky fans are quite fair and uncontroversial. They certainly describe me. Regarding Eng, I will be citing an article of his called *The Origins of "Otaku"* (2003)[16] in addition to *Otak-who?* If I had obtained a copy, I would also have referred to his doctoral dissertation, which was only recently released.

Aside from *Fan Cultures*, I also use a seminar paper by Hills, called *Transcultural Otaku* (2002).[17] In it he problematizes the concept of otaku as I do more extensively in this essay, in the sense of critically examining discourses to expose contradictions, ulterior motives, myths etc. He has led me to my most fundamental sources: David Morley and Kevin Robins provide many useful warnings to Westerners studying Japan by problematizing traditional misconceptions and prejudices in *Spaces of Identity* (1995),[18] while Joli Jensen offers similar warnings about studying fans in her essay "Fandom as Pathology".[19] She describes how passionate fans, particularly those of popular music and sports but presumably what I call geeks as well, are commonly observed as inferior "others", imagined to be trapped in morbid isolation and/or the overwhelming social pressures of modern life, to which their intellectual observers are somehow immune. In reality however, the behaviour of the observing intelligentsia is hardly any different from the behaviour of fans. It is just described by other, less emotional and thus more highbrow means.[20] Her conclusion is "that the characterization of fandom as pathology is based in, supports, and justifies elitist and disrespectful beliefs about our common life",[21] and I agree. A Swedish travelogue called *Japanska tecken* ("Japanese Signs", 1996)[22] is used in this essay as a representative example of a source I consider unreliable partly because it falls all too clearly into the conventional traps described by Morley, Robins and Jensen. I refer of course to its collection of essays by journalist Mattias Berg, not the photos by Mats Petersson. "Fandom as Pathology" is printed in *Adoring Audience* (1992),[23] which also contains "'Strangers no More, We Sing'"[24] by Henry Jenkins, a noted fandom researcher who happens to be the man Hills accuses of not dealing with the "geeky" stereotype of fans clearly enough. Lawrence Eng's work, mentioned above, appears to have been based in part on that of Volker Grassmuck, who is the named source of what Morley and Robins portray as misconceptions about otaku. I'll be quoting his *Man, Nation & Machine* (2000),[25] in which he shows improvement.

De visuella tonsättarna ("The Visual Composers", 2005), a compilation of newspaper articles on important animators credited to the postgraduate film student "Ajan" (Midhat Ajanovic), has already been cited. Sources specifically on Japanese animation come in two varieties, and I will be quoting a variety of works from both, often just to prove that "otaku" has been used in different ways. The collection of reviews and background information known as *The Anime Encyclopedia* (2001)[26] by Jonathan Clements and Helen McCarthy, and the smaller cultural encyclopaedia named *The Anime Companion* (1999)[27] by Gilles Poitras, both fall into the category of works written mainly for the fans. So do two books explaining Japanese traditions and legends which underpin anime, namely *Samurai from Outer Space* (1996)[28] by Antonia Levi and *Anime Explosion!* (2003)[29] by Patrick Drazen. Both of them tend to digress a bit, but provide quite solid information on genres and such. Levi has also written in the second category, which is the scholarly literature that has arisen in response to anime's growing cultural importance. She appears in the splendid *Cinema Anime* (2006)[30] with "The Americanization of Anime and Manga",[31] in which she humbly retracts the optimism evident in her earlier work.[32] "*Manga*" means what it does in Japan, i.e. Japanese comics. I've already cited editor Steven T. Brown's introduction ("Screening Anime") from the same anthology, as well as similar details from Brian Ruh's contribution, "The Robots from Takkun's Head". Tatsumi Takayuki's "The Advent of Meguro Empress"[33] will be quoted later on. Susan J. Napier, perhaps the most central figure in current anime research, contributes to the anthology with "'Excuse Me, Who Are You?'",[34] and I shall continue to cite her own book *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle* (2005), which is currently the most celebrated work on anime.

The success of *Pokémon* has spawned some more specialized scholarly literature. I've already quoted figures from Anne Allison's *Millennial Monsters* (2006), and cited Christine R. Yano's essay "Panic Attacks" from *Pikachu's Global Adventure* (2004).[35] Yano's essay is of general interest to understanding hostile reactions to anime. Relatively minor details are taken from Iwabuchi Koichi's "How 'Japanese' is Pokémon?"[36] and David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green's "Structure, Agency and Pedagogy in Children's Media Culture",[37] in the same volume.

On the intellectual outskirts of academia we find Annalee Newitz's example of a critical gaze at American anime fandom in her article "Anime Otaku" (1994),[38] available in the on-line magazine *Bad Subjects*. Frederik L. Schodt's *Dreamland Japan* (1996)[39] also shows an impressive depth of research but is almost all about Japanese comics and not formally academic. I rely more on Sharon Kinsella's anthropological pieces "Japanese Subculture in the 1990s" (1998),[40] the first solid English-language study on the inception of otaku. Her *Adult Manga* (2002)[41] includes a different version of the same study as well as brilliant insights into the corporate and amateur cultures producing Japanese comics. Kinsella's "What's Behind the Fetishism of Japanese School

Uniforms?" (2002)[42] treats a broader section of Japanese culture. I haven't found any relevant printed work by another cultural anthropologist, Ito Mizuki, but I will be quoting her by proxy using Ayub Khattak's article *Anime's 'Transnational Geekdom'* (2006),[43] which reports on Ito's ongoing research. Yoneyama Shoko, an Asian-studies scholar, writes critically about Japanese education in *The Japanese High School* (1999),[44] notably placing herself in opposition to the dominant (functionalist) paradigm.[45] She is a source partly because she is critical; I will use her to try to indicate a relationship between otaku and a supposedly dysfunctional school system. Her book is founded on a comparison between students' own experiences in Japan and Australia.

Murakami Takashi is an internationally successful artist who has curated a trilogy of noted exhibitions in the West, about Japanese culture in general and otaku-inflected pop culture in particular. Murakami holds a PhD in traditional Japanese painting but tries to level distinctions between high and low art. He has edited the bilingual *Little Boy* (2005),[46] an unscientific essay anthology which also serves as a form of exhibition catalogue of the last instalment in his trilogy. I will be quoting its English text except where otherwise noted. An already cited essay by Sawaragi Noi, "On the Battlefield of 'Superflat'", is found in that anthology. It's just one of the contributions loyally supporting Murakami's beliefs about what he calls Superflat, which is an overarching critical theory about Japanese culture and perhaps primarily an artistic movement led by Murakami. I will devote a chapter of this essay to a part of the theory. Its most authoritative appearance yet is in "Earth in My Window",[47] Murakami's longest contribution to *Little Boy*. He also appears as moderator in "Otaku Talk",[48] a conversation with critic Morikawa Kaichirō and Okada Toshio. Okada has written several books and lectured on the subject of otaku at various universities for years. He once co-founded an anime studio which I will be presenting shortly. Takeda Yasuhiro is another of its co-founders and has described his experiences there in *The Notenki Memoirs* (2005),[49] the most reliable source of information about the studio, despite Takeda's own claims that it might be quite inaccurate.[50] Marilyn Ivy[51] and Jaimy M. Mann[52] have both reviewed *Little Boy* for different academic journals. To construct a meaningful test of Murakami I will employ the hermeneutic theorist Wolfgang Iser's *The Implied Reader* (1974),[53] and a book partly based on it: Murray Smith's *Engaging Characters* (1995),[54] which outlines tools for analysing characters in fiction film.

The company Animeigo produces liner notes to go with their commercial releases of translated anime, and I'll be referring to the on-line version of such a set. Watanabe Masae and Watanabe Yuuji are both listed as cultural and literary consultants on the project, so I'll be crediting its notes to them.[55] I'm sure many others have contributed. Speaking of translations, I should mention Onizuka Kentaro's *Literal Translation Project*,[56] which has helped me understand another

title, in terms of language as well as references to other works. There is more about translations at the end of this introduction, after the anime themselves are introduced.

I will be citing a few miscellaneous journals and magazines: *The Economist*,[57] an article by Tony McNicol in *Wired*[58] and an article about a serial killer which originally appeared in *Tokyo Journal* but which is now also available on the writer Charles T. Whipple's personal site, with a minor addition.[59] Lastly, I should mention a couple of books I can't cite. My French is too poor to make truly reliable sense of Etienne Barral's *Otaku* (1999),[60] but from what I do understand of it, and from reviews of it, it's unusual mainly insofar as it's lengthy. Its foreword is written by Jean-Jacques Beineix, who directed an earlier documentary: *Otaku: fils de l'Empire du virtuel* / *Otaku* (Jean-Jacques Beineix and Jackie Bastide, 1994[61]). It credits Barral as "journaliste". The version I've seen is also from 1994, heavily edited by Swedish TV4, using Tom Wallenström's translation. I haven't found any reliable source for a complete translation of right-wing politician Ishihara Shintarou and Sony chairman Morita Akio's anthology *No to Ieru Nihon* (*The Japan That Can Say No*), an influential collection of nationalist essays from 1989, but I will refer to it as the object of an allusion. From what I've read elsewhere, Ishihara criticizes American materialism and urges Japanese people to show more self-respect, etc.[62]

Research Question

Using the sources listed above, this essay will attempt to answer the following question: What is the usefulness of the term "otaku" to film studies? By "otaku" I don't refer to the literal meaning or pronoun function. I refer to the set of meanings which relate, in various ways, to geeky fans and nerds. It will take much of the essay to clarify what "otaku" has in fact denoted over the last few decades. There will be no simplistic definition of the word, since much of the essay's purpose is to show a wide range of historical meanings currently affecting the usefulness of the term. I will nonetheless demonstrate how the term "otaku" can be applied in film studies, using Murakami's definition of otaku to test his theory.

Usefulness is obviously subjective, but I believe that the essay will form a practical foundation for understanding and applying the term at one's own risk. The results could have uses outside of film studies, particularly in cultural studies, anthropology and the study of comics.

Methodology

The answer to the research question will be pursued in two chapters. They are quite different in their methods. The first, "Transnational Geekdom as Alien Pathology", summarizes the evolution of many common meanings of "otaku" in scholarly and popular accounts, from the term's inception in the early 1980s to the present day. I pay particular attention sources I perceive to have been quoted

with relatively high frequency by other writers, and sources representative of broad trends, because recognition is a factor when it comes to usefulness: More common meanings are more likely to be familiar and to intrude upon interpretations when we use "otaku". As Hills suggests, media representations are central at least to an understanding of why some US and UK fans self-identify as otaku.[63] The overall method of the chapter can be called a critical discourse analysis, though I see no need to get into further methodological details about it. I demonstrate that the term "otaku" is encumbered by its popularization in a media panic and by orientalism, among other conflicting and confusing influences.

The second chapter, "Searching Gainax for Superflat", introduces and tests one last interpretation, namely Murakami's theory of otaku in *Little Boy*, which is part of his overarching Superflat theory. Some anime from Studio Gainax, presented under the next heading, are checked for signs of a target audience. That audience is compared to Murakami's description of otaku. The theorists I use to ensure fruitful close readings will be introduced right after the anime.

Studio Gainax and the Selection of Anime for Analysis

Founded in 1984 following its original members' iconic success with a pair of amateur short films, Studio Gainax has produced video games, live-action feature films and many other things, but primarily and most famously animation. They achieved some mainstream recognition for the first time in 1990, according to co-founder Takeda.[64] The following year they opened up a US branch office in Texas, thinking that it "*doesn't matter where these guys are – the needs of otaku are the same the world over*"[65] (italics in the original). Despite arranging a successful convention in California, the branch office did very poorly[66] and is now apparently defunct. The arrest of the studio's president for tax evasion in 1998[67] has not destroyed Gainax, which continues to make anime. The image on the cover of this essay is a frame from *Kore ga Watashi no Goshujin-sama / He Is My Master* (Saeki Shouji, Gainax, BS-i, 2005), their most recently completed TV series, suitably depicting a character who is repeatedly called an otaku by others.

Murakami claims that Gainax holds "a central place in the current anime world."[68] He highlights two of its anime as crucial to otaku culture. *Daicon IV Opening Animation* (Yamaga Hiroyuki, 1983) is the first of the two. It's a sequel to the much less polished *Daicon III Opening Animation* (Yamaga Hiroyuki, 1981). Both were amateur short subjects to be shown at science fiction (SF) conventions, namely the third and fourth times when Japan's largest annual convention was held in the city of Osaka. Such conventions were events "by *otaku* for *otaku*" even before the term existed, according to Murakami,[69] who goes so far as to say the two Daicon shorts "jump-started the evolution of anime subculture into full-fledged *otaku* culture."[70] *Daicon IV Opening Animation* "embodies every *otaku* paradigm"[71] and made the founding of Gainax possible.

The other Gainax anime Murakami praises is the *Evangelion* franchise. It started as a 26-episode television series called *Shinseiki Evangerion / Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Anno Hideaki, Gainax, TV Tokyo, 1995) and was concluded with the second of two feature films: *Shinseiki Evangerion Gekijouban: The End of Evangelion / Neon Genesis Evangelion: The End of Evangelion* (Anno Hideaki, 1997). Clements and McCarthy call the franchise "the most critically successful TV anime of the 1990s, drawing back many fans who had given up on the medium".[72] Napier notes its crucial role in legitimizing intellectual discussion of anime in Japan.[73] Murakami adds "young culture-lovers" to its audience, declaring it "an unsurpassed milestone in the history of *otaku* culture"[74] and its director an otaku.[75] Gainax has obviously had social importance, and is central to Murakami's idea of otaku culture. Scrutinizing the *Daicon* shorts or *Evangelion* in this essay would not show the value of Murakami's work however, since he has skilfully founded his theory on them to some extent. My strategy is instead to see how well his theory matches other works by the same studio, made by the same people for the same audience, but not analysed by Murakami. If the theory is solid it should be an easy test.

The first work I have chosen to investigate is a feature film called *Ouritsu Uchuugun: Oneamisu no Tsubasa / Honnêamise* (Yamaga Hiroyuki, 1987) (note that the short English title here is a complete subtitle on the cover of at least one Japanese edition,[76] but not the most common English title; see the appendix on page 51). It was not a total flop, but failed to recuperate its enormous production costs at the box office.[77] Clements and McCarthy note it as a success with the critics and say it started turning a profit in 1994,[78] so it eventually found an audience.

The second work is a series called *Toppu wo Nerae! / Gunbuster* (Anno Hideaki, 1988). Each of its six episodes is half an hour in length. They were released directly to video in pairs over several months. This peculiar format, called the OVA (Original Video Animation), was common in anime at the time, even for ambitious original titles. It is obviously suited to a well-informed market, and Takeda notes that the format tends to be "targeted at hardcore fans".[79] Reports of *Gunbuster*'s reception are scarce. Clements and McCarthy mention a Japanese re-release in 2001,[80] and Gainax recently completed a sequel using all new characters as well as a theatrical re-edit of the original series, indicating that there is a viable fandom. Takeda is vague on the matter.[81] My conclusion from the available evidence is that *Gunbuster* was (barely) successful, but never close to mainstream, in Japan.

My third selection, *Otaku no Bideo / Otaku no Video* (Mori Takeshi, 1991), is another OVA. Its two episodes are 50 and 47 minutes long. 20% of the running time is live action, specifically a series of fake ("mockumentary") interviews. I have no reliable details on *Otaku no Video*'s Japanese reception, but no reason to believe it flopped or was a major hit.

All three of these titles basically share the creative team behind the earlier *Daicon* shorts and the later *Evangelion*, albeit in different configurations. None of the three were mainstream successes. Only *Honnêamise* used a format conducive to broad popularity, the others used one that's almost inherently aimed at geeks. All three seem (eventually) to have reached a satisfied audience anyway, presumably the same one to whom the *Daicon* shorts and *Evangelion* are classics. That's why I consider these anime to be the optimal selection for a simple test of Murakami's theory. His otaku have certain tastes, and if these anime do not match those tastes, his theory will be weakened. Given the level of conjecture in my selection of the anime, I can't say Murakami's theory would be refuted if there was no match.

Interpreting Protagonists

I pay particular attention to the characters in Gainax's anime, specifically to protagonists. According to Murray Smith, "characters are central to the rhetorical and aesthetic effects of narrative texts. Character structures are perhaps the major way by which narrative texts solicit our assent for particular values, practices, and ideologies";[82] for instance geeky values. Some character structures in the selected anime are unusual, calling for a specialized tool kit like Smith's. I do not limit myself strictly to characters however. Genre signifiers, plot points, settings and so forth are also mentioned where they become significant to the test of Murakami, like the aforementioned OVA distribution format.

If there is a school of philosophical theory underlying this essay, it is perhaps the same as the selective structuralism of Smith in *Engaging Characters*. He identifies structuralism as a diverse tradition, turning against some aspects of it (particularly Brecht and literary modernism's combined devaluation of engagement with realistic characters) while preserving others.[83] He skirts post-structuralism, occasionally leaning on it,[84] at other times rejecting its extreme forms.[85] Distinctions between those schools of thought are not very relevant to the questions examined in this essay, since I need only Smith's model of character engagement. It is based more directly on the concept of schemata, from cognitive science,[86] than on any more controversial theoretical framework.

Smith's model has three chief components, together forming what he calls the "structure of sympathy": *Recognition* is our construction of characters, *alignment* is when we share information with them, and *allegiance* is when we evaluate their behaviour as more or less sympathetic.[87] Allegiance is of particular interest in this essay, since we may presume that protagonists written for otaku will generally carry some traits demonstrably resonant with those of otaku in order to engage the audience and achieve what Smith calls *assimilation*, which is similar to the "identification" of everyday language but indirect, provoking pity rather than grief as a response to a character's grief, for example.[88] I will also be referring to Smith's *primacy effect*, which is the phenomenon that "we

base our viewing strategies and expectations on the information we receive at the beginning of a text,"[89] to such an extent that we may illogically ignore later information.[90] Of course, this tendency is anticipated by many film-makers, and I believe that Gainax uses it cleverly, as I plan to show.

Implying an Audience

Iser wrote *The Implied Reader* to lay down a foundation "for a theory of literary effects and responses based on the novel, since this is the genre in which reader involvement coincides with meaning production."[91] It should be fairly apparent that an involvement on the part of a motion picture's spectator also coincides with the subjective meaning of that picture. If a novel's potential meaning, as in Iser's view, is prestructured by its text,[92] it must be possible to say the same about a film and its contents. Indeed, Smith bases his work partly on Iser's, though attributing greater importance to social aspects.[93] However, Iser focuses on a generalized reader, not on any "typology of possible readers".[94] Such typologies are more relevant to this essay.

My methodology calls for a definition of a "target audience". Despite the eccentricity of Studio Gainax, they weren't animating just for their own amusement. They were trying to sell their art to an audience, so they targeted one. For instance, Takeda writes that *Gunbuster* "contained all sorts of elements included to boost sales, such as robots, cute girls, action and sports."[95] At the risk of stating the obvious, not everyone becomes more likely to buy *Gunbuster* upon hearing of those contents; the question is who does.

A target audience is a demographic to whom creators *actively* adapt their work in order to ensure success and hence professional survival in a capitalist system. The adaptation can affect any and all aspects of a given work, leaving discernible marks. If the creators succeed, the demographic is likely to buy tickets, rent OVA tapes and so on. In Smith's less commercial terminology, every film is "constructed in the knowledge of what schemata spectators are likely to bring to it."[96] A target audience is therefore ideally equipped for what Iser calls the "actualization"[97] of a given prestructured potential meaning, whereas an untargeted audience is likely to miss cues and get less pleasure out of the experience, assuming pleasure is the purpose.

Genre fiction is often used in targeting, as audiences learn what to expect from a genre and may look for more of it. This is sometimes implied in the name, as in the sexistically titled "women's picture" genre. Smith condones and repeats Jonathan Culler's interpretation of genre as "clusters 'of norms and expectations which help the reader to assign functions to various elements in the work'."[98] Genre itself can thus imply a target audience with the special skills necessary to assign functions correctly. It is said that otaku like certain genres, which is an issue I'll return to below.

Self-Identification and Notes on Language

With Jensen as the basis of my approach, I should compare myself to my subject. I keep lists of the anime I've sampled since becoming aware of the phenomenon in 2001, so I can safely say that I have seen at least some part of over 500 titles in 5 years. Largely as a result of watching anime, I have become interested in Japan, where I have since vacationed. My fanhood has also affected my choice to study film, so it's had a pretty big impact on my life. However, much like Hills, I take cover among a "highly localised and limited set of fans", perhaps to escape stereotypes.[99] I do not go to major anime conventions or the like. I do not devote myself to a small number of franchises or genres, and there is plenty I dislike. My favourite film is British and I don't see Japan as a more attractive society than my native one. Partly because I engage in other hobbies that are traditionally considered geeky, I would call myself a geek. Whether or not I am an otaku is a question of the muddled semantics brought to light in this essay, but aside from a few past slips of the tongue, I don't call myself one.

Another result of my interest in anime has been a year's worth of formal studies in the Japanese language. I certainly don't read it fluently, but I will be making some simple translations in this essay. I favour a common variant of the revised Hepburn system of romanization and I will be using that to transliterate whenever I can, but there are some limitations of which the reader ought to be aware. For example, while I prefer the spelling *doujinshi*, Kinsella transcribes the same word's long vowel sound with a macron, as *dōjinshi*, so that's how I quote her. Excepting the previous sentence and the word "*dame*" (which means pointless and socially unacceptable, unlike the English word "dame"), non-proprietary Japanese terms will only be italicized on first use outside of quotes. Japanese nouns, faithfully, will not be pluralized.

I will not attempt to adapt the romanization of Japanese proper nouns as they are used in my sources, partly because I don't always know the Japanese spelling[100] and partly because many internationally active Japanese writers have chosen a personal romanization which ought to be respected. I preserve Japanese order in Japanese names, i.e. family first, which conveniently means that those names will not be reversed or punctuated for the bibliography. The usual romanization exceptions will be made for traditional spellings like Tokyo (otherwise Toukyou). Alternate titles for many of the motion pictures I mention have been consigned to the appendix, commencing on page 51. I will be using commercial translations to quote lines from *Honnêamise* (Manga Video) and *Otaku no Video* (Animeigo), but when it comes to *Gunbuster* I've found it more practical to use a translation of my own, guided mainly by Onizuka's attempt at a literal one.

Transnational Geekdom as Alien Pathology

Despite examples of mainstream recognition, like those mentioned in the introduction, most Western imports of anime are still world cinema. Family-unfriendly titles in particular flow almost exclusively through what Ito labels a "transnational geekdom", described by the term "otaku".[101] Besides geek, another simple translation of "otaku" in this context is "nerd",[102] yet another "fanboy",[103] and so on. Few people use those terms instead of, rather than alongside, "otaku" when talking about Japanese geeks, which indicates that "otaku" means something other than "geek". If we (Western intellectuals) thought simple translations were completely accurate, we would surely use them instead.

It seems to me that the basic human inclination to project our fears and desires onto people we perceive as different is the fundamental reason why so much is written specifically about otaku, and so little about geeks. Japanese geeks are exotic and out of sight on the other side of the world. Therefore, we may fantasize about them all we like. Our geeks are local, observable and therefore mundane, not very highbrow. Perhaps it is traditional prejudices against our geeks that have almost made them off limits; we may think they are actually pathetic and therefore undeserving of our attention, or we may fear being perceived as politically incorrect just for using the often pejorative word, even if we try to define it without judgement, as I do in this essay. Yano's report on otaku being held up as bogeymen to limit sales of *Pokémon* fits these ideas. The *Time* article she quotes[104] would have seemed like a silly attempt at bullying if it had pointed at ordinary household geeks as a threat the same way it points at otaku.

It's comfortingly difficult for most Western critics to disprove statements we make about East Asian culture, and this has led to a number of errors. For a relevant overview of the West's warped image of Japan, and vice versa, see the chapter on "techno-orientalism" in Morley and Robins's *Spaces of Identity*.[105] It is no coincidence that they briefly mention the common Western phantasm of otaku as media-crazy "unfeeling aliens", representing our unconscious fear of dehumanized technological capitalism, yet laced with our desire to adapt to the world we have unwittingly created.[106] They mention Grassmuck, but roughly the same fantastical image is promulgated in many popular accounts of Japanese otaku, such as Beineix's documentary. Though I proceed with caution to avoid such pitfalls, I do not henceforth reject the idea that a kind of geeks called otaku are special in some way. Grassmuck quotes Morley and Robins in his essay from 2000, and expresses an awareness of "exoticism" as a lurking source of error, but he still returns to his old conclusion that, parallels with *Star Trek* fandom notwithstanding, otaku are quite special.[107]

Eng is the most promising scholar who has continued to develop Grassmuck's ideas, but as I do not have access to his dissertation I cannot examine his arguments at length. In *Otak-who?* he describes otaku very creatively, in terms of how they value information, particularly through their views on secrecy and their new uses for information technology.[108] He openly states that this is not a conclusion but merely a definition made to enable research, based on personal experience of an American subculture. He even allows for the possibility that there are no otaku in Japan, by his definition.[109] While his work is interesting, his definition is not popularized and has virtually nothing to do with anime or specific conditions in Japan, so I will leave it at that.

Japanese Otaku

Berg's *Japanska tecken* makes several references to Japanese otaku that exemplify the term's contemporary popular imprecision in the West. We first hear of otaku as "an extreme form of the American hacker"[110] (my translation), a type of obsessive and isolated collector who is literally pathologized in that the essay revolves around a psychologist treating supposedly related issues of mental health. In the next reference, apparently regular teeny-boppers are also identified as obsessed idol otaku,[111] which even more clearly echoes Jensen's summary of how journalists tend to describe even very ordinary fans as strange and unhealthy.

Berg interviews a dubiously self-described former otaku who blames society for the negative traits of otaku, yet who is also hopeful about an emerging new type of otaku who enjoys communication.[112] No other source of mine corroborates such a bifurcation. Instead, this brief glimpse seems to validate Jensen even in Japan. The interviewed businessman, safely claiming not to be a part of what he describes, projects his fears (cracking under the pressure of modern life, ceasing to communicate) onto some geeks, and his desires (using modern media to communicate more efficiently) onto others. Morley and Robins scorn very similar ideas; it is not exoticism alone that permits people to view otaku both as a negative consequence of and as a new hope for today's society, but that hardly validates the opinion.

More reliable sources also describe Jensen-appropriate meanings of the word otaku in Japan. Sawaragi hints that it may all have begun when the housewives who had popularized otaku as a pronoun, and their overworking husbands, failed to understand the "alien" modern interests of their children,[113] who had not experienced the deprivations of the war or of the occupation and reconstruction. This generation gap set the stage for continued evolution, as charted by Kinsella. Her focus is on Japan's *doujinshi* (amateur comics; most of them can be considered fanzines) subculture, but her observations are equally relevant to anime, which became a major inspiration for doujinshi in the mid-1980s.[114] A type of doujinshi later became the foundation of certain genres of

anime overrepresented in 1990s exports to the West.[115] There are plenty of these connections between Japanese comic and animation fandoms.

The geek-related meaning of the term otaku arose in the 1980s, only "ostensibly invented by critic and *dōjinshi* artist, Nakamori Akio, in 1983."[116] Rather than having invented the geek-related meaning as such, Nakamori seems to have invented the negative stereotype of otaku as utterly obsessive dorks. He wrote that they are "either so scrawny they look like they're malnourished or like giggling fat white pigs with silver-framed glasses with the sides jammed into their heads",[117] and so forth in similarly vulgar and bullying fashion. That's actually a departure from the original geek-related meaning: Kinsella characterizes "otaku" as a witty way of saying "nerd", used by amateur artists and fans to describe particularly weird fans.[118] Such "weirdoes" themselves used the word as a pronoun. However, they sometimes misapplied it, choosing it in place of less formal and distant alternatives which would have been more appropriate. Although the Japanese language offers ample opportunity for such subtle errors, the misapplication of "otaku" clearly indicated a lack of social skills, particularly a lack of experience with close friendships. Using the term to refer back to such awkward enthusiasts was a double entendre, incorporating the word's literal meaning ("house") to suggest that otaku spent most of their time alone, at home.[119] Kinsella's description lacks details on the matter, but seems to indicate that even in the early days, before Nakamori, the term was a mild and humorous but otherwise Jensen-appropriate label for other, inferior fans, rather than a self-description or a stereotype like Nakamori's. Eng has compiled several other theories about the earliest uses of "otaku"'s geek-related meaning, which are all compatible with Kinsella's work, but there are no assertive details in his *The Origins of "Otaku"* either.[120]

The Panic and Its Aftermath

The media picked up on Nakamori's concept, even though the pornographic magazine in which he presented it quickly cancelled his insulting column.[121] However, the relatively halcyon days when "otaku" was usually mild and jocular seem to have continued until the discovery of a serial murderer, a printer's assistant in his mid-20s who ironically shares the family name of Miyazaki Hayao, though there is no connection: "Miyazaki Tsutomu abducted, murdered, and mutilated four small girls".[122] That is something of an understatement. According to Whipple, Miyazaki has confessed to a variety of even more unsettling crimes, including cannibalism and necrophilia.[123] When caught in 1989, the murderer was revealed to have been somewhat socially involved in animation and doujinshi fandom.[124] A good photo of his dense collections of comics and videotapes in a windowless bedroom is reprinted in *Little Boy*.[125] The frame from *He Is My Master* on the cover of this essay recalls that photo, depicting an alleged otaku whose collection appropriately towers

behind him as he schemes to exploit some underage girls. 16 years after his capture, Miyazaki is still darkly iconic.

Because of the killer's hobbies, the media began to explore the previously hidden world of fandom, which was thus publicly linked to Miyazaki.[126] The term "otaku" really came to public attention during that uproar and drew new shades of meaning from Miyazaki's acts, while expanding to align with Sawaragi's unusually alienating generation gap:[127]

> After the Miyazaki murder case, the concept of an *otaku* changed its meaning at the hands of the media. *Otaku* came to mean, in the first instance Miyazaki, in the second instance, all amateur manga artists and fans, and in the third instance all Japanese youth in their entirety.[128]

The blame for Miyazaki's remarkable maladjustment was variously pinned on his parents, on general patterns of societal change, and on violent and pornographic films,[129] all of which we recognize from corresponding events in Western media. In my opinion as a layman, poor parenting seems to have been the primary non-chaotic factor, aggravated by ostracism as a result of physical deformity.[130] Kinsella, who loosely categorizes the vilification of otaku at the time as a media panic, personally likens it to the "video nasty" debate of the West.[131] I would like to add that it also has much in common with the more damaging moral outrage against comics in the USA during the 1950s. Pustz describes that controversy.[132] In its prelude, "fans" were separated from the majority of readers, described in terms very often used about otaku, and pathologized by scholars.[133] The stigma persists; American comic book culture is remarkably isolated.[134]

Depictions of nerds as narrowly obsessive and socially inept are common. Such claims about otaku matched existing Japanese fears about particularism and individualism eroding traditional values,[135] which is very likely to have made the common prejudice against nerds particularly powerful in Japan. The sexism of the panic is also understandable in that light:

> It is striking that although the majority of amateur manga artists and fans were young women, the *otaku* panic has focused almost entirely on the young men who have adopted and adapted to this culture.[136]

Kinsella connects this skewed focus as well to older fears of change, here the weakening of the traditional patriarchy: Male otaku were singled out for revulsion because they adopted a subculture pioneered by women.[137] Kinsella suggests hegemonic US response to Caucasian Americans embracing "black ghetto culture" as an example of a similar phenomenon in the West.[138] A recent article in *The Economist* indicates that women still dominate in Japanese geekdom,[139] yet a minority of academic writers characterize otaku as exclusively male, e.g. Buckingham and Sefton-Green.[140]

Several more positive interpretations of otaku made their way in the media in the wake of the initial panic, particularly from "self-appointed representatives of computer and animation subcultures".[141] This is understandable partly as a continuation of the values previously invested in

the term: Weirdness of a fellow subcultural, fairly harmless sort. It is also natural that the targeted subcultures would want to mollify the public. Gainax's *Otaku no Video* can be understood as an example of self-defence in this media war, showing that adult geeks are as harmless as other adults, and quite human. Fans achieved little; the panic eventually led to police action and submissive policy changes.[142] A less predictable form of resistance came from intellectuals like Ohtsuka Eiji, a cultural anthropologist who described more than a hundred thousand people with Miyazaki's hobbies as "a whole standing army of murderers" but who *also* identified "otaku" as "the keyword of post-modern society", representative of a not entirely negative shift from the dominance of social experience to that of cultural experience.[143] The same shift must reasonably have occurred in the West.

At least one critic blamed the rigours of the country's school system.[144] Schodt seems to agree that otaku are special, mainly as a consequence of poor schooling.[145] This suggestion merits further investigation. According to Yoneyama, the Japanese system was and remains partly different from those of "broadly Western, liberal-democratic countries", though less different from Korean education as one example.[146] There is also a nationally distinguishing tendency for problems involving students to be directly school-related.[147] However, I think it would be difficult to support a causal relationship between the unique or rare aspects of Japanese schools and the special characteristics, if any, of the country's geek population. Nothing in Yoneyama's book convinces me there is such a relationship, but the matter deserves further study. I'll just note one example indicating the contrary, from an article by Kinsella herself. As if otaku were indeed special, she contends that many otaku engage in school uniform fetishism,[148] which implies that so-called otaku behaviour is not an escape from thoughts of Japanese schools. It might still be an escape from one's practical experience of them, but Yoneyama calls uniforms "the symbol of school rules".[149]

The struggle over how to interpret subcultures labelled as otaku continued throughout the early 1990s. The idea that doujinshi influenced young people only negatively was successfully discredited, but the subculture was stigmatized.[150] Despite the stigma, the term expanded to cover more than the fans of animation and comics. By the mid-90s, a wide range of less sex-and-violence-related hobbies like stamp collecting, as well as "obsessive" photography and such, could all mark people as otaku,[151] indicating that the term had popularly come to be used as "geek" is now normally used in English. Kinsella barely mentions the most significant instance when the murderous stigma was reactivated and reinforced: The nerve gas attack in Tokyo's subway perpetrated in 1995 by the religious cult Aum Shinrikyou.[152] According to Sawaragi, the cult drew heavily on certain "conventions of post-1960s subculture",[153] renewing the public perception of a threat from the geeks, and thus of otaku as dangerous. Napier[154] and Schodt[155] agree.

Interpretation

Miyazaki's serial murders and Aum's terrorism are quite isolated incidents. They appear to match standard models for understanding serial murderers and isolated cults respectively, though I am hardly a qualified judge. Whipple consults a Japanese psychologist who flatly characterizes Miyazaki as a "textbook case".[156] Similarly, none of the above attempts to invest new values in the term "otaku" come with proof that there is anything radically special about any of the groups of people at whom the term was directed. Very general descriptions of why fans form communities, such as the one offered by Jenkins,[157] are applicable to Kinsella's doujinshi fans, though not exhaustive. For example, the national legal situation contributes to the relative vastness of Japan's comic parody fandom.[158]

I don't think that the mainstream Japanese language had a concise equivalent to "geek" prior to the discovery of Miyazaki's collection. Schodt claims that "*mania*" (from *maniakku*, i.e. "maniac") meant "enthusiastic fans", but it was to an extent that Nakamori for one thought inadequate.[159] Sports fans and other people who would not broadly be considered geeks could and still can be called "*mania*", whereas "otaku" is applied to roughly the same range of interests as "geek". There doesn't seem to have been a broad public awareness of such a group before Miyazaki. It is possible that the Japanese public first became aware of normal geekdom in a haze of panic, because of a rare serial killer's coincidental hobbies. If so, we should obviously view the resulting image of Japanese geeks with extreme suspicion, yet that very image is the seed of foreign concepts of "otaku". It resonates in Grassmuck's writing, in Beineix's film, in Berg's travelogue and in many other sources. The West seems to have been tricked by a non-Western media panic, filtered through techno-orientalism.

I believe that many Japanese people called otaku go beyond social norms in the magnitude of their adult interests, but so do many Western fans. I have not seen any figures indicating a difference in proportions or methods on the whole. Granted, there are proportionately greater numbers of animation and comic-book fans in Japan, but that's easily explained as a consequence of animation and comics being more mainstream and produced in far greater quantities. It's no wonder if giant-robot cartoons attract more geeks per capita in Japan than in Sweden. The genre's role in mainstream Swedish entertainment is insignificant, and there is no domestic production. I think Swedes are more likely to get geeky on topics they encounter more often and have more access to, but equally likely to become geeks as such. Some murderers are fans, like Mark David Chapman who killed John Lennon (one of Jensen's "iconic" examples[160]), but there is no logical reason to assume that fanhood of any magnitude makes people murderous, in Japan or elsewhere. There is simply no good reason to accept that the Japanese people who are commonly called otaku are

generally more passionate, more exclusive, less social or more dangerous in their interests than the Westerners who are commonly called nerds or geeks.

Western Otaku

Even if otaku really aren't significantly different from Western nerds, could the term still be useful as an import? After all, "anime" itself means simply "animation" in Japanese, including Disney. Using it to refer exclusively to Japanese animation is quicker than such unambiguous phrases as "Japanese animation" or "*Nihon no anime*" (the actual Japanese term), and more aesthetic than the obsolete "Japanimation", which brings ethnic slurs to mind, so I use "anime" frequently. On the other hand, some say "anime" as if all Japanese animation shares a single genre or style, or even as the name for such a style, independent of Japan. This breeds confusion, which lowers the useful value of the term, in my opinion.

There is no doubt that "otaku", like "anime", once acquired a new and potentially practical popular meaning in the West, but that meaning is not "Japanese geeks". Poitras's *Anime Companion* points to it by accurately stating that fans all over the world "call themselves 'otaku' with pride".[161] Antonia Levi exemplifies an enthusiastic use of it at much greater length. Here she is in 1996, with a PhD in Japanese history and substantial experience of living in Japan:

> To say that an *otaku* is an *anime* fan doesn't really describe the phenomenon. Like a lot of the concepts that find their way into America via *anime*, *otaku* is a word that completely defies translation. Technically, it is a formal usage of the Japanese word meaning "your." In Japanese slang, it refers to someone with an obsessive interest in something, a geek. One can be a computer *otaku*, a fashion *otaku*, or an *anime otaku*. In America, it refers exclusively to those who are obsessively interested in *anime*. [---] In Japan, calling someone an *otaku* is a good way to start a fight. In America, however, the term is rapidly losing all pejorative connotations and may actually represent a source of pride.[162]

Despite this warning that "otaku" is derogatory in Japan, there is no trace of Miyazaki's murders, Aum's massacre or any real hint of the alien, violent, quasi-autistic creepiness attached to otaku since the panic in Japan, anywhere in Levi's book. There is no workable explanation as to why it's "a good way to start a fight". The closest she gets is to say that Japanese otaku have "few close personal relationships."[163] Similarly, Poitras only briefly notes that the original otaku were socially inept obsessive fans,[164] which undeniably corresponds to some popular Japanese descriptions. Poitras's negative characterization of the Japanese matches common stereotypes of geeks, rendered less glaringly pejorative by projection eastwards. Schodt is more nuanced; he notes that the new positive meaning of otaku has spread mainly through the anglophone countries, and credits Beineix's *Otaku* for giving many French citizens the impression of "an entire generation of wackos" instead.[165] The West, of course, is not homogeneous. Schodt is also noteworthy for sketching the Japanese panic (albeit somewhat inaccurately; Miyazaki is said to have killed three) and for

suggesting that it's another variation on the eternal theme of arbitrarily making youth a scapegoat for society's ills.[166]

Levi fails to communicate how the term "defies translation". A passion for anime could be the only criterion, which might make the term useful as a neutral way to denote fans of something in particular, in much the same way as "gamers" denotes fans of games. However, Levi is typical in her lack of neutrality. According to her brief list of tongue-in-cheek descriptors, American otaku are "people who will, without provocation, tie their friends to chairs and force them to watch *anime* until they too are hopelessly addicted."[167] Not only does she insincerely claim to have done this herself,[168] she also portrays the addiction as inevitable and good, on account of the quality of Japanese animation. Levi presents "otaku" as a self-deprecating but nonetheless positive way to label oneself as an *extraordinary* fan. It's a means of building a strong identity by joining a community, definable with that single, exotic, almost gnostic word: "Otaku". Unlike "geek", it's mercifully incomprehensible to the general public, and thus free of stigma. Implicitly, the community of otaku is justified by the aesthetic superiority of anime. Its members are praiseworthy as pioneers in "a cultural exchange so ambitious that neither the Japanese nor the American government would ever have dared to plan it",[169] and far from lazy: Understanding anime supposedly requires work.[170] Otaku are almost as special in Levi's positive description as in the negative ones which preceded it. It seems apparent that "otaku" was not reinterpreted only to denote a subset of fandom like any other, though I'm sure many users of the term see it as neutral enough.

Similar de-orientalizing but nonetheless romantic descriptions circulated in fandom years before Levi's book, and were taken up by critics and scholars. Even negative interpretations of Western fans were largely disconnected from the Japanese debate. In her 1994 article, for which she contacted more than a hundred fans, Annalee Newitz correctly surmises that "in order to affiliate themselves with anime fan culture, American fans are calling themselves by a name the Japanese use as an insult."[171] This leads into an interpretation of anime exports as cultural imperialism, whose American fans (the otaku) "*are rejecting their national culture*"[172] (emphasis in the original). She writes that otaku like anime because it "closely resembles American popular media" except that it's politically incorrect, encouraging sexist fantasies while simultaneously appearing to feminize the male fans themselves, partly through voluntary exposure to romantic attitudes in a small selection of anime, and partly through the fans' disempowering submission to imperialism.[173] Here anime itself is an alien pathological vector, undermining manly national culture. Otaku are the casualties. Newitz's idea of feminized otaku matches the Japanese fears of national emasculation described by Kinsella, but other than that, Newitz attaches yet another new set of negative values to "otaku".

Hills spends most of *Transcultural Otaku* discussing why many Western fans describe themselves as otaku, despite ubiquitous warnings about the term's negativity in Japan. He concludes that negativity is actually a reason for using the term. Making it seem as though the same geekdom exists and is persecuted for the same reasons everywhere, US and UK fans of anime "'naturalise' fan identities by implying that fandom is an essentially transnational/transcultural experience",[174] which I think is correct. Though the explanation is esoteric, it does go some part of the way towards explaining why presumably well-informed people like Levi would promote the term. Hills draws a parallel to the wide and positive self-descriptive use of "cult" in secular fandoms, a similarly contested term.[175] He also contends that many Westerners calling themselves otaku are picking up on the desire-based aspects of techno-orientalism.[176]

The Status Quo

Kinsella's work and the increasingly obvious overloading of the term with disparate meanings are probable reasons why it has seen less use in Western literature during recent years. Hills problematizes it throughout *Transcultural Otaku*, but avoids the question of whether Japanese geeks are truly different:

> Are supposedly bounded 'national contexts' and 'national differences' at work here? Seemingly not. Are we dealing with a nightmare of sameness in which a global and homogenised culture seeps across East and West? Again, seemingly not.[177]

Eng summarizes many interpretations with a critical eye in the first part of *Otak-who?*[178] and Schodt foreshadows Kinsella's findings in *Dreamland Japan*,[179] although the cover of that book proclaims its topic to be "Japanese Comics For Otaku". None of those writers openly reject the idea that Japanese people called otaku are special, i.e. meaningfully unlike (other, "our") geeks in more ways than banal contrasts like geography and language would make them. Morley and Robins do seem to reject that idea, but perhaps too quickly, since the concept they dismiss as a Western fantasy has been shown to exist in Japanese culture as well. Ironically, we've even seen that the Japanese infuse "otaku" with a fear of our particularistic, individualistic culture, just as we infuse it with a fear of their culture. The evolution of the word up until recently can perhaps be described as a free-for-all of intercultural phobias.

Drazen uses the term very sparingly and not in the sense of "anime fan". There's a "VCR *otaku*" in one of his footnotes.[180] This evocation, however faithful to Japanese everyday usage, comes without any attempt to relate the term to English. Otaku are thereby orientalized. In Levi's contribution to *Cinema Anime*, ten years after *Samurai from Outer Space*, otaku are nowhere to be seen. They've been replaced by "Japanophiles", the "hardcore fans" who insist on "the uniqueness of anime and manga" relative to the subjects of its neighbouring traditional fandoms.[181] Clearly,

these Japanophiles are not identical to otaku as she once described them, some of whom knew nothing about Japan.[182] Otaku are mentioned by other contributors to the anthology, even if the entry for "otaku" in its index forwards us to the one for "fandom".[183] Napier describes some pop-idol fanboys in an anime as "typically nerdy looking *otaku* (geeks)",[184] begging the question why she mentions otaku at all. They seem to have something that fanboys, nerds and geeks all lack, but like Drazen's reference, Napier's essay in *Cinema Anime* provides no clue as to how otaku might be special. In her own book, she curtly characterizes them as "rabidly fanatical fans", which would be literally pathologizing if rabies had not merely been a metaphor; she also notes that "otaku" is a pejorative term.[185] She almost seems to think they *deserve* a pejorative term, but doesn't explain why or cite sources. This is the status quo: Ideas about Japanese otaku as special geeks are now a bit less common than in the 1990s, and usually more vague. They are still orientalizing and insulting most of the time, and they still contradict one another. Ideas about Western fans as otaku are divisive to say the least. Some reject the label of otaku, often because of reading about the severity of the Japanese stigma. Others, like Eng, suggest the label can be appropriated to fight that stigma.[186] The debate continues in fandom's many forums.

There is some evidence to suggest that the Japanese social stigma of "otaku", like the English-language stigma of "geek", have weakened to a similar level after Aum Shinrikyou's attack. *Wired* magazine, a staunchly pro-geek publication known to have launched with the word "otaku" in Japanese on the cover,[187] quotes a columnist from the *Japan Times*:

> "Otaku have joined the mainstream to become a major cultural icon," says Tokyo journalist and social observer Kaori Shoji. "They've been lurking on the edge of hip for some years. Now they've gone completely legit."[188]

Too much of my information on this new esteem comes from similarly unreliable sources, so I will not attempt to draw assertive conclusions from it. Eng does see the same development though.[189] There are fascinating currents in scholarly writing as well. The Japanese Tatsumi uses "otaku" very suggestively in a discussion of Tokyo's districts:

> More recently, the early twenty-first century has seen the subcultural explosion of Akihabara, which, in sharp contrast to the youthful trendiness of Shibuya, aggressively pursues what might be called an *otaku* aesthetics. This contemporary aesthetics is very sensitive to high-tech both symbolized and realized in electronic devices, manga and anime figures, and in whatever might appear trivial but would nonetheless be significant for those in the know.[190]

Here the word is associated with a major structure that goes beyond Western ideas of geekdom and doesn't seem pejorative, although the association is a little indecisive. Otaku slide across the "edge of hip" in Murakami's view as well, and the next chapter is all about his theory.

Searching Gainax for Superflat

The word "otaku" has long been semantically dissonant and rarely if ever neutral as a term related to anime fandom, torn mainly between the fans themselves and those who view fandom as pathology. It has no single meaning, in Japan or abroad. In the previous chapter, we saw the geek-related meaning absorbed by a media panic in Japan. It left the word with more negative connotations than "geek" has in English, though a rebound is supposedly in progress. In this chapter we will look at one recent and less insulting theory about Japanese otaku as special geeks. The theory is now quite widely disseminated in the world of art, but there is reason to doubt its usefulness.

Murakami's Unified Theory of Modern Japanese Culture

In *Little Boy*, Murakami Takashi explains the state of his own Japanese culture as a lingering consequence of the Second World War, in particular the country's doubly unique position as the victim of atomic warfare and of the subsequent 1947 constitution,[191] written by American occupiers, denying Japan the right of every other sovereign nation to start a war. The "childhood taunt"[192] "little boy" refers to the Hiroshima bomb's nickname[193] but more centrally to the immature modern Japan,[194] pampered and patronized by economic and military protection,[195] as well as by its own media control.[196]

Murakami is highly educated but does not present his ideas as science. His style in *Little Boy* is subjective and he finds his culture a bit repulsive.[197] He seems to view the lack of open discussion about the war's horrors as more important than the actual horrors, and the contradiction of Japan rearming very expensively during the Cold War as more important than the country's nominal denunciation of warfare,[198] thus he is not much of a nationalist. He sees consequences even in perfectly mainstream culture and convincingly analyses Miyazaki Hayao's latest hit on the basis of his theory.[199] He can also explain the unusual importance of convenience stores,[200] and so on. However, as indicated by the subtitle of the book (*The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*), he places greater emphasis on how certain artists have carried the torch in sublimating repressed memories of the defeat, often in the form of playful or politically incorrect metaphors originally "told to children"[201] and loved by his otaku. As he phrases it, "After Japan experienced defeat in World War II, it gave birth to a distinctive phenomenon, which has gradually degenerated into a uniquely Japanese [---] *otaku* culture."[202]

As Sawaragi puts it, the artists who eventually dealt with the war openly in the 1990s, including Murakami, did so only after being "sensitized to it in the context of subculture."[203] Murakami has some reservations about calling otaku a subculture, partly because their interests are

not cool and foreign like classic subcultures, but an "'uncool indigenous Japanese culture'".[204] He also notes that they are being integrated into the mainstream and no longer suffer social disdain.[205] However, Murakami says he is not really one of them,[206] and neither is Sawaragi, though both of their births coincide with those of the first otaku generation.[207]

Even by positive reviewers, Murakami has been accused of forcing others into a narrative where they don't necessarily belong,[208] and of reducing critical possibilities[209] (i.e. making unfalsifiable claims). According to the official translation in *Little Boy*, he characterizes otaku as pathologically obsessed.[210] The actual words he uses are "*byouteki na kodawari*", which could just as easily translate to "abnormally prejudiced", but Jensen is very close at hand. Fortunately, scholars like Napier see similar causalities.[211]

It is noteworthy that Takeda's autobiography also underpins Murakami's arguments. Takeda writes about the Japanese people's "spectre of battle" affecting his childhood.[212] He enthusiastically attended the Osaka World Exposition in 1970,[213] an event which also looms large in Murakami's interpretation.[214] Like absurdly belated guerrillas, the founders of Gainax illegally manufactured explosives for the special effects in an early live-action production entitled *Aikoku Sentai Dainippon* (Akai Takami, 1982), yet were surprised to hear it denounced as "right-wing" by many in fandom.[215] The film's setting is contemporary, whereas "*Dainippon Teikoku*" ("Empire of Greater Japan") was the official term for Japan from 1867 to 1945. The archaic "*Dainippon*" in the title clearly brings wartime imperialism to mind. The film is hard to find and I have only seen the opening. The lyrics to it include the lines "*Kamikaze, sukiyaki, geisha* [//] *Harakiri, tenpura, Fujiyama*". The first five words are also the names of the film's heroes. Two of the words are commonly iterated foreign misreadings of Japanese writing: The airborne suicide attackers of the war (神風) were not called *kamikaze* but rather *shinpuu* (although they were in fact named after something called kamikaze, creating a double entendre), and Mount Fuji (富士山) is really called *Fujisan*, not *Fujiyama*, even though 山 (mountain) is generally pronounced *yama*. Similarly, what Westerners call *harakiri* is usually termed *seppuku* in Japan. This all indicates a complex, Murakami-appropriate stance on nationalism: The lyrics celebrate Japan, but the image of Japan has deliberately been filtered through foreign stereotypes and superficial details like exported foods. It may be a satire of nationalism, but for lack of the complete film I can't say for certain.

One problem with Murakami is that he does not describe otaku in the form of concise, easily testable criteria. Of course this is not surprising, but he even invites conflicting points of view in "Otaku Talk", with Morikawa and Okada. These two supposed experts staunchly disagree on the fairly central issue of whether otaku are attracted to so-called *dame* (pointless, socially

unacceptable) hobbies and emigrate as soon as a hobby becomes acceptable, as Morikawa says, or whether otaku is a label applied to fans whose stable interests just happen to be frowned upon (considered *dame*) from time to time.[216] With Jensen in mind, I see Okada's theory as far more credible in this disagreement. However, I have to mention that Okada has been criticized for jingoism,[217] which I think is a valid polemic; he seems to think Japanese geek culture is somehow superior to Western geek culture, and that exports of anime prove it. Oddly enough, even he ambiguously renounces the title of otaku,[218] which would reduce the number of my Japanese sources who claim the title for themselves to zero, but it emerges that Okada sees a generational shift which is not actually very relevant to this essay due to the age of the works analysed. He is a self-described otaku of the period in question,[219] including the time when he wrote the script for *Otaku no Video*.

Murakami's theory about meaningfully special geeks is tied to uniquely Japanese conditions, precluding foreign otaku. He and his contributors make occasional reference to the possibility of Japan foreshadowing "the future of the world"[220] and such, but there is no evidence. Napier points out that European and American cultures display apocalyptic themes that are often at least as strong as those in Japan; she credits shared social, political and technological upheaval and suggests that differing religious traditions explain differences in expression.[221] I am inclined to agree with Napier and unwilling to support nationalism, but if Murakami connected otaku to more general historical conditions, the theory would be less testable and therefore arguably less interesting to science.

Identifying Murakami's Otaku

As discussed above, the main thing that distinguishes otaku for the purposes of the following investigation is their fascination with the Second World War, particularly with Japan's defeat and its paradoxic consequences. Murakami writes that otaku are all "ultimately defined by their relentless references to a humiliated self",[222] tied to the humiliation of Japan. Such references would perhaps be a logical product of ostracism anywhere, but I'll leave that aside. The other traits attributed to otaku in "Earth in My Window" are more attributable to geeks in general. Conversely, few traits commonly attributed to geeks are left out of *Little Boy*. For example, geeks are associated with certain genres; for otaku the genres include "'robot anime' and *tokusatsu* (special effects)".[223] Those two rarely escape their overlap with the broader genre of science fiction, which is surely no more or less "intimately linked to *otaku* culture"[224] than it is to Western geek culture. We also learn that only *some* SF characters are "*otaku*-style",[225] but not which ones.

Murakami's description is similarly unclear elsewhere as well. One unusual but very vaguely described property of his otaku is their nebulously creative sexuality: "Every *otaku* category

sublimates into fantasy, fuelled by gargantuan information stores, integrated research, and the *otaku* quest for Eros."[226] Unfortunately, he doesn't elaborate much on that either in *Little Boy*; it's more of a theme in his other work. More definitely, otaku are "obsessed with personal taste and individualism",[227] relatively speaking, which would simply make them more like Westerners and Western geeks. They can still make friends with those who share their interests, but reject others.[228] They can be described as "abnormally prejudiced" (or "pathologically obsessed", as noted above) in favour of "realism",[229] which is obviously a contradictory thing to say about fans of robot anime and the like. I take Murakami's use of "realism" here to mean something like production values: A high level of detail and polish, which provides some measure of intuitive verisimilitude, rather than an exact, anti-romantic replication of everyday life. This may connect with how the beauty of the *Daicon* shorts is said to have appealed especially to otaku by showing that spirited fans can outdo professionals.[230] The intertextual density of the *Daicon* shorts, which allude to many dozens of earlier works, also appealed to otaku.[231] Furthermore, otaku are said to share "a groundless, optimistic attitude toward the future",[232] while also sharing great bitterness at the betrayal of their dreams so far.[233] They wish ultimately for "a peaceful festival."[234] This is an extension of the claim that otaku are something like "1970s" American hippies:

> A lifestyle that seems to turn its back on the world is founded on a nearly groundless obsession with peace and happiness, tremendous curiosity for the internal world of the self, extreme sentimentality, and keen sensitivity, all of which contribute to futuristic creation.[235]

Kinsella[236] and Schodt[237] have observed more superficial parallels in the post-panic images of otaku and hippies, though it's otherwise a fairly rare characterization. It would be hard to argue that all of the quoted hippie-like traits are commonly attributed to geeks, but I don't see anything seriously alien to geekdom in the list.

Murakami's own words are obviously the most relevant, but since there is no reason to believe he is trying for an exhaustive definition of otaku, let's look at Morikawa and Okada as well. Murakami doesn't disagree with them in Otaku Talk. More than Murakami, Morikawa conforms to viewing geekdom as pathology, calling otaku "socially inept" and "self-indulgent".[238] Though I don't give him much authority, it may be interesting to note that he says otaku "tend to focus on virtual things" rather than material things,[239] which corresponds to the focus on mental faculties in my definition of geeks. In the same discussion, Okada contends that "*otaku* don't want to grow up, although financially, they are adults."[240] Murakami would certainly agree, but not just about otaku; he sees a much broader section of Japanese culture as "embracing immaturity".[241] Okada's inherently "bashful"[242] otaku culture also "shuns the physical",[243] much like my geeks. Before *Evangelion*, he says, otaku were fascinated by a childish sense of justice, but that has apparently changed,[244] so it cannot have been central.

I don't hereby condone Morikawa's, Okada's or even Murakami's claims as accurate descriptions of any real person, but it is necessary to stabilize the meaning of "otaku" temporarily, using *Little Boy*'s definition to challenge its theory. This is done in the following analyses.

Honnêamise

What is the meaning of the word "Honnêamise"? It might refer to *honne*, Japanese for a person's true intention, her often hidden motive. However, the Japanese title spells the word phonetically as *Oneamisu*, weakening that hypothesis. This is symptomatic of the film. It takes place in a world where essentially everything except human biology is different. Gainax reverse-engineered the universe to produce an original setting as natural and credible as reality. This setting is extremely realistic in terms of natural laws, causality, human nature and wealth of details, but unrealistic in almost every other way. Resemblances, like honne in the title, cannot be verified. I would call *Honnêamise* a science fiction film because it takes place in an alternate and very logical world, without any hint of the supernatural. However, it doesn't take place in the future and none of the technologies portrayed in it are any more advanced than those of 1987, when it was made. In fact, local technologies in the country of Honnêamise are broadly equivalent to those of the 1950s through 1960s of Earth's First World. Futurism is a force in the film, but it's the historical futurism of the old Space Race, with no attempt to claim its validity. There are no giant robots, noticeable correspondences with otaku classics or anything else in the genre or setting to mark Murakami's otaku as the target audience. That leaves the plot and some interesting characters.

The primary spoken language in Honnêamise is represented by Japanese. The film begins with a voice-over in that language:

> Was any of this for good or bad? I really couldn't say. But, like most people I guess, I was raised in the same country where I was born. My family was middle-class, pretty ordinary. And so, I've never known the troubles of the rich, or the hardships of the poor. To tell you the truth, I could really care less.

Although we hear it is an adult speaking, we see only a teenager. In this first scene, he is happily watching military aircraft in a near-empty landscape of pure white snow. One of them lifts off from a carrier on a lake while the narration continues:

> When I was a kid, I wanted to be a Navy Pilot. You had to join the Navy if you wanted to fly jets... They were so fast... Flew so high... For me, there could be nothing better than flying. But, two months before I was to graduate from school, I saw that my grades weren't going to let me do any of that. And so... I ended up joining the Space Force...

This monologue correctly indicates that the teenager we see and the reminiscing adult we hear are the same person and the protagonist of the film. Specifically, we see the protagonist at the height of his boyhood dream, before he gets the humiliating news that his dream is hopeless. Smith's primacy effect imprints that boy in our minds as the basic version of the character.

The scene by the lake is followed by the opening credits, which dissolve to animation of the adult who narrated the opening scene. He sits by a window with the blinds closed, under strobing sunlight through a rotating fan, doing absolutely nothing. His chin is stubbly, his eyes half-closed, giving an impression of lethargy and hopelessness. The contrast with his younger self is stark. He eventually looks at a clock, gets up and walks outside, to a graveyard where a fallen Space Force comrade is being buried on a hot day. He has purposely missed the opening of the ceremony. He gets lost navigating the graveyard and accidentally topples a round stone, no doubt symbolic of a dead person's head, while taking a short cut. His commander berates him for being late and failing to wear dress uniform like the other "soldiers". The protagonist replies that he overslept while napping on the roof. Lining up with his friends, he tells them what seems more like the truth: "Just thinking about some stuff." In that moment, he is boyish again, keeping the primacy effect active.

Before he is even named, these sequences demonstrate the protagonist of the present day as a man of 20-odd years, whose typical boyhood dream has been crushed by his own lack of ability in formal education. In the next scene, he is called by his nickname, "Shiro", which can mean "white" in Japanese, again connecting back to the opening scene. He says he might enjoy working in a bakery, but stays in the Space Force because of indecision and rampant unemployment. He muses to himself that "We get hungry because we live. We eat to keep on living..." In his view, existence is a bland and pointless circle. The same night he plays a board game with his buddies and goes out for some debauchery. Prostitutes seem to be a socially accepted pastime among his friends, though we don't actually see Shiro go to any. Instead, he drunkenly falls asleep in the bed of his recently deceased comrade, further underlining his lack of respect and vitality.

The Second Life of Boyhood Ambition

Following instructions on a leaflet he received in the red light district, Shiro goes to see a woman called Riqunni, introducing himself to her with his full name: Shirotsugh Lhadatt. Riqunni is single, gentle and moderately pretty, which are probably the main reasons why Shiro visits her at the end of the trolley line. However, he knows from the beginning that she is deeply involved in a gloomy major religion. He insincerely spouts moral platitudes to win her approval, lying that the recent death of his "good friend" is what made him come. Her kind and idealistic words about his job light a spark in him though; he suddenly waxes enthusiastic about the mission to "clear the way to peace for all mankind" through space exploration, noting in passing that it's much better than what he saw the Navy doing in the formative first scene. From then on he naïvely believes in the futuristic propaganda of the space program, much like Murakami's otaku would. As an adult, Shiro has replaced his boyhood ambition with an even more boyish one, and wants to risk his life for it. He volunteers for the first manned flight into space, equivalent to Yuri Gagarin's mission in 1961.

During Shiro's long training process for the mission, he gets to fly in a fighter plane, but finds out that the Air Force is arrogant. He has become an otaku-appropriate pacifist and briefly abandons his work to help Riqunni when her house is torn down because of some cruelly collected debts. Despite her refusal to "compromise" on her religion to be physically intimate, Shiro seems to love her, although he is not what Murray Smith would call transparent in this matter, which is to say that our alignment with him excludes the psychological information necessary to explain his actions.[245] Society's obstacles in the path of Riqunni's harmless life, Shiro reading her misanthropic scriptures, the throng of unemployed protesters and beggars outside headquarters, the death of a friendly scientist working on the program, the relentless PR campaign for the mission, and a sudden move of the launch site due to bellicose autocrats are all possible reasons why Shiro loses faith halfway through the film. We hardly even see the change until he blankly answers "Purpose?" when a director instructs him to emphasize his purpose as a space hero in front of the cameras for another news broadcast. It is up to the audience to guess just why his second dream is crashing. As in his affection for Riqunni, he is opaque.

Shiro walks out from the set without a word and starts helping Riqunni distribute her religious leaflets. She takes him in, but he doesn't seem to tell her anything about why he's there. The next night, Shiro assaults Riqunni, stopped only by a blow to the head in a moment's pause. This attempted rape is Shiro's least transparent and most conspicuous moment. Though he tries to apologize when he regains consciousness the next morning, no particular motive is ever presented, nor do any genre signifiers provide one. The assault is improbable but not implausible, given average human psychology. It matches the commonly discussed features of a "normal" rape, e.g. acquaintance between (male) perpetrator and (female) victim, sexual frustration, and isolation from the police, in a clearly flawed patriarchal society. Riqunni takes care of a child whose parents often fought, and we see a short sequence wherein those parents grapple, the mother begging "Stop! Please stop!", indicating that rape may have played a part there as well. Indeed, the general concept of humankind advanced in the film is extremely unsentimental, from Riqunni's scriptures, through Shiro's commander's dark musings on history, to the outbreak of war in the end. Murakami's "peaceful festival" is not a plausible option.

Monster and Hero

Whatever its causes, one may theorize that the attempted rape makes Shiro see that he was falling back into his earlier abject mindlessness, which would be why he starts working hard again afterwards. It is Shiro himself who heroically convinces the others to launch his rocket even when a military incursion halts the countdown. In orbit, he prays for humankind, broadcasting his own voice out across his planet in the microwave spectrum. Thus he ironically ends the film as a sort of

cosmic saint. However, his newly espoused religion is a fiction. Despite vague parallels with real-world theology, the audience is well aware that Shiro's church is as made-up as his country. Consequently, the film is not religious propaganda. Religious belief is just symbolic of secular confidence.

Shortly after the scene of the attempted rape, Shiro asks a friend if, supposing that life was a story, he's ever wondered whether he's a good guy or a bad guy. The friend's answer is that everything exists because there's a use for it. Moral forces seem irrelevant if they exist at all. Presenting this as a sympathetic thought (Shiro likes it, and note his first lines), *Honnêamise* almost explicitly rejects what Smith calls Manichaean morality, i.e. a strict dichotomy of good and evil.[246] However, Shiro also fails to match Smith's graduated moral structure, a spectrum in between good and evil.[247] Shiro is a regular slob, nearly a rapist villain, and a pious astronaut hero. Taken as a whole, he fits in no single position on a linear scale between good and evil, in any moral system I've ever heard of. This is vaguely appropriate to Murakami's general characterization of Japan,[248] but not specifically to otaku. Complaining about not being able to make up his mind about switching jobs, and then resurrecting his boyhood dream in a still grander and less mature form, the introduction's early Shiro echoes Okada's words on adult otaku who don't want to grow up. However, adulthood in the film is not consistently associated with losing faith or generally having a hard time, since Riqunni's adoptive child seems happy much more seldom than most of the adults.

Shiro's boyhood dream was proven to be unfounded, but the sympathetic sides of his character remain directly tied to an optimistic attitude toward the future. This is appropriate for an otaku: Shiro's struggling, irrational, pacifist hope is celebrated as the thing that keeps him away from the sort of self-indulgence which, when combined with social ineptitude, manifests as attempted rape. Self-indulgence and social ineptitude are present in Morikawa's description, and certainly in historical stereotypes of otaku. Perhaps Shiro's development symbolizes tension between a positive concept of otaku and the negative concept Nakamori had already made known when production of the film started. In this model of interpretation, Shiro represents a reflective otaku who is aware and afraid of his own supposed weaknesses, including the fragility of his optimism and the risk of being trapped in *dame* behaviour (symbolized by a palaeolithic midden revealed to exist underneath the launch pad itself). Like books in one theorist's interpretation, *Honnêamise* is "a machine to think with",[249] a tool otaku can use to ponder conflicting visions of themselves. Shiro uses his fragile optimism to escape the planet, metaphorically escaping the stereotype's influence. If Western colour symbolism had been reliable in the context, this interpretation might have been strengthened by the fact that it starts to snow on Riqunni in the very last scene, signifying a return to the white purity of childhood from the opening shot.

While those correspondences would perhaps appeal to an audience of intellectually inclined otaku, their connections to Murakami are very tenuous. Social stigma was weak in 1987, before the Miyazaki murders, so the above interpretation almost certainly exaggerates the social angst of the demographic. An interpretation more suitable to Murakami is also much more banal and less otaku-related: Shiro's undulating optimism parallels that of the people who went to the 1970 Osaka World Exposition as children.[250]

Most importantly, it is remarkably hard to find parallels to World War II in *Honnêamise*, further weakening the idea that otaku are the target audience of the film. The rulers of Honnêamise lure a neighbouring empire to raid the launch site, apparently to achieve a propaganda victory and qualify for reparations. This is a tiny bit similar to how the US government sought to justify fighting the Axis and were pleased to get US public opinion on their side after the attack on Pearl Harbor. However, that weak analogy would inappropriately cast Shiro as an American. At most, we may view the humiliated Shiro's mission as symbolic of Japan's desire to join the Space Race in particular and the "big boy" struggles of the Cold War in general, a desire which plays into the sense of childish impotence described by Murakami, but even that is a very speculative hypothesis. My conclusion is that *Honnêamise* is a poor match for Murakami's theory in general, and a very poor match for his claims about otaku as distinct from geeks.

Gunbuster

Just as in *Honnêamise*, the very first shot in *Gunbuster* shows the protagonist, and the scene establishes an ambition to fly. It's a still photograph of a handsome, young and slightly futuristic uniformed naval officer with his little daughter in his arms, but the officer is not the protagonist. We hear the daughter vocalizing a composition for elementary school:

> My Daddy
>
> by no. 2, 4th class, 3rd year: Takaya Noriko
>
> I think my daddy is a very great man. Daddy's job is to protect the Earth in outer space. Daddy's ship is the fastest in the universe. He always tells me so with pride. Daddy is the captain of the space battleship "Luxion". When I grow up, I want to be a space pilot and go to space with my daddy.

Third year of Japanese elementary school would make the girl about 8 years old. With the primacy effect irrecoverably in play, as in *Honnêamise*, the narrative jumps ahead: Noriko's voice-over, now based on her diary, describes her father's death in battle a few years later. This corresponds to the sad news of Shiro failing his exams, but Noriko immediately reaffirms her ambition to be a pilot. Near the present day of the main narrative, in the early 21st century, we see a set of forms indicating that Noriko has applied to a military high school in Okinawa, which necessitates a move from her native Osaka and tells us she is about sixteen. The opening credits follow. During the remainder of

the first episode we learn that Noriko, like Shiro, shows no promise at first, but she trains hard and ends up going to space at the end of the episode.

While such similarities with *Honnêamise* are significant, so are the differences. Noriko's gender is one of them. In the first scene after the opening credits, she sits staring into space much like Shiro, but it is revealed that she was actually looking at an older girl whom she admires, while eating from a cute pink lunch box. She may be something of a glutton when it comes to sweet snacks, if we ascribe a mess in a locker room to her, but not an unkempt otaku-appropriate 20-something like Shiro. In fact, Noriko is a feminine stereotype. Her near-romantic admiration for the older girl is recognizable as a trope of the modern *shoujo* (literally "young girl") genre, not as a lesbian impulse. Levi introduces the genre and the trope, noting that a heterosexual girl is often considered purer if her first object of affection is female.[251] "Pure" is a suitable adjective for Noriko, who takes few detours and expresses no malevolence in her quest to confirm and avenge her father's death. She never wears her hair shorter than shoulder-length. She is emotional and irrational, easily frightened by ghost stories, and a believer in astrology. It is no coincidence that her sign of the zodiac is Virgo (*Otome-san*, "the maiden", in Japanese), another feminine reference. She's a little inelegant and becomes a good military pilot, which is certainly a masculine job, but she is also unfailingly kind, sweet and innocent when she is not overcome by grief or adolescent insecurity. Could such a feminine stereotype be targeted at Murakami's otaku?

The Eternal Otaku Porn Star

Gunbuster is arguably the best-known SF motion picture where Einstein's theory of relativity is used for drama with anything resembling accuracy. Several of Noriko's missions require her to travel so close to the speed of light that she ages far less rapidly than those who travel more slowly, including everyone on the surface of the Earth. In the second episode, mere hours pass for her and two of her fellow soldiers on her first mission, whilst six months pass in the lives of every other human. These temporal differences grow throughout the series, yet little more than a year passes in Noriko's own life from the opening credits of the first episode to the very end. In the fifth episode, Noriko's best friend from school is grown up and married. She begs Noriko to get her two-year-old daughter evacuated from the Earth. At the start of the last episode, that daughter is already Noriko's own age. Noriko's closest partner, the older girl she admired in the beginning, ages 15 years on Earth and becomes a widow before rejoining the fleet and meeting Noriko, to whom it's only been another six months. In the finale, Noriko and her partner gut the galaxy with an artificial black hole. Barely escaping the event horizon of the relativistic weapon, they return to Earth after what might be a few days in their eyes. Noriko is still seventeen at that point, yet it's AD 14292. The series ends before we get any details of Noriko's reception, but a human society of some kind still exists and

still remembers her as a saviour, delivering a phrase ("Welcome home") that a 3rd-millennium ancestor of the 15th millennium's people promised to say to Noriko. The scene of the homecoming is extremely sentimental yet also futuristic, as is much of the series, which is totally appropriate for otaku.

Surviving more than ten thousand years unchanged, Noriko is a perpetual adolescent in the adult-like humanoid armoured shell of the giant-robot genre. One might even call her an eternal child, since the first mission (identifying an incoming ship which turns out to be her father's) brings back the memory of her "daddy" so strongly that it makes her act the age she was when he died, which is also her age in her first appearance, directly in line with Smith's primacy effect. Her childish recklessness causes the mission to go awry. In fact, the extent of time dilation in the first mission is so great precisely because of Noriko's actions, but her partner explains to others that her rude behaviour is understandable partly as a *consequence* of the traumatic time dilation. In other words, Noriko's failure to act responsibly accidentally makes her immune to ageing and simultaneously creates an excuse for her failure, which is a Murakami-appropriate fantasy, though again its appropriateness is not specific to his otaku. The extreme time dilation in the final mission is voluntary. These metaphors for wilful immaturity could be construed as all the more appropriate since they are intimately tied to advanced physics, something I believe geeks are especially likely to appreciate. Murakami doesn't mention such a predilection in otaku however, weakly indicating that in the scientific aspect, geeks are a target audience and otaku are not. Anyhow, the fact that the narrative always moves at Noriko's unique pace is an unusual sort of contribution to Smith's alignment, emphasizing Noriko as a central device for targeting an audience, and there is more to her.

Clements and McCarthy note that Noriko's stasis in "a world of childish things" resembles that of the characters in *Otaku no Video*.[252] In fact, Noriko might be a geek herself. Her best friend in the first episode wears spectacles and unfashionable hair. The pair are bullied by older students. The main reason for bullying Noriko is the mistaken but plausible assumption that she is exploiting her late father's status. The main bully develops into a good teacher, then into the kind and gentle old director of the school; she is not a true villain. More interestingly, there are several shots of Noriko's various living spaces throughout the series. In the first episode she has a poster of an anime character (unknown to me, possibly original) over her bed; the other pictures are more realistic. In the fourth episode, a poster near her bunk in a dormitory appears to refer to the American rock band Television, though there is no proof that the poster is really Noriko's. In the fifth episode, posters of Totoro and Nausicaä from Miyazaki's *Tonari no Totoro / My Neighbour Totoro* (Miyazaki Hayao, 1988) and *Kaze no Tani no Naushika / Nausicaä of the Valley of the*

Winds (Miyazaki Hayao, 1984) are on the wall above her bed. Still more extreme is the next shot in the same scene, showing a big poster from *Uchuu Senkan Yamato / Space Battleship Yamato* (Matsumoto Leiji, Academy Productions, Yomiuri TV, 1974) right above her pillow. *Yamato* is one of the greatest classics of anime and otaku culture.[253] It doesn't end there either; when Noriko lies down on her bed there's an eyeline match to a Van Halen calendar pinned to her ceiling. The next episode shows an electric guitar with amplifier in her room, and yet another big poster, this one for *Wakusei Daisensou / The War in Space* (Fukuda Jun, 1977), a typical *tokusatsu* film. The following shots contain still more posters and stacks of otaku reading material. Despite all these references, we never actually see Noriko talking about her interest in or consuming otaku culture or rock music, nor does anyone ever react to her display of such interests,[254] which is implausible. She even contradicts Murakami's criteria, mainly by making friends with people who show no tendency towards otaku interests. I don't believe the mise-en-scène is really there to indicate that Noriko is a proper otaku. It is primarily one part of a series of references similar to those in the *Daicon* shorts, which would make the series as a whole more attractive to otaku. Many allusions do not connect specifically to Noriko's character at all. Clements and McCarthy point out that space ships in the series break up like plastic scale models, and that one character is named after a prominent American anime fan, as examples of "staggering" in-jokes.[255]

All of Gainax's co-founders and later additions to its central team are men. Murakami is silent on the matter, but men appear to dominate in his vision of otaku. It may seem unlikely at first that male viewers would assimilate a stereotypically feminine protagonist like Noriko, but there is plenty of precedent,[256] including Miyazaki's Nausicaä (who is admittedly much less of a stereotype). The superficial references to masculine rock idols and geeky Japanese classics in connection with Noriko may help men (and especially male otaku) empathize with her. However, her character also contains an aspect of pornography. She is often shown in skimpy clothing. Her nipples are bared in three episodes, always in non-sexual circumstances like bathing. There is no corresponding pornographic display of male characters, and Smith doesn't discuss nudity. The classic Western feminist interpretation would probably be that Noriko is objectified, preventing assimilation, which doesn't directly contradict that Murakami's otaku are the target. Whether as object and/or as subject, she certainly seems designed for otaku audiences, male and possibly female.

Games with History

Murakami traces the history of otaku favourites in terms of how their "hero-figures increasingly question and agonize over their righteous missions to defend the earth and humanity."[257] *Gunbuster* fits perfectly into that evolution, which is no wonder since Anno, its director and one of few individuals Murakami calls an otaku, also made what Murakami calls the evolution's "endpoint",[258]

Evangelion. Noriko's alien enemy is theorized to constitute a natural defence mechanism of the galaxy, which makes all of humankind resemble a cancer. The finale destroys the bright galactic core just to preserve the Earth. That operation is not without human critics, and Noriko is often in a state of shock or tearful introspection. *Gunbuster*'s heroine is certainly more angst-ridden than the hero of *Kidou Senshi Gandamu / Mobile Suit Gundam* (Tomino Yoshiyuki, Sunrise, Nagoya TV, 1979), the most important predecessor in Murakami's evolution. However, Noriko's humanoid vehicles are ironically less credible than *Gundam*'s, undermining what might otherwise have been a purer tragedy. *Gunbuster*'s humanoid vehicles are not only extremely practical, they also seem to benefit from callisthenics and operate better when you switch off some avionics, provided you have enough passion. The teenage pilots yell the names of special close combat attacks while performing them, and seem perfectly capable of controlling their immensely complicated single-seat machines with little more than two joysticks. Noriko apologizes to her last machine (the eponymous Gunbuster) while damaging it to reveal its ribs (!) in the final mission. The size of it is virtually unprecedented in the genre at some 240 metres in height, when combined; it can separate into a pair of fighter jets. All such tropes are so exaggerated in *Gunbuster* that an experienced viewer is likely to perceive it as an affectionate parody of the giant-robot genre, which a knowledgeable otaku is likely to appreciate. It's also a deliberate regression from the revolutionary realism of *Gundam*, wherein humanoid vehicles are only vehicles, much like those of any other shape. *Gunbuster* returns in part to the era of its animators' childhood, when the genre's robots were more mystical and silly.[259] However, the production values are impressive, so the sort of realism I think Murakami associates with otaku is still there. Notably, Gunbuster includes several other less Murakami-appropriate genres, including the aforementioned romantic shoujo, and sports drama as Takeda indicated.

"Wartime allusions abound" in *Gunbuster*, according to Clements and McCarthy: They mention the unsympathetic role of humankind in the war, and the fact that the "home islands" are desperately defended from Okinawa.[260] The application forms of Noriko's high school declare it to be a branch of *Teikoku Uchuugun*, the Imperial Space Force. Note the use of the same word for Imperial as in the expansionist *Dainippon Teikoku*. Later, the name is elaborated to *Chikyuu Teikoku Uchuugun*, the space force of the "Earth Empire", but not only is this so-called empire the only known human faction, it also lacks conquests; we never see any human settlements beyond the Earth, indicating that *Teikoku* is used mainly as an allusion to the war. Several non-Japanese members are introduced, most prominently a Soviet pilot, but the narrative alignment is always with Japanese people. The main officers are seen dining on *sushi*. No language other than Japanese is spoken, and very little English is written. Japan is privileged, almost eclipsing the rest of

humankind in the war against the aliens. Throughout the series, Noriko intermittently wears school uniforms, which have military origins and associations even in reality.[261] In *Gunbuster*, several of them are in fact military uniforms, since Noriko's high school is a military installation. Adults tend to wear uniforms similar to those of the wartime Japanese navy. In the last episode, the human commander refers to a suicidal attack by the aliens as "*tokkou*" (literally "special attack"), a more generic term than shinpuu but still identical to euphemistic World War II terminology. In the ensuing battle, a couple of frames show a ship marked "Nippon" (Japan), complete with the Japanese flag, embroiled in the fray. Weapons of mass destruction, including explicitly nuclear ones, are common, though not in alien hands. There is certainly evidence to suggest that *Gunbuster* sublimates memories of and alludes to World War II, exactly as Murakami would have it. All in all, the target audience of the series matches Murakami's theory of otaku very well indeed.

Otaku no Video

Both episodes of *Otaku no Video* begin and end with animation. Each segment of animation, except the last, is followed by a dated teleprinter message reminding the audience of some largely unrelated event from the setting of the animation we just witnessed. These texts mainly build a sense of historical context. They are followed by often lengthy live-action segments. These form a series titled "Portrait of an Otaku". Each one is a more or less fake interview with an alleged otaku. They are in turn followed by brief slide shows, wherein a narrator soberly relates some apparently authentic statistics gathered from amateur field studies of otaku. Then it's back to the animated narrative, which begins in 1991 but quickly flashes back to 1982 and tells a linear story ending in 2035, with appropriately fake teleprinter text. There are exceptions to this cycle of media; the first episode's third interview and the second episode's fifth (the last one) are not followed by statistics, and there is a loose teleprinter message preceding the closing credits of each episode.

Kubo's Crazed Kingship

The protagonist of the animated drama is a man named Kubo, who is introduced saying to himself how much he hates otaku, at the very beginning of 1991. His appearance is ordinary, and beyond telling off a customer who calls him at "work" (where he's in a sleeping bag, just minding an almost nondescript office, alone) during the New Year's holiday, he does little to express a personality. We get no further than Smith's first stage, recognition of Kubo as an individual character, before the opening credits. The primacy effect is therefore so weak as to be virtually irrelevant, and there is no flash forward as in the previous two anime. Instead, we flash back to 1982.

Kubo is a freshman at the elite Waseda University, with a pretty sophomore girlfriend called Ueno, and friends in the university's tennis club. He's only a little socially awkward, as

demonstrated by his failure to play tennis more nicely against a less competitive girl. However, his friends' trendy chatter about hot brands like Saab doesn't seem to amuse him. Politely retreating from their company one night, he runs into Tanaka, a chubby high school buddy who seems to lead a group of geeks. Several segments of animation end with Kubo surrounded by Tanaka's friends in a rather creepy fashion. However, he gradually softens up to them, and they to him. A female geek dresses in a provocative costume for an event, which apparently excites Kubo more than the bourgeois Ueno can.

Tanaka shows a complete videotape collection of a TV show Kubo liked as a boy. The geeks seem to have joint control of an apartment and invite Kubo to watch the tapes there any time. He accepts, and is gradually inducted. Each geek is a specialist in certain areas and introduces them until Kubo no longer finds them weird. He starts dressing up as characters for conventions, camping out for film premieres and so on, blending in perfectly with the group by the end of the first episode, in 1984. The effects are remarkably realistic: Kubo gets lethargic from lack of normal sleep, he starts putting on a little too much weight and he's often seen with an unsightly stubble. Ueno notices and politely disapproves. One day, Kubo finds out she's cheating on him. This leads to the climax of the first episode, where he resolves to become an extreme otaku as a form of protest against the boring society that unjustly calls tennis players normal and anime fans "*dame*". The once entirely normal Kubo is now a fairly manic geek, with a grudge against normative society and particularly against the normal woman who left him, even though he never seems to have paid much attention to her when they were together.

Kubo and Tanaka abandon their attempts to find ordinary jobs. In 1985, they start manufacturing miniatures. They are very successful, but Ueno does not recognize it, so Kubo is not satisfied. In *Otaku no Video*'s only apparent allusion to World War II, he travels to China to exploit its cheap labour. The path of his journey is reminiscent of Japan's 1931 invasion of Manchuria, which was a prelude to the Pacific War and thus to World War II itself. The Chinese people in the series are consistently portrayed as ethnic stereotypes in military uniforms. At this stage, Kubo is hardly sympathetic. His megalomaniacal initiative is too risky for the bank that funds it, so the board of directors demote him. It is amusingly revealed that Ueno is behind this "betrayal" and becomes the new president of the company. She has come to symbolize disapproving normality and is therefore Kubo's epic nemesis. She is seen abandoning her husband, the banker who demoted Kubo, in 1997, but her ultimate fate is unknown.

It is during Kubo's exile from the board room that 1991 rolls around and he declares that he doesn't like otaku. One day he meets Tanaka, who's become a nervous wreck after ousting Kubo and then being framed for embezzlement and fired. That point in 1991 is roughly where *Otaku no*

Video was created. The last quarter of the series describes the future with rapidly decreasing realism, entering traditional SF territory. Kubo and Tanaka form an animation studio, together with a woman who is more docile than Ueno, and with whom Kubo seems to fall in love. Their anime is so successful that they are able to build a vast theme park on artificial islands in Tokyo Bay. They call it "Otakuland" and it seems to be a resounding success, a great "peaceful festival". Its grand opening in 1999 prompts Kubo to declare himself the king of otaku and also "the Terrible Great King". Even in this great triumph, he still has a vicious streak of aggrandizement. It seems that his revenge will never be complete, so he doesn't match the obsession with peace that is characteristic of Murakami's otaku. He does match their unusually strong bitterness at having been "betrayed" though.

Otakuland eventually sinks into the sea as part of some unspecified disaster, but it's miraculously revived when Kubo and Tanaka go looking for their youth at the bottom of the sea, as old men in the final segment. In what might be a fantasy on the brink of death, they enter the park's central tower, where Tanaka's weirdo companions have all gathered, unchanged by time. When they remove their scuba-gear helmets, Kubo and Tanaka are also young again, together powering up the tower's engines to blast off into space, heading for a planet of otaku. Optimistic sentimentality conquers all.

The animated drama is obviously about concepts of otaku, but not necessarily Murakami's concept. Since the script was written by Okada Toshio, before his scholarly career, it's no surprise that Kubo sees the same unfair discrimination as Okada regarding what's considered *dame*. It is more noteworthy that some of Tanaka's friends treat Kubo with particularistic derision at first, but they are a minority. It's not quite up to the level of Murakami's rejection of outsiders. *Otaku no Video*'s animation is also filled with countless allusions to other works and to Gainax's own history, some of which are detailed in nine pages of Animeigo's liner notes.[262] For instance, *The War in Space*'s poster is repeated from *Gunbuster*. There are even a couple of hints that *Otaku no Video* takes place in *Gunbuster*'s universe; this would explain the rise in sea levels.

The economic nature of the re-invasion of Manchuria is interesting. A few other details also constitute Murakami-appropriate fantasies about Japan's economic status, notably very brief newspaper reports on the reception of Kubo's "future" exports: The Russian lines for his anime are said to be longer than those for bread, and the USA deploys protective sanctions, making trade unfair. Perhaps in response, Kubo and Tanaka co-write a bestseller called *Iya! to Ieru Kuni* (roughly "The Country That Can Say Stop!" (my translation); *iya* has a wide range of meanings), a joke about Ishihara and Morita's *The Japan That Can Say No*. These minor details signal an interest in the humiliation of Japan, which Murakami would probably derive from the war but which is not

clearly connected to the atomic bombs or the constitution. The mode of the new invasion of Manchuria could be seen as an indication that economic power has replaced military power, which allows the humiliated nation to overcome its war-renouncing constitution and make bloodless war by proxy, thus partly redeeming itself as sovereign. In that interpretation, *Otaku no Video*'s target audience has the trait that makes Murakami's otaku special, but the connection is weak. The Chinese journey sequence is ambiguous. The economic headlines and the shot of the book are very brief. None of it resembles Murakami's sublime apocalyptic imagery, which is otaku anime's normal way of dealing with the war.[263] The sinking of Otakuland isn't even shown, making the whole thing appear a bit too dry for otaku, with the exception of the completely sentimental ending.

Ambiguous Live Action

Although they aren't animated, the fake interviews in *Otaku no Video* deserve a few words here at the end, because they seem to condemn otaku almost as strongly as Beineix's *Otaku*, made two years later. Two male subjects in *Otaku no Video* are implied to be masturbating on camera. A model gun geek in a mock battle is asked if he's ever thought of shooting a living thing with his souped-up assault rifle. His reply is "I'm not sure about cats but I think I could easily kill pigeons and small animals with a single shot." He doesn't seem very likely to go out and do it, but unlike even the manic Kubo, this armed geek isn't obviously harmless. Miyazaki Tsutomu killed cats,[264] and the style of the fake documentary is almost always serious. Gainax is clearly going for realism on some level, not simple partisan propaganda. However, even in the model gun segment, there is no clear influence from the war, and thus little Murakami.

The very last "Portrait of an Otaku" parodies the scandal-hungry reports that followed the discovery of Miyazaki. A camera crew stalk and try to corner a man whom they believe has just attended a meeting with animation cel smugglers. The normal-looking man insists that it doesn't matter what's in his bag, but vicious reporters hound him until their camera is destroyed. In another segment, the alleged otaku initially denies any serious interest in fandom, but the interviewer presents material proof of his involvement. He cheerily surrenders and quotes a *Gundam* character after donning the proper hat, which just happens to have been beside him throughout the interview. Only that one geek sheds his shame and gets the last laugh, which is probably the clearest indication in any of the interviews that geeks are the target audience. However, Murakami's otaku are not particularly welcome.

Conclusion

A large amount of forces have given the word "otaku" an extraordinary range of related but generally contradictory meanings. Anyone can pick a definition and use "otaku" as often as she likes. Anyone can even appropriate "otaku" to refer to something quite different, the way Eng has done. However, there is one caveat. Even if we ignore the more outré definitions of otaku (as an entire generation of the Japanese people, as exclusively male etc.), we still have to consider that all common Western descriptions of otaku indicate that they are really different from (all or other) Western geeky fans. In the case of Japanese otaku, they are supposedly not just Japanese geeks, and in the case of Western otaku, they are supposedly not just geeky about a particular set of interests (mainly imported Japanese animation and comics, but related hobbies as well). There is no consensus with regard to what makes them special in either case, and effectively no strong evidence in support of their uniqueness, which means we ought to question if they really are so meaningfully different that they cannot more productively be described as geeks, assuming of course that we can now use a contested term like "geek" without reinforcing stereotypes.

Murakami's description of otaku, which pretends to be based on real meaningful differences between Japan and the rest of the world, has been tested at length in this essay. In my opinion, it was not confirmed to be particularly useful in analysing films, though it has shed light on several details, such as the context of wartime allusions in *Gunbuster*. I have not refuted Murakami's theory, but I hope that I have shown what a massive undertaking it would have to be to "prove him right", i.e. to base a clear and reliable scientific theory on his work and use that theory's image of otaku, as distinguished from geeks and other fans, for understanding film culture more deeply. An alternate but equally arduous task would be to chart the psychological relationship between Japanese geeks and Japanese schools (or more general rearing traditions), which could also produce some insight. As indicated by the aforementioned relationship between the war and the symbolic values of school uniforms, these two paths forward should probably be combined. In any case, it would be a start to explore geeky fans as distinct from fans in general, if indeed they are distinct enough to study.

It's easy to look at a few descriptions and then start using "otaku" thinking that, whatever happens, there is at least something real out there in the world that can best be defined as otaku. I wouldn't do that after writing this essay. My personal conclusion is that extremely few (if any) existing definitions of otaku are based on meaningful differences with regard to (all or other) Western geeks. Consequently, any uncritical use of "otaku" in Western writing can do little except to perpetuate misunderstandings, so I hereby advise against it.

Summary

An understanding of the Japanese word "otaku" is relevant to the study of Japanese animation. Through a critical discourse analysis, this essay has uncovered a wide range of meanings attributed to "otaku", apart from its literal meaning ("house") and its function as a pronoun. The numbers in parentheses here refer to pages in the essay itself.

"Otaku" can mean a special breed of geek or nerd, originating in Japan but threatening to spread. That concept has been used as a bogeyman to scare people away from Japanese exports (12). However, Western descriptions of otaku as particularly obsessive "unfeeling aliens" fit perfectly into a grand pattern where we misinterpret Japan on the basis of our fears and desires (12). A typically Western journalistic account can include everything from borderline mentally ill extreme hackers to teenage pop-idol fans as otaku (13), and prejudiced descriptions are by no means limited to the Western world. The ostensible inventor of the term describes otaku as a horde of emaciated loons and "giggling fat white pigs" (14), similar in concept to bullying stereotypes of Western geeks. By contrast, the word was really invented to describe fellow fans (14). It was popularized in 1989, when a domestic media panic made it seem as though Japanese geeks were all dangerous people like Miyazaki Tsutomu, the necrophile, paedophile and cannibal (14). Aum Shinrikyou's nerve-gassing doomsday cultists later reinforced that unrealistic stigma (16). In the aftermath of his arrest, Miyazaki's entire generation was identified as otaku, corrupted by Western individualism and the collapse of patriarchy (15). Countless Western sources claim that "otaku" exist all over the world; many Western fans of Japanese animation call themselves by the term, often in a celebratory fashion (18). It has also been turned against Westerners, for instance portraying them as pitiable victims of cultural imperialism (19).

Some people who believe that Japanese geeks really are different from Western geeks blame Japan's school system (16), but no clear link has been established. Murakami Takashi disseminates a more recent definition of otaku as an artistic pseudo-subculture fascinated by Japan's unique humiliations surrounding the Second World War (22). Gently testing his theory through close reading of some carefully chosen animation, I have found that *Gunbuster* seems to address traits distinguishing Murakami's otaku from geeks quite clearly. *Otaku no Video* is more ambiguous, despite revolving around something called otaku, and *Honnêamise* does not match the special claims of Murakami's theory in any truly convincing way at all.

In conclusion, I see no compelling reason to think that Japanese geeks, or Westerners geeky about Japanese imports, are particularly special. Therefore, a continued uncritical use of the word "otaku" in Western academia cannot be recommended.

Notes

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3   Brian Ruh, "The Robots from Takkun's Head: Cyborg Adolescence in *FLCL*", *Cinema Anime: Critical Engagements with Japanese Animation*, Steven T. Brown (ed.), London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 140-141.
4   Ajan (Midhat Ajanovic), *De visuella tonsättarna: Animationens mästare i urval av Ajan*, Göteborg: Optimal, 2005, 7-9.
5   Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle*, x.
6   Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination,* Ewing: University of California Press, 2006, 193.
7   Christine R. Yano, "Panic Attacks: Anti-Pokémon Voices in Global Markets", *Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon*, Joseph Tobin (ed.), Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004, 130.
8   Sawaragi Noi, "On the Battlefield of 'Superflat': Subculture and Art in Postwar Japan", *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, Murakami Takashi (ed.), New York: Japan Society; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005, 189-190.
9   Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, London: Routledge, 2002.
10 Ibid, 9.
11 Matthew J. Pustz, *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999.
12 Ibid, 114.
13 Pustz would not, as his definition is clearly different. He uses "geek" in the same way as Hills; see Pustz, 208.
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16 Lawrence Eng, *The Origins of "Otaku"*, Cornell Japanese Animation Society: http://www.cjas.org/~leng/otaku-origin.htm, 2003.
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21 Ibid, 10.
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50   Ibid, 3-4.

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61   I believe *Otaku* was produced for/by and first aired on France 2, which may still have been called Antenne 2 at the time. The original title translates as "Otaku: Sons of the Empire of the Virtual".

62   Morley & Robins, 148-149.

63   Hills, *Transcultural Otaku*, 11.

64   Takeda, 130.

65   Ibid, 146.

66   Ibid, 147.

67   Ibid, 169

Viktor Eikman   42

68   Murakami, 127.
69   Ibid, 112.
70   *Little Boy*, 10. See also Murakami (112-118).
71   Murakami, 113.
72   Clements & McCarthy, 116.
73   Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle*, 18.
74   *Little Boy*, 88.
75   Murakami, 128.
76   Ibid, 127.
77   Takeda, 97.
78   Clements & McCarthy, 446-447.
79   Takeda, 111.
80   Clements & McCarthy, 158.
81   Takeda, 121, 128.
82   Smith, 4.
83   Ibid.
84   Ibid, 44.
85   Ibid, 34, 53.
86   Ibid, 46-52.
87   Ibid, 75.
88   Ibid, 181. As an aside, none of the three anime seem to invite a more centrally imagined identification, at least not as characterized by "a brute fantasy of physical empowerment" (94), unless *Gunbuster*'s giant robots count.
89   Ibid, 118.
90   Ibid, 121.
91   Iser, xi.
92   Ibid, xii.
93   Smith, 63. He later mentions similarities bridging novels and classical films (235).
94   Iser, xii.
95   Takeda, 173.
96   Smith, 171.
97   Iser, xii.
98   Smith, 166.
99   Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 86.
100 Just one example: Several variants of "Outsuka" and "Ootsuka" are in use as surnames, but neither Kinsella's "Ohtsuka" (*Adult Manga*, 129) nor Schodt's "Ōtsuka" (81) shows which of them is actually used in the name of the same man.
101 Ito Mizuko quoted in Khattak.
102 Kinsella, *Adult Manga*, 128.
103 Newitz.
104 Yano, 130.
105 Morley & Robins, 147-173.
106 Ibid, 169-170.
107 Grassmuck.
108 Eng, *Otak-who?*, 23-28.
109 Ibid, 29.
110 Berg & Petersson, 102.
111 Ibid, 242.
112 Ibid, 253-254.
113 Sawaragi, 190.
114 Kinsella, "Japanese Subculture in the 1990s", 301.
115 Ibid, 308.
116 Kinsella, *Adult Manga*, 128.
117 Nakamori Akio quoted in Schodt, 44.
118 Kinsella, *Adult Manga*, 128.
119 Ibid.
120 Eng, *The Origins of "Otaku"*.
121 Schodt, 44.
122 Kinsella, "Japanese Subculture in the 1990s", 308.
123 Whipple.
124 Kinsella, *Adult Manga*, 126-127.

125 Murakami, 131. Another image is reproduced in Whipple.
126 Kinsella, "Japanese Subculture in the 1990s", 310.
127 Sawaragi, 188-190.
128 Kinsella, *Adult Manga*, 128-129.
129 Ibid, 127-128.
130 Whipple.
131 Kinsella, *Adult Manga*, 127-128.
132 Pustz, 33-43.
133 Ibid, 33-34.
134 Ibid, 209-210.
135 Kinsella, "Japanese Subculture in the 1990s", 313-314.
136 Kinsella, *Adult Manga*, 138.
137 Kinsella, "Japanese Subculture in the 1990s", 315-316.
138 Ibid, 315.
139 *The Economist*, "Kick-ass Maidens", 48.
140 Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 17. As noted by *The Economist* among other sources, many female Japanese geeks are now calling themselves *otome* ("maidens"), no doubt hoping to escape both the negative and masculine stigmata of "otaku", but that's not an adequate explanation for Buckingham and Sefton-Green's characterization.
141 Kinsella, *Adult Manga*, 129.
142 Ibid, 131-133.
143 Ibid, 129-130.
144 Ibid.
145 Schodt, 48.
146 Yoneyama, 23-24.
147 Ibid, 10.
148 Kinsella, "What's Behind the Fetishism of Japanese School Uniforms?", 224-227.
149 Yoneyama, 119.
150 Kinsella, *Adult Manga*, 136-137.
151 Schodt, 46.
152 Kinsella, *Adult Manga*, 208. Her date is incorrect.
153 Sawaragi, 192.
154 Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle*, 8.
155 Schodt, 46-47, 228-232.
156 Whipple.
157 Jenkins, 213.
158 Schodt, 42.
159 Ibid, 44.
160 Jensen, 11.
161 Poitras, 103.
162 Levi, *Samurai from Outer Space*, 2.
163 Ibid, 162.
164 Poitras, 103.
165 Schodt, 49.
166 Ibid, 43-49.
167 Levi, *Samurai from Outer Space*, 2.
168 Ibid, ix.
169 Ibid, 1.
170 Ibid, 30.
171 Newitz.
172 Ibid.
173 Ibid.
174 Hills, *Transcultural Otaku*, 12.
175 Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 120-125.
176 Hills, *Transcultural Otaku*, 10.
177 Ibid, 4.
178 Eng, *Otak-who?*, 7-23.
179 Schodt, 45-48.
180 Drazen, 228.
181 Levi, "The Americanization of Anime and Manga", 44.
182 Levi, *Samurai from Outer Space*, 67.

183 *Cinema Anime*, 246.
184 Napier, "'Excuse Me, Who Are You?'", 33.
185 Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle*, 7.
186 Eng, *The Origins of "Otaku"*.
187 Schodt, 43.
188 McNicol.
189 Eng, *Otak-who?*, 22.
190 Tatsumi, 68.
191 *Little Boy*, 22.
192 Murakami, 101.
193 *Little Boy*, 19.
194 Murakami, 101.
195 Ibid, 141.
196 Ibid, 123.
197 Ibid, 149.
198 Ibid, 125-126.
199 Ibid, 102-105.
200 Ibid, 135.
201 Ibid, 123.
202 Murakami Takashi quoted in Okada et al., 165.
203 Sawaragi, 200.
204 Murakami, 132. Note that Sawaragi is similarly reserved for different reasons; he actually uses the word subculture as a synonym of otaku culture, just for simplicity (206).
205 Ibid, 133.
206 Okada et al., 170.
207 Murakami, 125.
208 Mann, 96.
209 Ivy, 502.
210 Murakami, 141.
211 Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle*, 28. She has a series of Murakami-appropriate chapters on the theme of how anime "confronts history", including one on direct depictions of World War II (217-229), one on apocalypse (249-274) and one on elegy (275-290).
212 Takeda, 20.
213 Ibid.
214 Murakami, 118-121.
215 Takeda, 74-75.
216 Okada et al., 173, 178.
217 Iwabuchi, 60.
218 Okada et al., 170.
219 Ibid, 174. Murakami also mentions that there are different generations of otaku (119, 125, 133).
220 Murakami, 100. He amusingly predicts that Japan's experiences can be used as a therapeutic model (141).
221 Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle*, 250.
222 Murakami, 132.
223 Ibid, 113.
224 Ibid.
225 Ibid, 117.
226 Ibid, 133-134. See also the plates on Ohshima Yuki (*Little Boy*, 55) and Katō Izumi (*Little Boy*, 57).
227 Ibid, 132.
228 Ibid.
229 Ibid, 141.
230 Ibid, 113.
231 Ibid. Murakami proceeds to list many of the allusions (113-117).
232 Ibid, 141.
233 Ibid, 121.
234 Ibid, 117-118.
235 Ibid, 118.
236 Kinsella, *Adult Manga*, 129.
237 Schodt, 46.
238 Okada et al., 170.
239 Ibid.

240 Ibid, 170.
241 Murakami, 100.
242 Okada et al., 175.
243 Ibid, 172.
244 Ibid, 179.
245 Ibid, 174.
246 Smith, 197
247 Ibid, 207.
248 Murakami, 100.
249 I.A. Richards quoted in Iser, 45.
250 Ibid, 119.
251 Levi, 9-11. See also her note on relationships in *Gunbuster* (133).
252 Clements & McCarthy, 158.
253 *Little Boy*, 70.
254 Actually, in the fourth episode's bonus material (in this case about two minutes of comedy and technobabble following each episode's closing credits), a version of Noriko is called an otaku and talks about her interests, but the bonus material is not strictly canonical. For an introduction to the tradition of paratextual super-deformed self-parody, see Drazen, 24.
255 Clements & McCarthy, 158.
256 Kinsella, *Adult Manga*, 122-123.
257 Murakami, 128.
258 Ibid, 128.
259 Ibid, 145.
260 Clements & McCarthy, 158.
261 Kinsella, "What's Behind the Fetishism of Japanese School Uniforms?", 217.
262 Watanabe et al., 2-10.
263 Murakami, 122-123.
264 Whipple.

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Appendix 1: Full Titles

Ideally, all relevant titles of motion pictures would be listed on first mention in the essay, but as I'm about to demonstrate, that system can get out of hand when referring to some Japanese works in a Swedish essay written in English. This appendix may help the reader find the pictures. "English release" in the list means commercial release in the US/UK. "Literal" translations are my own; I make no guarantee as to their quality and do not advocate them for wide use.

- *Aikoku Sentai Dainippon*
  - Japanese: 愛国戦隊 大日本
  - Common English translation (unknown source): *Patriotic Taskforce Great Japan*
  - Literal translation: *The Dainippon Patriot Taskforce*
- "*Evangelion*"
  - Television series
    - Japanese: 新世紀エヴァンゲリオン (*Shinseiki Evangerion*)
    - English releases (Gainax-mandated translation): *Neon Genesis Evangelion*
    - Literal translation: *New Century Gospel*
  - First theatrical feature (not cited in the essay, rendered virtually obsolete by later re-edits)
    - Japanese: 新世紀エヴァンゲリオン劇場版 シト新生 (*Shinseiki Evangerion Gekijouban: Shi to Shinsei*)
    - English releases: *Neon Genesis Evangelion: Death & Rebirth*
    - Literal translation: *Death and Rebirth: A New Century Gospel Theatrical Edition*
  - Second theatrical feature
    - Japanese: 新世紀エヴァンゲリオン劇場版 THE END OF EVANGELION (*Shinseiki Evangerion Gekijouban: The End of Evangelion*)
    - English releases: *Neon Genesis Evangelion: The End of Evangelion*
    - Literal translation: *The End of Evangelion: A New Century Gospel Theatrical Edition*
- *Kaze no Tani no Naushika*
  - Japanese: 風の谷のナウシカ
  - First English release (heavily edited content): *Warriors of the Wind*
  - Subsequent English releases: *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Winds* (sometimes without the second definite article and/or with *Wind* in the singular, which is more accurate and effectively literal)
  - First Swedish release (heavily edited content): *Vindens krigare*
- *Kidou Senshi Gandamu*
  - Japanese: 機動戦士ガンダム

- English releases: *Mobile Suit Gundam*

- Common alternate titles due to spawning a massive franchise with similar names: *First Gundam* and *Mobile Suit Gundam: 0079*

- Literal translation: *Gundam the Maneuverable Warrior*

- *Otaku no Bideo*

  - Japanese: おたくのビデオ

  - English releases: *Otaku no Video*

  - Literal translation (double entendre at the least): *Your Video* or *Video of Geeks*

- *Ouritsu Uchuugun: Oneamisu no Tsubasa*

  - Japanese: 王立宇宙軍 オネアミスの翼

  - Original subtitle on at least one Japanese edition: *Honnêamise*

  - First English release (heavily edited content): *Star Quest*

  - Subsequent English releases (less edited): *Royal Space Force: The Wings of Honneamise*

  - Literal translation: *Wings of Honnêamise: The Royal Space Force*

- *Tonari no Totoro*

  - Japanese: となりのトトロ

  - English releases: *My Neighbo(u)r Totoro*

  - Possible first Swedish release (TV1000; unverified): *Totoro*

  - Upcoming Swedish theatrical release (Triangelfilm): *Min granne Totoro*

  - Literal translation: *The Twoll Next Door* (note that "Totoro" is a small child's mispronunciation of *tororu*, meaning troll; it comes to serve as the name of a troll-like creature)

- *Toppu wo Nerae!*

  - Japanese: トップをねらえ！

  - Original eyecatch title and subtitle: *Gunbuster*

  - English releases: *Gunbuster*

  - Literal translation: *Aim for the Top!*

- *Uchuu Senkan Yamato*

  - Japanese: 宇宙戦艦ヤマト

  - First English release (edited content; still used in some modern distributions): *Star Blazers*

  - Some later English releases (non-literal, mandated by producer Nishizaki): *Space Cruiser Yamato*

  - Most modern English releases (literal): *Space Battleship Yamato*

  - First Swedish release (edited content): *Stjärnbrigaden*