Anime Referentiality as the Glue that Binds Otaku Culture

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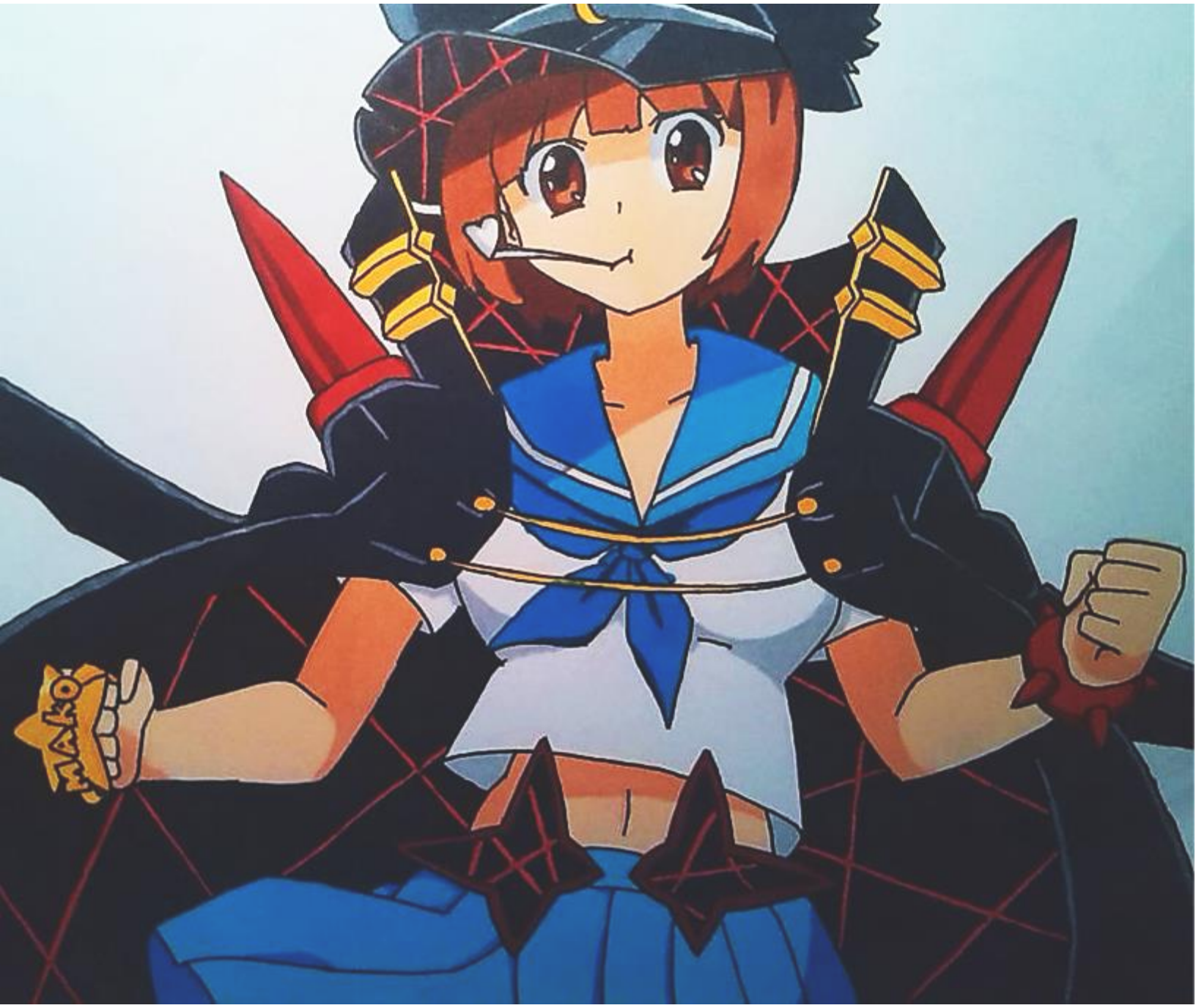

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Word of thanks

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Introduction

When reading or interacting with texts in the modern world, it is very rare to not compare the text to another text or think about the relationship between other texts and the one being read. References appear in many different forms to create a network of texts, where a higher level of cross-referencing results in a more defined and coherent network of texts. When reading a text within such a network, the reader must be literate to unlock the full meaning and enjoyability of said text. Even texts such as this research rely on references and their place within a network of works by other researchers to be able to generate a meaningful conclusion. It is this process of cross-referencing within a network that will be the focus of my research.

The target subject will be the group of texts called anime. Since this grouping and naming convention is something that was adopted in English, whilst the term in Japanese is just a shortened version of the word animation, my focus will be on Western literature. Japanese literature on アニメ (*anime*) often specifies the type of animation they are talking about by calling it 'Japanese animation',[1] or by grouping it together with manga to talk about a specific style of drawing/animation.[2] I will be further exploring the definition of anime in a Western context during the discussion of theory, in which I will also introduce the different theoretical approaches relevant to my research. The context and history of the anime industry will be a starting point to look at the forming of *otaku* culture. The *otaku* (someone with an obsessive interest, loosely translated as geek) culture is a global community which has formed around anime texts as their binding factor, where we will understand the anime canon as the network in which references play an important role for its coherence. I will argue that the way the *otaku* culture emerged and evolved has influenced anime texts a great deal, which I will introduce as the '*otaku* condition' of anime texts.

For this reason, the choices I have made as to which anime texts would result in suitable analyses for my research are based on their influence on and representations of *otaku* culture, not artistic quality or personal enjoyment. The texts have not necessarily won prizes or enjoyed critical

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[1] 孫定康, Sun Dingkang. 切断されるアニメ、切断するアニメ -アニメ認識をめぐる二つの切断. '*Setsudan sareru anime, setsudan suru anime – anime ninshiki wo meguru futatsu no setsudan*.' 表象・メディア研究 *Hyōzō media kenkyū* 15 (2025): 69–92.

[2] 渡部宏樹. Watabe Kohki.平面と遊ぶ主体：アニメや漫画のキャラクター・イメージのトランス メディア的拡散. '*Heimen to asobu shutai: anime ya manga no kyarakutaa imeeji no toransumediateki kakusan*'*F1000 Research* 12 (2023).

endorsement, but they all deal with *otaku* culture in different ways and are thus more important to the understanding of the culture than texts with critical acclaim. Some are meta level representations of the culture, others are central pieces of the anime network because many texts rely on references to said texts, and others show how references to other texts can create a new cycle of texts circulating in the network.

Of course, this process is not unique to anime but happens with many different cultures. I would argue, however, that it plays a special role within the anime world, partly due to the way the fandom has formed itself within the context of the anime industry, and partly because the idea of what exactly anime is, can also be attributed to the various effects of referential connections between anime as a network. For this reason, it is important to look at how these connections are formed and operate within the sphere of anime texts. Much academic literature deals with defining anime through a visual or narrative style, some I will discuss in the next chapter, but academic literature on referentiality in anime is lacking. My focus is to bring the effects and causes of a referential network to the foreground.

In order to do so, I will be mainly concerning myself with a close reading exercise. As close reading is generally a vague concept that is employed by academics without further explanation on many occasions, I will attempt to visualize my idea of close reading here. For me, in order to perform close reading, a theoretical groundwork has to be lain in advance. After reading different approaches and analyses on subject matter akin to mine, I think about the ways theories can support each other and lead to new insights. I will be taking an interdisciplinary approach to theory, combining perspectives and ideas from different disciplines to help me create the lens that will lead to a proper understanding of my subject material. This concept can be seen as a discursive genre of theory in which multiple different analyses coalesce and work together to help form new understandings through analysis. Starting from the different approaches and theories present within anime scholarship, I will combine them with an approach to culture as textualities by Rein Raud.[3] This will be the preparatory first step that leads to my close reading analyses of case studies.

After establishing a theoretical base, the close reading will concern the contextualization of my case studies. By using the theory accumulated in my first step, I will look at the forming and history of the anime industry to contextualize my theoretical approach to the *otaku* culture. I will do this by reading multiple sources that deal with the history of the anime industry and its context

[3] Rein Raud, *Meaning in Action: Outline of an Integral Theory of Culture*, 2016, https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB22757558.

while keeping my theoretical approach in mind to see which elements will be instrumental to my analysis. Here I will start to also look at four anime series that play an important role in *otaku* culture to show how the ideas that started from the contextualized theoretical approach work in actuality and analyze whether the ideas hold up. With that I wrap up my interpretation of close reading and turn towards the first step of discussing theory.

I will be taking an interdisciplinary approach to theory, combining perspectives and ideas from different disciplines to help me create the lens that will lead to a proper understanding of my subject material. This concept can be seen as a discursive genre of theory in which multiple different analyses coalesce and work together to help form new understandings through analysis.

Discussion of Theory

Anime is a concept that defies easy definition. Even when it does evoke a strong image, the image will be different depending on who you ask. Some might define it as specifically Japanese-made; some might lean towards anime as a style or genre, and even others would simply say it includes all animation. Western scholars have tried to give a clear definition of anime, but have struggled to do so successfully, partly due to the definitions of anime in the West seeming to be everchanging.[4] When anime is defined by its origin, Japanese made animation in a cartoon style (such as *Ducktales*) problematizes the definition. When anime is defined as all animation (as in Japanese), we lack a term for the body of works that international audiences define as anime. I personally think anime is best described as a style with generic qualities, as this encompasses the growing body of works considered to be anime. For example, series such as *Castlevania* or *Lord of the Rings: The War of the Rohirrim* are being marketed and accepted as anime, whilst the teams behind the production are mostly comprised of non-Japanese people. They are, however, animated and designed within the style of animation that has come to be understood as anime. Commonly seen are the big eyed characters and the static animation, also known as the animetic interval, as explained by Thomas Lamarre:[5]

> Cinematism tends to put your eye on the point of a speeding bullet, on the tip of the plummeting bomb, or looking directly ahead from the locomotive—or conversely, you are the target, and the train or bullet or bomb is speeding toward you. It is a voyage into the landscape, which entails a push for greater mobility and velocity, for the ability to turn on a penny or to stop on a dime. Animetism is different, however. While it too is a modern art of the engine grounded in a speed-riddled instrumentalized perception of the world, animetism is not about movement into depth but movement on and between surfaces. This movement between planes of the image is what I will call the animetic interval.
>
> Thomas Lamarre 2009

[4] Denison, Rayna. *Anime: A Critical Introduction*. London; Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing, Inc, 2015. pp. 1-2

[5] Lamarre, Thomas. *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation*. Minneapolis, MN [etc.]: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. pp. 7

Plainly said, the difference between cinematism and animetism is simple: it is about the drawing of movement versus the movement of drawings, respectively. With the animatic interval, static elements that move within a plane create the illusion of movement, without having to animate that movement with multiple different drawings. This, in combination with the animation 'on 3s' (8 frames per second opposed to a traditional 24 frames per second), results in the stocky animation that is a visual hallmark of anime.

Next to a focus on the visual components that make up anime, Marc Steinberg has proposed a transmedia system to understand the concept of anime.[6] This system focuses on the components of a narrative that can travel between types of media, which are mainly its characters. The anime landscape has come to include more than just TV-series, since the worlds are often explored through media such as manga, games, films, books, fanfiction, merchandise and more. This aspect of anime has come to be because of the historical context of the anime industry, as I will further explain later, and has influenced the way anime is consumed by its fanbase.

Azuma Hiroki introduced the concept of the database in his study on the way *otaku* consume anime.[7] Deborah Shamoon explains the theory as follows:[8]

> In his book *Dobutsuka suru posutomodaan* (The Animalizing Postmodern, translated into English as Otaku: Japan's Database Animals), Azuma Hiroki claims that otaku, or obsessive fans of anime and manga, are no longer interested in the grand narrative of their favorite fictions but focus instead on organizing details of the characters and fictional world into a database. As his example, he looks at the TV anime series Neon Genesis Evangelion (1995), in which the greatest impact, Azuma argues, was not the complex fictional world of giant robots, alien invasion, or Kabbalah-inspired mysticism but the character Ayanami Rei, whom the obsessive fans or otaku found attractive. Her appearance and personality were broken down into discrete units of moe (affective) elements and copied in the designs of many other characters used in other manga, anime, video games, figurines, and so on. Azuma claims that this is not merely a matter of imitation but a database model of

[6] Steinberg, Marc. *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012

[7] Azuma Hiroki. Otaku: Japan's Database Animals. Minneapolis, MN [etc.]: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

[8] Shamoon, Deborah Michelle. *The Yōkai in the Database: Supernatural Creatures and Folklore in Manga and Anime*. Marvels & Tales 27, no. 2 (2013): 276–89. pp. 277

> consumption; every time a popular character like Rei emerges, aspects of that character are recombined to create new characters.
>
> Deborah Shamoon 2013

The database is made up of different nodes, or focal points, which are established when a character such as Ayanami Rei appears. The nodes can be broken down into components that become the building blocks of new nodes, creating a network of nodes connected to each other through shared building blocks.

I argue that this way of thinking can be applied to more than just the consumption of character archetypes in anime. For example, Rein Raud's approach to studying cultures through textualities can be thought of as a similar approach to a network of nodes in a database.[9] Raud points out that cultures are like webs of relations, which are chaotical and unstable much like the weather. It is hard to speak of a set of rules when it comes to a culture, as Raud states that he uses the word culture as a way to denote all phenomena that help make sense of social relations and mechanisms of power.[10] These cultural systems in turn do not have a universal quality to them, as they are built upon the knowledge and understanding of local groups of people.[11] You can, however, always speak of a 'shared cultural language', which can be seen as a type of code that all participants of a culture must be familiar with to understand the texts that a culture is based on. Through this language and their shared texts and practices, the cultural subjects become able to share meanings. Whereas national cultures used to be the standard, shared texts can cross national and lingual boundaries, as we see with the fandom surrounding the Harry Potter texts:[12]

> Fans of Harry Potter may inhabit many countries and they may partake of the adventures of their hero in a multitude of languages – all being members of the same community based on a shared text. Territorial and linguistic coherence, traditionally the arguments by which national cultures have been claimed to be a natural level of abstraction to their carriers, are no longer all-important.
>
> Rein Raud 2016

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[9] Rein Raud, *Meaning in Action: Outline of an Integral Theory of Culture*, 2016, https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB22757558.
[10] Ibid. pp. 30
[11] Ibid. pp. 29-30
[12] Ibid. pp. 40

Since anime texts have the ability to move beyond borders much in the same way as the Harry Potter texts have, the fandom forms based on a shared cultural language that is not tied to a specific nation or language, but on sharing meanings and interpreting anime texts. Ultimately, looking at the texts that are central to anime culture will be the most insightful for defining the body of texts that is called anime.

Raud goes on to denote two different types of texts within cultural communities:[13]

> We can start by dividing all texts into two main status categories – base-texts that are a part of the definition of a cultural community and are, at least in some ways, shared by the majority of its members and can therefore actively participate in the generation of new texts, or result-texts, that have just entered circulation within the cultural community. Some of the latter have short life spans, like fads that stay in fashion for one season only, but others may eventually become base-texts themselves. Between these two there is the operational memory of the culture, a shared (and internally contradictory) mental space of the cultural community and its various subgroups where texts are produced and processed.
>
> Rein Raud 2016

Base-texts can also exist on different levels; base-texts within anime as a whole exist, but there are also base-texts for specific anime genres, which could be considered as base-texts for specific sub-communities within a bigger culture. The shared operational memory contains the anime canon, or the most important base-texts, which are used to interpret and decode the result-texts.

As Raud points out, result-texts are able to become base-texts over time. When new texts enter the cultural space, Raud identifies them as 'bids', which can be understood as a claim to present a new perspective.[14] To survive, these bids must be endorsed or accepted within the cultural community, which happens through a (symbolic) authority.[15] An authority might be a respected person within the community, but can also be a studio or streaming service that endorses the new text. When these bids get accepted, they can become new base-texts and help advance a cultural community to the next generation. This cycle of base-texts, result-texts and bids has a similar structure to the way nodes within a database operate: base-texts are the nodes from

[13] Raud, *Meaning in Action: Outline of an Integral Theory of Culture*. pp. 82
[14] Ibid. pp. 19
[15] Ibid. pp 70

which elements are taken to create result-texts or bids, which can eventually become new nodes if they manage to survive within the database.

Another type of texts that form coherent bodies in a similar manner are genres. Genre is a difficult concept to grasp because of its tentative nature. Rick Altman argues that genre neither has stable borders and identities, that genres are not defined by the film industry, that no individual film belongs and fits wholly within one single genre, and that genres change and evolve over time.[16] Andrew Tudor explains the reason for genre's elusivity by relating it to cultural differences:[17]

> In other words, the crucial factors that distinguish a genre are not only characteristics inherent in the films themselves; they also depend on the particular culture within which we are operating. And unless there is world consensus on the subject (which is an empirical question), there is no basis for assuming that a western will be conceived in the same way in every culture. The way in which the genre term is applied can quite conceivably vary from case to case. Genre notions—except the special case of arbitrary definition—are not critics' classifications made for special purposes; they are sets of cultural conventions. Genre is what we collectively believe it to be.
>
> Andrew Tudor 2012

Repetition of themes, ideas, conventions, narratives etc., are what create a body of work which we can connect to a genre. This repetition is referential in nature and requires the audience to have knowledge of the genre to interpret referential repetitions that can establish meaning. These references are the glue that connect the different nodes within a database to create a network, which I argue happens in the database of anime texts as well. Anime is, much like genre, a tentative and hard to define concept that finds different meanings within different cultures. Since anime can adopt mainstream genres and has birthed its own genres, however, seeing anime as a genre would be confusing and unfruitful. Instead, looking at the way referential connections between base-texts and result-texts help create a coherent database in genre can help us understand the causes and effects of references in anime.

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[16] Altman, Rick. *Film/genre*. Reprint. London: British Film Institute, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. pp. 13-29
[17] Grant, Barry Keith. *Film Genre Reader IV*. Piraí: University of Texas Press, 2012. https://doi.org/10.7560/742055. pp. 7

In order to study references, I will first look at Raud's ideas on intertextuality and references, before introducing the types of references that I will use in my analyses. Raud uses intertextuality to think about his idea of culture as a textuality as follows:[18]

> Textualities are the frameworks within which intertextuality takes place, the sites of coding, decoding and recoding, of the production and disqualification of rules, norms and habits that govern both expression and interpretation. The organization of textualities follows degrees of cognitive salience, foregrounding the texts that actively shape our behaviour at the expense of those which constitute our passive knowledge.
>
> Rein Raud 2016

The operational memory which forms the database of texts available for reinterpretation is the network within which these intertextual references can occur. References are a key part of the culture because they also help actively shape and transform the database within which they operate:[19]

> A critical mass of ongoing allusions to a text is conversely also necessary for retaining it in circulation while the texts containing these allusions stay in circulation themselves. These allusions should also be critical for the interpretation act, not mere trivia. If the base-text is structurally involved in the production of new result-texts, then it cannot be replaced by any other, including its own clones, i.e. texts that mechanically repeat its structure and consist of building blocks that mimic the original.
>
> Rein Raud 2016

This would mean a base-text that is not being referred to anymore would cease to be a base-text, as it is not an integral part of the cultural language anymore. New texts that are being referred to will replace the old base-texts and start producing their own result-texts in an ongoing cycle.

Generally speaking, when thinking about the meaning of something within visual media, the formula of form + content = meaning can be applied. Form can be understood as the mise-en-scène, whereas the content can be understood as the narrative. References can be either form or content, but never both, as that would be a copy instead of a reference. By putting either the form or the content within a new formula, the meaning is changed, and the viewer can experience

[18] Raud, *Meaning in Action: Outline of an Integral Theory of Culture*. pp. 88
[19] Ibid. pp. 92-93

something new. For the viewer to fully understand the new meaning, however, they must be familiar and knowledgeable about the original text that is being recontextualized. In genre, Altman refers to this process with the concept of genre as a contract: both parties (director and viewer) understand the terms and conditions of the genre, meaning that references within the genre can be utilized and will be understood.[20] In other words, the inherent qualities of genre ask for a sort of understanding between the producers and the consumers, as they both need to be familiar with specific genres to be able to properly engage with them: you could not understand the meaning and artistic qualities of a film such as *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* if you have no understanding of the Western genre.

The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly utilizes pre-existing genre conventions and tropes, hailing from the base-texts of the Western genre, to create new meanings; overplaying the American ideals of violence while maintaining a 'the victor is always right' mentality can be understood as a critique on the highly violent nature in which America dealt with fascist Italy. The main characters, whilst having the title of being good, bad, or ugly, are all very similar in character, but we are coerced to believe 'the good' is good, because he ends up victorious in the conflict of the film. This process of interpretation is based on having iterations of base-texts, where innovative elements are added to create new meanings:[21]

> Another result of the process is an impression of the text, the psychological state it induces together with the ideas (signification claims) it has provoked in the interpreter. Most of these are reiterations of what she has previously experienced, because otherwise she would not be able to receive the text at all. However, what makes particular texts meaningful is the small proportion of signifying claims novel to their recipients – unexpected tropes, bold philosophical assertions, adjustments of aesthetic standards, or precisely captured nuances of reality that are rendered significant in representation.
>
> Rein Raud 2016

Ultimately, it is these new meanings through an iterative process which is present in the different stages of genre works. Base-texts are referred to when thinking about the standard ruleset and conventions of the genre, whereas later result-texts will challenge these to subvert earlier ideas and tropes. This process of creating new iterations of previously accepted base-texts is what I will call

[20] Altman, Rick. Film/genre. Reprint. London: British Film Institute, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. pp. 15-16
[21] Raud, *Meaning in Action: Outline of an Integral Theory of Culture*. pp. 117

iterative referentiality.

The other side of the same coin is what I call mimetic referentiality. These references function not to create new meaning, but as an ode to another work. These references are often harder to spot and require more extensive knowledge of the database, since they do not rely on the reference for new meanings but hide it within their text as a kind of easter egg hunt game. Easter eggs are common within games, where creators may put small and hidden references to other games within their world for the player to find and enjoy. In the world of anime, either another anime's form or content may be mimed in a concealed manner for the knowledgeable fan to find. When finding such elusive references the viewer might revel in his ability to recognize the intent of the creator and have a feeling of mutual understanding with the creator of the anime.

Jessica Mason makes a distinction between 'marked' and 'unmarked' references, where marked references specifically mention another text or body of texts, while the unmarked references omit specifically mentioning or 'marking,' the text(s) referenced, requiring a higher level of fluency in the shared cultural language to interpret them.[22] With visual media, this distinction becomes problematized. The issue is that certain visual markers, say a specific hat that a character from another show often wears, can be interpreted as an intertextual reference, but it is a stretch to call this 'marked' intertextuality. Mainly because a hat can also coincidentally have similarities, and it almost never has the title of another text or an identifiable marker on it. Visual references can also vary from certain items, characters, clothing, or even adopting a slightly different visual style than normal. Of course, animation also has audio based references, since it is an audio-visual medium. Audio referencing is more similar to the description of written forms of intertextuality. For example, a character from another text could be quoted for an unmarked reference, but another character or series might be namedropped for a marked reference. The two can also be combined; an unmarked visual reference might for instance be accompanied by a marked reference through dialogue.

Unmarked references are harder to understand for a reader because there is no way of looking up the reference that is being made. If a text is being cited, the reader could use the internet to find out more about the referred text, but when a reference is unmarked, the reader would probably not realize that a reference is being made if their familiarity with the cultural language is not sufficient. But even to properly understand marked references, the author presupposes a

[22] Mason, *Intertextuality in Practice*. pp. 78-79

certain amount of knowledge from the reader. Mason explains this with an example of a reference to the Genesis story in the bible:[23]

> This only makes sense if readers are able to draw on pre-existing knowledge of the Genesis story, without which 'Eve' would be an unknown character and the 'tree of knowledge' an unknown object. Thus, the simile can only function if the reader is able to draw on knowledge of the other narrative.
>
> Jessica Mason 2019

This means that including references in a text can only be done when authors are familiar with the knowledge of their intended audience. The database from which elements can be used to create new nodes needs to be fleshed out, as references to texts outside of the database will only lead to confusion.

Of course, this same principle also applies to marked references, but in a slightly different way:[24]

> It is reasonable to suggest that the inclusion of an intertextual reference to another narrative marked only by title, or with minimal accompanying material (such as a short direct quotation), typically constructs an implied reader who brings prior knowledge of the referenced text to their reading of the Base (the text in which a reference is found). That is, such references presuppose a reader who will successfully perceive some kind of narrative interrelation between the Base and the referenced text. This assumption of prior knowledge on the part of the implied reader is not fixed, however, but instead greatly depends on the visibility, or not, of the points of narrative contact being drawn between the Base and the marked text; on how far the author seems to have assumed the reader will perceive their intended interrelation. Specific marked intertextual references can therefore encourage readers to construct mind-models for both the author and who they perceive to be the implied reader, based on these textual cues.
>
> Jessica Mason 2019

The main difference between marked and unmarked references in this respect is that marked references are more accessible to readers that are not part of the culture surrounding a database

[23] Mason, *Intertextuality in Practice*. pp. 51
[24] Ibid. pp. 96

since they do have the ability to look up the referenced material.

History and Forming of the Anime Industry: The Television Era

The origin of anime is often attributed to Tezuka Osamu's *Astro Boy* (1963), but some scholars argue that we should start with the first Japanese animated films when studying the genus of anime.[25] Early Japanese animation is likened to the spectacle movies of Georges Méliès before they take a turn towards a repurposing for war propaganda.[26] Taking inspiration from the success of Disney films, early Japanese animation often retells classical folktales, remixing them into a contemporary story. Examples can be found in *Momotarō: Umi no Shinpei* (*Momotaro, Sacred Sailors* 1945), in which anthropomorphic animals are inserted into a war-time version of the folktale, and *Hakujaden* (*The Tale of the White Serpent* 1958), the first feature length animated film produced by Toei Animations which adopts a classical Chinese folktale known as 'The Legend of the White Snake'.

I think it is important to stop and think about the influence of *Hakujaden*, mostly because it has directly impacted people who worked on *Astro Boy* and Hayao Miyazaki, who can be argued to be at the forefront of today's anime landscape. *Hakujaden* emulates Disney by adapting a classic tale known in many East-Asian countries, trying to find success as a counterpart to the Western focused storytelling of Disney.[27] It does not only take influence from its narrative formula, however, it also takes away from the design and stylistic elements of Disney's early animation. Large eyes have become a hallmark of the anime style but originated in Disney's animations.[28] We can trace Tezuka Osamu's design choices back to this influence, since he worked as an animator for Toei Animations. Notably, one of his manga stories that adapted a classical Chinese folktale, the story of Sun Wukong, known in the West as the Monkey King, was the source material for one of the films he worked on at Toei Animations. In 1961, Tezuka formed his own production studio, Tezuka Osamu Productions (now known as Mushi Pro). This formation is significant as it bridges the influence from Toei Production's early animation days to the production of *Astro Boy*, arguably the most important piece of media in shaping the anime industry.

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[25] Clements, Jonathan. *Anime: A History*. London [etc.]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. pp. 90

[26] Denison, Rayna. *Anime: A Critical Introduction*. London; Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing, Inc, 2015. pp. 71

[27] Hu, Tze-Yue G. "Postwar Japanese Animation Development and Toei Animation Studio." In *Frames of Anime*, 77-. China: Hong Kong University Press, HKU, 2010. doi:10.5790/hongkong/9789622090972.003.0006. pp. 90-95

[28] 手塚治虫著., 手塚治虫, 1926-1989, Tezuka Osamu cho, and Osamu Tezuka. 1997. *ぼくのマンガ人生*. Tōkyō: 岩波書店.

Even though *Astro Boy* was not the first TV animated series to come out, as *Otogi Manga Calendar* (1961) was released before it, it is the first animated series to fit within the format of anime we know today. *Astro Boy* was released on a weekly basis and sported 30 minute long episodes, whereas *Otogi Manga Calendar*'s episodes were only 3 minutes long. But even more telling for the shaping of the anime industry is what has come to be known as Tezuka's curse:[29]

> This was in no small part because Tezuka had made the problematic decision to undersell his Atomu series to the TV station. Aiming to quell the TV station's anxiety about the cost of animation production and undersell the competition in advance, Tezuka sold each episode for less than it cost Mushi Production to make it. (There is some dispute about the actual amount Tezuka asked for, but the most commonly cited sum is 550,000 yen, while it is said to have cost 2.5 million yen to produce each episode.) This fateful move—known to the animation industry today as Tezuka's curse—guaranteed that anime would develop as a transmedia system.
>
> Marc Steinberg 2012

Even though he would lose money on the production side of things, Tezuka predicted that he would still end up profiting off the series through selling its rights to Western TV stations and, most importantly, by merchandising. He modelled the main character Astro after Mickey Mouse because he knew that a character's popularity can directly translate to profit if marketed correctly. Steinberg goes on to explain that using Astro for an ad campaign with Meiji, a Japanese sweets brand, takes advantage of an inward and an outward force:[30]

> These two tendencies gain concrete form in the Atomu sticker: the attractive force of the character that transforms things and media into its own image (the premium remade in the character's image) and the expansion or material dispersion of the character image within everyday space (the character-sticker's expansion through the lived environment).
>
> Marc Steinberg 2012

Other than the repurposing of a character's image in an ad campaign, selling goods in a character's image became another way of finding profit when production costs were higher than the amount of

[29] Steinberg, Marc. *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. pp. 40
[30] Ibid. pp. 44

money TV stations would pay. Whereas Tezuka might have thought his underselling of *Astro Boy* would be a one-time thing to win over the TV stations, it ended up setting a precedent for the TV stations to underpay production, since they could still make money through these other ways.

Next to Tezuka's choice to focus on merchandising characters for revenue, he made another important decision which impacted the anime industry: cutting down on animation costs. As I introduced through the ideas of animetism and animating on 3s earlier, anime's static look hails from the need to produce animation for as little money as possible. Tezuka did so by animating 8 frames per second instead of the traditional 24, moving static layers on top of each other to create the illusion of movement, and isolating moving parts by animating only those while keeping the rest of the drawing static. Budgetary problems still have a lasting impact on the anime industry, as animators are notoriously underpaid and overworked. Since Japanese labor is expensive, many of the less important frames are also being animated in neighboring countries with lower costs. On the other hand, it also allows for an enormous amount of anime to be able to produced, helping to create the extensive database of anime worlds.

Another important aspect of the legacy of *Astro Boy* is that it was based off Tezuka Osamu's manga series of the same name (1952-1962). This solidified anime's transmedia roots, as TV stations and production companies would hereafter often only want to invest in series with proven potential. In this sense manga became a sort of testing grounds for anime, which tied the two forms of media together ever so strongly. Hayao Miyazaki, for example, also adapted his own original manga story when he was the head director of a film for the first time. This way, the potential popularity of the story had already been proven, while he also had a preliminary storyboard to work with (*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind,* 1984).

An important distinction between manga and comics is the amount of censorship and the target audience of the medium. Manga was prone to a lot less censorship than Western comics, mainly because comics where generally intended for a younger audience, whereas manga audiences were more diverse.[31] During the popularity of the first TV anime, *Astro Boy*, the name anime had not yet been coined. In this period, these animations would be called *terebi manga* (TV cartoons).[32] At first the shows had been focusing on children as their target audience, both because they were emulating Disney's success, and because character merchandising would capitalize on

[31] Fischer, Kirsten Cather. *The Art of Censorship in Postwar Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2012. doi:10.1515/9780824865733.
[32] Denison, Rayna. *Anime: A Critical Introduction*. London; Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing, Inc, 2015. pp. 5

the appearance of children as a new consumer on the market. With the economy thriving, parents started to spend more money on their children, which is one of the reasons that character merchandising ended up being as successful as it was. But as the children who grew up with anime started to get older, anime started to mature with them. Starting in 1974, anime's appeal to a more adult fanbase started to become apparent, mostly through the Sci-Fi genre. Mainly the series *Space Battleship Yamato* (1974) and the movie *Space Battleship Yamato: The Movie* (1977) attracted much of attention from adult viewers, which caused anime's image to change from something for children to something for many different age groups. In turn, this was more aligned with the way anime's source material, manga, was being read. Subsequently, this also marks the end of the first major era of anime, the TV era, and the beginning of the second era, the VHS era.

History and Forming of the Anime Industry: The VHS era

The biggest change that the VHS era brought to the anime landscape was the way anime was distributed. Before the VHS, fans could only rely on what was being televised or what was in the cinema. The VHS, however, brought fans the possibility to choose what they wanted to watch themselves, without relying on programming by TV studios: the VHS could be played at home, giving audiences the agency to pick and choose from a much larger database than before. On the other side of the spectrum, anime production was now also not purely reliant on selling the rights of their shows to TV studios, since they could profit off the direct-to-video market. This not only lowered the hurdle of producing anime, but it also opened the doors for diversification of themes and genres. Studios would not have to rely on the wishes of a TV station, and they could capitalize on smaller niches within the anime landscape. Since the direct-to-video market also had no constraints on gore or nudity, this also solidified anime as a medium for adult content.

Probably the most influential piece of anime content when it comes to the international spread of anime during the VHS era is the film *Akira* (1988). Whereas anime had already been accepted as a medium that could provide mature content in Japan, the west still mostly regarded anime in the same way they did cartoons. This is also why many TV anime were censored and changed to fit this target audience in the west. But when *Akira* was released to the theater, western audiences started to see that animation could be used to tackle mature content as well. With its relatively easy to produce special effects compared to live action, genres like Sci-Fi really fit well and became a hallmark of VHS era mature anime content.

Next to the invention of the VHS, 1978 also saw the emergence of the first anime specialty magazine called *Animage*. Anime magazines such as *Animage* and *Animec* gave a platform to the fandom to discuss their knowledge, but also to start partaking in the creation aspect of anime culture. Anime magazines would help spread the cultural language of the anime fandom, allowing new people to come in and become members of the cultural community. Magazines would often include competitions for fan art or cosplays (dressing up as a character from a piece of media), which laid the groundwork for the fandom to become part of generating content. The magazines started in Japan itself, but the VHS era distribution also helped in the spread of anime transnationally, which made the magazines follow suit. A real fandom started to emerge, who later became known as *otaku*.

The word *otaku* directly translates to something like ‘your house.’ Japanese Sci-Fi fans

started referring to each other in this way as a sort of inside joke, but the term has come to include much more than just the Japanese Sci-Fi fandom.[33] In Japanese, it is understood as something like the English word 'geek'. Just like how there are many different types of geeks, there are many different types of *otaku*. One of the most well-known might be the 'train *otaku*', or a train geek, a person that tends to collect model trains, take pictures of trains and tries to see or ride as many different types of trains as possible. For my research, however, the 'anime *otaku*' is the most important type of *otaku*. It is also the definition that is brought to mind when the word *otaku* is used in contemporary English: the anime/manga nerd.

The VHS era could be said to be the starting point of the agency of the *otaku*, which began with them distributing and subbing VHS tapes, helping anime find global audiences.[34] Even more so than in Japan, the VHS caused a sure in availability of anime content in other countries. In the TV era, consumers reliant on TV stations to import and translate works for them, but the VHS created an underground market of distribution. Since VHS tapes could be edited by the individual, local networks of illegal ripped anime content, translated by the fans themselves started to appear. The distributors within these local networks became something like local authorities, since they were the ones who decided which bids would penetrate their local market and become part of the shared cultural language. Translations done by the fandom came to be known as either fansubbing or fandubbing, depending on which type of translation was done. VHS eventually evolved into DVD, which was generally more accessible, and later turned into the digital distribution of today. Where fansubbing and -dubbing transformed from small and local practices to a global part of the consumer-creator identity central to the anime fandom:[35]

> As a result of a fast-changing distribution landscape, fans of anime now occupy a spectrum of positions rather than the two outlined earlier. Many anime fans simply consume their anime online, legally or otherwise, while others, like fan subtitlers, use expertise in Japanese language to translate anime, or technical skills with computer software to encode, time or proofread subtitles, creating "fansubs."
>
> Rayna Denison 2015

[33] Galbraith, Patrick W. *The Otaku Encyclopedia: An Insider's Guide to the Subculture of Cool Japan*. First US edition. New York, NY: Kodansha USA, 2013.
[34] Denison, Rayna. *Anime: A Critical Introduction*. London; Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing, Inc, 2015. pp. 86-87
[35] Ibid. pp. 106

The forming of this consumer-creator identity and the genesis of the *otaku* brings us to the next big chapter in anime history: *Neon Genesis: Evangelion* (1995). *Neon Genesis: Evangelion* is a story about a young boy named Shinji who is the only person able to pilot giant robot-like suits and battle the incoming alien beings called angels. Shinji, however, is troubled by a bad relationship with his father, who is also the mastermind behind the creation of the mecha-suits called Evas. Even though he is the 'chosen one', Shinji does not want to fight the angels, feeling insecure about his abilities and wondering why he has to play the role of the chosen one.

The origin of the *otaku* in Science-Fiction is significant for the way anime fandoms have formed, because *Neon Genesis: Evangelion* was the bridge that connected Sci-Fi fans to anime, but also because the creators of *Evangelion* were *otaku* themselves, further enhancing the consumer-creator status of the *otaku*. One founder of the studio (Gainax) that made *Evangelion*, Takeda Yasuhiro, used to be a big Sci-Fi geek. Ian Condry explains elements of participatory culture with a quote from an interview with Takeda:[36]

> I thought that I was extremely well read, but after joining, I was surprised to discover that the upperclassmen in the club had read a lot more than me.... Once I began talking to them, I discovered the incredible amount of information they actually knew. During the course of a single conversation they'd jump from one topic to another, go back to where they'd started, then take off in another direction altogether. It was nothing more than idle chit-chat, but it was incredibly entertaining, and I couldn't get enough of it.
>
> Takeda Yasuhiro 2005

In my eyes, participatory culture hinges on knowledge and showing off said knowledge. This can also be seen in the way *otaku* fandom is performed: anime specialty magazines are dedicated to record even the smallest details or allusions present in a series.

The Animec magazine is a good example of this phenomenon. It boasted in-depth analyses and contributions by readers, creating a 'by fans for fans' feedback loop.[37] The tight knit community that had begun to form when the people who grew up watching anime on Japanese TV became adults hinged on the same type of knowledge flexing as what Takeda described the Sci-Fi fandoms being like, it was all about attaining a certain status. The status that individuals who shared and

[36] Ian Condry. *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story*. Duke University Press, 2013. doi:10.1215/9780822397557. pp. 128
[37] Ibid. pp.130

showed a great amount of knowledge could reach, is similar to that of an authority concerning bids. People would respect your opinion on newer result-texts, because you have shown your expertise regarding earlier works. This value system is the cause for two different elements that play into how genre and referencing is being utilized in the anime industry: 1. Fans become more knowledgeable about anime and anime series, making them able to understand niche references, and 2. Fans become creators of anime, making it so that the creators now understand the knowledge system valued by the fans and play into that when making anime.

To expand on that, niche references are not only utilized because they can be understood, but finding and understanding them is an important element of the fun of watching anime. I want to think about how a fandom's social structure can influence the creation of anime, instead of the more standard approach of how series or media can shape a fandom. Fandoms that have this abstract value system of niche knowledge can develop into a sort of meritocracy: not just having niche knowledge but spreading knowledge and sharing said knowledge is what will earn you status as an *otaku*. This has taken shape in different forms throughout the history of anime and *otaku* fandom, but I would argue that the anime specialty magazine is where this form of culture could first be observed:[38]

> As fans matured, they founded new forms of fandom. Specialty anime magazines aimed at teenagers and older readers, such as Animage, had been launched with the Yamato boom. Anime fan clubs emerged around Gundam in high schools and colleges. Many of these fans were energized by the military and sci-fi elements of Gundam; in turn, "research'' into the show became an important fan activity. For example, one of the show's conceits was that "Minovsky particles'' could be used as a kind of defense shield. Fans took this idea and developed detailed theories of "Minovsky physics'' (Minofusukii butsurigaku), producing study guides and other fan-made materials. Significantly, the creators never objected to fans' interpretations of the Gundam world. According to Ueda, "When asked about these fan works, we always said, 'It's possible that's the way it is.'" This openness helped energize fans in the 1980s and beyond, an early example of how media could be a platform for participation as much as an object of consumption. In this regard, too, we see the

[38] Ian Condry. *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story*. Duke University Press, 2013 pp. 125

> precursors of today's social media and a kind of prehistory of media's shift from content to platform.
>
> Ian Condry 2013

An important element of these magazines is that they were not made by the industry or the anime studios, but by the fans themselves. In that sense, it was a platform that supported the knowledge based meritocracy that I argue the anime fandom turned into.

The phenomenon of VHS distribution networks and local translation practices can also be understood as a quality of the knowledge meritocracy that is the *otaku* fandom. The transnational *otaku* community, who wanted to engage with anime in more ways than they had access to before VHS tapes, found help in the people distributing anime locally. Other than just distributing the tapes, however, translation also became a big factor in gaining merit.[39] In a process that I have described as 'fansubs' or 'fandubs', fans take the translation of a yet untranslated work of anime into their own hands, be it through subtitles or a full dub, the participants in this process would generally not make a lot of money, but do it 'for the community', which could be understood as 'to gain merit within the *otaku* community'.[40] They would either show and spread their knowledge by distributing works that had not yet made it to the local market, or by helping translate works that had not yet gained a local adaptation.

Turning back to the creators of *Evangelion*, they can be seen as fans of Sci-Fi and anime who grew up watching anime, but had become adults since. They wanted to create anime targeted at people like themselves, the kind of giving back that is important to the merit based culture I have described.[41] They started doing this before they became studio Gainax at an anime convention called Daicon. Conventions were a place much like anime specialty magazines, they allowed the fandom to interact with each other and express their creative side of the consumer-creator identity. This mainly happened through either cosplay, which I mentioned before, and AMV (anime music video) contests. AMVs were basically fan edits of existing anime shows, where the fan would edit their favorite parts of a show to a fitting song. The goal was to create an ode to the show, which highlighted parts in a new way. Much like an AMV, intro animations became a hallmark of the

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[39] Denison, Rayna. *Anime: A Critical Introduction*. London; Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing, Inc, 2015. pp. 101
[40] Ibid. pp. 101
[41] Ian Condry. *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story*. Duke University Press, 2013 pp. 127-134

Daicon conventions. The intro of Daicon IV is still a legendary piece of anime media, because it was created by the people who would become studio Gainax. They created their own character and animations, hinting to many different anime and Sci-Fi works within the short film, all guided by a song they thought fitting.

Being knowledgeable about the anime fandom and their beloved works allowed the creators of *Evangelion* to play into the knowledge based value system that was present in the *otaku* fandom. *Neon Genesis: Evangelion* has often been described as *riaru* リアル, taken from the English word 'real', because of its engagement with real life struggles.[42] The main character, Shinji, deals with childhood trauma and mental struggles. For the first time someone is asking us if being the chosen one would be desirable, which we can understand as a form of iterative referentiality, as we build upon conventions that were introduced through earlier base-texts. In this sense, *Neon Genesis: Evangelion* can be seen as a continuation of the general maturation of anime and as one of the first anime made by anime fans. Combined with the previous focus on characters, since they were merchandisable, *Evangelion* started a new trend in character based anime consumption, which Hiroki Azuma has studied through a postmodernist lens to explain his conception of the character database.[43]

The Otaku Condition: An Evangelion Case Study

What started of as a reliance on children to buy merchandise, has changed with a maturing audience. The adult audience does not change the fact that anime has to rely on merchandise to make revenue, but it does change the interactions between the fandom and the content. First of all, we see the character become the focus of monetization, as I have discussed with the database mode of consumption. Second, anime's themes and narratives grow up in tandem with its audience, through the process of iterative referentiality. And last, fans who grew up watching anime start working in the industry and producing their own anime, being able to rely on the shared knowledge of the *otaku* culture, which in turn is deepening because of the knowledge based meritocratic structure of the fandom, to play with different types of references. The last point is what I from hereon out will call the '*otaku* condition' of anime.

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[42] Ian Condry. *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story*. pp. 117-119.
[43] Shamoon, Deborah Michelle. *The Yōkai in the Database: Supernatural Creatures and Folklore in Manga and Anime*. Marvels & Tales 27, no. 2 (2013): 276–89. pp. 277

One of the frontrunners that exhibit the referential results of the *otaku* condition is the aforementioned *Evangelion*. In order to understand the way iterative and mimetic referentiality works under the *otaku* condition, I will be analyzing the different references present in *Evangelion* through the lens of database consumption.

Most of the references found in *Evangelion* are unmarked, as I argued is the common in visual media. These unmarked references mostly concern tributes or visual influences from other pieces of media, like how the Eva's, particularly the mech suit called Unit 1, look similar to The God Warrior in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*. The visual similarity is thought to be a reference because Anno started his animating career with the production of the movie adaptation of Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*. Most of these references are speculations by the fanbase that can be found on fan-made Wiki websites.[44] The references can range from similar shot sequences, like the following example that compares a sequence from *Oniisama E* to *Evangelion*: an establishing shot of two friends sitting in a park cut to a shot of the characters feet and ending with a shot of sandbox with similar items, to characters that have similar appearances. The shot sequence is, again, a form of unmarked referencing, since only the well-read viewer who has a high level of familiarity with other shows within the medium would see this sequence and recall *Oniisama E*. Ultimately, these references to other anime reestablish the previous texts as important bids within the anime culture, helping them on their way to attain a base-text status.

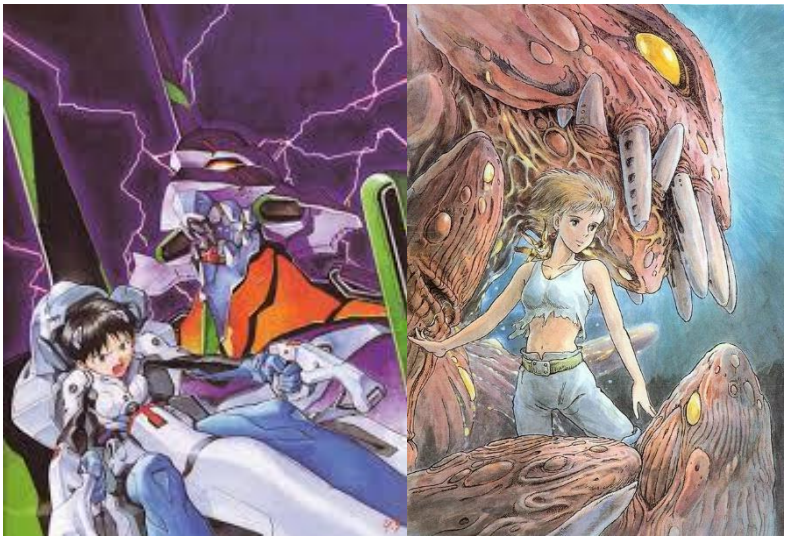

Figure 1: Comparison between Unit 1 and The God Warrior

[44] EvaGeeks.org. "Tributes to Other Fiction in Neon Genesis Evangelion." *EvaWiki*. Last modified February 23, 2025. https://wiki.evageeks.org/Tributes_to_Other_Fiction_in_Neon_Genesis_Evangelion.

I would argue that the main function of mimetic references is exactly this: the function of symbolic authority. As producers start to hail from the *otaku* culture, attaining the dual consumer-producer status, the producers start to have a type of authority they can exert through their productions. As Raud argued, bids need to be accepted or put forward by a (symbolic) authority to be accepted and given the opportunity to evolve into base- or result-texts that play an important role within the culture.[45] Since, as I explained, mimetic references have no real narrative function, but exist to add another layer of interaction between the producer and consumer, mimetic references often create links between otherwise completely unrelated nodes in the database. Unlike with iterative referentiality, there is no added meaning or context to play with the original, but the original is often being referenced to out of a feeling of respect of affection from the producer. In this sense, the producer is putting forward an earlier text and stamping it with their approval to help it on its way within the cycle of bid, result- and base-texts. Ultimately, this means that mimetic references have a function on the level of consumption and on a meta level within the culture; the game of recognition and the authority progressing bids respectively.

Since *Evangelion* came out quite a while ago, when the *otaku* culture was still younger and more connected to Sci-Fi in general than a formed anime canon, many of the references in *Evangelion* are specifically related to this genre. Anno himself was part of the first wave of *otaku*, which formed around Sci-Fi conventions, making him literate in the genre. As I mentioned earlier, Takeda liked to partake in discussions about Sci-Fi works, speculating and comparing different texts within the genre and adding fan made theories to the mix.[46] Coming from this scene, where discussing the various references within a piece of media was the binding factor of a community, Gainax took it upon themselves to create an anime in which influences, references, and tropes played a big role in the watching experience.

Mainly Gerry Anderson has been a big influence on Anno's work, which has been studied by fans and compiled into short videos.[47] A short edit on YouTube aptly compares several elements from original works by Anderson and *Evangelion*: The Eva's launch sequence looks like a launch sequence in the Thunderbirds, retractable buildings play a part in both *Evangelion* and *Stingray*

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[45] Raud, *Meaning in Action: Outline of an Integral Theory of Culture*. pp. 70
[46] Ian Condry. *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story*. Duke University Press, 2013. doi:10.1215/9780822397557. pp. 128
[47] Dougurasufilm. "Neon Genesis Evangelion: A Tribute to Other Fiction." *YouTube*. Published August 9, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LB12HNNDDcc&ab_channel=Dougurasufilm.

(1964), but most of all, *UFO* (1970) has had many elements borrowed from.[48] Breathable liquid, character design, a suitcase with the same locking system, are some examples of the unmarked references to the *UFO* TV series. Anno goes further and even includes a marked reference to the series, by including a character called General James Henderson in a mission directive, this character has the same name as a character from the *UFO* series, thus becoming a marked reference, even though it is still hard to figure out without deep knowledge of the 70s era Sci-Fi world.

The quintessential Sci-Fi genre within anime had been the Mecha genre. The main tropes of the genre included giant piloted robots used to fight other giant robots or beings, which could often only be piloted by teenage children. Normally, these children would gladly accept their role and act as the hero of a narrative, but *Evangelion* takes a darker, more cyberpunk approach to this setup by exploring the psyche of such a teenager in a depressive way. Cyberpunk often explores topics of humanity and humaneness through artificial intelligence or cyborg characters, mixing the biological with the mechanical. *Evangelion* does so too, by having the biological and mechanical cross when the pilots and the Eva's are linked.

As the mecha anime had already been established by the release of *Mazinger Z* (1972), the genre had progressed to a late stage in the 80s. When genres arrive at this late stage, they tend to turn inward and either overplay some conventions, go against them, or remix conventions within a different generic setting. Fans of the genre will recognize which convention is being played with and appreciate the new perspective on a genre they already love. *Aura Battler Dunbine* (1983) is an example of an anime series that exploits late stage genre. The series takes the conventional idea of people boarding mechanical suits to battle, but exports it into a medieval fantasy. Because technology is not present in this world, the author introduces giant insect like creatures that can be boarded and controlled by people who possess a strong aura. Eventually, anime that contain biological battling suits were categorized within a sub-genre called the flesh mecha. *Evangelion* also takes this approach to the genre, but conceals the biological nature of its mecha suits until the climax and uses it as an important plot point.

As we look into the more complicated genre references used within *Evangelion*, we start to realize how much of the shows meaning hinges on a recontextualization, or reiteration, of earlier conventions and tropes. Naturally, a fan would need to have a certain level of familiarity with the

[48] Ibid.

database of, in this case, Sci-Fi to be able to trace the connections of the different nodes that unlock the recontextualized meanings of *Evangelion*. Since the *otaku* community started off as a culture surrounding mostly Sci-Fi texts, the stage for these complicated references would still be set by the beginnings of the *otaku* condition I have introduced earlier. By showing a knowledgeable audience that you can work with complicated referential structures and you are familiar with works that are held within high regard, a producer also validates their status as an authority within the culture. This links back to the function of mimetic references alongside iterative references, as one enables the function of the other on the meta level. Of course, iterative references also have a function to promote a referenced text to an important result- or base-text, but they do so by directly linking the new text and the referenced text, becoming a result- and base-text duo.

As *Evangelion* became hugely popular, with one character, Asuka, stealing the show in particular, it set the stage to be used as a point of reference for new result-texts that would come out after. Azuma has described the way *Evangelion* has influenced anime consumption in detail by arguing that the focus came to lie on characters.[49] Asuka has appeared in many types of media after being born within the *Evangelion* anime series; think of merchandise like figurines, trading cards, stickers, custom artwork, posters, or even appearing in games, films or books. Asuka has become the blueprint for a character archetype that is known as the *tsundere*, a character that tends to act in a cold manner towards another person but also shows sudden bursts of romantic interest towards said person. The term is a combination of two different onomatopoeia: *tsun-tsun* and *dere-dere*, which mean to be disgusted and to act lovey-dovey, respectively. This title, established by the fanbase through their discourse, became part of the database of anime character archetypes. Since becoming part of the database, many other archetypes using components of the *tsundere* have emerged, like the *yandere, tsunshun, dandere, deredere, kuudere* and many more.

The power of a database in anime is twofold, the first being the fact that it supports a mode of consumption that works well with the *otaku* condition of anime. The second is more in line with the how genre often works well on a budget: relying on a database of tropes, conventions, archetypes, and more can cut costs when establishing themes, narratives, or characters. Much like how one of genre's strengths is the instant recognizability to a fan, as genre film can cut a lot of explanations in favor of exploring new topics because viewers are already familiar with the general blueprint of a piece of media within a specific genre, a database can create a similar basis from

[49] Azuma Hiroki. Otaku: *Japan's Database Animals*. Minneapolis, MN [etc.]: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

which establishing sequences can be left out. After *Evangelion*, for example, the tsundere character type would become recognizable through the database, creating expectations without the need to establish the character.

The reusage of character types originating from *Evangelion* is one way the series has started to live a life as a base-text, but much like the way sequences from other series are being referenced in *Evangelion*, the reverse is also true. For example, the hit series *Jujutsu Kaisen* has a character called Mechamaru, who is physically immobilized but fights with different remote controlled robots. His ace is a giant robot which he rides, much like in many mecha anime. The first time the giant robot appears, however, the animators have reconstructed a sequence from *Evangelion*: the robot first rises with a roar while looking upward before going into a series of similarly choreographed moves as Unit 1 in *Evangelion*. Their punches come from the same angle, they both jump and go into a flying kick and are connected to a power source through a big cord. Next to the choreography, the special effects of the animation also recall *Evangelion,* mostly the glimmering white that appears when the robots kick look almost one-to-one. Real fans would immediately recognize the similarities between the two sequences and have an extra layer of enjoyment added when watching, but as the online *otaku* community lives for sharing and showing off knowledge, videos highlighting such similarities are abound on the internet.[50]

Thematically, even though films like *Akira* would already target a more adult audience, *Evangelion*'s realistic exploration of a teenager forced to become an adult would thematically influence many anime after it. *Serial Experiments Lain*, an anime that came out three years after *Evangelion*, adopts a similar approach towards its protagonist as *Evangelion*. Lain is a girl who struggles with her identity while becoming more and more rooted in the digital world. Questions of personhood and coming-of-age elements are central to the *riaru* that is being deployed, relying on elements established in *Evangelion*.

The knowledge hungry superfans of anime try to dissect all the referential elements of their favorite series, as we see nowadays on popular social media or specialized fandom websites. By identifying and categorizing different elements that connect pieces of media, the fandom creates a database which extends beyond just character archetypes. Since the fandom has platforms where they share this knowledge, the database becomes more than a cultural idea, it becomes a physical database with which the fandom can interact. The database of anime is essentially the groundwork

[50] Tabris. "Neon Genesis Evangelion: An Analysis of Tributes to Other Fiction." *YouTube*. Published June 12, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5BEK95mWmA&ab_channel=Tabris.

for the iterative referentiality that anime expresses, as it concerns the tropes or conventions that multiple shows start utilizing. When result-texts keep reusing elements of another show, or when texts become base-texts, their narratives, themes, syntactic and semantic elements become a hallmark point within the anime culture centered around these texts. This process is much like a larger scale version of the way individual genres tend to develop and evolve.

Since much of the databases are created in the online environment, which came a while after *Evangelion*, when the *otaku* condition of anime had evolved to be particular to the anime canon, instead of the Sci-Fi canon, it is fitting to now turn towards the next big change in the anime landscape: the digital environment.

History and Forming of the Anime Industry: The Digital era

Once again, the main element that changed from the VHS era is the way anime is being distributed. Instead of relying on physical copies of anime, like VHS and DVD, streaming services had made their entry into the world of anime. In 2006 a website called Crunchyroll was founded, which was an online platform that streamed anime illegally. It pirated mostly shows that were otherwise hard to access outside of Japan, which was much like the way local VHS distributors started their networks. What was different, however, is that the internet is not a local network, but a global one. After 3 years, Crunchyroll changed their policies and started to move away from piracy to become a properly licensed streaming service. This impacted the accessibility of anime immensely, causing the fandom to grow and the industry to translate and export more shows.

Consequently, former ways of distribution and translation were problematized, as international access to anime was increased and pirating anime would now harm the industry more than help it. People working on fansubs or fandubs were now racing against the anime industry to get their work out there faster, again not to make money but to gain status within the community. This can be seen in the often ridiculous displays of knowledge found in fansubs, also known as the translator's notes. A notorious example can be found in the fansub of *Death Note*, where the subtitle 'all according to *keikaku*' appears together with a translator note clarifying that *keikaku* means plan in Japanese. This is both a translator flexing his knowledge and an *otaku* trying to share

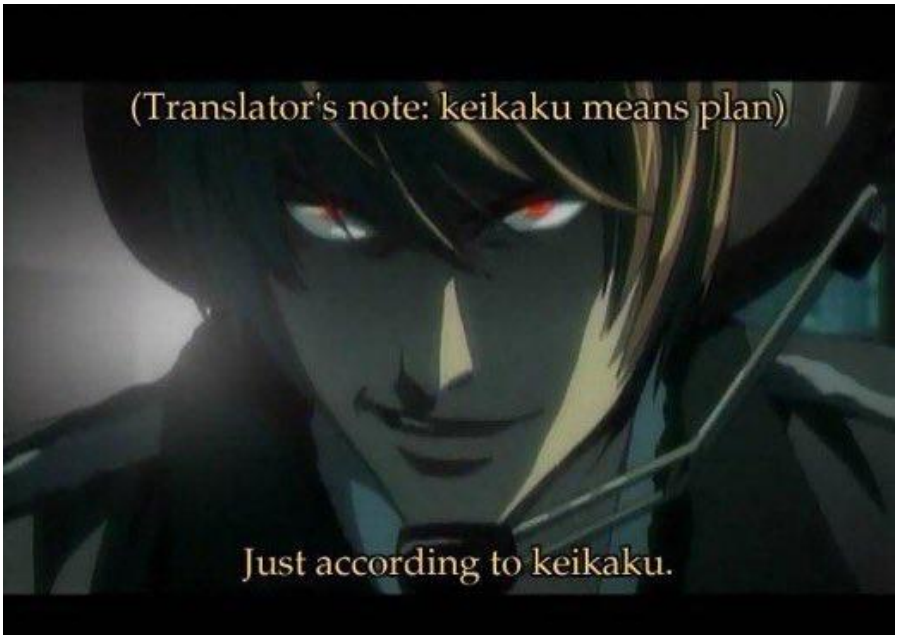

Figure 2: Fansubber flexing his knowledge in Death Note

knowledge to gain status within the fandom. I would ultimately argue, however, that the most important addition of the digital era came from social media.

As online forums and wiki pages replaced much of the functions of the specialty anime magazines that we saw before the dawn of the digital era, a new way of creating content also emerged. Social media like YouTube allowed anyone to upload video content to their website. The site quickly grew in popularity, with creators building followings and communities forming on the website. Gaining a following on social media websites now has also become a new way to become an authority able to endorse or reject bids. Next to that, fans who had been a part of that community could now create in a way that was not possible before. The reviews, theory crafting, interviews and fan-made drawings/animations that had been part of the specialty magazines were now possible to be consumed through video, instead of paper. This helped to increase the accessibility and reach of individuals within the cultural community, resulting in a stronger globalized unity through the internet. The merit that translated to status within the community could now also be capitalized on, as YouTube would pay creators ad revenue based on views.

Next to YouTube, social media such as Reddit, 9gag, Instagram, and many more, would become a place to share short form content about anime. Short videos, pictures, or memes (defined as an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations) about anime are a way people share their love and knowledge about anime in the contemporary online environment. Memes only work when a group of people has significant knowledge on a topic, since they function mostly like a sort of inside joke, they are only funny if you 'get' them, meaning you need to have specific information about the contents of the meme to partake in the enjoyment of the inside joke. Reddit is also known for its comment section, hosting many different forums where people can discuss topics of interest. People who want to delve deeper into hidden meanings or allusions often turn to Reddit to discuss their findings or see what other people have found.

Transmedia Result Texts: A JoJo's Bizarre Adventure Case Study

These social media texts dealing with the anime database are part of the result-texts within the *otaku* culture. They are unique in the sense that they do not have the ability to evolve into a base-text, however, as base-texts at the core of anime culture must specifically be anime series. These result-texts do have the ability to elevate the text they are about to a higher status and eventually help it become a base-text. With the diversification of result-text in the digital era of anime, this

process also started to change. Whereas the VHS era and its anime magazines mostly supported interviews, deep-dives, or review type texts, short form social media meme content caused a shift in the way shows could be brought to the *otaku* public.

One series that is notorious because of the social media content made about it is *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* (I will mostly focus on the anime that was released in 2012 and the manga in 1987). *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure (JJBA) is* a series that follows a different protagonist each season. The nickname of the protagonist is always JoJo, and they are all related to each other in some way or another, belonging to the Joestar family. As each season follows a new member of the family, different season take place in different eras and areas, ranging from pre WW2 England to modern day America or Japan. The antagonists of the series also vary, confronting the different protagonists with various perilous situations. The main point of the structure of the story is the protagonist JoJo finding and building a group of strong people to face the impending doom represented by the antagonist, but the different seasons of the show fit different genres. While all the seasons are action packed and rather adventurous, the darker, more horror like themes of season 1, *Phantom Blood,* are contrasted heavily by the colorful and slower slice-of-life like scenes present in season 4, *Diamond is Unbreakable*.

I would identify the exaggeration of fight scenes as the most important thematic coherence between the different seasons of *JJBA*. The action relies on exaggerations that are taken seriously within the diegetic world of *JJBA*, but are meant to be enjoyed with a grain of salt by the viewer, as it takes a parodical stance towards *shōnen* and action anime, whilst refraining from becoming a gag show. In this sense it relies on iterative referentiality as an overarching theme, since it creates a new perspective on the established conventions and tropes of these *shōnen* and action anime by exaggerating. This process is often seen within genres, where later stage genre works overplay earlier tropes to ridicule certain ideas. The earlier mentioned *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* is a good example of this process, as the exaggerated brutality of the 'good guy' in the film is highlighted to call America's policies into question and pose that the good guy is not that different from the bad guy, we only call him the good guy because he was the winner in the end. In *JJBA* this form of iterative referentiality is present throughout each season, even when the atmosphere or genre deviates from season to season.

It is important to note that the conventions which *JJBA* overplays are all based on anime-specific texts, or genres that have been birthed and are contained by the anime/manga body of texts. For example, *shōnen* anime often have complicated fight scenes with many 'rules' dictated

by someone's abilities or diegetically speaking short instances that get zoomed in on and take up much screen time. *JJBA* overplays elements like these to create fantastical and bizarre action scenes that keep taking itself seriously, but *otaku* fans would immediately understand the exaggerations of anime-specific conventions at play. An example could be found in season 6, *Stone Ocean*, episode 7: a prison guard dislikes one of the main characters, Ermes, so he tries to make her trip and fall into some crocodile feces. This moment is taken as if it were a high stake fight scene, with many shot-reverse shot sequences, zoom-ins on facial expressions, and the standard fighting scene music playing in the background. The JoJo of this season uses her abilities to save her friend and make the guard a victim of his own devices. This has a satirical effect because an otherwise very unserious scene is taken seriously and dealt with in a manner that *shōnen* often do: internal dialogue, explaining actions, and a villain that falls into his own trap because of the protagonist's powers.

These subversion of the *shōnen* battle anime conventions are then supported by the character design based on base-texts that introduced these conventions to the database. The character design of mostly the earlier season of *JJBA*, *Phantom Blood, Battle Tendency,* and *Stardust Crusaders*, all boast big muscular manly characters which look heavily inspired by the character design in the classical *shōnen* series *Fist of the North Star*. Beyond the similar looking characters, Araki also borrowed some of the action from *Fist of the North Star*, which introduced the flurry attacks that would become a staple of the *JJBA* main characters throughout the different seasons. In this sense, both references on the level of form, the character design, and the level of content, the exaggeration of tropes, are utilized to create a series that relies on iterative referentiality for its subversive meanings.

Interestingly, many of the mimetic references within the *JJBA* universe refer to Western music, as opposed to other anime. For example, many of the characters or their powers are named after musicians and bands, these include *ACDC*, *Wham*, *Vanilla Ice*, *Red Hot Chilli Peppers*, *Sticky Fingers*, *Sex Pistols* and many more. The references to this type of music can be partly attributed to the fact that the original manga of the series is quite old, as it started in 1987, when the database of anime references was still in its infancy, and partly because Araki, the creator of *JJBA*, is a big fan of Western music and wants to spread his love for his favorite artists through the usage of mimetic references. These result in the creation of bids to endorse certain texts (songs) or authors (artists), but I would argue that they do not work very well as a way to help the texts gain more status because the audience for *JJBA* and Araki's preferred Western music is a mismatch.

But more so than referencing other media, *JJBA* is most well-known for its appearances in other shows, especially since the release of the newest anime adaptation in 2012. Many anime shows that reference *JJBA* are not related to the series in terms of genre, which is interesting because this shows that cross referencing in anime is often nothing more than a game of recognition between author and audience. An example of this can be found in the anime *Oreshura*, short for *Ore no Kanojo to Osananajimi ga Shuraba Sugiru*, where a character references stealing the main characters first kiss, much like how Dio stole Jonathan's girlfriend's first kiss in the first season of *JJBA*. After stealing the kiss, she goes on to explain that she is deliberately mimicking the scene from *JJBA* because she is a fan. The show itself is a Romcom, which is very distanced from the *shōnen* type action found in *JJBA*. References like this, however, can still work because the anime audience is well-read not only in the genres they prefer, but also in the anime canon as a whole.

Much like with *Evangelion*, videos online point out the cross-references between *JJBA* and other anime. These videos are mostly informative, helping fans expand their knowledge of the *JJBA* influence on the anime landscape. But *JJBA* has evolved beyond this, mostly because of the high number of references other completely unrelated anime shows make to the series; internet culture has adopted the 'JoJo reference' as a meme. These memes are another form of references to *JJBA*, now taking place on social media platforms in the shape of short form content. Since its transmedia nature is at the base of what anime is, the shift to meme content is another logical step in *otaku* productiveness. The memes mainly consist of decontextualized clips of scenes in anime series that reference *JJBA*, which highlight the prevalence of the series and helps to build knowledge within the *otaku* community.[51] An example would be a short video or a picture that compares a scene from *No Game No Life*, where the art style suddenly changes to look like *JJBA* and the iconic 'ゴゴゴゴゴ' (*gogogogogo*) sound effect is put on the screen, accompanied by a text such as 'is this a JoJo's reference?' This process is a digitalized version of the knowledge based meritocratic activities that originated in anime specialty magazines during the TV-era and help the

[51] Know Your Meme, "Is This a JoJo Reference?" *Know Your Meme*, accessed March 23, 2025, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/is-this-a-jojo-reference.

fandom with their literacy of the database.

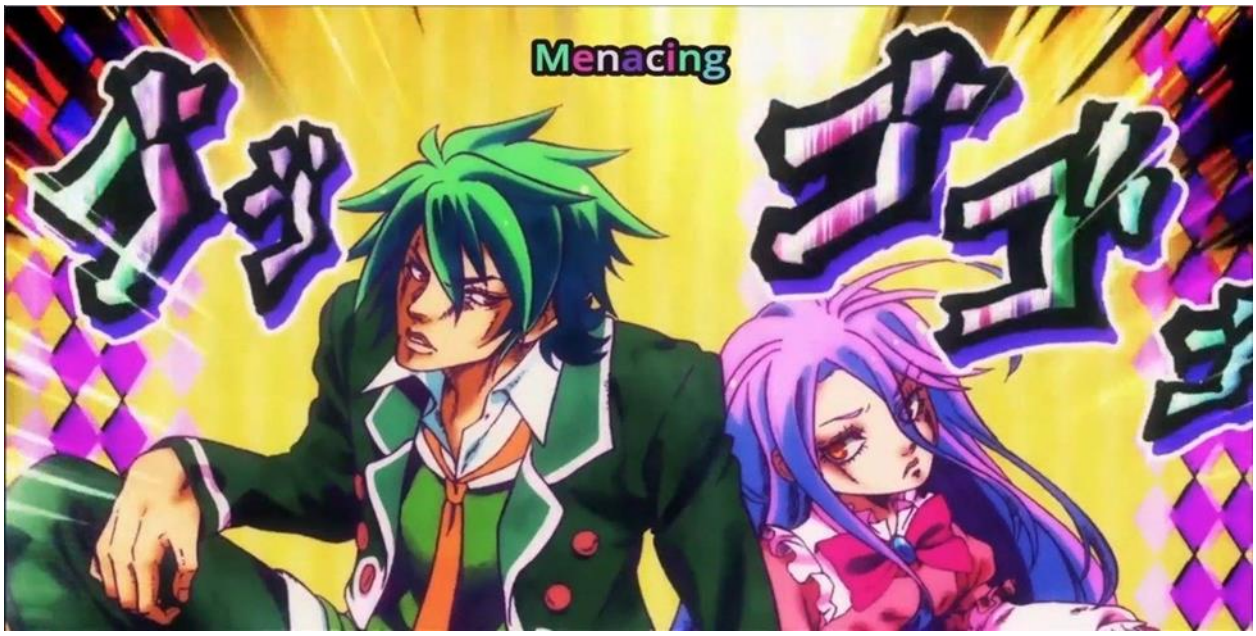

Figure 3: No Game No Life imitating JJBA

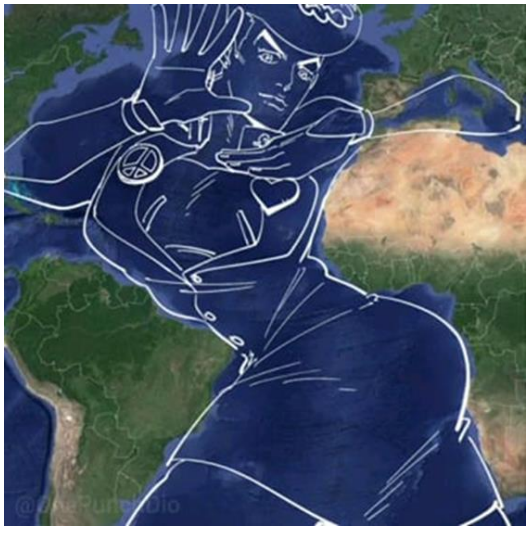

Figure 4: A meme that pretends the world map is a JJBA reference

The meme has since then evolved into a pretention of finding references to *JJBA*. Since so many different anime series with little to no connection to the *JJBA* universe reference the show, the meme has evolved to finding *JJBA* references everywhere, even in places they definitely do not exist. An example of this type of meme could be a short video of the world map, fading to a character from *JJBA* that has some similar shapes, posing the question if the world map could be a JoJo's

reference. Ultimately, both forms of the meme have the same effect: showing the *otaku* audience how prevalent the influence of *JJBA* is, and helping it gain more status as a base-text of the anime canon.

I think it is important to realize that when Raud proposes a textual approach to culture, the texts that apply to a culture do not need to be within one set medium.[52] When the culture is *otaku* or anime, the texts we should consider have as much of a transmedia nature as the worlds and characters of anime are. Often result texts start as manga, popular manga might get reviewed and talked about online, which are a new form of result texts perpetuating the manga result texts. The manga might be adapted into an anime because enough bids are being made about the text, which is another form of result text that tries to establish the world and characters introduced in the original manga to a base text level. Again, reviews and discussions online might be made about the anime result text, which is the next cycle of bids that might raise the status of the texts that together form the whole story. Bids can also come in references, like we see with other shows referencing *JJBA* or *Evangelion*. Most importantly, with the coming of the digital-era of anime, the amount of different shapes texts within the anime culture can adopt has seen a stark increase. Whereas the magazines of the TV-era mostly supported interviews and reviews, all in the form of written texts with images, the online world has brought us video content, long form and short form, interactive forums, meme content, wiki sites and more types of result texts that can perpetuate bids within the anime community.

Activities like interacting with bids, which has become more frequent due to the amount of result texts increasing, raise the average amount of knowledge within the fandom, creating a type of feedback loop: cross-referencing in anime is implemented by consumers turned producers who understand the knowledge of the fandom -> the fandom interacts with these cross-references, creating more content which spreads knowledge -> the fandom becomes more knowledgeable, creating a suitable audience for highly referential types of media. In the case of *JJBA* we can identify Araki as an *otaku* who turned into a producer, as he is familiar with other anime/manga works like *Fist of the North Star* and references these works in his own. The fandom creates videos and memes that highlight references some anime make to *JJBA*, like the YouTube video or meme mentioned earlier. Ultimately, because the fandom likes to participate in these activities, producers take advantage of *otaku* knowledge by including even more *JJBA* references in their works.

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[52] Rein Raud, *Meaning in Action: Outline of an Integral Theory of Culture*, 2016, https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB22757558.

Interestingly, because *JJBA* references have become part of online meme culture, the function of *JJBA* references in otherwise unrelated anime has shifted. The references used to be in line with other mimetic references found in anime, like the similar mise-en-scène I highlighted when discussing *Evangelion*. These references function most like a hidden homage, which the well-read audience will find and discuss with other viewers. This was the basic structure of cross-references I identified earlier, similar to a kind of conversation between producer and consumer, adding a layer of enjoyment to consuming by having the well-read consumer re-experience other media. But when the *JJBA* reference became so prevalent it turned into an internet meme, the references started to fit more into the 'gag-anime' style comedy shows.

This also highlights the transformative powers of bids/result texts. The amount of meme content produced by the fandom surrounding *JJBA* has caused references to the series to be seen in a comedic light, since meme content is generally meant to be laughed at. Since memes work much like inside jokes, the point is not that the joke is hilarious, but that it is only funny when you are initiated: you need specific knowledge to understand the comedic references. The popularity of the JoJo reference meme has caused the perception of a JoJo reference to shift; whereas a *JJBA* reference was not necessarily related to comedy at first, the references now mostly find their place as gags in series that are thematically devoid of anything JoJo.

Otaku Agency: A Zenshu Case Study

The fact that *otaku* became more productive in their creative endeavors on the internet and with technology also changed their public image. The first time the *otaku* was part of national news in Japan was not in a positive limelight. As it was connected to the serial killer Tsutomu Miyazaki, who was arrested in 1988.[53] *Otaku* culture had not been part of the mainstream yet, but it gained notoriety because the killer was deemed an *otaku* obsessed by violent and sexual manga, even though there was not much of it found in his room. This implied connection between perverted obsession and the *otaku* fandom made people wary of the group, thinking of them as antisocial beings who despised the real world because of their interactions with the fantastical worlds of anime and manga. This connection had a lasting impact on the way *otaku* were viewed in the public eye during the VHS era. The negative pertained mostly to the non-social: seclusion, introversion, and inability to make normal conversation were seen as hallmark traits of an *otaku*, making them

[53] Galbraith, Patrick W, Thiam Huat Kam, and Björn-Ole Kamm. *Debating Otaku in Contemporary Japan : Historical Perspectives and New Horizons*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. pp 141-142

weird and other.

With the digital age came a new appreciation of the *otaku*'s talents, however. Their general knowledge of technology made them now not only avid consumers of media in the public eye, but also producers of new media and technologies:[54]

> In contrast, "good otaku'' have been recuperated as leaders in the new information society, again because of what they produce. The game designer Satoshi Tajiri, for example, developed the Pokémon handheld videogame that eventually led to a global media bonanza. As Anne Allison (2006) describes, Tajiri's desire to use virtual worlds as a way to reconnect with other (living) people was part of what drove fascination with the Pokémon game, where players could not complete their collections unless they communicated with others.
>
> Ian Condry 2013

This phenomenon can be seen in representations of *otaku* in anime as well. Kon Satoshi, a Japanese anime film director mainly dealing with crossing the boundaries of reality and the fantastical, has made two different films starring *otaku* that show this change very well. The first is *Perfect Blue* (1997), a film in which an obsessed fan stalks his idol pop artist. The artist decided to leave the singing behind her in order to become an actress, but the obsessed fan is devastated, since this means he can never go to another concert of hers. His obsession goes so far that he starts a blog in which he claims to be the idol, spreading information about her personal life whilst saying that the version of her that wants to become an actress is not real. When he eventually turns violent and his room is found, the amount of technology and *otaku* related imagery recalls the Miyazaki incident and his room 'full of manga pornography'. The film *Paprika* (2006) also stars an *otaku* character, but this time he is not antagonized. The character still boasts many of the negative aspects *otaku* tend to be compared to, his body is big, awkward, and unhealthy, he is socially awkward, and he mainly resides in a room full of screens and technology. Instead of the obsessive nature of the room in *Perfect Blue*, however, this room facilitates productivity. He is the genius behind a device that allows people to enter another's dream, which is used in a therapeutic way in the film. We clearly see that he has no bad intentions and does good for society, which mirrors the way *otaku* were understood in the age of technology.

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[54] Ian Condry. *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story*. Duke University Press, 2013. doi:10.1215/9780822397557. pp. 189

The productive side of the *otaku* helped in creating more content and sharing more knowledge, leading to a fandom that is well-read and knowledgeable about the medium. We have arrived at a global community that lives to gain and share knowledge about the texts they are a fan of. Consequently, fans are not only able to read deeper meanings and find hidden references but are also in a position to become industry creators themselves, much like the way the founders of studio Gainax started out. As discussed earlier, maturing fans wanted to create anime that spoke to their age group, and not just to the younger age group they were a part of during the TV-era of anime. Because the producer and consumer side of the industry had a large overlap, production could easily play into the wants and needs of the consumers. As I discussed earlier, cultures form around a set of texts, which become the base-texts at the core of a cultural community. As a community started to form and grow during the VHS era and reached a peak through the global connectivity of the internet, anime creators had more and more base-texts and popular result-texts to work with. Consequently, new result-texts would boast more and more references to texts that had been part of the fandom for a longer time.

One anime, *Zenshu*, represents this shift in *otaku* agency while utilizing references on a diegetic and meta level, resulting in a work that contains many elements I have described in my thesis. In *Zenshu* we follow Natsuko, a director and animator at an anime studio, on her dreamlike journey through another world. She is experiencing a writer's block with her latest project, as she has to write about a first love, something she has never experienced before. During her struggles she is not mindful of what she eats, resulting in her accidentally eating expired clams and dying. She is reborn in a world she recognizes: it is the world of the anime movie that inspired her to become an animator herself. She knows the story does not end well and all people basically end up dying in the story's climax, but she finds herself with the magical ability to make her animations come to life. She can summon her animation desk through her pegbar, where she draws scenes that then help fight monsters or other bad guys. She slowly starts to fall in love with the main character of the movie world and when the world seems finished during the climax of the story, she manages to recreate the world through her animation powers. When she saves everyone, she wakes back up in the real world and is now able to break through her writer's block and finish the film about a first love through her newfound experiences.

What makes *Zenshu* interesting for my research is mostly its display of the *otaku* condition of anime. When thinking about the consumer *otaku* who turns into a producer, Natsuko is a prime example of this process. She starts her journey by becoming an *otaku* herself when she first

interacts with the anime film *A Tale of Perishing*, which inspires her to pursue a career in the anime industry. This mirrors many real life stories of anime directors, like the one I highlighted when talking about *Evangelion*'s Hideaki Anno. She is shown interacting with the many different levels of anime fandom, like anime magazines, buying merchandise, and making fan-art, which solidifies her position as an *otaku*. The show also puts a focus on the creative agency and productive powers of the *otaku*, as Natsuko's drawings not only come to life to fight, but also emotionally impact characters and are shown to inspire others. This goes for the animations she summons with her magical abilities during her time in the world of *A Tale of Perishing*, as well as for her amateur and professional creations as an animator in real life.

The set-up of the story makes it that the references to other shows also work on a meta level. When Natsuko summons her animations to life, they are not only references to other anime texts in real life, but they are also references to other diegetic anime texts. When we cut back to segments taking place in the real world, we see posters of anime shows and movies that show characters or monsters that Natsuko has drawn to fight her problems in the world she is transported to. This makes the reader aware of the process of referencing in anime, as we directly see an animator create sequences in the likeness of other diegetic anime texts, resulting in a meta level perspective on mimetic anime references.

These references also still work on a non-diegetic level, as the characters or monsters that are borrowed from other diegetic anime texts, are in turn borrowed from non-diegetic anime texts. For example, the first time Natsuko uses her power to summon a monster, she creates a sort of helmed giant that shoots laser beams from its mouth. The mouth in particular looks very similar to the mouth of a creature from *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, as both have a circular shaped mouth with claw like teeth protruding out from around the mouth. They also both have large circular and unicolored eyes, which, in combination with their plated armor, gives them an insect like appearance.

Next to their physical similarities, we also see references to shot composition: as both monsters load up to shoot a gigantic laser beam, we then cut to a distant shot of the laser beam impact, reverse-shot to the people witnessing the laser beam, and finally a shot that contrasts the protagonist to the explosive aftermath of the laser impact. In a later scene of a flashback to the real world, we see some anime posters on the wall of the studio Natsuko works at. These posters all show different characters or monsters that Natsuko has summoned, which creates the layer of diegetic references. The animator that worked on *Zenshu* was much like Natsuko in how they

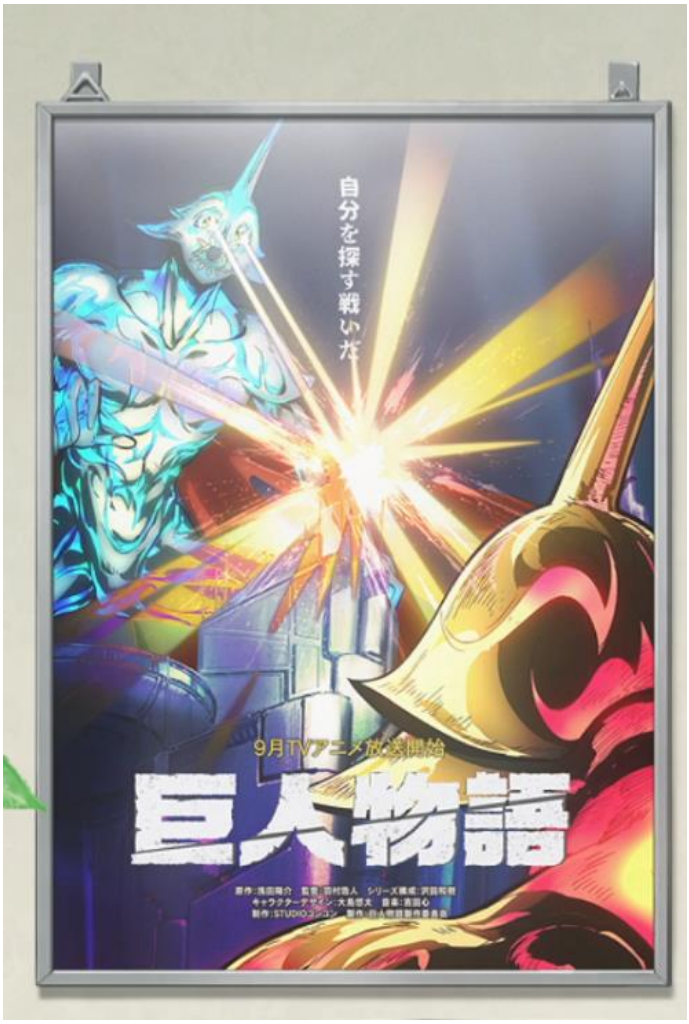

Figure 5: Poster in Natsuko's studio that shows the monster she summoned

animated a sequence that referenced a popular anime base text, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, showing the way *otaku* producers play with references to create hidden layers of pleasure for the *otaku* consumer.

Consequently, all of her animations follow a similar pattern of being both a diegetic and a non-diegetic reference, solidifying the process of referencing as a ubiquitous quality of *otaku* type production. Some of the other references include a mobile suit from the *Gundam* series, a small mech from *Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann*, the magical girl from *Sailor Moon*, and a wrestler in a cat outfit from *Tiger Mask*. When Natusko also eventually draws Luke, the main character in *A Tale of Perishing*, it is highlighted that these references are also a way for the animator to express their interests. By referring to certain shows, or placing a bid, the producer engages in a conversation with the consumer: when the consumer notices the reference, they can feel a moment of bonding

over shared interests with the producer, resulting in that extra layer of enjoyment that is otherwise unrelated to the show itself.

Next to Natsuko's drawings showing off the referencing element of *otaku* culture on a meta-level, her actions and behavior also dissect other aspects of *otaku* culture. Whereas we can understand a high level of referencing within anime as a result of the *otaku* condition, *Zenshu* and Natsuko also show us the building blocks for the *otaku* condition. First of all, as I mentioned earlier, we see Natsuko become an *otaku* herself before she gets into animation. Her obsession with an anime film makes her interested in the process of creating anime, starting with her drawing fan-art of her favorite characters. Through active participation, the world of anime can move through types of media, in this case becoming fan-art. After becoming more serious about honing her skills as an animator, she is shown to interact with anime specialty magazines, one of the places where *otaku* can share and receive the knowledge on which the *otaku* culture is based. In this case, the *otaku* Natsuko is consuming interviews with respected animators to help her transition to a professional creator, but she is also shown to consume more mundane knowledge about the series she likes. For example, when talking to Luke, she mentions having memorized all the main cast's 'character sheets.' These are sheets of extra information about the characters that is not easily grasped from watching the series/film itself, but is another way to interact with them, while playing into the knowledge based culture of *otaku*.

Second, the plot of Natsuko's near-death dream in *A Tale of Perishing* mainly focuses on Natsuko animating new sequences to alter the otherwise depressing plotlines of the original movie. For many anime fans, this process would also remind them of real life *otaku* activities: creating fan fiction, or a fanime. The next step after creating fan-art would be creating a spin-off series, an altered plot, or a sequel/prequel to a favorite anime. This step is very important to the dual consumer/producer nature of *otaku*, as it can be seen as a proving ground for new up-and-coming animators. For example, the founders of studio Gainax, mainly famous for making *Evangelion*, started their animation career by producing the introduction videos for Daicon (an anime convention). When Natsuko creates new sequences, the plotlines change, making her suddenly unfamiliar with the rest of the story. Interestingly, a character that is a reincarnation of the deceased director of *A Tale of Perishing* shows up and confronts Natsuko about her changing stuff on her own accord. She says changing things will still result in the same outcome, hinting at the fact that fan fiction can never become canon. It also highlights a conflict of interest between the fans wanting to interact with their favorite series more, and the studio wanting to protect their copyright.

Having incorporated all these elements, *Zenshu* is an anime about the producers of anime, as well as about the consumers, who can both be classified as *otaku*. Since the *otaku* is central to anime culture, the anime tries to justify and support *otaku* culture through its representation. As I mentioned earlier, by making Natsuko's animation come to life and tangibly impact the lives of people around her, the agency and influence of animation is highlighted. But next to that, *otaku* knowledge is also rewarded: because Natsuko has interacted with anime specialty magazines and has a substantial amount of knowledge about the characters of *A Tale of Perishing,* she is able to prevent disasters from occurring and properly help the characters who are quickly becoming her friends. This in turn leads to her being able to create a fan fiction version of her favorite story that does not end in despair, after which she awakes with new experiences that she can use to help her get out of her writer's block. In this sense, the story is not just a showcasing of the *otaku* condition, but also a justification for it.

Another way the show justifies *otaku* culture is by highlighting the two-way positivity that comes from fan interaction with a series. *Otaku* are generally thought of as antisocial beings, as I mentioned when first discussing the *otaku*. This aspect also plays a part in *Zenshu*, as Natsuko is shown to be completely oblivious to romantic interests of people around her when growing up. Her obsession with the 2D creates a rift between her and reality, as she is only interested in real life experiences as a means to becoming able to animate them. Her appearance in the first episode supports this shut-in personality, as she looks like she does not take care of herself: her hair is so long that her face is not visible, and she wears an oversized hoodie. The reason for her writer's block is that she has to direct a story about a first love, something she has never experienced due to her *otaku* obsessions. She stalks co-workers for their stories of first love but is unable to understand the emotions because of her own lack of experience. During her near-death experience in the world of *A Tale of Perishing* she eventually experiences a first love with the stories main character, Luke Braveheart. She has been obsessed with him ever since she saw the film for the first time, mentioning that she has made so much fan art of him that she would be able to draw him blindly from any perspective. The *otaku* obsession is transposed into a real experience, making Natsuko grow as a person next to being able to now write about a first love. Plainly put, an anime studio makes a story that highlights how anime obsessions can create learning experiences and character growth in a fan, showing that *otaku* culture can have positive influences on the lives of the participants other than just being a good way to spend pastime. On the other hand, Natsuko has a positive influence on anime as well because of these experiences, since she is now able to create

more varying stories that highlight real experiences and allow viewers to connect with the characters and learn from them in their turn. This two-way positivity is ultimately connected to the *otaku* dual nature of being consumer and producer, as they continue to evolve and create new stories alongside each other.

Genre mixing as the result, not the cause: An *Attack on Titan Case* Study

Finally, I will take a look at an anime called *Attack on Titan* (進撃の巨人 *Shingeki no Kyojin*) in order to think about the differences between genre references, or categorizing within a genre database, and cross-referencing within the anime database. The Japanese title, which would more accurately translate to something like 'the attack titan', holds a clue that the English title does not: the existence of the attack titan, and subsequently the role it plays in the story. The setting of the series is a medieval Europe inspired society, with the exception of the enormous walls that surround not just one city, but all of the inhabitable space for human beings. Outside the walls, gigantic humanoid creatures called titans roam the earth, hunting humans for sport. The series starts with a special, never-before-seen colossal titan appearing and breaking into one of the outermost settlements of the world of humans. The main characters manage to evacuate and decide to join the army and dedicate their life to fighting back against the titans in order to attain freedom. We reunite with the main cast when they are already in the military corps, and another encounter with the colossal titan causes the main character to find out he has the power to transform into a titan himself. From here on out, the scope of the story changes and mysteries are proposed to the viewers: are there more people inside of titans? Could there be people outside the walls?

As the story progresses, we find out there is a world inhabited by humans outside the walls, and titans, who all have humans inside of them, only exist on one island. The show turns more political, and instead of keeping a medieval and fantastical setting, technology like airplanes, guns and ships are introduced. All phenomena that occur, from the origin of the titans to the reason why only certain people can turn into them, are explained with a scientific reasoning that makes sense within the diegetic world. This beckons the question whether the series is a dark fantasy or a Science-Fiction.

People have been discussing the correct genre terminology for the series, but more than that, I think it is interesting to think about the references in *Attack on Titan* as within the sphere of anime texts. This is because the elements that people identify as Science-Fiction components, can actually be attributed to the connection of *Attack on Titan* to *Evangelion*, consequently making it incorporate many elements of the mecha genre. The mecha genre is integral to the history of anime, as it was both one of the earliest ways to market to children, but also one of the genres that played a role in the maturation of the anime fandom. Even today, the *Gundam* series, a mecha type anime that has existed since 1979, boasts a huge fanbase surrounding its models called *Gunpla* that fans

can put together themselves. In this sense, instead of *Attack on Titan* being a result of genre-mixing, I would argue that the genre-mixing is a result of anime cross-referencing in *Attack on Titan*.

Because I argue that the mecha elements present in *Attack on* Titan are not caused by active genre mixing, but by referencing other anime, I will focus on putting *Attack on Titan* next to *Evangelion*, since I think the latter influenced the former in both its presentation of the main component of the story, the titans, as well as the themes and overall narrative structure. Both shows host gigantic enemies that keep humans from being free. In *Attack on* Titan, what we think is the last surviving host of humans have shut themselves within gigantic walls that keep the titans out, whereas the city in which Shinji lives, Tokyo 3, has an emergency tactic which retreats the city into an underground enclosure, resulting in a similar locked in state as in *Attack on Titan*. The humans that transform into titans control the titans from a tight and biological cockpit situated at the nape of the titan's neck, just like the people who control the gigantic fighting mech suits in shows like *Evangelion*. The pilots in *Evangelion* are also submerged in some type of life-support fluid when they establish a neural link to their suits, the people that control titans also do so with a neural link, and shots of the people inside a titan look similar to the controllers of a mech suit in the sense that they seem to have their arms embedded in some kind of muscle fiber where we would otherwise often find mechanical control systems.

Another important element that links the titan transformation to mecha anime is linked to the physiology of the pilot. In its origin, as I have discussed earlier, anime was geared towards children, with a main focus on the ability to sell toy merchandise for profit. The mecha anime was

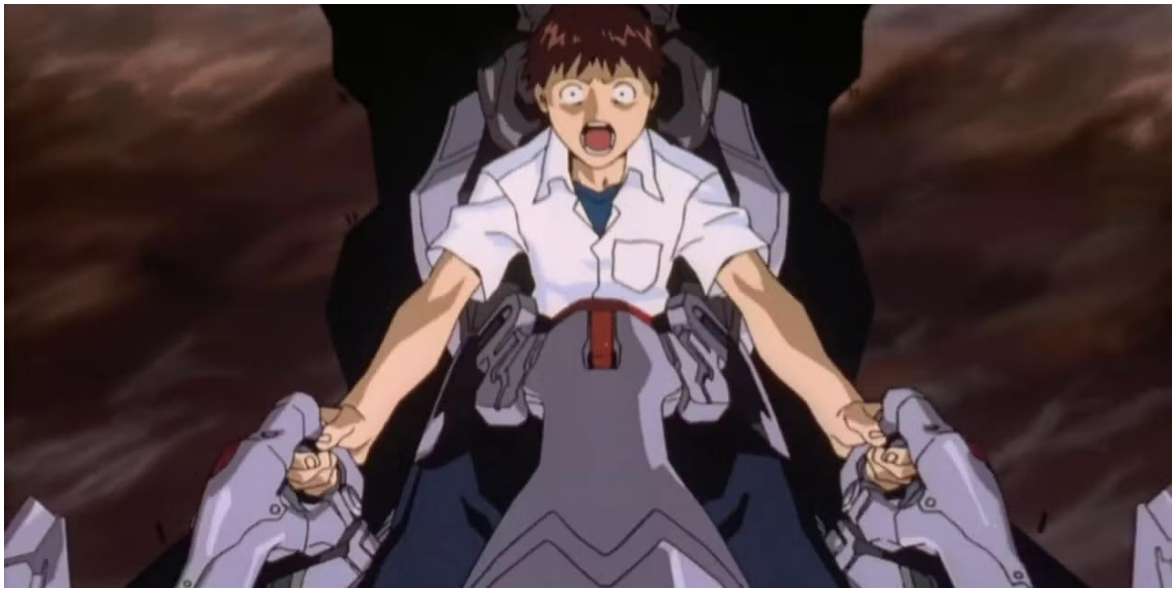

Figure 6: Shinji while controlling a mech suit

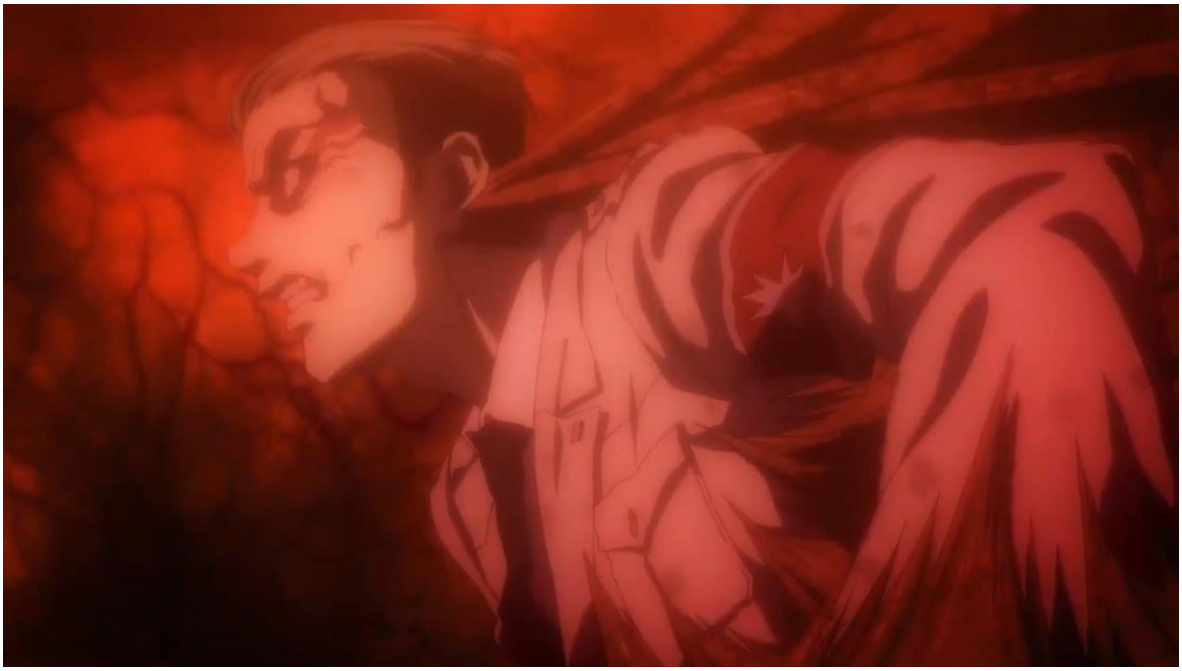

Figure 7: A person shown controlling a titan from the inside of its neck

born from this starting point, as giant robots, preferably ones that a pilot could ride, worked very well as merchandisable toys. The robots would be designed in a way that toys could be easily manufactured in their likelihood, which is why shows like *Mazinger Z* could be marketed so effectively. To appeal to a younger audience, the pilots of these mech suits would often be young too. In early mecha anime, like *Mazinger Z,* the age of the pilot would not be tied to their ability to ride the suit, but when the genre was more developed and its audience was more adult, reasons for the younger age of the pilots started to make their way into the plot. For example, *Evangelion*'s pilots are all young teenagers, but this is necessary for the synchronization of pilot and mech suit. Instead of playing the kid hero, the protagonists show how traumatizing the role of a hero can be for someone still growing up. This way, the topics can be suited to an adult audience, while keeping with the traditional younger protagonists. Interestingly, the only people that gain the titan transformation ability are also teenagers, which is why I argue the concepts disguised by dark fantasy are actually references to popular mecha anime.

In *Attack on Titan*, the concepts and rules of the universe do not necessarily dictate that the user of the titan transformation ability be a teenager, but it just happens that it is most effective way to create strong soldiers. The people that hold the power of titan transformation are from another island, and their goal is to utilize the power to secure a strong position for themselves. The one problem with the power is that a user only has 13 years left to live after first obtaining their power. This phenomenon is called 'the curse of Ymir', after the first to ever transform into a titan, Ymir. The

way Marley, the country that holds the key to the titan transformations, goes about their grooming process is by selecting talented teenagers and putting them through rough training. The best of the bunch gets to inherit the power at a young age, so that they have some time to train with the power before they reach their physical prime. In *Evangelion*, the pilots are also cursed, but instead of premature death, their physical bodies become unable to age. In this sense, the limitations and curses that the titan transforming humans experience are a reference to the way pilots in *Evangelion* also experience similar curses: both subjects will never reach real adolescence.

Finally, there is one more important component that *Attack on Titan* took from *Evangelion*. In *Evangelion,* the main characters fight giant aliens called the Angels with the help of the gigantic mech suits, whereas in *Attack on Titan*, people fight titans with swords. This changes when the protagonist becomes able to harness the power of the titans, and the titan is being used in a similar way to the mech suits to fight giant enemies. In *Attack on Titan*, it is clear that the enemy has also become friend; now that humanity can utilize the power of the titans, they have become an important step in the evolution of mankind. This seems different in *Evangelion*, since the suits are technological feats of human innovation, but it is revealed later in the series that the suits are actually biological creatures; they are Angels that have been altered so that a person can link with the creature, becoming able to control it from the inside. Calling back to the *otaku* condition of anime, the baseline is that creators and consumers share similar knowledge, and since *Evangelion* is widely regarded as a base text that helped transform anime into a more adult oriented style, I would argue that *Attack on Titan* is a result text based on these similarities.

Fandoms have also noticed the similarities in the approach between these two series, as they have started to refer to these series as being part of a subgenre called the 'flesh-mecha', which is basically a type of mecha anime where the mechas are living creatures or made of biological matter, instead of being technologically constructed. On a semantic level, the two do not seem similar at all: one is set in a dark fantasy world with limited technology, whilst the other is a futuristic dystopian Sci-Fi. This is why I would argue against trying to group them on a genre level, but instead see them as a base- and result-text duo. *Attack on Titan* is the result of remixing the ideas present within the base structure of *Evangelion*. When you would look at *Attack on Titan* as a text made to rely on mecha conventions through the flesh-mecha subgenre, we lose sight of how much the series does to recontextualize ideas proposed in *Evangelion*. *Attack on Titan* does not rely on genre tropes to construct new meanings, but on iterative referentiality to create a discussion between an earlier base-text and a recontextualization to bring those ideas central to the *otaku*

culture to a new audience in a fresh light.

On a syntactic level, there is much more likeness between the two series than just the titans/mechs and their pilots. The catalysts in both series plots are a pair of parents with similar functions: they sacrifice themselves so that the protagonist gains the ability to control their giant suit, and they seem evil and controlling, but we do not know what their ulterior motives are. Both shows have an important scene where one of the protagonists parents gets eaten by an enemy: in *Attack on Titan*'s first episode Eren's mother is eaten by a titan who is later revealed to be Eren's biological mother, and in *Evangelion* we see a dream sequence in which Shinji's father is eaten by his mech suit, which only functions because it is fused with the soul of his mother. A human-made female protagonist also appears in both shows. A genetically engineered human that is made to obey all orders and should be a weapon against the giant enemy appears in the shape of Mikasa and Rei. Thematically speaking, both shows also carry a similar problem that is being tackled, the problem of existing. Both main characters are struggling with the fact that their own existence creates a whole bunch of problems for themselves and people they value dearly, making them question the ethicality of wanting to live. In both shows, we start thinking the giants are the enemy the protagonist needs to face, but they end up realizing that people are behind their real problems, making them question their motivations.

Next to these syntactic similarities, which basically put a different perspective on the same basic narrative ideas, there are also many instances of simple visual mimetic references. One of the most referred to shots of *Evangelion* would be the shot of the 'Gendo pose', in which his glasses reflect light while he sits with his hands interlocked in front of his face. This shot is also repeated by Hanji, a character in *Attack on Titan*, in what is an obvious reference to the show for any *otaku*. Then there are also the poses of Shinji's mech suit and Eren's titan, who can both go into a berserk state where they lose control. This has similar visual cues in both shows: bright shining eyes, open mouthed breathing, and sprinting on all fours. In this case, mimetic references support iterative references by tying the two series together on different levels. It can be hard to spot when a series is reusing narrative structures or themes from a specific anime and placing them in a new context, but by underlining the iterative referentiality with mimetic referentiality, the audience is lead towards the base-text important to understanding the meaning of a result-text in more than one way.

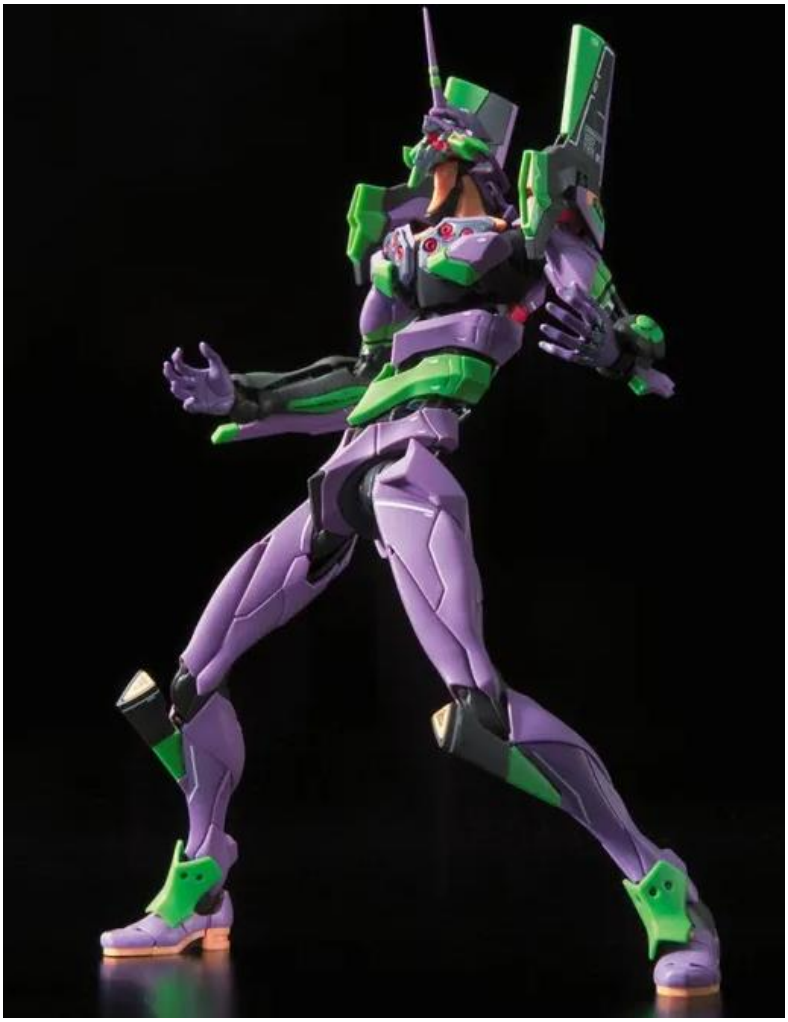

Figure 9: Evangelion official toy showing the infamous roar pose

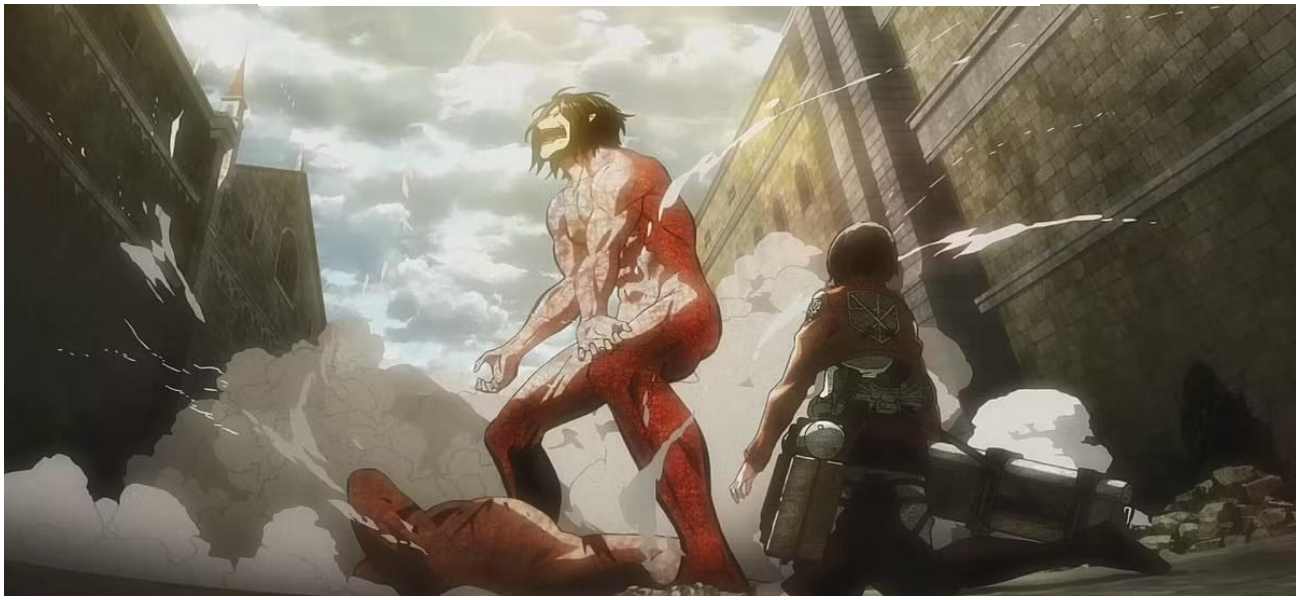

Figure 8: Eren's titan mimicking the infamous roar pose from Evangelion

In conclusion, *Attack on Titan* should be understood as a result text based on *Evangelion*. Although the story deviates by transferring the ideas proposed by *Evangelion* to a different genre, but keeps much of its iconography, like the roar in figure 3 and 4, *otaku* would see this and understand what *Attack on Titan* is trying to accomplish: show a different possible outcome to the much loved base text part of anime culture. Highly referential pieces can still work in a vacuum, however, as *Attack on Titan* has enjoyed a lot of mainstream popularity. Coincidentally, I would argue that this has caused *Attack on Titan* and *Evangelion* to attain similar status and functionality within the anime community, snice both have shown how anime can handle mature subjects, *Evangelion* has mostly shown people how it can deal with 'real' emotions, and *Attack on Titan* has shown the mainstream public that anime is by no means meant for children with its gruesome scenes and themes. This goes to show that a series does not live or die by understanding the references within it, but that the references add an extra layer of enjoyment for real *otaku* producers and consumers, the core of the anime community.

Conclusion

To reiterate, where anime has had a distinct style in terms of animation on which academics have relied to define the tentative subject, I have introduced another element that we can use to think about what anime is: the *otaku* condition. Starting off from a place of reliance on super-fans to be able to survive economically, the *otaku* started to mature and form a community based on the knowledge of their favorite texts. First, they were mostly concerned with Sci-Fi, but eventually their focus became anime texts. Their thirst for knowledge started to create a meritocratic structure within their culture as anime magazines created a platform for fans and creators alike to share their insights and information about beloved texts. Sharing and gaining information became a key element of *otaku* productivity, consequently equipping them with the skills needed to become producers of the type of texts which their culture was based on: anime. This consequently led to the producers having a deep understanding of the mindset of the audience, since the consumer/producer nature of the *otaku* allowed them to occupy both positions at once. In conclusion, we can state that these interactions allow for a high level of referentiality in anime texts, as information about these texts is widely available and held in high regard, while the producers are also familiar with the canon of anime, or the base-texts of the culture. In this sense, creating result-texts based on these base-texts or on other result-texts within the culture, is an important way anime texts are bound within a database, becoming a coherent network of nodes connected to each other through a cross-referential glue.

Again, we can identify this process within other groupings of texts as well, such as genres or fandoms of certain IPs such as the Marvel universe. What makes this process especially interesting, however, is the fact that it can operate at a noticeably high level because of the *otaku* condition. Next to that, it can also help us understand and identify the otherwise hard to grasp body of texts called anime. It would be interesting to look at the changes of perception on anime and see how new result-texts might start relying on other base-/result-texts to position themselves within the network, and it would be especially fruitful to look at modern changes in anime perception, where more and more Western studios are producing anime titles. These titles are often made by big studios such as Netflix and are made in English, but marketed and, most importantly, talked about by fandoms, as anime. As the *otaku* has become a more global concept through internet culture during the digital era of anime, we can now pose that the *otaku* condition has become a part of the global community and non-Japanese studios start to position their works within the database

network of anime texts. For future research, taking these texts and looking at the way they utilize references, both iterative and mimetic, would be an appropriate topic to help us keep up with the ever-changing nature of anime definitions.

I would like to recall Andrew Tudor's approach to defining genres ('genre is what we collectively believe it to be'), as I think it is very interesting to think about tentative subjects in such a manner.[55] It mostly becomes a matter of who is the 'we,' and how does the definition change if the 'we' changes. In the case of anime, I would argue that the people with the most influence on whether something should or should not be considered anime can be divided into two categories: *otaku* producers of anime series, and *otaku* producers of social media content dealing with anime texts. The first group has a power of marketing and authority: if they define their work as anime and they are an authority on the subject of animation, their claim has a certain credibility to it. The second group also has a certain authoritative power, but more in the sense that they are at the top of the meritocratic culture based on anime knowledge, so their judgement is respected by the anime fandom. But most importantly, both groups still fall within the definition of *otaku*, as they are highly literate participants of the anime database, trying to work with the connections between different nodes to position works either within or outside the boundaries of the database network. This means that what anime is or can be, is completely within the hands of the *otaku* culture, once again showing the importance of the *otaku* condition to the understanding of anime textualities.

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