

博士論文

**Anime and Social Imagination:
Media Fictions in Japan's Age of Neoliberalism**

アニメと社会的想像力：
ネオリベラリズム時代の日本のメディア・フィクション

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation offers a critical, historical, and theoretical examination of popular media within Japan's neoliberal turn from the late 1990s through the 2010s. Drawing inspiration from media theory in Japanese and English, as well as from contemporary social theory in many disciplines, it focuses on the form of popular Japanese animation commonly referred to as "anime," as well as related media forms, in connection with neoliberalism and globalization. Each chapter uses a different genre conceit to elaborate links between "anime fiction" as a transmedia form, neoliberalism as a governing structure of social experience, and imagination as a cognitive process operating within multiple sites of human activity. This method challenges common interpretations of anime as an escapist media form or as a reflection of commercialized Japanese identity. I argue that the changes in anime representation from the late 1990s onward constituted a new set of techniques for imagining social experience which, while not representing social issues in a critical way, nonetheless were geared for "thinking through" the problems of neoliberal globalization. Anime fictions make social worlds perceivable by playfully combining images into virtual experiences that fantastically resituate the institutions of neoliberalism. While they sometimes feed into nihilistic or reactionary views, they also produce imaginative situations which articulate and stimulate alternative forms of social organization. I elaborate this thesis through comparative visual analyses and also through examination of anime images being utilized in the wider public sphere. Anime's presence in Japanese public culture is not reducible to global capitalism or Japanese nationalism, but testifies to the dynamic and fundamentally contested nature of imagined social space, both the national imaginary of Japan and the globalized imaginaries of capitalism itself.

The dissertation chapters are divided into two parts, each of which covers the time period from early neoliberalism in the late 1990s through the cultural branding

initiatives of the 2010s. The first part is concerned with domestic issues of labor and socioeconomic networks, the second with geopolitical identity and globalization. Chapter One discusses early visualizations of neoliberal risk society in anime and related media. Chapter Two looks at character-oriented fictions in the context of labor casualization in the early 2000s. Chapter Three continues this discussion in the context of the 2010s with an analysis of the trope of *isekai* or “other-world” vis-à-vis national feelings of precarity and the state of creative labor in the anime contents industry. Chapter Four discusses how anime “genres of violence” engage with the contested geopolitical imaginary in the post-Cold War world. Chapter Five discusses the potentials and limitations of the *mecha* genre and its manifestations of collective change during the period of the Iraq War. Chapter Six discusses so-called *moe*-military transmedia projects in the context of controversies regarding resurgent Japanese nationalism. In my specific area of research, my focus on imagination in this dissertation challenges common interpretations of anime and related media, as well as their place in contemporary Japanese political culture. In the broader field of film and media studies, it offers new possibilities for engaging with social representations across genre and medium, and also uncovers hidden potentials in “low” cultural forms.

要旨

本博士論文は、日本の 1990 年代後半から 2010 年代にかけての新自由主義時代における大衆メディアを、歴史的、批評的、理論的に検討するものである。日本と英語圏のメディア論及び学際的な社会論を参照しつつ、新自由主義とグローバル化の文脈の中で発表された「アニメ」という日本のアニメーション形態とそれに関連するメディア形態を考察する。各章では、異なるアニメのジャンルや作品群を取り上げることにより、メディア形式としてのアニメと社会的経験を構成する仕組みとしての新自由主義、個人と共同体の認知プロセスとしての想像力の関係を、複数の側面から検討する。本博士論文では、1990 年代後半以降のアニメ表象が、社会認識を媒介する新たな想像力の手法をもたらしたと論じる。さらに、このような「メディアで媒介された想像力」は、現実の社会問題を必ずしも批判的に描写していない場合でも、新自由主義とグローバル化の問題を「考え抜く」のに役立つ手法である。これらの「アニメ・フィクション」が提供する、メディアで構成されたヴァーチャルな社会的経験は、新自由主義の支配的な組織を想像力のレベルで再構築する。アニメ・フィクションが媒介する社会的経験のプロセスは、虚無や反動的な思想にいたる場合もある一方、そこには資本主義を超えた社会像に関連した想像力も見出せる。本論文では、これらの主張を、映像の比較分析とアニメに関する言説分析により実証する。日本の公共圏におけるアニメの存在は、文化的ナショナリズムやグローバル資本主義に還元できるものではなく、その両方から想像された社会の矛盾と変遷を証左するものであると考えられるのだ。

本博士論文は二部六章から構成されており、1990 年代後半の新自由主義転換期から文化産業政策に特徴づけられた 2010 年代にわたる期間を対象としている。第一部では国内の労働と社会経済経験に焦点を当て、第二部ではグローバル化と地政学的アイデンティティに焦点を当てる。第一章では新自由主義的なリスク社会に関する初期の映像化を検討する。第二章では 2000 年代に労働が流動化

していく文脈にかかわるキャラクター中心との作品を分析する。第三章では「異世界」というジャンルとアニメ業界の現状を照らし合わせながら、第二章の議論を2010年代の文脈でさらに論じていく。第四章ではアニメの「暴力のジャンル」が冷戦後に争われた地政学像をいかに想像するのかについて、認識論的、政治的な側面から検討する。第五章では、イラク戦争時に放送された、巨大ロボットを使ったSF作品の戦争と革命の描写について、その可能性と限界を議論する。第六章では2010年代のナショナリズム言説を背景に起こった「萌えミリタリー」というメディア作品形態についての論争を解析する。本研究の意義として、アニメーション研究の文脈では、想像力を中心とした方法論により現代日本史におけるアニメの位置付けを再検討することに貢献する。より広い映像学の文脈では、ジャンルと媒体を超えたイメージ分析を理論的・具体的に提示することで、従来「低級文化」と見なされがちだったアニメの潜在的な可能性と学術的価値を明らかにする。

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Introduction

This dissertation examines intersections between anime, neoliberalism, and imagination. My use of the Japanese term “anime” indicates my focus on the recognizable aesthetics and cultural politics of the popular style of Japanese animation which developed from the postwar era onward. In recent decades anime has become deeply associated with Japan’s international image and has also become a common topic of humanities research inside and outside of Japan. “Anime studies” is growing into a recognizable site of multidisciplinary research with its own unique prerogatives (see Berndt 2018). Many scholars have investigated the function of anime within globalization (e.g. Iwabuchi 2002; Allison 2006; Annett 2014; Suan 2020b); others have theorized anime’s relationship to contemporary capitalism (e.g. Steinberg 2012; Lamarre 2018; Ōsawa 2018). However, there are few extended studies which explore the connections between anime and *neoliberalism*, not just as economic policy but as modes of consciousness and conceptions of the social world formed by the global adoption of neoliberal rationality. This project aims to contribute to anime studies and to critical media studies at large by providing an extensive treatment of anime and Japan’s neoliberal experience.

My basic premise is that contemporary *anime fictions* constitute a form of *mediated imagination* that developed in close relation to the spread of neoliberalism in Japan, from the socioeconomic crises of the 1990s through the national branding projects of the 2010s. The theoretical focus on imagination leads me to three interconnected claims developed throughout the chapters. First, anime fictions are actively “thinking through” neoliberal modes of life (rather than simply representing them or being functions of them.) Second, they are geared toward producing virtual experiences within fictional and mediated environments but are nonetheless invested in *the social* as an embodied human world. Third, these techniques playfully – and often unintentionally – experiment with forms of

social collectivity that contort, reapportion, or surpass the governing rationales of Japan's age of neoliberalism in ways unavailable to more realist media forms. As I hope to show, this perspective not only reframes anime's place in contemporary Japan but also prompts a broader reconsideration of the role of imagination within the media environments of 21st century capitalism at large.

As a critical work, this dissertation is concerned with rethinking modes of aesthetic engagement with media images in a context where neoliberal logics of privatization, risk, and fluidity have eroded the foundations of systematic critique. Anime fictions do not primarily function as *representations*, that is, as intentional depictions of presumably "real" social contexts. Therefore, they provide a unique space to locate the cognitive work that fictions, as articulations of human imaginative processes, can do in the absence of a coherent background for representation. This potential extends to political horizons as well. Imagination, I claim, emerges as a pivotal source of human agency within neoliberalism. To signal my bias at the outset, I believe that imagining social forms beyond capitalism in general and neoliberalism in particular is a necessary enterprise. Furthermore, in contrast to narratives of so-called "capitalist realism" (Fisher 2009: 4), I find that media and people are imagining alternatives all the time. The problem is that they do so partially, temporarily, and rarely in consistent political terms. Anime's transmedia iterations, which spill over into public life in numerous ways, make visible the amorphous process of mediated imagination as it operates through social life. In what follows, I will sketch out my understanding of key terms within the context of previous research.

1. Anime Fictions and Otaku Media

"Anime" in this dissertation refers not to Japanese animation per se, but to a transmedia ecology of media forms including late-night (*shin'ya*) television anime,

certain genres of Japanese manga comics, anime-themed “light novels” (*raito noberu*), and narrative video games. Perhaps controversially, throughout the chapters I will discuss manga works, novels, magazines, and other media forms as anime-adjacent fictions. The visuality of anime as a particular *kind* of Japanese animation is seen as the organizing force of this diverse network of images, fictional tropes, production methods, and consumption patterns (see Wada-Marciano 2010: 243). As mentioned, “anime” here also signifies certain perceptual modes, relationships with media, and cultural politics which developed alongside the supposedly low-brow forms of Japanese animation and related media in late 20th and early 21st-century Japan. My project builds on previous transmedia theories of anime: Azuma Hiroki’s (2001) “database consumption,” Ōtsuka Eiji’s (2001; 2003; 2013b) industrial aesthetics, Marc Steinberg’s (2012) analysis of “media mix” production, and mostly importantly Thomas Lamarre’s (2009; 2018) theory of anime and related media as techno-social “machines.”¹ My term *anime fiction* refers flexibly to any fictional conceit arising from anime’s transmedia ecology – be it a single work, a genre or subgenre, a narrative trope or situational premise, or a character type – that arises out of its “environment of imagination” (Azuma 2007: 64).² In a word, anime fictions are defined by a belief in the self-sufficiency and gratifying power of this environment and its attractive characters and settings. I will provide more justification for my perspective throughout this introduction; for now it is necessary to outline the historical formation of “anime” as an aesthetic and social entity in Japan.

Japanese animation has its roots in the early 20th century, when early practitioners labored to find a place for the new medium within Japan’s burgeoning media culture (Clements 2013: 35). Both the aesthetics and the production techniques of these early forms arose through a mixture of foreign influence, particular that of American cartoons, and the institutional and political climate in Japan (see Ōtsuka 2013a: 266). As we will see, the legacy of these early conditions lingers in anime and related media today. However, the formation of what would be called “anime” is a postwar phenomenon.

Tsugata Nobuyuki has characterized the dynamics of contemporary Japanese animation as a tension between two stylistic and industrial “axes” (*jiku*) emblemized by two postwar studios: Tōei Animation (1956-present) and Mushi Production (1961-1973) (Tsugata 2004: 143-144). Taking cues from the aesthetics and industrial structures of Disney films, the Tōei style focused on so-called “full animation:” the labor-intensive practice of fully animating character movement across animation cels to achieve a cinema-like experience. (Tsugata 2004: 137; Lamarre 2009: 64-67). In contrast, the style of Mushi Production or “Mushi Pro,” founded by pioneering *mangaka* (manga comic book artist) Tezuka Osamu, was geared to meet the grueling schedule and budget constraints of the new medium of television. This primarily meant a reliance on so-called “limited animation:” the use of composited layers of simple animation and other techniques to avoid the costly and time-consuming process of full animation (Lamarre 2009: 157-160). Tezuka’s “labor-reduction system” (*shōryokuka sareta shisutemu*) took these strategies to the extreme, creating a reduced and stylized form of animated storytelling based on pre-existing manga (Tsugata 2004: 138-139). Though lambasted by proponents of full animation, the “limited” style, which Tezuka himself called “anime,” proved to be extremely popular. The successful 1963 release of Mushi Pro’s *Astro Boy/Tetsuwan Atomu* (Tezuka 1963-1966), Japan’s first recognizable anime television series, touched off the first “anime boom” and determined the shape of subsequent television anime (Masuda 2016: 14-16).

As Tsugata describes, the term “anime” began to be used from the early 1970s by older fans of these ostensibly children-oriented television shows, but also by artistic minded creators as a term of discrimination for the low quality and merchandising-oriented trash culture that TV animation appeared to represent (Tsugata 2011: 7-8). It is certainly true that anime production was – and continues to be – heavily structured by “production committees” (*seisaku iinkai*) of investors seeking to get returns through new media iterations and product tie-ins (Clements 2013: 152). Marc Steinberg has elaborated

these transmedia industrial practices in his theory of anime's "media mix." According to Steinberg, recognizable images of characters repeated through multiple media and product iterations work together to produce complexes of affect which in turn form "environments" of media consumption (Steinberg 2012: 84). Anime's transmedia economy is evident in its symbiotic relationship with manga, which has continued to be the "almighty" source of original material for anime, even as new media forms arise in the 21st century (Masuda 2016: 51-52). Reciprocally, anime adaptations serve the manga industry as a form of publicity for their popular titles. The historical separation of manga into demographically targeted categories such as *shōnen* (young boys), *shōjo* (young girls), and *seinen* (young adult) also transfers into the anime media mix, creating analogous gendered environments of media mix products, though adult fandom was characterized by cross-gender readership and viewership (Sasakibara 2004: 21-25; Clements 2013: 148). As Rayna Denison describes it, "chains of adaptation" run through anime and manga into "ever-more dispersed ancillary media networks" (Denison 2015: 7).

The transmedia relationship between anime and other forms is not merely one of mercenary commercialism. As one creator of the Mushi Pro period has asserted, anime, manga, and film evolved in conjunction because the creators of these respective mediums were consistently inspired by each other (Takahashi 2011: 51-54). Even within commercial parameters, the limited animation techniques of TV anime began to acquire their own intense aesthetic, characterized by a "hyperactive, hyperreal on-screen chaos" of high-speed shifts in perspective, movement, emotion, and conceptual references (Clements 2013: 153-154). Anime's "hyper" qualities and its original orientation toward children made it especially adept at depicting fantastic or science-fictional motifs. Fighting robots, monsters and ghosts, interplanetary battles, and magically endowed teenagers quickly became central images within the medium. Thomas Lamarre describes how the flattening effect of limited animation also enables the free assembly of media

“clichés...stock situations, generic locations, dependable gags, iconic characters” across the cel surface without regard for a real-world referent (Lamarre 2009: 201). Lamarre locates anime’s transmediality in this flat and distributive character, through which it integrates the codes of other media and in turn influences them. As Lamarre describes, this “animetic” image logic came to determine character design and movement across forms, impacting the structures of even anime’s ostensible predecessor, manga (Lamarre 2009: 298-299). By the end of the 1970s anime had developed a recognizable style while also experimenting with new techniques and themes to cater to a growing adult fanbase.

The genres of anime and related media discussed in this dissertation are associated with the legacy of the “otaku” phenomenon, which has indelibly influenced both anime fictions themselves and their place in the Japanese public sphere. “Otaku” – the overly formal “you” pronoun used by early fans to address each other – was used in the early 1980s to describe the young men and women who remained infatuated with manga and anime into adulthood. The loose subcultures formed by these fans began to be recognized as an “alternative pursuit of pleasure” to mainstream media consumption (Tsuji 2012a: 317-318). The term was then broadened to denote a certain kind of postmodern youth subject: an “unbalanced specialist” obsessively versed in niche forms of knowledge while inept at “regular” social and sexual relations (Miyadai 1994: 54; Galbraith *et al.* 2015: 6-8). “Otaku” also came to signify practices of spectatorship and connoisseurship that were attuned to new media technologies and the rise of information capitalism (Okada 1996: 45-49). The influential theorist Azuma Hiroki sees otaku media as the apotheosis of Japanese postmodernity, a “database” mode of cultural production in which creators draw from a non-hierarchical stock (database) of collectively recognizable anime-esque tropes to make pleasurable new combinations without regard for narrative (Azuma 2001: 64-67). In particular, female *bishōjo* (“beautiful girl”) characters came to act as sites for assembling different database elements: eye shapes, hair colors or styles, outfits or accessories, poses, spoken phrases, all of which connote certain personality traits and

fictional environments. Otaku visuality became increasingly defined by a structure of affect known as *moe* (lit. “budding”), a quasi-romantic or erotic attachment to these *bishōjo* characters (Galbraith 2009: *n.p.*). Originally only one of many otaku concerns, *moe*-based character desire rose to become a dominant force in both otaku culture and in the anime media mix business by the beginning of the 2000s (Maejima 2010: 64).

Crucial to the otaku movement was the spread of new media technologies in the 1980s, mostly important videocassette players. The home video market led to the rise of original video animation (OVA) as a site of anime creativity from the 1980s to the mid-1990s. These direct-to-video releases could cater to the small but active otaku consumer base without the strictures of television production. In addition, creators could use OVA as experimental spaces for new animation techniques and “adult” material – complex plots and social themes as well as sexual and violent content (Clements 2013: 160, 169-171). In addition, the ability to record, pause, and rewind allowed otaku fans to pick apart anime in detail, enabling both the complex compendiums of tropes that would form the otaku “database” and the fan productions and derivative works which sought to reapply them. Fan spaces arose to cater to these forms, most notably the biannual Comic Market event and the Akihabara neighborhood in Tokyo (Galbraith 2010: 214-215; Morikawa 2012: 134-139; Galbraith 2019: 25-27).

Otaku became subjects of national infamy after the 1989 arrest of child murderer Miyazaki Tsutomu, who owned a substantial collection of anime pornography (Toivonen and Imoto 2012: 13). Images of otaku as dangerous media-addled perverts led to a “moral panic” and subsequent blacklistings of otaku events (Kinsella 1998: 308-314). Interventions by creators and critics such as Okada Toshio and Ōtsuka Eiji sought to clarify the meaning of otaku, differentiate “regular” otaku from Miyazaki, and set otaku within the context of Japanese society (Okada 1996: 223-226; Kamm 2015: 60-63). Elsewhere, Saitō Tamaki’s influential psychoanalytic analysis defended otaku desire for characters and “affinity for the fictional context” as a “normal” sexuality within media-

saturated society (Saitō 2000: 33, 338-339). The otaku figure gained prominence as a problem of late modernity in Japan, giving a face to lurking questions about masculinity, sex and gender relations, social cohesion, and the role of media. Importantly, anime fictions themselves began to internalize the public discourse, not only becoming more oriented toward otaku spectatorship but also reflexively depicting their own problematic social status.

A major crux was the huge success of the series *Neon Genesis Evangelion/Shinseiki Evangerion* (Anno 1995-1996, hereafter *Eva*). *Eva* provocatively used images of teenagers piloting giant anthropomorphic vehicles against invading monsters as allegories for psychological trauma and identity formation (Figure 0.1). It deconstructed core anime tropes and innovated new ways for anime to act as an abstract metaphysical medium.³ Moreover, the detailed portrait of its neurotic, decidedly unheroic protagonist Shinji functioned as a critique of male otaku themselves (Maejima 2010: 44-48). Its complex mixture nonetheless spoke beyond otaku fans to a broad base of Japanese young people, turbocharging anime business nearly overnight (Masuda 2016: 25-27). *Eva* also played a role in a shift in the anime media mix back to television; originally running in an evening slot, the series was re-broadcast in 1997 within the newly opened *shin'ya* or “late-night” TV slots, which quickly became the main space for showcasing otaku-oriented anime with adult themes (*ibid.*). As will be discussed, this period of rapid change also saw shifts in anime’s media ecology due to the rise of digital media technologies and online platforms (*ibid.*: 178-182). *Eva*’s national success reoriented the industries of anime and related media in this critical period, setting later anime fictions on a path toward even more reflexivity and virtualization. All the fictions discussed in this dissertation emanate in some way from the “post-*Eva*” moment.

The national *Eva* phenomenon resonated with the renown of Miyazaki Hayao’s films and the worldwide popularity of the *Pokemon* franchise, which precipitated a surge in global demand for both children’s and adult anime titles (Clements 2013: 183). While

exports of anime series had been quietly carried out for decades, this sudden rush of attention to anime and related media from abroad caught the eyes of business elites and policymakers, who began to integrate the anime media mix into national economic strategy, as well as into discourses of cultural nationalism (Iwabuchi 2002: 30-35). This entailed a rehabilitation of the problematic figure of the otaku. The infamy of the 1990s gave way to a “triumphant” accommodation from the 2000s onward, as official discourse began to ratify otaku as “national cultural symbol” and “diplomatic tool” (Toivonen and Imoto 2012: 15; Galbraith *et al.* 2015: 8-10). By the 2010s anime and otaku culture had become part of government-sponsored national branding initiatives, though their sexual content and other factors cause these official efforts to periodically erupt into controversy (DeWinter 2017: 47).

2. Neoliberal Reason and Japan’s Neoliberal Turn

Discourses on otaku have generated a set of parameters for understanding anime images and their social functions which persist into the present day. The first, criticized by Lamarre, is a sociological approach that searches anime for good or bad representations of contemporary Japan, usually according to assumed categories of national and cultural identity (see Lamarre 2009: xxiii). Its philosophical counterpart problematizes anime in terms of a lack of meaning in an eternally postmodern Japan, exemplified by the lasting influence of Azuma’s formulation of the database as the “animalized” consumption of random character attributes (Azuma 2001: 100). My specific disagreements with both perspectives will hopefully become clear in the chapters. As a whole, I am concerned about what we miss by continuing to apply critical lenses based on coherent spaces of representation to media and cultural forms created after the effects of neoliberalism, globalization, and digital media had become normalized. Such lenses include the legacy of Marxist postmodernism, which is characterized by its

“analogue” literary analysis of the digitally configured “neoliberal imagination” that was beginning to structure global capitalism in the last decades of the 20th century (Abbinnett 2021: 1-2, 144-145). This dissertation aims for a more fine-grained description of anime images – and by extension, of mediated experiences in general – within the technological and social dis-organization that the spread of neoliberalism entailed.

Critiques of neoliberalism generally fall into two groups. The first focuses on neoliberalism as a global political project from the late 1970s which reconsolidated capitalist power through privatization and commodification, financialization, profitable manipulation of crises, and direction of state resources toward elite business (Harvey 2005: 160-165). Professed ideals of individual responsibility and market fundamentalism worked to hide neoliberalism’s reliance on the state as a guarantor of markets (*ibid.*: 19). The second, stemming from Michel Foucault’s lectures on liberal “governmentality,” focuses on neoliberalism as a form of rationality, not simply an ideology but a subject-forming truth regime based on individuation and invisibility. As Foucault describes it, neoliberalism universalizes the “bizarre mechanism” of modern political economy, which situates the “individual subject of interest within a totality which eludes him [*sic*]” but “nevertheless founds the rationality of his egoistic choices” (Foucault 2008: 277-278).

Building on Foucault’s work, Wendy Brown argues that as neoliberal reason and its “model of the market” permeate a society, the social subject is recast as “human capital.” Ideas and actions can only be conceived as individual “investments” within an all-consuming market (Brown 2015: 31-41). In Japan, Shibuya Nozomu characterizes neoliberalism as a false “publicness” (*kōkyōsei*), where the individual is responsible for its own welfare but always answerable to a vaguely defined “society” (*shakai*) (Shibuya 2003: 58-59). There is of course a gap between a governing rationality and one’s experience of it (Couldry 2010: 80-83). Life within the worlds created by neoliberal reason is rarely a direct sense of one’s own economization. Zygmunt Bauman’s “liquid modernity” frames neoliberal social experience as “remoteness and unreachability of

systemic structure” and an “unstructured, fluid state of the immediate setting of life-politics” (Bauman 2000: 8). Liquidity erodes collective institutions and normalizes the reductive forms of individualism which become necessary for survival within it. A correct apprehension of extant conditions only serves to reinforce alienation (Fisher 2009: 20). Neoliberal rationality is thus a kind of mental trap which reifies its own world order. As exemplified by Margaret Thatcher’s famous “no society” declaration (see Brown 2015: 100), neoliberalism works by dismantling *the social*, by which I mean a basic phenomenological sense of cohesion enabled through our interdependence as human actors (Couldry and Hepp 2016: 9-10). Neoliberal de-socialization has political consequences beyond the material damages caused by the actual policies. Brown warns that the entrenchment of economic reason within public institutions has all but erased “bare democracy” – the core conceit of collective sovereignty and the belief in people’s ability to change their institutions – from civic life (Brown 2015: 201-203).

I see this constriction of collective imagination and its disempowering effects as a key problematic for understanding media fictions within neoliberalism. As Bauman provocatively wrote during the height of global neoliberal hegemony, the task of critical thought is to help “recollectivize” the privatized worlds of life politics “so that they can acquire once more the shape of the visions of the ‘good society’” (Bauman 2000: 51). In this spirit, my dissertation will critically examine Japanese media culture as one instructive “movement” within neoliberalism’s “historical geography” (Peck 2010: 8-9, 31-34). Naturally, there is debate about the chronology of Japanese neoliberalism.⁴ However, a recognizable turning point is the mid-1990s, when the socioeconomic fallout from the 1989 Bubble crash began to affect ordinary citizens’ lives, while a series of disasters catalyzed the sense of a dysfunctional and vulnerable society (Leheny 2006: 28-30). Business and government elites capitalized on the crises to enact neoliberal structural reforms (Watanabe 2007: 312-317). Political realignments throughout the 1990s sped the process along, since neoliberal hawks could harness public anger at government

inefficiency and scandals through a language of reform (*ibid.*: 305-307). Neoliberals were also energized by the geopolitical context of the post-Cold war and globalization (Yoda 2006: 23-28). By the early 2000s, the remnants of Japan's developmentalist economy had been brought into full compliance with the global neoliberal project's prerogatives of deregulation and austerity (Nihei 2014: 297).

As numerous studies have documented, the period was characterized by a strong and widespread sense of disorientation within social and cultural life. (*e.g.* Genda 2005; Kelly and White 2006; Allison 2013). However, the so-called "lost decade" (*ushinawareta jūnen*) of the 1990s also saw social innovations by disruptive youth cultures, minorities, and burgeoning internet culture (Kotani 2017: 10-11). Media outlets regularly debated the meaning of "Japanese society," indicating that national identity was up for debate (Nihei 2017: 62-64). Against potential bifurcations, business and government elites promulgated a rhetoric of *jiko sekinin* or "self-responsibility," directing public discourse toward individualized responses while invoking state authority at key moments (Hook and Takeda 2007: 118-119). Public programs promoting "self-governance" and "ground-up" community activism worked to train citizens to accept the privatization of socioeconomic risk (Ogawa 2015: 18, 68-69). The effects of neoliberalization in Japan were like those elsewhere; through the 2000s the ethereal "economy" recovered a measure of productivity while lived socioeconomic networks progressively decomposed (Watanabe 2007: 318; Hattori 2013: 54-55). As neoliberal reason became the governing institutional logic, nationalism and neoconservatism began to dominate public culture (Kang and Yoshimi 2013: 60-62). The cultural branding initiatives and repressive politics of the second Abe administration in the 2010s can be seen as the culmination of Japan's version of the neoliberalization process, which inevitably trends toward authoritarianism (see Brown 2019: 58-59; Gallo 2021: 3).

Crucially for this dissertation, the socioeconomic shifts intertwined with the rise of new media technologies like the internet and mobile phones. This is perhaps a unique

feature of Japan's neoliberal turn. While neoliberalism in Latin America, the United States, Western Europe, and China had developed in the decades before the age of the internet, with Japan's "late-coming neoliberalism" (*kōhatsu neoriberarizumu*) these two forces hit more or less simultaneously (Nihei 2014: 318). As I will describe, Japan's neoliberal turn can be seen as a media-social "convergence" in which connections between new and old forms of media amplified the sense of crisis and helped shape subjectivities in line with neoliberal prerogatives (Jenkins 2006: 2-3). Anime fictions from the 1990s onward underwent their own convergence as new modes and platforms were integrated into otaku media. Again, *Eva* is a key example. *Eva*'s innovation was to use anime to display otaku subjectivity in a way that resonated with anxieties on the broader sociocultural level. As Lamarre theorizes, limited animation provides an "exploded view of the psyche," where thinking is spread out across image surfaces (Lamarre 2009: 182). This form of mediated thought was brought to new heights in *Eva*, through which director Anno channeled his personal depression and his frustration with what he saw as the escapist tendencies of male otaku. Its version of animetic imagination – of alienated characters arrested by flows of abstruse imagery – became part of the larger repertoire of otaku media and post-millennial culture, mixing with other "database" elements as anime-based transmedia developed in tandem with the spread of neoliberal reason, risk, precarity, and national commodification (Figure 0.2). Its success in the newly opened late-night television anime time slots prompted a new economic model for "mature" anime, while discussions about *Eva* shaped the early internet as a communicative space for dispersed and digitalized fanbases (Maejima 2010: 48-53). The links between these two convergences are crucial for understanding how the images of anime's transmedia ecology in the 21st century are bound up with Japan's neoliberal turn.

Adopting Lamarre's (2009: xi) notion that "anime thinks technology," I claim that anime fictions in this period also "think neoliberalism" as a contemporary condition. This is not the same as representing neoliberal conditions or espousing neoliberal values. Here

I follow the affect-based approaches of Lamarre, Steven Shaviro, Lauren Berlant, and others, which treat media in terms of their capacity to produce structures of feeling. As intimated above, neoliberalism's dissolution of socioeconomic structures into logics of privatization, risk, and fluidity entails the dissolution of broadly shared references that can structure representation. Neoliberal convergence intensifies the tendency in advanced capitalism for media representations to "actively constitute" social and economic processes by generating forms of affect (Shaviro 2010: 2-3). Contemporary fictions like those in anime are "aesthetically mediated affective responses" in their own right; they actively construct feelings, ideas, and relationships, and make them available as possibilities within the liquified social (Berlant 2011: 3). However, my perspective differs somewhat from these theorists, in that I place more value on moments when flows of media affect coalesce into moments of conscious experience that postulate subjects, worlds, and collectivities as sources of agency. That is, I am interested in affect insofar as it feeds imagination.

3. Towards a View of Mediated Imagination

Invocations of "imagination" and "imaginaries" have become staples of the humanities and social sciences, including anime studies. Unfortunately, many such treatments rely on colloquial understandings of imagination or on the assumptions of their disciplines. In some cases, "imagination" or "imaginary" is invoked simply as a substitute term for "culture," which erases the dynamism and novelty that imaginative processes entail (Koukouti and Malafouris 2020: 33). Drawing on an interdisciplinary body of work, this dissertation aims for a more comprehensive view of what it means to understand media forms in terms of imagination. The broadly cognitive concept of imagination I deploy is the one that I have found to best articulate the commonalities between the different strands of contemporary research which treat imagination as a central object.

By “cognitive,” I simply mean that imagination is best conceived as a kind of thinking, a “primitive” or core mental activity with almost innumerable variations (Kind 2016: 2).⁵ At its base, imagining is a process of making an “image” present to consciousness and, through that presentation, transforming or augmenting it (Gosetti-Ferencei 2018: 5). “Image” here is not strictly visual, but a “multimodal” situational construct based on the body’s affective receptivity and its capacity for action (Lennon 2015: 2-3, 71-72; Zittoun *et al.* 2020: 144). Imagination involves an “uncoupling” of experience from an immediate situation; however, the uncoupling is nonetheless grounded in that situation and feeds back into it (Zittoun and Gillespie 2016: 38-40). Though couched in many different terms, there is also a common understanding across disciplines that imagination is a “productive” process; it does not simply replicate extant images but generates “new syntheses and new configurations” within multiple fields of human activity (Ricœur, in Adams 2017: 4). On this general level, practical forms of imagination and fantastical or creative imagination are variations of the same basic operation (Kind and Kung 2016: 1-5). This conception departs from the Lacanian view of the Imaginary as the realm of misrecognition that compensates for the constitutive lack within the human psyche. While psychoanalytic perspectives are still valuable, this dissertation joins a growing interdisciplinary consensus that human minds and their relations with the world are less like static pathological structures and more like active and *enactive* processes (*e.g.* Orgad 2012; Lennon 2015; Varela *et al.* 2016; Lamarre 2018). Importantly, an active concept of imagination should not be equated with the assumption of a unified rational subject, as has been the case in previous cognitivist approaches to film and media (*e.g.* Currie 1995; Bordwell and Carroll 1996). Imagination, like other modes of consciousness, arises through multileveled cognitive processes that are fundamentally “open” to material, social, and media environments (see Colombetti 2013: 31, 80-81).

Contemporary theories of imagination conceive it within one or more of four

functional “sites,” each of which is bound up with media subjectivity (see Figure 0.3). The first is within embodied human experience. In classical and analytic philosophy, individual imagination is conceived as a representational “faculty” within “the mind” as a closed system (Currie 1995: 141). Imagination here is exclusively an “offline” activity (*ibid.*). Neuroscience approaches similarly describe imagination as the “formation of vivid mental images” within neural architecture (Peterson and Aaroe 2013: 275). However, recent phenomenological work based on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of embodiment has offered a more dynamic picture of individual imagination as “the affectively laden patterns” by which we experience the world and “mark our engagement” with it (Lennon 2015: 1-3). Imagination’s images are the “vehicles” that give embodied affects their form, allowing us to experience the world *as such* or *in a certain way*. Therefore, even a fantastical kind of imagining is not simply an “escape” from reality but an “experiential presentation of possibility...grounded the connections throughout the body and in interaction with the world” (Gosetti-Ferencei 2018: 27). This concept draws connections with new cognitive science and sociological perspectives. In the first place, our “perceptual openness” to affects implies the presence of complex feedback loops between the “simulated situatedness” of imagination and our actual present situation (Jansen 2013: 75-76). In the second place, the “imaginary texture” of the perceived world entails an “implicit publicness” within subjective experience, in that we perceive objects in terms of how they might be perceived by others (Lennon 2015: 52, 59).

My countable term “*a fiction*” is informed by the embodied perspective. As Jean-Marie Schaeffer has explained, analytic accounts of fiction as propositional games of “make believe” cannot explain bodily responses to fictional experiences (Schaeffer 2010: 167-168; *c.f.* Walton 1990: 51-59). In their own ways, fictions *happen to* us; this is especially true of audiovisual media but by no means exclusive to it. It has been shown that even textual narratives stimulate the construction of imaginative “mental models” of fictional experiences which tap into our spatial and sensorimotor faculties (Quinlan and

Mars 2020: 468-471). Adopting Schaeffer's terms, I see fictions as "affective constellations" enacted through shared mimetic techniques which "model" a speculative or vicarious experience of actions, events, encounters, etc. (Schaeffer 2010: 172). Similarly, Jose Medina sees fictional experiences in any form as simulated "agential perspectives" within the "enactive imagination" (Medina 2013: 33). A fiction, be it a single fictional work, a particular element within a work, or a conceit repeated in many different works, is an articulation of imaginative processes that "interact with rather than represent the world" (Hutto 2015: 68).

The second site, related to the first, is the realm of "material engagement" (Malafouris 2013: 35-38). This location has become visible through theories of "4E" (embodied, embedded, extended, enactive) cognition, as well as through James Gibson's ecological psychology, which situate cognition "outside the brain" in fields of interdependent mental processes, material objects, and physical environments (Newen *et al.* 2018: 3-7). A media object is one of innumerable "anchors" that shape and extend our thought processes within "cognitive ecologies" of material, technological, and social elements (Mithen 2000: 50; Smart *et al.* 2017: 252-253). In this perspective, even the conscious processes like imagination not only "use" external objects and structures like media forms but are at least "partially constituted by them" (Jansen 2016: 151). Imagining here becomes:

a process through which the perception of an imaginary object in our mind and the material form that exists or is produced in the world are experienced together.

It becomes imaginative praxis, an enactment of possibilities.

(Koukouti and Malafouris 2020: 43).

In this context, the difference in status between the imaginative processes within media fictions themselves and those within the people who create, consume, or talk about them starts to fade. They are mutually implicated in a process of mediated "cocreation" wherein each articulation adds its own divergences (Quinlan and Mars 2020: 466).

Following from the second, the third site of imagination consists of the intersubjective social practices and representational techniques that allow humans to develop common ideas about entities beyond immediate perception. Art, ritual, and media representations all contain their own “array of cultural strategies and devices” to make extra-sensory entities “perceivable and experienceable [*sic.*]” (Heise 2008: 67). In doing so, they also act on these entities by shaping people’s attitudes and responses to them. Techniques of imagination include pictorial and rhetorical devices which unify politicized groups into coherent imagined communities (Anderson 2006: 24; Bottici 2014: 91-95). Consequently, the site of imagination as “social fact” is important for globalization studies (Appadurai 1996: 31), as well as for national media studies which investigate media as sites for organizing a national image (Sakamoto 2020). It also features in American fan studies, where popular media are viewed as “shared vocabulary” for “creating a shared imagination and participating in a social world” (Ito 2010: 84). A view of media works’ formal qualities as *techniques of imagination* will be deployed throughout my chapters. The “media fiction” of my title – of which anime fictions are a variety – thus refers to shareable modelings of speculative experiences and situations through media techniques. As we will see, different techniques of imagination enact different views of reality and possibility within a given socioeconomic environment.⁶ This is not to say that a fiction is determined by a given genre or medium. Rather, imaginative modelings work through genre and medium to articulate resonant wholes grounded in lived human contexts. Arguably, it is precisely their imaginative function that enables fictions to be re-modeled through different media forms while retaining experiential coherence.

Finally, imagination operates as encompassing frameworks of normative ideas and images which structure feelings, identities, and expectations, thereby making large-scale collective entities possible (Gatens and Lloyd 1999: 5; Taylor 2004: 23). This is the concept of a “social imaginary:” a social space and temporal horizon that configures human encounters (Gaonkar 2002: 10). Social imaginaries are also materially instantiated

in the structures of legal and political institutions (Adams *et al.* 2015: 19).⁷ The social imaginaries concept has its roots in the work of post-Marxist thinker Cornelius Castoriadis, whose notion of “imaginary institutions” will appear throughout this dissertation. For Castoriadis, collectives are defined by a tension between “instituted society” – the materialized institutions of an extant symbolic order – and “instituting society” – the “radical imaginary” dimension of human life which endlessly produces differential images of collective existence (Castoriadis 1987: 108).⁸ An imaginary is not simply a hegemonic reality, but a dynamic field of “imaginal” contestations, which today are predominately enacted through media images and technologies (Orgad 2012: 44-47; Bottici 2014: 106-107).

A set of principles emerges from a comprehensive view of mediated imagination. First, imagination is a *transversal* process operating across and through individuals, artifacts, spaces, and collectives. Second, it is fundamentally *open and incomplete*; even seemingly stable objects (nations, laws, cultures) are being minutely reinvented as they move through different iterations within and across sites. A media fiction is an *articulation* within this ongoing process, mutually constitutive and reverberating with other articulations in individuals, material ecologies, and/or sociocultural frameworks. Third, imagination invests reality with the potential for *transformation*, allowing for a concept of agency not reliant on a critical subject. Seeing entities which are not immediately present, or seeing a present entity as otherwise, can constitute micro-acts of human autonomy. A fantasy is not an escape but the enactment of a desired state, and because imagination is fundamentally *social*, a fantasy can galvanize a desired change by making it perceivable. Finally, imagination’s social nature brings questions of *imagined collectivity* to the forefront. Though it often resembles postmodern “bricolage” or a Deleuzian “rhizome,” imagination is inexorably constructive, tracing out possibilities for mutual horizons of understanding, empathy, and collective action within flows of images (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987:6; Jameson 1991: 83).⁹ I hope to show how anime

fictions are defined by a deep investment in the social work of mediated imagination.

4. Anime as Imagination

The concept of imagination described above orients my relationship to previous research. Most importantly, it signals my point of divergence with Thomas Lamarre, whose media theory of anime has been a huge inspiration to my project. Through his analysis of the layered construction of cel animation, Lamarre provides a material basis for examining how anime *thinks through* its moving images. As he describes it, the “de-hierarchization of the layers of the image” in anime produces a “distributive field” of “temporary or contingent frames of reference” that move across a flattened surface (Lamarre 2009: 126-127). This distributive quality allows “animetic” images to easily “unfold” across different media platforms and industrial structures, as well as to “enfold” images from diverse media within themselves. The distributive field concept wrests anime’s creative “flatness” away from culturalist views of anime as Japanese postmodernism and shows how anime techniques of imagination lend themselves to transmedia and transcultural assemblages.

Lamarre applies a Deleuze and Guattari-influenced perspective which sees anime as a techno-social “machine” of non-subjective becoming. For Lamarre, anime’s essence is its tendency to unfix stable relations into media “cascades” (Lamarre 2009: xxxiv; 2018: 115). The insights of this perspective are undeniable; there is no question that anime’s productive difference from other media forms is closely related to the unstable fluctuations of its images. However, anime and related media are just as essentially *fictions*: imaginative enactments of experiences with people, events, situations, landscapes, etc. As we will see, contemporary anime fictions’ viewing experiences and social presence are calibrated to produce affective virtual experiences that fulfill a particular social intention. These moments of coherence can be seen as instances of the

imaginative gestalt of phenomenology, where a “schema or organizing form... emerges from a creative interplay between corporeal subjects and the world...giving immediate perception an experienced depth” (Lennon 2015: 57). This includes the *moe* phenomenon described above. Critic Komori Kentarō has described *moe* as a fictionalized affective intentionality, where a desirable character activates the constant editing of a horizon by consciousness (Komori 2013: 46-47). The *moe* character is desirable insofar as it fits into a horizon of experience which affords multiple potential ideas, feelings, and actions.

Despite their status as quintessential products of communicative capitalism, post-*Eva* anime fictions consistently articulate a form of social imagination. Their “machines for generating affect” distill the core experiences and tensions of the neoliberalized world in ways that are productively different from other media (Shaviro 2010: 3). From the most fantastical and gratuitous reveries arise speculative experiences of belonging, agency, and collectivity that feed unexpectedly into debates about the nature of capitalist imaginaries in the present day. The wager of this dissertation is that within the deepening anxieties of the conditions produced by neoliberalism, there is value in elaborating the full range of possibilities within popular imaginative forms instead of reducing them to functions of established political identities on the one hand or machinic media flow on the other. I will argue that anime fictions encourage a political aesthetics of imagined collectivity, which I see as a useful counterpart to extant critical methods.

There of course have been previous treatments of anime and related media through concepts of imagination. I hope to indicate how my concept of mediated imagination goes beyond the discipline-specific assumptions of previous research. In Japanese cultural criticism, for example, “imagination” (*sōzōryoku*) is invoked in a general way to describe various creative activities or products, usually in terms of their narratives and character dynamics, or again, as a substitute term for the immaterial parts of national culture (e.g. Nakazawa *et al.* 2009). The most valuable example is Azuma’s updated version of his database theory in *The Birth of Game-like Realism/Gēmuteki riarizumu no tanjō* (2007).

Azuma describes how the database enables an “environment of imagination” (*sōzōryoku no kankyō*) for creating stories based on anime-style characters and then for treating such creations as “real” through shared social practices (Azuma 2007: 60–65). This dissertation will develop Azuma’s generalized use of the term within a detailed conception of imagination as an embodied and extended practice.

Sōzōryoku criticism has also interrogated Japanese fictions’ relationships with neoliberalism. The most famous is Uno Tsunehiro’s *The Imagination of the Aughts/Zeronendai no sōzōryoku* (2008), which compares narratives across numerous media as responses to common problems of social being in post-1990s Japan, while offering a useful critique of Azuma’s initial ideas of the database (Uno 2008: 6-11). Unfortunately, Uno’s potentially enabling idea of imagination as social thinking within fictional texts feeds into a strangely conservative aesthetics, in which all narrative fiction must provide thematic guidelines for “responsible” public communication (Uno 2008: 383). More recently, sociologist Ōsawa Masachi has applied a concept of “*subcultural imagination*” (*sabukaru no sōzōryoku*) to the global issue of capitalism realism, analyzing the degree to which popular anime resist the “calling” (*yobikake*) by “the god of capitalism” (Ōsawa 2018: 215). As with Uno, his interesting readings ultimately suffer from an exclusive focus on narrative which ignores the multilayered mediated experiences that inform both contemporary media fictions and contemporary social life.

In English, Anne Allison’s *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (2006) examines globally popular Japanese media franchises as products of imagination, first as “mass fantasies” arising from Japan’s postwar experience and later as a global “capitalist imagination” based on immersive media play (Allison 2006: 11, 26). Her analysis of the latter usefully shows how “core fantasies” develop across media iterations which enact fictional “structure[s] of an encounter” (*ibid.*: 197). However, in addition to her limiting view of imagination as a “fantasy” for escaping reality (*ibid.*: 167), her ethnological perspective treats different media forms in terms of a single Japanese

experience. My project will highlight imaginative differences within a national media culture. On the opposite end, Alistair Swale has applied a concept of imagination to examine anime as post-cinematic art, using the aesthetic theory of early 20th-century philosopher Arthur Collingwood (Swale 2015: 23-25). While perhaps valuable for certain academic circles, this treatment of imagination has little explanatory power beyond a select range of cinematic works. Grounding analysis in more recent research on imagination will better highlight the often-unintentional creativity in anime.

Susan Napier, a pioneering scholar of anime in the English-speaking world, has set a precedent for some of the ideas in this dissertation with her concept of anime as a “fantasyscape” (Napier 2005: xii). Building on comments from anime director Oshii Mamoru and the groundbreaking Japanese critic Ueno Toshiya, Napier argues that anime’s flexibility and hyperreality have given it the social role of an “alternative world” with which Japanese viewers “resist the conformity” of their own culture (*ibid.*: 25-26). She also suggests that this function is part of anime’s global appeal, since it allows space for alternative identities for people in any culture. Napier’s “fantasyscape” resonates well with Azuma’s “environment of imagination,” providing a social account of *why* people would want to treat that environment and its characters as real. Like Allison, however, Napier treats these issues mainly in national and anthropological terms. The assumption is that there is a baseline cultural experience – Japanese or otherwise – which imagination and fantasy can either reflect or resist. The theory of imagination deployed here will draw attention to the ways that “real” collectivity is itself part of a complex imaginative process which is always political.

Detailing the history of debates surrounding *bishōjo* characters and their male otaku fans, Patrick Galbraith offers a useful counter to nation-based studies of anime and otaku, highlighting the otaku phenomenon as evidence of a contested national imaginary (Galbraith 2019: 131-136). He also directly addresses the perennial suspicion of the sometimes-extreme sexualization and/or idealization of female characters in otaku media.

Galbraith elaborates how character desire is not simply objectification, but part of an urge to imagine “alternative social worlds” for intimate experiences which resist “commonsense, hegemonic” notions of reality (Galbraith 2019: 13-18). *Bishōjo* help imagine alternative forms of masculinity and intimacy, including queer-adjacent forms of desire (*ibid.* 60-64). Galbraith is mainly concerned with validating otaku practices as a form of subcultural identity within the cultural sphere of Japan. This dissertation will situate the character imagination Galbraith describes within a wider range of fictional experiences which engage with the contested imaginaries of global neoliberalism.

5. Dissertation Structure

Each chapter in this dissertation takes up a genre of anime fictions which gained salience over the past two decades, explaining its historical and media contexts and theorizing its imaginative engagement with neoliberalism. Textual selection was guided by extant discourse. I have mainly chosen fictions discussed by Japanese critics in the context of social issues in Japan, comparing their analyses with those in the English-speaking world (if any) and identifying where a focus on imagination reveals previously overlooked elements of both text and context. In many cases, this also entails highlighting works from the same field which have been dismissed or ignored by the previous discussions. Importantly, “genre” here does not have hard borders. As will be evident in some chapters, certain conceits straddle genre categories without having an agreed-upon name for themselves.¹⁰ This applies to medium as well. Though some eyebrows will likely be raised at the number of manga works in this project on “anime fictions,” I believe my selections are justified because they all emanate from the otaku phenomenon and the anime-based transmedia ecology which it engendered. Their image choices, fictional situations, and economic pathways all flow through and refer back to “anime” in one way or another. I examine the fictions through a combination of comparative visual analysis,

media-ecologies perspectives, and surrounding critical discourses. This will sometimes include comparisons between anime fictions and other forms such as cinema and live-action television, not as measuring sticks but as evidence of simultaneous activity within Japan's media culture. Where applicable, I also discuss cases where anime images operate "extra-fictionally" in public life. Though the emphasis will differ in each chapter, the overarching goal is to present anime fictions as situated within transversal processes of imagination across a broad media field, but also as imagining the social differently according to their own prerogatives.

I am interested in the capacity of mediated experience to think both *through* and *beyond* neoliberalism. Thus, my aim throughout is to locate instances where anime fictions' techniques of imagination produce *bifurcations*: moments when aesthetic and socioeconomic formations open, however briefly, onto political possibility (Berardi 2009b: 7-9). Negative views of fantasy and the imaginary as ideological obfuscation will largely be taken for granted; my view is that these points have been belabored long enough. I want to focus instead on elements which allow for visions of imagined collectivity that can potentially resonate with political projects against neoliberal rationality. However, it is necessary to identify imaginative *limits*, where a potentially productive process of imagination comes to an impasse or regresses due to its own internal logic. As we will see, the centrality of heterosexual desire and certain forms of masculinity in otaku media often becomes a fatal internal limit for these fictions as they strive to imagine newness. It is not at all my intention to pose anime fictions as a radical countercultural imaginary. Every potentially new idea they produce is partial, temporary, and too easily captured by power. In fact, it is precisely because of their partialness, their irresponsibility in social representation, and their nonetheless earnest desire to see and feel fulfilling forms of social experience that they offer a useful model for thinking the social in line with the vicissitudes of the neoliberal age and potentially beyond it. Through the case study of anime and related media in neoliberal Japan, I hope to show that a close

attention to differential flows of imagination can notice productive frictions and potential bifurcations which critical media studies have heretofore ignored.

This dissertation is divided into two parts of three chapters each. Both parts cover a roughly analogous chronological period from the turn of the millennium through the 2010s. Part I: “Logged Horizons: Character Visuality and Socioeconomic Locations” deals with genres that closely engage with the neoliberalization of Japan’s economy and its traumatic influences on social relations. Chapter One, “A Word called ‘World:’ *Sekai-kei* and the Social in Japan’s Neoliberal Convergence” discusses the controversial post-*Eva* style of fiction called *sekai-kei* (lit. “world-type”), whose tragic narratives of young lovers determining the fate of a vaguely depicted world conflict was widely discussed as a type of postmodern solipsism permeating otaku media and Japanese youth culture at large. I will argue against this longstanding view, describing the subgenre as an early crystallization of post-millennial anime fictions’ social imagination in the context of global risk society and media convergence. I will also demonstrate how *sekai-kei* enacts a form of audiovisual experience that does not quite fit into any of the major models of media subjectivity. This chapter will establish the critical and theoretical perspectives on transmedia visuality and neoliberal experience that inform the rest of the dissertation.

Chapter Two, “Working Worlds and Everyday Imaginaries: Critical Depictions and Integrative Fantasies in the Precarious 2000s,” examines a broad range of audiovisual media forms in the context of labor casualization and the domestic consequences of Japan’s neoliberal turn. Drawing on insights from the autonomist strain of Marxist theory, my comparative analysis will show how anime fictions help us theorize “critical” and “integrative” imaginative responses to neoliberal precarity. While the former is largely favored within the progressive humanities, I will show that ostensibly escapist integrative responses offer their own potentials for thinking within and beyond neoliberalism, via an analysis of slow-paced, character-oriented fictions that provide virtual experiences of working life outside a neoliberal context. Chapter Three, “‘A Place for Others:’ Mediating

Collectivity in Precarious *Isekai* Fictions and Beyond,” continues this discussion in the context of the 2010s with an analysis of the trope of *isekai* or “other-world” fictions that feature a protagonist’s sudden transportation to a fantastical realm. I will show how the *isekai* conceit acts as an imaginative modeling of the anime’s monetized transmedia ecology and the larger environmental feeling of precarity within a neoliberalized Japan. However, as in Chapter Two, these *isekai* fictions’ techniques of imagination also help to visualize forms of collectivity within these conditions, a process I see replicated within certain initiatives in the anime industry itself.

Part II: “Shock Images: Genres of Violence and their Geopolitical Fictions” examines genres that engage with international issues in the post-Cold War world and with the neoliberal-nationalist discourses that have framed Japan’s position within the globalized 21st century. Chapter Four discusses “genres of violence” as a broad concept for understanding how anime fictions’ violence is often used to visualize the multiple terrains of geopolitical space. I will examine politically themed manga and anime as functions of “otaku knowledge,” which I will characterize as a practice of imaginative engagement with mediated “landscapes of affordances” (Rietveld *et al.* 2018: 41). Through this analysis, I will suggest that anime fictions enact an agentic “global imagination” that can resist neoliberal-nationalist global imaginaries and that acts as a positive force within anime’s own globalization.

Chapter Five, “Screens, Clichés, and Revolutions: *Code Geass* and the Mediated Imagination of Change,” looks at the “*mecha*” genre of giant combat robots during the years of the Iraq War, describing how their visions of geopolitical violence engaged with a desire for large-scale change. I will focus specifically on the series *Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion/Kōdo giasu: hangyaku no rurūshu* (Taniguchi 2006-2008). As I will argue, *Code Geass* is a distinctly commercial product which offers its viewers an exhilarating fantasy of self-empowerment, but does so by effectively modelling the conditions of possibility for collective change within the media infrastructures of the mid-

2000s. In presenting its fantasy, *Code Geass* unwittingly edges toward the radical democratic “refusal of closure” (Castoriadis 1991: 21). *Code Geass* ultimately is limited by the gendered core of its imagination, but this very failure helps us determine parameters for analyzing imagined change in media fictions and in media activism.

Chapter Six, “Nationalism Digested: Imaginative Ecologies and Collective Experience in *Moe-Military* and Beyond,” discusses national images in anime fictions via an examination of “*moe-military*,” a genre of anime and related media which features cute *moe* characters operating the military weapons of modern and historical nations. In the mid-2010s, *moe-military* transmedia projects were sources of controversy because of their perceived relationship to Japanese cultural nationalism and the authoritarian politics of the second Abe administration. I argue that closer attention to *moe-military* as a fictional ecology reveals the much stranger phenomenon of “digested” national experience, in which the affects of any national, military, or imperial project can provide imaginative fulfillment. *Moe-military* fictions thus exemplify the schizophrenic forms of post-nationalism that populate the media networks of global capitalism. However, the animetic digestion of nation-ness appears in different ways throughout anime fictions, and often works toward healthier structures of collective feeling. Finally, in the conclusion I will briefly summarize the potential impact of my dissertation, then close with a more personal speculation about what the concept of mediated imagination might mean for our post-pandemic era, as both anime and the ever-tenacious neoliberal order have been showing signs of significant change.

Part I

Logged Horizons:

Character Visuality and Socioeconomic Locations

Chapter One

A Word called “World:” *Sekai-kei* and the Social in Japan’s Neoliberal Converge

To understand media images as imagination is to highlight the ever-unfinished construction of the social worlds in which they exist.¹¹ In Cornelius Castoriadis’s thought, “the social-historical is perpetual flux of self-alteration – *and* can only exist by providing itself with ‘stable’ figures by which it makes itself visible” (Castoriadis 1987: 204, italics added). As part of this perpetual flux, mediated social imagination exceeds and transmutes the stable figures of social institutions even as it seeks to visualize and establish them. This is especially relevant in the current stage of capitalism, which as Steven Shaviro and many other thinkers have indicated, is not objectively representable (Shaviro 2010: 131). Contemporary social institutions are in a constant state of crisis as they are forced to mutate to meet the globalized flow of capital. As Shaviro phrases it, this world of “divergent series” does not permit a stable vantage to apprehend and thus to represent it. As mentioned in the Introduction, such conditions give media forms a constitutive role in social experience. Contemporary film and video works do not represent socioeconomic worlds but “help to constitute them” by generating modes of affect and subjectivity that can serve as temporary “investments” within neoliberalism’s fluid environment (*ibid.*: 3-4).

It is precisely this lack of stable references that make the constructive quality of imagination worth investigating. Mediated imagination certainly disseminates neoliberal reason and its logic of de-socialization, but it also constantly alters what is given, generating new possible “stable” forms in the process. The gestalt of an experienced “world” can be seen as a basic unit in this process. Whether perceived by a flesh-and-blood human or articulated within a media fiction, moments when perceptual elements cohere into an experiential world include the imagination of multiple possible viewpoints,

and thus contain a “vital social dimension,” a “context within which we may experience intuitive connections with others” (Gosetti-Ferencei 2018: 166). Attention to mediated imagination reveals the persistence of these engaged human modes of conceiving location and relation in the absence of stable social institutions or spaces of representation. This first chapter attempts to delineate how the techniques of imagination in post-millennial anime fictions weave an “imaginary texture” of the “present and elsewhere” of perceived experience within the neoliberal context (Lennon 2015: 57).

As discussed in the introduction, the success of *Neon Genesis Evangelion/Shinseiki Evangelion* (Anno 1995-1996, hereafter *Eva*) was a turning point for anime and related media. Synthesizing and philosophizing a pivotal moment of otaku production within the apocalyptic feeling of its larger social context, the series became the model for anime’s potential. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a new space of creativity opened up as creators and producers were allowed to pursue innovative projects which might replicate *Eva*’s aesthetic feel, emotional force, and economic success (Maejima 2010: 15). The ensuing strain of “post-*Eva*” fiction became a primary site of emergence for the mediated social imagination which is the subject of this dissertation. This chapter will discuss the strand of post-*Eva* fiction known as *sekai-kei* or “world-type,” which enjoyed a controversial period of fame in the early 2000s. The term *sekai-kei* arose within early online culture to describe a new story conceit in anime, manga, and other media in which a young couple’s doomed romance is directly connected to an apocalyptic “world” conflict. *Sekai-kei*’s apparent self-centeredness was debated as an example of millennial Japan’s emotional climate and as a sign of deep changes within otaku media.

I will situate the *sekai-kei* conceit within two media-cultural “convergences,” to loosely apply Henry Jenkins’s term, occurring in Japan during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Jenkins 2006: 2-3). First, *sekai-kei* fictions are early examples of the convergence by which the established codes of anime and manga blended with new media forms into a vastly expanded and intensified “environment of imagination” for otaku media culture

(Azuma 2007: 64). Second, *sekai-kei*'s traumatized characters and melancholic narratives of world-annihilation are emblematic products of the economic and social destabilization that accompanied millennial Japan's integration into global neoliberal capitalism. The connection between *sekai-kei* and these socioeconomic forces was recognized by public intellectuals at the time, who approached the new conceit through the lens of literary postmodernism. Japanese cultural criticism since the 1980s had tended to treat popular culture as constructions of semiotic identity within a monolithic economy of signs. In consequence, the *sekai-kei* narrative of tragic teen lovers amid a cosmic conflict was posed as further evidence of the social detachment of (male) youth and the problems of identity within post-growth Japan. Through the normalization of this reading, *sekai-kei* has been doubly consigned as a transient fad of Japan's lost generation and as an indication of fundamental pathologies both in otaku media and in Japanese society as a whole. The view of *sekai-kei* as an original sin of contemporary anime still informs critical work to this day (e.g. Sudō 2016: 161-163; Watabe 2021: n.p.).

Against this characterization, I see *sekai-kei* as an early crystallization of the mediated social imagination through which anime fictions have processed the neoliberal turn. The postmodernist reading of *sekai-kei* fundamentally misunderstands both the audiovisual experience of the fictions themselves and the intensified transmedia environments which produced them. Seen in its full dimensions, *sekai-kei* is neither a transcendent escape from social responsibility nor a degeneration into self-gratifying media consumption. It is an exercise in apprehending social experience through the new transmediated, globalized, and privatized forms of visibility synthesized within Japan's burgeoning neoliberal "risk society" (see Beck 1992: 100-101). Given *sekai-kei*'s lasting influence, a reappraisal of its techniques of speculative perception has important consequences, not only for our understanding of how anime fictions have functioned within Japan's neoliberal experience, but also for the concept of *the social* – the production of coherent relations of human reciprocity – as it can be imagined through the

exigencies of media-saturated, precarious, and globalized life-worlds (see Couldry and Hepp 2016: 11 *et passim*).

Crucial here is the concept of a media environment, which Marc Steinberg defines as “both media ecology as a system and its lived experience by human subjects” (Steinberg 2012: xi). While Steinberg concentrates on the anime media mix as a particular environment of consumption, we can recognize that such environments fit within a larger “array of possible technologies, delivery systems, platforms, discourses, texts, modes of address,” as well as patterns of usage which “define a space that is increasingly mutually referential and reinforcing” (Silverstone 2007: 5). The larger media environment, which includes entertainment media, advertisements, news sources, institutional messaging, and the manifold communicative forms of the internet, is the means by which we gain access to the space beyond our immediate perception and attempt to chart our locations within it. For better or for worse, environmental networks of media allow us to see the world. But these networks threaten to overwhelm as well, dissolving meaningful representations and situated social subjects within recursive flows of stimulation. We can see this as the fundamental duality of media environments: opaque self-referencing assemblies reproducing oppressive logics of consumption on the one hand, communicative and expressive conduits for human imagination on the other.

Sekai-kei fictions instructively model this dilemma through their unique engagement with global neoliberal risk. They do not productively “represent” the conditions of their social context and therefore frustrate narrative sociological readings, including those which relegate them to symptoms of Japanese postmodernity. Like many contemporary media works, *sekai-kei* fictions are “machines for generating affect” (Shaviro 2010: 2-3). They produce pathos through virtual experiences assembled from the codes of their transmedia environment of imagination. But unlike other celebrated anime fictions of the same time period, they do not treat media environments as the beginning of technological posthumanism. *Sekai-kei*’s transmedia visuality is housed within anxious pairs of eyes

and the embodied limits of individual experience. They retain a concept of the social, not in terms of a stable modern subject, but in terms of a fluctuating interplay between fictional horizons and the ordinary affects of the everyday. These dynamics continue to influence subsequent fictions in both obvious and subtle ways. A recuperation of *sekai-kei* therefore paves the way for uncovering a different form of social thinking which exists throughout anime-based transmedia.

1. *Sekai-kei* and Neoliberal Convergence

A “neoliberal turn” – a process of rendering a national economy compliant with the deregulated global market – involves the deconstruction of social collectivity on both institutional and experienced levels. As Wendy Brown’s analysis of neoliberalization in public institutions demonstrates, the dismantling of social democracy by neoliberal *policies* is only possible through the spread of neoliberal *reason*, which replaces the structuring concept of a mutual “society” with that of individual “responsibilized citizens” operating “in contexts replete with risk, contingency, and potential violent changes” (Brown 2015: 84). As a case in point, Japan’s neoliberal turn during the late 1990s and early 2000s put an end to Japan’s postwar self-image as a uniquely stable society and exposed its population into the globalized insecurities of the new millennium (Nihei 2014: 268-270). Yoshimi Shun’ya summarizes the climate of the post-Bubble recession as “a universally depressive mood across all society,” with phrases like ‘failure,’ ‘crisis,’ and ‘collapse’ repeated throughout the media,” with neoliberal reforms “enacting historic structural change in the background” (Yoshimi 2009: 169). The post-Bubble hiring freeze and the large-scale casualization of the labor force during the second half of the 1990s created new divisions along gender, age, and class lines (Ueno 2013: 25–27), while national crises like the Kobe earthquake and the Aum Shinrikyō cult’s sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway appeared to expose a disintegrating public sphere. News coverage of

violent youth crimes fed into an image of an urban landscape replete with incomprehensible violence (Ivy 2006: 204-205; Kotani 2017: 9-10). National destabilization was compounded by the loss of Japan's secure geopolitical position due to the end of the Cold War and the rise of other East Asian economies, accompanied by a public re-interrogation of Japan's colonial legacy in Asia (Yoshimi 2009: 223–225). Increasingly atomized by the neoliberal discourse of “self-responsibility” (*jiko sekinin*) that was repeated through numerous government mouthpieces, Japanese citizens were forced to “reorganize their everyday lives, as with Alice in the looking-glass world,” amid the chaotic environments of post-Cold War geopolitics and economic globalization (Hook and Takeda 2007: 122–123).

The insecurities birthed by Japan's neoliberal turn were intimately bound up with the rise of new media technologies and their integration into daily life. The internalization of global risk, for example, was accelerated by the expansion of international visibility through increased media resources, including the expansion of Japan's television news networks through cable and satellite, and well as the advent of the internet in the late 1990s (see Fujitake 2005: 76-77, 278-280; Hagiwara 2012:14-17). Drawing on Ulrich Beck's “risk society” concept, Fukuda Mitsuru has identified an increase in “risk communication” in Japan during the period. “Risk consciousness” grew throughout the 1990s in feedback loops with increased media coverage of the domestic and international calamities described above, weaving a simultaneously globalized and privatized sense of risk into daily life (Fukuda 2010: 51–52). In addition, the uneven penetration of the internet throughout the “nighttime region” of private consumption generated the image of a reclusive and “post-social” (*datsushakaiteki*) space threatening the “daytime region” of public life (Hamano 2014: 440–444).

Japan's neoliberal turn thus constituted a kind of large-scale media “convergence,” a cultural shift resulting from new possibilities generated by interactions between old and new media platforms (Jenkins 2006: 1-3). While Jenkins' original formulation celebrates

convergence as a new type of public culture (*ibid.*: 177-178), the rise of risk consciousness reveals a darker form. In his recent work on media ecologies, Thomas Lamarre argues that the intersection of neoliberalism and media technology form a particular kind of “attention-reason” complex (Lamarre 2018: 185). In the context of this chapter, the separate experiences of job casualization, market globalization, geopolitical insecurity, and social atomization were interwoven and amplified through their visibility within expanded media networks, inducing new types of anxious viewing and communication, normalizing feelings of distrust, and ultimately producing forms of subjectivity conducive to the new regime of globalized and privatized risk. *Sekai-kei* fictions arise out of this techno-social convergence of neoliberal insecurity.

Originating on the website “Prunie Bookmark” in late 2002, the term “*sekai-kei*” or “world-type” was invoked to describe a new story conceit in which the budding romance between an ordinary boy and a mysterious girl is directly implicated in a massive “world” conflict, the sociopolitical specifics of which are left unknown (Maejima 2010: 27). Lacking the detailed world-building of other science-fictional works, *sekai-kei*’s plot events take place either in the confines of school and neighborhood routines or on apocalyptic battlefields. Azuma Hiroki characterizes this dynamic as “small-scale relations...directly connected to large-scale drama...without any practical intermediary institutions” (Azuma 2007: 96–97). The supposed absence of “mid-level” social relations like economics or politics, combined with melodramatic tones and immature characters, led to a conception of *sekai-kei* as a male fantasy wherein the virginal heroine’s affections validate the unremarkable male protagonist’s existence. Azuma himself interpreted *sekai-kei* in line with his theories of otaku media’s postmodern “database consumption,” discussed in detail below. Azuma poses *sekai-kei* as a form of wish-fulfillment that conflates the everyday with the transcendental. (*ibid.*).

In contrast, novelist Kasai Kiyoshi, one of the most active exponents of *sekai-kei* as a literary and cultural form, emphasizes its sense of social anxiety. As Kasai notes, *sekai-*

kei texts give the pervasive image of a “society in ruins” and a “scattered disorderly space of representation” (Kasai 2009: 22). The three recognized core *sekai-kei* fictions: Takahashi Shin’s manga *She, the Ultimate Weapon/ Saishū heiki kanojo* (2000-2001, hereafter *Saikano*), Akiyama Mizuhito’s novel *Iriya’s Sky, Summer of the UFOs/Iriya no sora, UFO no natsu* (2001-2003, hereafter *Iriya*), and Shinkai Makoto’s self-produced anime *Voices of a Distant Star/Hoshi no koe* (2002), certainly support his reading. Their similar narratives depict the female lead forced to fight in a brutal war while the male lead impotently looks on. In *Iriya*, the romance between Naoyuki and UFO-pilot Kana, including her eventual self-sacrifice, is revealed to have been orchestrated by Kana’s military supervisors in order to motivate her to continue fighting. *Saikano*’s female lead Chise is altered by the Japanese Self-Defense Force into a biological weapon whose evolving fighting capacity gradually warps her into a monstrous godlike form. Finally, in *Voices of a Distant Star*, classmates Nobu and Mikako are forced to communicate across endless gulfs of space when Mikako is drafted into an intergalactic mission against a hostile alien species. The minimal social worlds in which their narratives take place engender a sense of isolation from empowering networks of social action, with brief moments hinting of violent and conspiratorial global forces acting on the bodies and minds of the young lovers.

Although *sekai-kei* fiction is saturated with the atomized insecurity of its sociocultural context, it does not quite engage with the social conditions themselves. Issues like the abandonment of youth workers or Japan’s expanded military participation hover in the background but remain unfocused. In one scene in the *Saikano* manga, an old soldier admonishes a new recruit shocked at a pile of bodies, “Don’t say you didn’t know. You’re a culprit too” (Takahashi 2001: Vol. 4, 135). The interchange conceivably nods to the legacy of Japanese war crimes, which was being interrogated in the years preceding *Saikano*’s publication. Likewise, in a tense scene from *Iriya*’s original video anime (OVA) adaptation (Itō 2005), Naoyuki admonishes one of Kana’s supervisors for

forcing Kana into “a fight you adults started,” perhaps a veiled jab at the older generation of business leaders for their forsaking of young workers after the Bubble crash (Genda 2005: 43). The indistinct nature of these representations disallows any pretensions to materialist critique, and their anecdotal location within their stories prevents them from contributing to an overarching thematic message. These fleeting perceptions are affective rather than representative; they are enacted moments of shock or angry outbursts that flail at some ugly and dimly understood social reality. This lack of referentiality contributed to a view of *sekai-kei* as a “disappearance of the social region” (*shakai ryōiki no shōshitsu*, Kasai 2008: 52-53). This was amenable to public intellectual discourses at the time, which could fit *sekai-kei* into running commentaries on Japanese postmodernity.

Sekai-kei gained notoriety beyond the online world through the efforts of a network of novelists, literary critics, and freelance writers whose ideas are sometimes classified as the “thought of the aughts” (*zeronendai no shisō*, see Steinberg 2014: 289). Since many of them were associated with Azuma, they usually approached *sekai-kei* through his version of postmodernism. Like *Eva* before it, *sekai-kei* was seen to depict the anxiety of identity in a society stripped of its grand narratives, where longing for a personalized transcendence is conflated with one’s own sexual desire (Satō 2009: 136-138). This reading stems from Azuma’s formulation of otaku media as “animalized” (*dōbutsuka shita*) postmodern consumption, discussed below, as well as from the influence of the New Academism mode of public intellectualism, which performatively discussed culture in terms of semiotic disaffection (see Azuma 2001: 125-135; Zahlten 2017a: 200-206). The narrative-less society explicated in these critiques is inevitably a nationalized one, with “Japan” as an eternal space of postmodern solipsism (see Yoda 2006: 34-35).

Within the context of millennial Japan, *sekai-kei* was far from unique in depicting social alienation, and critics could easily draw connections between *sekai-kei* and other types of fiction. Kasai links *sekai-kei* with new genres of detective fiction (Kasai 2008: 17-20 *et passim*), while Watanabe Daisuke locates *sekai-kei*-like themes in famous works

of millennial cinema. Watanabe focuses on what he calls *jun'ai* or “pure love” films, most emblematically Yukisada Isao’s *Crying Out Love in the Center of the World/Sekai wo chūshin ni ai o sakebu* (2004), whose minimal settings and memories of daily life (*nichijō*) are colored by the transcendental (*hinichijō*, lit. “not everyday”) sense of loss at a lover’s death (Watanabe 2009: 348-349). Other connections were available in the numerous films expressing what was seen as the disillusioned ethos of Japanese youth, which is encapsulated in sociologist Miyadai Shinji’s concept of *owari naki nichijō* or “the endless everyday” (Miyadai 1998: 88-91). Iwai Shunji’s *All about Lily Chou Chou/Rirī shushu no subete* (2001), Shiota Akihiro’s *Harmful Insect/Gaichū* (2002), and even *Eva* director Anno Hideaki’s experimental live-action feature *Love and Pop/Rabu ando poppu* (1998) – based on a novel by Murakami Ryū, one of the architects of cool 1990s ennui – similarly utilize creative framing and stylized editing to fashionably depict amoral youth protagonists aimlessly wandering through repeating locations and isolated from their “proper” social roles. It is understandable that the perceived absence of a social region in *sekai-kei* would be seen as part of this minimalized national horizon by contemporary commentators. However, this view ignores their status as *transmedia* fictions arising from and engaging with an intensifying media environment.

2. *Sekai-kei* and the Transmedia Environment of Imagination

Uno Tsunehiro, *sekai-kei*’s most vocal detractor, portrays the conceit as a devolved copy of *Eva*’s introverted psychosexual dynamics. As described in the introduction, Uno’s *The Imagination of the Aughts/Zeronendai no sōzōryoku* (2008) evaluates fictional texts via a narrative-based concept of imagination. For Uno, *Eva* and *sekai-kei* react to the collapse of collective meaning in post-Bubble Japan with a “reclusive psychologism” (*hikikomori shinrishugi*) in which the male subject “retreats inward in search of validation for their own self-image” through the divinely empowered female character loving them

“as they are” (Uno 2008: 41). Uno lambasts its inactive self-searching as the “old imagination” of the 1990s, which he claims gives way in the 2000s to a “new imagination” of neoliberal narratives of “decisionism” (*ketsudanshugi*) featuring immoral but active subjects in survival situations. In addition to its limiting focus on narrative, however, Uno’s critique loses credibility in view of what he poses as the positive alternative to *sekai-kei*.

Uno’s social outlook is basically a re-application of Miyadai’s Shinji’s theories of “dis-communication,” which were highly influential at the time. Miyadai’s overarching thesis was that the rise of inscrutable youth cultures and idiosyncratic forms of communication were symptoms of deepening social fragmentation in postmodern Japan that needed to be pragmatically (rather than ideologically) addressed (Miyadai 1994: 51).¹² Uno’s use of this already normative concept is colored by his own peculiar moralism. *Sekai-kei* and “*moe* romanticism” are bad because they form isolated communities which cannot communicate with other ones. (He regularly uses Miyadai’s phrase *shima uchū* or “microcosm.”) Otaku are on par with “easy left-right ideologies” and other “weak people who cannot bear the extreme fluidity” of post-Bubble Japan. They will therefore inhibit any reunification of society (Uno 2008:152-54). Instead, Uno praises texts which portray a reasonable and active main character who moves across postmodern micro-communities as a *mobairuteki jitsuzon* or “mobile true self” (*ibid.*: 370). Consciously or not, Uno internalizes the Japanese version of communitarian discourse discussed by Shibuya Nozomu, which has provided government and business with a cover for authoritarian labor and welfare policies (Shibuya 2003: 51). His “mobile true self” is nothing if not “human capital,” a neoliberal and neo-national subject with an individual mandate to accommodate themselves to the new Japan (see Brown 2015: 34-40). Uno’s naturalization of neoliberal risk society makes his criticism of *sekai-kei* ring hollow.

Kasai criticizes Uno’s arbitrary distinction between psychologism and decisionism,

showing how *sekai-kei* influences later politically oriented fictions like the supernatural crime manga *Death Note* (Ōba and Obata 2003-2006) and the geopolitical anime *Code Geass* (Taniguchi 2006-2008), discussed in Chapter Five. Kasai clarifies that *sekai-kei*'s absent "social region" is not sociality itself, but the enabling institutions which would allow for an agentic social subject. Drawing on the political philosophy of Carl Schmidt and Giorgio Agamben, Kasai argues that *sekai-kei* represents nothing less than the collapse of the "social contract" of postwar civil society into the neoliberal "state of exception" (*reigai jōtai*). In the state of exception, legally mediated subjectivity decomposes, leaving a naked subject forced to make arbitrary decisions (Kasai 2009: 30–33). For Kasai, ennui and nihilism are two complimentary *sekai-kei*-esque reactions to the failure of the postwar social order. However, Kasai's political reading falls into same rut as Uno's by exclusively focusing on the role of the protagonist within the narrative, resulting in a vague existential meditation on the difficulties of moral action in a world which lacks a societal framework. Moreover, his recognition of the neoliberal state of exception is subsumed into a preoccupying resentment for what he perceives as the hypocrisy of postwar pacifism, once again limiting his analysis to the default horizon of Japan (*ibid.*: 55-60).

Uno's and Kasai's readings correctly link *sekai-kei* to the background of Japan's neoliberal turn. However, the dearth of social specifics within *sekai-kei* texts forecloses the possibility of a detailed coordination with material conditions. Consequently, their search for social relevance leads to unsatisfying descriptions of *sekai-kei* in terms of bodiless subjects in late modernity. Furthermore, their focus on narrative and character dynamics obscures the wealth of sensory experience offered by *sekai-kei* fictions' combination of literary and visual techniques of imagination. The omission is especially disappointing because the very possibility of their discussing *sekai-kei* as a unified body of fiction emanates from a media-cultural convergence in which they themselves were involved: the integration of new modes of otaku expression into an intensified transmedia

environment.

In *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals/Dōbutsuka suru posutomodan* (2001, title translation 2009), Azuma theorizes that otaku consumption shifted in the 1990s from “narrative consumption” (*monogatari shōhi*), a term coined by Ōtsuka Eiji (2001), to “database consumption” (*dētabēsu shōhi*). In narrative consumption, anime producers develop extensive fictional worlds across different textual iterations, which fans consume in pieces to amass information about the overarching narratives (Ōtsuka 2010: 107-108). The iconic example is the *Mobile Suit Gundam/Kidō Senshi Gandamu* franchise, which features numerous anime, manga, and novels that tell different stories set within the same future war. Fans not only consume these products but also share information with each other and create their own derivative works based on the world settings, mixing them with those of other franchises. Through such practices a vast and interconnected stock or “database” of images, tropes, and settings becomes collectively available to producer and consumer alike. Within it, characters become more important than worlds or narratives, since they can be freely reapplied to new iterations. Azuma’s theory claims that by the end of the 1990s, all the organizing forms between these elements had broken down. There are now no more narratives or worlds, only the grand “non-narrative” of the database (Azuma 2001: 61-64). In the new database consumption, non-differentiated consumer/producers assemble characters and story tropes from an anonymous stock of pleasurable elements (*ibid*: 76-79). Without any narrative hierarchy, users comb the database, not for meaning nor even whole characters but simply for any attribute that provides a pleasurable stimulus, as a means of confirming their existence “as a pure spectator” (*ibid*: 100).

Azuma argues that the digitalized form of otaku culture is an “animalized” form of postmodern subjectivity, a mode of desiring consumption that has no psychological structure of desire (Azuma 2001:135). The main proofs he offers are the story-based *bishōjo gēmu* or “beautiful girl video games” which grew in popularity throughout the

1990s. These are story-based video games in which the user chooses narrative pathways to unlock different endings, usually but not always involving sexual or intimate relationships with the different female characters.¹³ Azuma poses the dissociative logic of their branching plotlines and their transposable visual designs as evidence of the non-teleological nature of otaku database consumption (*ibid.*: 123-125). However, the same period saw the ascension of anime-based “light novels” (*raito noberu*) to a prominent role in otaku media (Enomoto 2008: 38-45). These are simply written print narratives which playfully invoke the generic tropes and character types of anime and manga and also contain anime-like illustrations (*ibid.*: 85-93; Steinberg 2014: 293). Satomi Saito (2015) has detailed the central role played by light novels in generating original content for contemporary multimedia franchises since the early 2000s. Focusing on the influential *Suzumiya Haruhi* franchise, Saito explains how its “character movement across media” is made possible through a “curious primacy of narrative” in Tanigawa Nagaru’s light novel *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya/Suzumiya Haruhi no yūutsu* (2003). Saito explains that the *Haruhi* series “reflexively mimics the way consumers explore multiple story worlds” and therefore provides a model for a kind of production and consumption that freely traverses the boundaries between narrative, audiovisual, and game forms (Saito 2015: 156-157).

Light novel fiction is made possible by collective recognition of common motifs, characterizations, and narrative expectations which amateur creators can creatively reassemble. Saito recognizes this shared stock as the “the database of endless derivative simulacra that does not belong to a single franchise but is open to multilevel user participation” and is “akin to a collaborative storytelling” (Saito 2015: 159-160). In fact, the huge expansion of light novels in the 2000s led Azuma to update his database theory to account for the enduring role of narrative in otaku media. In *The Birth of Game-like Realism/Gēmuteki riarizumu no tanjō* (2007), Azuma asserts that the database enables an “environment of imagination” (*sōzōryoku no kankyō*) for creating stories based on the

dominance of anime-style characters (Azuma 2007: 61-64). Storytelling within this environment of imagination utilizes anime tropes as a base of understanding for transmitting characters' identities and experiences, producing a realism which takes the transmedia database as its referent (Steinberg 2014: 294-296). New and old media forms converged in the late 1990s, stimulated by new platforms and expressive modes and by an ongoing discussion of these changes into which *sekai-kei* figured heavily.

Maejima Satoshi's detailed history of *sekai-kei* situates it within the shift in viewing patterns resulting from *Eva*'s paradigm-shifting success. The popular reception of *Eva*'s psychological angst-ridden worldview among young adults catalyzed an increased demand for self-reflexive narratives over the older narrative consumption of detailed consumable worlds. According to Maejima, *Eva* shifted the nature of anime fictions from "media for otaku" to "literature about otaku" (Maejima 2010: 44). As the paradigmatic "post-*Eva*" fiction, *sekai-kei* became the object of controversy regarding the changing meaning of "otaku culture" taken as a whole. Maejima goes so far as to claim that the "center of otaku culture in the early 2000s was not image but text" (Maejima 2010: 58). This is certainly an exaggeration, not least because both light novels and *bishōjo* games centrally rely on images to move their narratives forward. It would be more accurate to say that the rise of these forms added a literary element – first-person reflexive narrative voice from light novels – and a "game-like" element – spatial unfolding and branching plotlines from *bishōjo* games – to the visual-chronological forms of anime and manga (see Bedir 2020). These combinations also enabled new character types, world-settings, and plot devices which intermingled with established ones to create an exponentially complex database of expression. One of the more interesting critical artifacts from this time is Satō Shin's "Bishōjo Game Perfect Map" (in Azuma 2004: 5-6). Satō's "map" is a graphic visualization of cultural practice from the early 1990s through 2004, organized according to the central categories of "literary imagination" and "narrative consumption." (Figure 1.1). Whether or not one agrees with its specifics, Satō's map beautifully

visualizes transmedia as an integrated and collectively shared imaginative environment.

A common environment makes possible the sharing of images and issues across media boundaries, and single texts can become sites of expansive intermediation anchored by anime-like character images. Stevie Suan has usefully encapsulated the practice through his notion of the “anime-esque,” where individual works “twist and contort their respective mediums to perform similar anime-esque elements and thus produce the image of inter-relatable media” (Suan 2018a: 208). As Suan describes, *sekai-kei* clearly exhibits this internal transmediation, and not merely in the obvious clue that the expressive core of *sekai-kei* is comprised of texts from three different media. The reading of *sekai-kei* as a narrative representation of postmodern discontent misses the intense transmedia visuality in even the printed forms. For example, Volume 1 of the *Iriya* novel replaces a table of contents with illustrated mock-ups of movie posters which situate the chapters according to cinematic genres of “youth love story,” “suspense,” and “spy drama” while grouping the characters as “actors” according to their role within the chapter. In the prose itself, Naoyuki’s internal monologue is regularly interspersed with real-time descriptions of his field of vision as he encounters dramatic events in the story. The 2005 original video animation (OVA) actualizes the novel’s latent visuality. Conversely, Takahashi’s original *Saikano* manga is superlatively narrative; the male lead Shūji’s painful self-examinations often span several pages of text set on blank panels. These moments give way to a versatility of manga styles: romantic close-ups composed of sensual lines reminiscent of *shōjo* manga, detailed bio-machinery and body horror, and comedic moments in the bubbly style of gag manga. The anime version mimics these forms while capitalizing on movement and sound to emphasize the physicality inherent in the manga’s themes of intimacy and trauma. Within a single *sekai-kei* fiction, one gets a sense of an encounter with the entirety of the intensified otaku media ecology at the turn of the millennium.

Yet Maejima is correct in characterizing *sekai-kei* as essentially bildungsroman-style narratives of self-consciousness. The vast array of science-fictional tropes all serve this impetus. For example, in *Iriya*, Naoyuki daydreams about the newly matriculated Kana:

There's no doubt about it; that girl is an alien....It's the same in all the books you read...They've put agents in countless places in human society disguised as regular people....Definitely. This girl called Iriya is one of those agents, in charge of junior high schools.

I didn't remember anything about class. (Akiyama 2001: 80-81)

The novel is full of such hackneyed flights of imagination tethered to Naoyuki's humdrum experience of adolescence. The “fantastical gadgets” of anime, manga, and science fiction are evoked not for themselves, but as tools to situate the vicissitudes of youth subjectivity in such a way that the reader/viewer gains an awareness of their relation to the whole of the integrated environment (Maejima 2010: 110, 151). Azuma describes this style of narration as “half-clear” (*hantōmei*), meaning that it seeks to depict social reality but uses the conventions of anime-related media to do so (Azuma 2007: 96-101). *Sekai-kei* fictions do not function as “clear” windows to Japan's neoliberal turn. Yet neither are they an opaque “meta-commentary format for the participatory culture” as Saito says of the *Haruhi* series (Saito 2015: 157). Their “half-clear” approach orients them toward the social – here, a coming-of-age story in the midst of societal collapse – through a reflexive invocation of their transmedia environment of imagination. Crucially, *sekai-kei* fictions extend this approach to the entirety of Japan's neoliberal convergence. As the remainder of this chapter will demonstrate, *sekai-kei* reproduces an experience of the world within the totalized media environment through which the atomized subject is forced to process the dislocating conditions of globalized neoliberal risk. *Sekai-kei* perceives that in the 21st century, globalization, destabilization, and mediation form a

mutually constitutive environment, a network that almost – but not quite – obliterates the social.

3. *Sekai-kei* and the Transmedia Horizon

According to Uno, the “imagination of the aughts” (*zeronendai no sōzōryoku*, Uno 2008) is a uniform narrative. *Sekai-kei* produces just another version of every text in millennial Japan: a bodiless linguistic subject detachedly gazing at a nationally coded metaphysical totality. Even Azuma’s useful description of the “environment of imagination” is framed within cumbersome historical blocks of premodern religious iconography, modern naturalism, and postmodern database (Azuma 2007: 93-95). Such limitations indicate the value of conceptualizing imagination in experiential rather than semiotic terms. Understanding a media fiction as an “enacted simulation” of a perceived world through imagination can highlight the different textures and methods of its articulations (Jansen 2010: 149-150). This in turn allows for a more nuanced understanding of its potential contribution to social thinking. As visual transmedia, *sekai-kei* fictions contain an earnest and embodied intention toward visualizing social experience that directly engages with the developing neoliberal convergence. Simultaneously evoking social climate and transmedia networks, *sekai-kei*’s imaginative techniques generate a simulation of “what it feels like to live in the 21st century,” engulfed within a globalized media environment. (Shaviro 2010: 2).

Figures 1.2 and 1.3 show two scenes from *Saikano* which assemble two very different mediated visualities. In Figure 1.2, Shūji and his mother watch footage of the war (Takahashi 2001: Vol. 3, 206-207). Their figures are repeated inside sparse white backgrounds with the television image as the focus, while Shūji’s narration remarks how the broadcast contains “no voiceover or caption, just the image of war.” This is the

vulnerability in *sekai-kei* which Kasai notices, a moment of encounter with grand and terrible events encroaching on your everyday existence via the access points made available by media networks. The spread culminates with the close-up of Shūji crying, combining the war image with its affective response framed inside the image of a character witnessing it. Figure 1.3 shows an analogous yet radically different mediated vision through the eyes of *Saikano*'s "ultimate weapon" Chise, whose biotechnical systems have begun to automatically access global satellites to spy on Shūji (Takahashi 2001: Vol. 3, 120-121). Tightly packed panels crowd the page with tactical maps, a picture of the globe from space, and overlapping lines of code. The images close in around her, culminating in the same close-up, this time a moment of moral crisis as she attempts to reject what she sees. Here the triangulation of mediated visibility, affective response, and viewing subject are joined to an excess of information showing Chise more than is ethically justifiable. These scenes exemplify how *sekai-kei*'s images of intimate trauma and global chaos are enacted through shifting scales of mediated perception which evoke their destabilized social location.

In *sekai-kei*, we something rather different than the technological dis-embodiment which is often associated with the anime and related media of this period. Here it is helpful to compare *sekai-kei* to another post-*Eva* anime that explicitly connects millennial society to media intensification: the anime series *Serial Experiments Lain/Shiriaru ekusuperimentsu Rein* (Nakamura 1998, hereafter *Lain*). As Lamarre demonstrates in *The Anime Machine* (2009), anime is centrally concerned with technological conditions. Accordingly, technological embodiment and mediated society have been abiding themes in anime fictions, especially from the 1980s onward. While Oshii Mamoru's cinematic anime *Ghost in the Shell/Kōkaku Kidōtai* (1995) remains a favorite of western academics, Lamarre shows that the layering methods of image composition in limited animation make television anime uniquely adept at depicting "a series of affective responses" to mediated flows of images which dissolve the subject into "a series of little subjective

nodes” (Lamarre 2009: 106). *Lain* tells the story of the titular teenager Lain as she becomes involved in the world of “The Wired,” a fictionalized internet, eventually learning that she is actually a digital entity created to achieve a scientist’s plan to establish a disembodied network of human minds. *Lain*’s world is populated with lonely youth dealing with problems in isolation from adult society, with the Wired as a space of posthuman possibility steadily penetrating their lives. The anime’s hallucinogenic aesthetic works to visualize the strangeness of the new communication arising in the young internet, implicating its viewers as participants in the new transmedia subjectivity (Wada-Marciano 2010: 250-252). As the series progresses, Lain dissolves into and expands throughout the Wired, ultimately becoming a kind of distorted networked goddess. *Lain* expertly uses limited animation to generate an open media affect in which bodily integrity disintegrates into flows of elements across borders, dissecting human figures and backgrounds into geometric patterns and hallucinogenic images (Figure 1.4).¹⁴ In contrast, the *Saikano* scenes above are distinctly embodied. Affective moments are always rendered through a triangulation of subject, vision, and pre-emotional reaction. In *sekai-kei* there is always a pair of eyes, attached to a limited body and a local context, deeply if also futilely invested in constructing of some order of meaningful social relationships.

Sekai-kei stands at the crux of the duality of media systems mentioned in the introduction, balancing two different visions of how media environments affect human life in the age of globalization. For the purposes of this chapter, we can roughly categorize these as the *control* and *interactionist* perspectives. Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the “control society” elaborates the ways in which de-centered and digitalized functions of advanced capitalism break apart old forms of authority and selfhood, dissolving subjectivity into flows of information governed by the movements of capital (see Deleuze 1995: 178-181). From this perspective, environmentalization of media entails the subsumption of even the most intimate spheres of human life into post-Fordist

consumption networks, be they the brand-worlds of the anime media mix (Steinberg 2012: 188-193) or Hollywood's post-cinematic media sphere (Shaviro 2010: 67). In hardline versions, media dooms subjectivity to model the logic of capital through the production of "cinematic" environments (Beller 2006: 71, 256) or the false participation of "communicative capitalism" (Dean 2009: 23-25). Contrarily, in the interactionist model of liberal social theory and globalization studies, media environments enable subjects to imagine a global web of relations around their local existence. As Roger Silverstone describes it, "the media are becoming environmental, but not in the Baudrillardian sense of the media as generating a distinct sphere...more a sense of the media as tightly and dialectically intertwined with the everyday" (Silverstone 2007: 5). Silverstone's "everyday" means to preserve not only face-to-face social relations but the entire potential space of human encounters. Media representations enable the extension of these encounters toward large-scale social life by providing "symbolic resources for individual and collective imaginations" as Shani Orgad phrases it, allowing situated subjects to construct broader narratives around the locus of the self (Orgad 2012: 157-158). However, they also act as conduits through which the knowledge of global dislocation enters local contexts (Tomlinson 1999: 9).

Both paradigms seem to appear in *sekai-kei*'s endlessly telescoping and overdetermined yet blocked and fragmented gaze. As discussed, the social crises of the 1990s and early 2000s were processed and amplified through consumption of continuously publicized media spectacles, resulting in a widespread risk consciousness (Fukuda 2010: 90). Enabled through expanded media access, the descent into neoliberal risk made visible a new network of dangers and responsibilities. *Sekai-kei* fictions construct series of events which crystallize the feelings of dislocation within this simultaneously isolated and exposed environment.¹⁵ Their movements reproduce the modulations of the control society, yet still hold on to the promise of media as a field of

encounter in “a world that is by definition shared” and “guaranteed by the presence of others in a space of appearance” (Silverstone 2007: 32).

Sekai-kei's fluctuations of sensory experience are enacted through numerous media forms: satellites, televisions, hand-written diaries, CG renderings. Both the male and female characters act as viewing subjects, providing different scales of visuality with their own problems of intimacy and connection. *Voices of Distant Star*'s Mikako is the focal point for the anime's grandiose scenes of space travel and alien landscapes. However, outside of battle scenes she is usually shown wistfully holding her cell phone inside in the transparent cockpit of her fighting robot, framed against her marvelous surroundings yet isolated from them by screen-like glass augmented with data (Figure 1.5). Criticizing the lack of science-fictional rigor here would be a misrecognition of the images' goal: the vicarious experience of a subject with technologically enabled cosmic vision who is at the same time alone and vulnerable. *Saikano* associates its expansive moments with feelings of guilt and fear directed toward an undisclosed other. After she destroys a city, Chise's image is set against the annihilated landscape as she undergoes contradictory moments of hysterical breakdown, first pleading “Kill me! I don't want to be like this anymore!” then screaming “No! I don't want to die! I know I've killed many people but I want to live!” Building toward their different thematic goals, the female viewpoints in *Voices of Distant Star* and *Saikano* enact a fearful mediated global vision that overpowers the emotional intelligence of the subject without quite destroying the moral centrality of its embodied location and its intentionality toward the social.

In contrast, the vantage points of male characters tend to be cramped and paranoid. The young soldier's reaction in *Saikano* and Naoyuki's confrontation with the military supervisor in *Iriya* exemplify this limited and context-poor vision which is nonetheless aware of its own engulfment within the disordered and violent global space. Mediation penetrates experience down to the hormones; the lovers' sexuality is scrutinized and even facilitated through surveillance and communication networks. In one scene from *Saikano*

Shūji moves to kiss Chise but she informs him that “about 900 people” are observing her. Much to Shūji’s shock she adds, “You’ve got twelve on you.” A switch in drawing styles – from the sensual realism of a hand on a shoulder to the semiotic shapes of gag manga – actualizes this abrupt shift from touch to sight (Takahashi 2000: Vol. 2, 38). In one rather incriminating scene from the *Iriya* anime, Kana lies unconscious in a military bunker, with Naoyuki receiving phone instructions on how to revive her from the military aide Enomoto (Figure 1.6). Told that he must inject medicine into her heart, Naoyuki struggles with the teenage awkwardness of touching a female body as Enomoto upbraids him. Naoyuki steels himself to plunge the phallic syringe only to be rescued by an arriving medical team. Naoyuki and the viewer are treated to the experience of being guided through a sexual encounter by the communicative armature of the military industrial complex. We continually find ourselves at the limit point between the media environment as enabler of mutual experience and as subsumption into networks of surveillance and control.

Taking into account *sekai-kei*’s properties of internal transmediation, however, one might argue that the limit point has already been crossed. The interactionist model of environmental media depends on a perceiving subject who can integrate fictional and nonfictional media images into its imagined world according to proper categories of real-world social relations: nation, class, ethnicity, religion, gender, etc. *Sekai-kei* fictions articulate a very different relationship between mediated images and imagined worlds. To repeat Maejima’s thesis, *sekai-kei* is a narrative of self which is enacted through the tropes of the otaku environment of imagination taken as a whole. *Sekai-kei* applies this same totalizing method of image-assembly to the global media environment. The effect collapses the hierarchies of transmedia environments into a single horizon of perception. Shaviro calls this a “flat ontology,” by which he means that “there is no hierarchy of representations” and “no image source or sound source is treated as more authentic than

any other” (Shaviro 2010: 73–74).¹⁶ The “world” or totality of media environments is imagined as an undifferentiated genre assemblage.

Perhaps the best example, *Voices of Distant Star* casually invokes “common premises and types” to just barely organize the space in which Noboru and Mikako’s love-story unfolds (Maejima 2010: 85). The tropes of robot anime and sci-fi films are woven into clichés from school dramas and coming-of-age stories. Fantastic scenery is couched inside the cute language of a text message. Augmented reality and virtual displays are poised alongside normal cell phone screens. Critically, these are all interspersed with lingering stills of everyday objects like railroad crossings and telephone lines. Rather than a logically organized genre and world-setting which can represent a material condition, fictional and nonfictional media images evoke shared categories of understanding and fuse them with sense-rich “real” images into a phenomenological collage comprising a “*sekai/world*.” Mikako’s opening soliloquy directly references this approach: “There’s this word ‘world.’ Until middle school, I thought that ‘world’ meant the place where your cellphone waves could reach” (Shinkai 2002). The “world” is that field of engaged perception accessible through the imaging and communication tools at your disposal. In *sekai-kei* the fictional and non-fictional, the mediated and the direct, the large and the small, are all equal generators of experiences that can assemble into a subjective world.

Sekai-kei’s vision of the contemporary media environment seems to directly contradict the interactionist model. A flat horizon of undifferentiated media-images referring to each other in an endless disorienting web seems to foreclose the possibility of a situated social subject that can organize a representation of the world for itself and to others. Orgad recognizes this, commenting that “the landscape of the representations that feed personal and collective imaginations is a huge construction site” which challenges “fundamental social and cultural roles of representation” (Orgad 2012: 362). A scene from the *Iriya* anime comically illustrates its own futility (Itō 2005). Naoyuki and Kana

go on a movie date, unknowingly observed by Kana's military supervisors and by Naoyuki's jealous younger sister and UFO-enthusiast classmate. The scene shifts between the two spy parties as they use surveillance devices to eavesdrop on each other and on Naoyuki and Kana, shown watching a movie composed of clichéd cinematic scenes. Both the supervisor Enomoto and Naoyuki's classmate continuously shift enthusiasm between the ostensible goals of their respective "missions" and Naoyuki's romantic success. In this space of mutual surveillance, the serious genres of spy drama and global conspiracy merge into locker room talk, sibling jealousy, and other trivial genres of social interaction, all bound together by the film screen which is itself a mix of genres. In this moment, the *Iriya* anime creates a mocking microcosm of its own futile desire to visualize totality as it is constantly redirected through varying scales and emotions in the cacophonous space of media images.

Nevertheless, *sekai-kei* fictions do visualize moments of coherence in the flat and fluid world without relying on rational subjectivity, through their very reliance on the collectivity inherent in fiction itself. A subtle but telling moment in the *Saikano* manga reveals *sekai-kei*'s underlying premise that when the supposedly real bases of experience dislocate and dissolve, the shared imaginary horizons which structure our fictions have the power to temporarily hold a world together. After planning to run away together, Shūji waits for Chise in front of the train station, but she is prevented from meeting him by an order to sortie (Takahashi 2000: Vol. 1, 222-223). A two-page spread shows Shūji in the foreground slumped in disappointment inside a phone booth, while behind him a massive aircraft moves across the sky (see Figure 1.7). This aircraft has not appeared before, nor will it appear in this form again. However, a certain curvature of the wings and arrangement of its metal tendrils allows a reader sharing *Saikano*'s environment of imagination to intuit that this is another form of Chise-as-weapon. The repeating and recognizable design elements of anime-style *mecha* (from the English "mechanism" or "mechanical") machinery form a visual thread binding the concealed elements of the plot

together; she is passing over in an attempt to inform him of what happened. Shūji's back is turned and the opportunity is missed. For the reader, however, the image is pregnant with the possibility not only of mutual recognition but also of constructing a temporary schema of the structures and events which brought them to where they are. The collective and "co-creating" exercise of the imagination that fiction entails creates threads of recognition that can bind experience together, and potentially connect people as well (Quinlan and Mars 2020: 468).

Counterpoised to the encompassing work of fiction are the everyday sensations which appear throughout *sekai-kei* fictions as anchors within the flow of mediation. While they do not amount to Silverstone's sense of the everyday as a full social world, these moments hold on to the promise of basic reciprocity. *Voices of a Distant Star*'s stills of mundane urban objects, which would become a fixture of director Shinkai Makoto's style, serve as anchors of experience and as confirmations of the shared space Noboru and Mikako inhabit before she leaves for space. Importantly, media technologies provide such reminders as well. Though Mikako can only use her cell phone to send text messages which will reach Noboru years later, throughout her galactic travels she is shown clutching it, retaining in the media object the promise of direct communication in its potential to transmit a "voice." Writing about *Saikano*, Suan characterizes Shūji and Chise's relationship in terms of Judith Butler's notion of "the mutual implication of the "you" in the "I." As the two grow closer, Suan explains, "we can see an exposure of the fault lines of the bordered-whole individual," with the final image of their kiss "combining the two together" (Suan 2018a: 221). While Suan uses the moment to illustrate how anime complicates global neoliberalism's drive to affix unique and saleable identities to both people and objects, within the fictional experience we can see this same mutuality coalescing into the beginnings of an imagined world. Beautifully actualized instances of the potential for mutual implication occur throughout the *Saikano* anime (Kase 2002), where the most detailed animation is reserved not for battles nor even for

the final apocalypse but for the couple's intimate moments. In one tragic scene, the two lie next to each other as Shūji reveals that he has cheated on her. As he confesses, she bites him on the arm, drawing blood (Figure 1.8). The close-up of her twitching face above the frame-by-frame flow of red blood seeping into Shūji's shirt creates a strong sense of presence. In *sekai-kei*'s fullness as visual transmedia, such moments serve not to validate the transcendental identity of a lone male subject but to preserve the reality of the lovers' contact, even painful contact, to validate the intimacy and everydayness of human connection as it stands to be dissolved within a global flow of troubling images. The pair of eyes, the blood and organs supporting them, the pressure of desires and anxieties, and the tenuous promise of recognition – for *sekai-kei*, these are potential beginnings of the social.

4. The *Sekai-kei* Legacy and *Suzumiya Haruhi*

Stimulated by a sense of deep socioeconomic change, *sekai-kei* fictions produce affective experiences of the dislocation characteristic of neoliberal capitalism. Within horizons composed of multiple media environments, they find potential for renewed social being in the collective imaginative processes of fiction and in the simple sensations of everyday life. In this final section, I will consider how these imaginative dynamics disseminate into later fictions via a look at *Haruhi Suzumiya*, the franchise described by Saito as “a meta-commentary format for the participatory culture” which “self-reflectively mimics the way consumers explore multiple story worlds” (Saito 2015: 157). Maejima recognizes *Haruhi* as a parodic offshoot of *sekai-kei* which randomly assembles otaku world-settings and stock character types only to subsume them into an ironic narrative of youth subjectivity (Maejima 2010: 117). The story follows the developing relationship between the imaginatively obsessive Haruhi and the cynically practical Kyon. Haruhi has decided that she has “no interest in regular humans” and continually attempts

to enact plot elements from genre fiction in order to bring paranormal events into being. She is always frustrated in her quests, while Kyon's professed desire for small-scale belonging is beset by the supernatural phenomena which Haruhi, the unwitting creator of the universe, generates unintentionally. Each side character embodies a different genre paradigm – aliens, time-travelers, and superpower-users – whose overcomplicated backstories intertwine confusingly. The pleasure of *Haruhi*'s world emanates from the unstable interactions between the genres that construct it, which create a complex sensorium shifting between numerous fictional world-settings. As discussed, social imagination is “both confirmation and contestation of the present situation,” that is, a simultaneous drive to affix and to alter (Ricœur 1986: 3). In contrast to *sekai-kei*'s earnest use of fictionality to hold a worldview together – to imagine the world-as-is – *Haruhi* conspicuously plays with fiction's expansive ability to create other realities – to imagine the world as something else.

Haruhi contains none of the geopolitical panic or the melancholy fatalism which define the core *sekai-kei* fictions. However, it is even more saturated with mediated visuality. Tanigawa Nagaru's original 2003 light novel established the influential character dynamic of “ironic boy meets obsessive girl,” as well as the textual process of calling attention to its own haphazard use of the “quotes, archetypes, allusions, and references” it draws from otaku transmedia (Saito 2015: 156). Put into the terms of this chapter's discussion, *Haruhi* turns *sekai-kei*'s scales of visuality and constructions of world-as-genre-assemblage into a mundane process. The lived experience it articulates becomes obvious in 2006 anime series by the emerging studio Kyoto Animation (Ishihara 2006), which actualizes *Haruhi*'s dynamics within an energized hyper-mediated environment. Scenes are fractured and reassembled through frenzied cuts, enhanced with extra-diegetic flourishes, blended with associative symbols, and shot through with endless moments of remediation – all unified by Kyon's persistent voice-over. In effect, the *Haruhi* anime simulates an experience of school life within a media-saturated world,

reorienting *sekai-kei*'s social imaging techniques toward a manic celebration of the self-referencing media environment which it itself generates.

The intense connectivity of *Haruhi*'s world is characterized by an almost magical form of associative thinking on both the diegetic and structural levels. Haruhi's plans involve assembling symbolic elements of a certain genre in a kind of ritual meant to summon the narrative events they represent. Her actions do affect the world but are endlessly warped, deflected, and recombined, as in the episode shown in Figure 1.9. Through a byzantine chain of sci-fi causality, Haruhi's handmade club logo allows an interdimensional cricket monster to awaken within computer networks. The sense of an intensified and disordered post-social space through which *sekai-kei* fictions grasped the social breakdown at the turn of the millennium persists inside *Haruhi*. Stable imaginaries of "normative notions and images" organizing social experience have long since gone, replaced by perplexing fluctuations of media systems, world-settings, and narrative frames (Taylor 2004: 23). If the original *sekai-kei* fictions were anxious apprehensions of the initial phase of neoliberal globalization, one might easily see in the *Haruhi* anime a gleeful acquiescence in Japan's absorption into the fluid media environment of global communicative capitalism.

However, *Haruhi* does not completely disperse into the non-hierarchical subjective nodes of the animetic "distributive field" (Lamarre 2009: 110). Its narrative-based structure always grounds mediated experience in subjective perception. The logo incident ends with character shots of Kyon saying "I'm afraid" and pensively walking down a moonlit street. Here too, the ludic play of recombinatory images reflects and feeds a subjective social orientation, a pair of eyes looking at and trying to order their world. The physicality of the everyday also continues to reassert itself within the seemingly endless flow. The discomfort of the seasons – cold mornings in winter and sweaty classrooms in summer – are recurring themes, as is Kyon's grueling uphill walk to school. One full episode is given over to "long takes" of events moving in real time, showing the

characters from a single angle as they silently relax in their club room, with only ambient school sounds in the background (Figure 1.10). The shock of this extended stillness after long periods of speed creates, at least for a moment, a hierarchy of perception with it at the center. It gives a sense of the delirious flow through spaces of possibility and fictional alterity created by media environments naturally and inevitably returning to the naked sensation of being physically situated in the world, experiencing it alongside other similar beings. In its own way, *Haruhi* also attempts to imagine the social through transmediation.

Coda

Sekai-kei resists both the functionalism of the interactionist perspective and the semiotic commitments of Azuma and the thought of the aughts. Its perception of neoliberal risk through transmediation operates on a kind of “affective logic” by which confused sensations are woven around certain core experiences into a temporary imaginary shape (Lennon 2015: 59-60). Image-thinking arises from image-affect. In this sense, it models Lamarre’s “attention-reason complex” wherein affective storms of media ecologies act as “gravitational attractor for flights of ratiocination” (Lamarre 2018: 186). For Lamarre, the subject is “an effect of the storm, not its cause, and as such, it does not afford a position of mastery” (*ibid.*). The political potential of anime is therefore its ability to de-center subjectivity in favor of a “signaletic animism” of cascading “infra-individual” affects (*ibid.*: 353-354). Shaviro’s approach is to politicize video works which aggressively accelerate the de-subjectivizing flows of capital, an “approach that ups the ante on our very complicity with the technologies and social arrangements that oppress us” (Shaviro 2010: 117).

However, *sekai-kei* also resists the Deleuzian commitments of figures like Lamarre and Shaviro. It remains phenomenological in nature, consistently striving to weave an imaginary texture for the real from fixed vantage points of perception (Lennon 2015: 57).

It privileges the rare moments of coherence where the beginnings of a social world are imaginable. The fact that these moments are temporary effects of the storm makes them all the more central. This opens anime fictions up to a different political aesthetics, one based on the production of imagined collectivity. Through its adaptation and proliferation through franchises like *Haruhi*, the mediated social imagination exemplified by *sekai-kei* persists in anime fictions throughout the age of neoliberalism. The possibilities of social relation or potential politics its articulations produce are the topics of the following chapters.

Chapter Two

Working Worlds and Everyday Imaginaries:

Critical Depictions and Integrative Fantasies in the Precarious 2000s

The last chapter described a process of mediated social imagination which took shape within anime fictions during the neoliberal turn. Resonating with yet differing from dominant models of media subjectivity, it maintains the standpoint of embodied perception even though that perception is primarily composed of unstable media images. It remains invested in human connections even while it mimics the recursive flows of capitalism. This intention to coherent social horizons from out of media affect encourages a different way of thinking about how popular media interact with neoliberal conditions, which I characterized as a political aesthetics of imagined collectivity. This chapter will elaborate this potential through comparative visual analysis of Japanese media during Japan's "crisis of work" in the 2000s, comparing depictions of work (or lack thereof) in anime and manga with key samples from other forms.¹⁷ These depictions connect to the domestic consequences of Japan's neoliberal turn, in which the casualization of labor led to a widespread sense of insecurity regarding work (Genda 2005: 111).¹⁸

Throughout this chapter, I will pay attention not to the representation of actual labor conditions but to the capacity to simulate experiences of social belonging. Images of work comprise a vital part of the *social imaginary*: the background of "normative notions and images" undergirding a given social order (Taylor 2004: 23). However corrupted by capitalist incentives they may be, the productive social actions referred to colloquially as "work" give visible form to individual and collective life, integrating human rhythms into larger scales of subjective relations which in turn help to perceive the ambiguous whole of society. As I will describe, the crisis of work in Japan constituted a complication of its national imaginary, and depictions of work throughout its media field partook in the

collective process of negotiating altered social horizons. Attention to these imaginative syntheses can disrupt the melancholic narratives of “capitalist realism” which lament culture’s inability to imagine alternatives to neoliberalism (Brown 1999: 20-21; Fisher 2009: 1-2).

As throughout this dissertation, my emphasis on imagination is meant to broaden the scope of what counts as an engagement with neoliberalism. This chapter particularly aims to challenge the preoccupations of what might be called *political representationalism*, that lingering assumption within the humanities that a progressive fictional text is one that: a) didactically represents real-world structures of exploitation and b) offers ideas for resisting them. This reduction of mediated imagination to an assumed political reality limits aesthetic engagement, as we will see in the recent application of western precarity studies to Japanese literature and popular media. Although such studies have broken new ground in documenting public consciousness of economic insecurity and social atomization, they are constrained by an approach which focuses on whether texts reify or criticize neoliberal hegemony through realistic depictions of working life. As I will argue, this approach underestimates the effects of neoliberal precarity on our ability to conceive collective formations. Consequently, their textual objects do not provide the hoped-for solutions.

Attention to processes of mediated imagination allows us to shift focus from the assumed reality behind a fiction to the productive value of fabulation itself, while also taking better account of the complexities of mediated sociality. Any mediation of the social imaginary is both experiential and representational, both affective and discursive. This multivalence is especially important when considering a fiction as a unit of mediated imagination. Political representationalism overemphasizes discursive roles, nullifying fictions’ equally important role as enactive “modelizations” of actual and possible experiences (Schaeffer 2010: 172). Jean-Marie Schaeffer’s theory of fiction, discussed in the Introduction, shows how the mental operation of fiction is at its core an “imaginative

simulation” based in sensory-motor capacities of mimesis (*ibid*: xii-xv). In fictional immersion we adopt a “quasi-perceptive semblance” that models real and possible affective-cognitive states, which plays an important role in psychic and social development (*ibid*: 172-174). Schaeffer’s view is similar to accounts based on 4E cognition which see fiction as “imaginative (re)enactments of patterns of interactions” that are “embodied and action-based” (Medina 2013: 320, 332; *c.f.* Jansen 2016: 152). Even the most didactic fiction making a statement about a given social condition must first model a resonant experience of it, and these two functions are not the same. Conversely, a seemingly escapist fantasy entails the modeling of a virtual, possible, or desired condition through affects and perceptions which are commonly recognizable.

This view of fiction as imaginative modeling will help highlight the potential of what I will call *integrative* responses to social changes. *Critical* responses model the problems, limitations, and pains of contemporary social experience; integrative responses fabricate alternative experiences where problems are solved, limitations are overcome, or wounds are healed. Both are modes of imagining the social with their own pitfalls and potentials. Here we can draw insights from the autonomist strain of Marxist theory. Often disregarded as escapism or capitulation, imaginative integrations contain oppositional productivity when their visions of the world “articulate new possibilities for living” beyond the alienating conditions that produce them and when they affectively bind social images to concepts conducive to cooperative life outside of a capitalist context (Lazzarato 2004: *n.p.*). I suggest that potential for popular rejection of capitalist realism exists in fictions that can use affectively charged images of work to give form to a virtual social without reproducing alienated conditions, producing “specters of the common,” as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have described the concepts of shared existence buried under capitalism’s relentless privatization of the social (Hardt and Negri 2009: 153). In such efforts, flights of pleasurable fancy can outpace critical realism.

As discussed in the last chapter, the millennial period saw new conceits and genres

coalesce within otaku media thanks to the integration of new media forms and communication methods. Their virtual and associative qualities enabled a unique modeling of media-social experience. These techniques of imagination are capable of critical responses to precarious conditions, as I will demonstrate with the anime *Welcome to the NHK/NHK ni yōkoso* (Yamamoto 2006). However, the most popular anime fictions of the 2000s were those that enacted fantasies of self-reinvention or senses of “*iyashi*” (soothing/healing). Two conceits in particular solidified into regimented genres which served as cash cows for the anime industry in the 2000s and 2010s. These are *isekai* or “other world:” a fantasy of travel to a fantastical realm, and *nichijō-kei* or “everyday-style:” an idealized presentation of characters living slow-paced daily lives (see Denison 2015: 101). At face value these two conceits lend credence to a stereotype of otaku media as escapist. However, they both contain an experiential force which certain of their permutations utilize to engage with the crisis of work. I will close the chapter with a detailed analysis of two influential works which creatively combine *isekai* and *nichijō*: the *ARIA* manga series (Amano 2002-2008) and the anime *Haibane Renmei* (Tokoro 2002). The techniques of imagination in these “*nichijō* fantasies” produce experiences of fantastical worlds via images of interconnected characters integrated through work into a visible social whole, satisfying a need to re-visualize collective being against socioeconomic instability

The potential of a *nichijō* fantasy’s integrative response lies in its very detachment from realistic social representation. The hyperreality of anime fictions’ transmedia “environment of imagination” (*sōzōryoku no kankyō*) allows for freedom to play with the different affects of incongruous social images, enabling soothing visions of work to unfold a world whose economic rhythms lie outside of both Japan and neoliberal capitalism (Azuma 2007: 64). Through comparisons with other works, I hope to show how the modes of imagination exemplified by *ARIA* and *Haibane Renmei* can provide “solutions” which overtly critical texts cannot: autonomous visions which escape the

neoliberal traps of nostalgia and impasse. These fantasies point us away from critical rigor and toward the social imagination's raw processes of imagistic and affective cognition as the unconscious source of concepts amenable to exodus from the imaginative armature of neoliberalism.

1. Precarity as Imaginative Complication

Though its root causes were much older, Japan's crisis of work manifested during the "lost decade" of the 1990s, which left vast numbers of graduates unable to find work due to a nationwide hiring freeze after the post-Bubble recession. Genda Yuji writes that the freeze led to a widespread recognition of the tiered system of "internal" and "external" labor markets that had been developing in corporate Japan, with the protected internal market beyond the reach of most people (Genda 2005: 110). The loosening of contracting laws radically casualized the labor force in a few short years (Miyamoto 2011: 110-112). These structural changes mixed with increased ambiguity of job descriptions and other factors to normalize a sense of insecurity among the labor force (Genda 2005: 44). Neoliberalism as ideological package came with Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō, whose flashy reformist rhetoric masked a project to reshape Japan's old developmentalist institutions in the image of American neoliberalism (McCormack 2007: 31-33, Watanabe 2007: 317-318). Discourses on instability and inequality came to the fore as widely viewed media events helped shape a macroscopic vision of a newly unequal society. The NHK documentary *Working Poor* (Kamada 2006) and the high-profile New Year's Temp Village, organized to care for downsized contract workers following the global financial crash in 2008, both helped to "make poverty visible" to the nation (Yuasa 2012: 93). Of darker significance was the infamous Akihabara Massacre of June 8, 2008, when a 25-year-old temp laborer killed or wounded seventeen people in Tokyo's Akihabara district. Personal experiences coalesced through these spectacles into an ominous image of Japan

as a *kakusa shakai* (unequal society, see Yamada 2004).

In Anglophone contexts the term “precarity” is widely used to evoke the interacting socioeconomic and psychological effects of neoliberalism (Millar 2017: 2). It describes both the insecure conditions of post-Fordist capitalism and the abstract feelings of vulnerability they engender (Ettlinger 2007; Neilson and Rossiter 2008). Precarity is one of the semi-conscious structures described by Lauren Berlant as “post-Fordist affect,” or “the sensorium making its way through a postindustrial present” (Berlant 2011: 18). Writer-activist Amamiya Karin, one of the few Japanese figures to use the English term, explains that precarity appears in Japan as a vague *ikitzurasa* (lit. “painfulness of living”): serial experiences of individual hardship with little understanding of what causes them (Amamiya 2010: 251, 254-255). As Amamiya notes, however, *ikitzurasa* is merely a Japanese version of a more widespread phenomenon. It is therefore appropriate that recent scholarship in English has used “precarity” to discuss Japanese experiences.

Anne Allison’s ethnological study *Precarious Japan* (2013) documents the country’s shift from postwar stability to post-millennial precariousness. Allison uses her case studies to characterize Japanese precarity as the loss of “a sense of the future” into an eternally anxious present. Life in precarious Japan devolves into a cynical and atomized “politics of survival,” where individuals are “more concerned about their own ability to get through the day” than “living harmoniously with others” (Allison 2013: 83-84). She invokes Berlant’s notion of “cruel optimism,” which refers to obsolete fantasies of normalcy persisting within the decaying structures of social democracy (Berlant 2011: 1-3). As Allison identifies, the hyper-normativity of Japan’s “family-corporate system” pathologically persists throughout the neoliberal 2000s. Her case studies show people instinctively striving for postwar images of prosperity and belonging – uniform school-career paths, lifelong employment, home ownership, patriarchal family structure, and family-based welfare – even as the economic means to realize them have all but disappeared (Allison 2013: 68-71). For Berlant and Allison, cruel optimism is one of the

definitive psycho-social modes of neoliberalism, where honest pursuit of an outmoded sense of a “good life” becomes a self-destructive compulsion (Berlant 2011: 24-27).

Allison cogently diagnoses the ills of post-millennial Japan, and she rightly points to encouraging trends like anti-poverty campaigns and cultures of volunteerism. In the realm of culture, however, she tends to downplay textuality as a productive social force, lending credence mainly to autobiographical works which serve as transparent documents of Japan’s dissolving social fabric (see esp. Allison 2013: 71-76, 108-112). As described in the Introduction, Allison’s work on Japanese toys acknowledges, albeit briefly, the potential of creative play within the “capitalist imagination” of *Pokemon* and other media franchises (Allison 2006: 30). In *Precarious Japan*, however, fictional media and related popular cultures are merely “commodified care” allowing temporary relief from neoliberal atomization while ultimately perpetuating its causes (Allison 2013: 99).

An opportunity to rethink the relationship between media images and precarity emerges when we understand them as iterations of social imagination, that is, not as complete and purposeful representations of an objective condition but as flashes of coherence within the “always imperfect and unfinished” collective process of apprehending the form and force of social life (Castoriadis 1997: 368). Each image contains a temporary invocation of a social imaginary: a background of “normative notions and images” structuring people’s expectations of their lives and interactions with each other (Taylor 2004: 23-24). As Dilip Gaonkar elaborates, “within the folds of a social imaginary, we see ourselves as agents who traverse a social space and inhabit a temporal horizon, entertain certain beliefs and norms, engage in and make sense of our practices in terms of purpose” (Gaonkar 2002: 10). Imaginaries are therefore normative both in a repressive, obfuscating sense and an integrative, coordinating sense.¹⁹ More than mental structures, they are materially instituted in the implementation of practical institutions (Taylor 2004: 112-114). They exist in the haptic senses as well; imagined location within a social totality is articulated (and potentially contested) through people’s

habits of movement within cities and other manmade environments, in what Michel De Certeau characterizes as “spatial practice” (De Certeau 1984: 110). Finally, the inter- and sub-personal affects of our working lives internalize and mirror our implicit understanding of larger economic structures (Gregg 2010: 250-251). As mentioned in the Introduction, imaginaries are not ideologies; they do not comprise a single hegemonic version of reality. They are composed of the innumerable imaginative processes listed here, which cleave to “instituted” normative frameworks while also “instituting” incremental deviations (Castoriadis 1987: 127-131). Media forms are another site of instantiation of the differential process by which an imagined social landscape is “both formed and forming, displaying both stability and creativity” (Lennon: 2015: 78).

Media images of work can be examined in terms of their place within a social imaginary. Zygmunt Bauman highlights work’s “ability to give shape to the formless and duration to the transient” in modern societies (Bauman 2000: 136-137). Accordingly, depictions of work in popular culture often function not as representations of actual labor relations but as visual nodes binding together a potential experience of the social world, acting as lynchpins for a cohesive fantasy of imagined community. This certainly applies to postwar Japan, where work and its structures were evoked in government policy, corporate rhetoric, and popular media as quasi-natural essences of national identity, a view legitimized by *Nihonjinron* (“theories of the Japanese”) discourses of Japanese cultural uniqueness (see Yoshino 1992). The ideological functions of figures like the male “salaryman” and the female “office lady” are obvious, but they are more than simple obfuscations (see Allison 2013: 91). Images of workers and assumed social totalities helped to constitute a mutual horizon of expectations which enabled practical coordination of interests, affections, and aspirations. While inadequate in terms of justice and inaccurate with regard to the economic lives of many actual citizens, these “collective fictions” produced a structuring reality outside of a true/false distinction (Gatens and Lloyd 1999: 122-123).

Consequently, the crisis of work precipitated a major complication of Japan's national imaginary. As Nihei Norihiro has detailed, Japan's neoliberalization differed from western countries in that it did not primarily involve the large-scale dismantling of public welfare institutions, which postwar Japan did not have many of in the first place. Instead, disruption of gender-based networks of family and corporate welfare through labor casualization and deregulation forced a deluge of previously private social needs into the public realm (Nihei 2013: 331). Watanabe Osamu argues that the lack of a strong welfare system or independent unions in the later postwar economy meant that there was neither a buffer to ease the transition into neoliberalism nor an institutional platform from which to criticize it (Watanabe 2007: 327-328; *c.f.* Akahori and Iwasa 2010: 7-8). Tachibanaki Toshiaki also speculates that with social belonging and aid distributed through the private units of the family and the corporation, citizens were discouraged from conceiving values of interdependence as political issues (Tachibanaki 2006: 26). Anxieties over changing economic and social structures entered public consciousness through sociocultural channels, mapping the crisis of work onto an image of the threatened nation as a whole. Consequently, media culture tended to apprehend neoliberal destabilization through work-based *subject/world relations* between a working individual and an imagined totality. The rest of this chapter will examine different versions of these articulations, through which we can begin to recognize anime fictions' contribution to a political aesthetics of imagined collectivity.

2. Critical Imagination and the Neoliberal Impasse

When we understand media fictions as negotiations of a social imaginary, we notice that a critical depiction *of* neoliberalism is first and foremost a spatial and temporal modeling of the experiential worlds *created by* neoliberalism (see Busselle and Bilandzic 2008: 257-258). It is an instance of so-called "concrete imagining," the "seeing-as" that

amplifies perception by endowing it with a certain quality (Gosetti-Ferencei 2018: 36). This of course may feed into an intentional representation of an exploitative condition, but it is not the same thing. We can say that the critical response of imagination models the affective structure of the world *as inadequate*, within which the critical representation is allowed to unfold. In Kurosawa Kiyoshi's 2008 film *Tokyo Sonata*, for example, the recently downsized manager Ryūhei comes to inhabit a very different Tokyo than he had previously known. Cast out from the clean and bustling office of his old job, he wanders through trash-strewn alleys, waits in labyrinthine lines along grimy stairways to apply for temporary jobs, and eats free lunches in weedy lots with the denizens of soup kitchens. Ryūhei's change in labor status precipitates an environmental transformation of his experience. He nonetheless refuses to accept his new situation and compulsively repeats his old rhythms. Hiding his dismissal from his family, he makes a daily show of putting on a suit and leaving for a nonexistent office while trying with increasing franticness to maintain paternal authority over his sons. *Tokyo Sonata's* spatial elaboration of Ryūhei's attachment to the image of his old life and the damage it does to his family sensualizes the knowledge that the old society is gone, that post-millennial Japan has become a more savage world in which the subject cannot survive without its own transformation.

Ryūhei's experience encapsulates not only the cruel optimism described by Allison but also the relationship of individual precarity to the broader social imaginary. Part of the film's achievement is to embody socioeconomic dislocation in ominous sequences of the urban landscape of Tokyo, which as Roman Rosenbaum notes, can be traced to Kurosawa's background in horror film (Rosenbaum 2010: 116). Ryūhei is unconsciously dealing with the fact that he no longer inhabits the shared horizon of expectations that had governed his previous life. A scene where he embarrassingly botches an interview at a modern firm effectively dramatizes this on the small scale, while the climactic scenes after he panics at being discovered by his wife does so on the large scale (Figure 2.1). In a complete break from any familiar location, we see the jumpsuited Ryūhei framed against

the darkened cityscape as he aimlessly runs across an overpass while tripping over boxes of trash, his movements becoming progressively animalistic until he is hit by a car. Ryūhei's relationship to the roles and locations of his working world has completely crumbled, his spatial practice stripped of meaning. *Tokyo Sonata*'s artistic sensibilities present an unsparing vision of life in the new Japan, using its repertoire of filmic techniques to model the subjective experience of millennial precarity. It invests its social images with critique and is manifestly successful in eviscerating the cruel optimism of its main character to present a picture of the neoliberal imaginary. But precisely because of this investment it must end with the impasse that comes after the worldview's destruction (see Berlant 2011: 221-222). The famous final scene at the son's piano recital enacts an ultimate acquiescence; in Ryūhei's world, the only solution is to carry on with fewer illusions, and trust in the next generation's promise.

Understanding the impasse in works like *Tokyo Sonata* requires us not to conflate critical imagination of a neoliberal lifeworld with a politically motivated representation. We see this tendency in the edited book *Visions of Precarity in Japanese Literature and Culture* (Iwata-Weickgennant and Rosenbaum 2015) whose essays share a goal of identifying a new proletarianism in Japanese culture. Despite their wealth of insights, they are constrained by an underlying expectation that a "vision of precarity" in fiction will contain both a systemic critique of socioeconomic exploitation and a presentation of possible "solutions." Most emblematic is Christopher Perkins' reading of the live-action television series *Freeter, Buy a House/Furītā, ie o kau* (Kōno and Jōhō 2010) as a neoliberal "new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 7-8). Perkins claims that *Freeter* fails viewers by not enabling "critique of the structure of the social, political and economic processes they are embedded in" (Perkins 2015: 65). Similarly, Maria Grajdian's reading of Shinkai Makoto's cinematic anime concludes that Shinkai's "realistic, though mournful tableau of Japanese society nowadays" offers "no general solution" (Grajdian 2015: 127). Kristina Iwata-Weickgennant's innovative analysis of

Kirino Natsuo's novel *Metabola* uses the text to articulate how "precarity is at least partly a problem of perception," but also concludes that *Metabola* offers no solution, "at least not beyond the individual" (Iwata-Weickgennant 2015: 36).

Rosenbaum, one of *Visions of Precarity*'s editors, elsewhere criticizes *Tokyo Sonata* along similar lines, saying that by resorting to the "outmoded legerdemain" of horror, Kurosawa's films "still lack political and social motivation" and that *Tokyo Sonata* does not commit to the political legacy of Japanese film (Rosenbaum 2010: 132-133). Political representationalism causes Rosenbaum to disregard his own insights about Kurosawa's use of horror techniques of horror, which become "outmoded" devices preventing the film from functioning like a political essay, rather than the filmic resonance which allows *Tokyo Sonata* to show the experience of cognitive impasse that comes from a worldview crumbling. More importantly, Rosenbaum's demand that contemporary Japanese directors offer "real alternative solutions" beyond individual perseverance begs the question of what "real alternative" would be plausible for the many people who experience a world like that in *Tokyo Sonata*. The global rise of neoliberalism is due in no small part to the fact that the collectivities which the 20th century's radical filmmakers could rely on – the world proletariat, the counterculture, etc. – have been nullified as potential imaginaries.²⁰ Similarly, Perkins' demand that representations of precarious labor enable a critical map of systemic issues is doomed to disappointment, because this is exactly what the current stage of capitalism makes impossible. "Politics of survival" and "*ikitzurasa*" occur through the loss of systemic perspective that precarity entails. *Tokyo Sonata*'s success is to model a world of experience gone awry, but its contribution ends there. Regardless of the creator's representational intentions, a fiction's "vision of precarity" – its resonant simulation of the neoliberal lifeworld – will tend to reproduce its blocked horizons.

We can see how the impasse is not that of particular creator or medium via a look at the different media iterations of *Welcome to the NHK/NHK ni yōkoso*, originally a novel

written by self-described “*hikikomori*” Takimoto Tatsuhiko (2002). The *hikikomori* or shut-in is one of the problematic youth categories, along with *furūtā* or “freeters” (unaffiliated part-time workers) and NEETs (non-jobseekers), which were problematized in public discourse around the turn of the millennium. The term (lit. “someone who stays in”) describes the phenomenon of young adults who withdraw from society, avoiding social contact and staying home as much as possible. *Hikikomori* in particular spawned an entire “industry” of discussion about their psychological and social causes, including condemnations of the parents or other adults who enabled such behavior (Horiguchi 2012: 122-123).²¹ Takimoto’s literary stories of alienated youth characters had a measure of credibility in being written by a “real” *hikikomori*, and were also seen to be connected to the pulse of otaku culture. Though his first influential novels were published online, their quirky monologue-driven style and playful use of anime-esque tropes led Takimoto to be classified along such figures as Nishio Ishin, Satō Naoya and other pop literature authors associated with the mystery literature magazine *Mephisto* (1996-present). Their style of fiction was championed by Azuma and other “thought of the aughts” critics for bringing otaku aesthetics into the literary realm (see Uno 2008: 33-35). Takimoto’s breakout novel *Negative Happy Chainsaw Edge/Negatibu happī chensō ejji* (2001) bears strong traces of the *sekai-kei* aesthetic. *Welcome to the NHK* builds on these connections but adds more social commentary.

The original novel follows the classic “I-novel” (*shishōsetsu*) style of Japanese literature; the narrative is told through *hikikomori* protagonist Tatsuhiko’s first-person musings on his own life as he struggles with his inability to integrate into society. Prevented from finding stable work and relationships by his neurotic personality, Tatsuhiko’s clever monologues develop the idea of a conspiracy by Japan’s public broadcast company NHK that is turning Japanese youth into *hikikomori*. Otaku culture figures heavily in the story as both an addictive distraction and a possible pathway to employment, but it is only one part of a larger picture of Japanese problems which also

includes suicide pacts, pyramid marketing schemes, and familial breakdown. Through the novel's ironic prose, *Welcome to the NHK* critically comments on crisis of work in millennial Japan through a single personal viewpoint, providing an engaging view of the broken social landscape and the mental processes created within it. The manga version (2003-2007), written by Takimoto himself with illustrations by Ōiwa Kendi, largely replicates the novel's realist aesthetic; aside from a minority of imaginary scenes, the manga panels remain within the diegetic space of Tatsuhiro's life in Tokyo. Rosenbaum's analysis of the manga version in *Visions of Precarity* praises this realist impetus, seeing Tatsuhiro's relationship with his family as a graphic allegory of youth labor issues in Japan (Rosenbaum 2015: 147-148). Both printed versions of *Welcome to the NHK* place anime within the "real" national imaginary of precarious Japan.²²

The anime version produced by the studio Gonzo (Yamamoto 2006), takes a substantially different approach, using the novel's monologues as platforms for ludic visualizations which capitalize on the plasticity of anime images. For example, a story about combing the internet for pornography becomes a hallucinogenic whaling trip in a pink sea, where Tatsuhiro hunts female-fish hybrids who are morphing into photographs (Figure 2.2). Each significant narration in the novel becomes actualized in a new surge of associative imagery as the anime "enfolds" other sociocultural and media frames of reference into the layering logic of the "distributive field" (see Lamarre 2009: 126-127 *et passim*). As we saw in the *Suzumiya Haruhi* anime, these flights of mediated alterity return to the daily settings of Tatsuhiro's filthy apartment or the downtown areas he occasionally visits. The anime elaborates the critical vision of *Welcome to the NHK* through animetic techniques of imagination, orienting the frenetic layers of media visibility and psychological fugue around the inescapable fact of everyday embodiment.

Though these techniques the anime is able to fully articulate the systemic critical imagination hinted at in the novel. The mental and physical objects comprising the broken social landscape are presented through shifting audiovisual stimuli which prime the

viewer's associative faculties. Sexual delusions and consumerist compulsions are not ironically narrated but presented in grotesque immediacy, teasing the possibility of connections with elements in other scenes. Like the *sekai-kei* fictions, the *Welcome to the NHK* anime processes neoliberal precarity and media saturation as the same phenomenon, the core of socioeconomic insecurity interwoven with the intense connectivity of mental and media networks, all shot through with the logic of consumption. The word "conspiracy" (*inbō*) appears throughout the layers, sometimes as a personified demon snickering amid distorted arrays of *bishōjo* bodies, sometimes as Tatsuhiro's despairing voiceover against realist background stills of Tokyo. The "conspiracy" refrain shifts from that of a personal excuse to a frantic attempt at "cognitive mapping" which glances at but cannot quite gather the almost-perceivable organizing force behind the increasingly chaotic national imaginary, namely, the new phase of capitalist accumulation (Jameson 1991: 50-52). The *Welcome to the NHK* anime can be seen alongside *sekai-kei* fictions as animetic modes of critical imagination which model "what it feels like to live" within it. (Shaviro 2010: 2-3).

No iteration of *Welcome to the NHK* penetrates the fog, however. In each of them, the story ends with Tatsuhiro and his love interest, the also unstable Misaki, rejecting the option of suicide and promising to endure life's struggles together. Replicating neoliberalism's affective and imaginative modes across multiple media forms seems ultimately to reach the same conclusion. Like *Tokyo Sonata*, its contribution is to provide a sullen kind of clarity amid the flow of delusion by allowing the subjects to "catch up to their situation" (Berlant 2011: 192-193). Though better recognized, liquid modernity continues apace as an un-systemizable labyrinth of individual sensations (Bauman 2000: 8). This is the logical conclusion of a critical modeling of post-Fordist affect. Rosenbaum's treatment of *Welcome to the NHK* as a successful text and *Tokyo Sonata* as unsuccessful makes little sense. Both *Welcome to the NHK* and *Tokyo Sonata* remain true to the human lives through which they visualize the complicated imaginary as they exist

in the archetypal neoliberal state of the impasse (Berlant 2011: 4-5).

These are not merely textual modes. Neoliberal impasses permeate society through what Mark Fisher describes as “capitalist realism,” a “reflexive impotence” in daily life and in cultural production that reproduces the neoliberal horizon through the very act of properly recognizing it (Fisher 2009: 20-21). The other concepts discussed here – *ikitzurasa*, politics of survival, liquid modernity – are similar attempts to seize on the atomizing disorder of the neoliberalized world. While Japan’s complication of the social imaginary has its specific valences, its impasses are versions of a global phenomenon. The lack of solutions should be seen not as shortcomings of individual works or creators, nor as examples of an apolitical Japanese culture, but as a kind of trap or limit point for critical imagination within neoliberalism’s dissolution of the social. Critical depiction of a neoliberal lifeworld is not a precursor to alternative solutions. This leads us to the less acknowledged but equally prevalent energy of mediated social imagination I am calling “integration,” through which anime’s experiential fantasies exert unique potential for imagining collective foundations. Critical responses and integrative responses are not mutually exclusive and are often present within a single fiction, as I will discuss in Chapter Three. My argument here is that the latter need not follow from the former to qualify as an engagement with neoliberalism, and that attention to imaginative integration as its own form of social thinking will uncover potentials beyond the impasses met by critical depiction.

3. Imaginative Integrations and *Nichijō*’s Hidden Radicalism

In a representative scene from Amano Kozue’s *ARIA* manga series (2002-2008), apprentice gondolier Mizunashi Akari pilots her gondola through canals on the outskirts of Neo-Venezia, a fantasy Venice located on a terraformed future Mars (Amano 2002: Vol. 2, 161-164). Akari is a newcomer to this world, an immigrant from “Man-Home” or Earth.

The reader discovers this new world alongside Akari; its interrelating structures are manifested through her daily experience. In this scene, manga panels bring the reader in close to Akari's facial expressions and bodily movements, shifting through moments of concentration and satisfaction as she navigates a difficult waterway (Figure 2.3). Successions of intimate scenes are interspersed with views of the hybrid landscape; the picturesque foreignness (to Japanese readers) of the European-inspired countryside lies beneath the futuristic marvels of interstellar ships and islands floating in the sky. The different textual pleasures build moments of work into a comforting sensation of social belonging, with its subject integrated into a manifestly visible social totality.

ARIA is a typical manga success story. Initially serialized under the title *AQUA* in a minor *seinen* (targeted to young adults) manga magazine, it moved to a new imprint under the title *ARIA*, where it quickly gained popularity, prompting a legacy of TV anime, OVA, films, and albums which continues to the present day.²³ As demonstrated in the scene above, *ARIA* embodies the aesthetic of *iyashi* or “healing” that had developed from the late 1990s. *Iyashi-kei* or “healing style” fictions aim to create a soothing feeling by depicting characters living slow and pleasant lives amid picturesque landscapes (see Hairston 2008: 257-258). Amano's comments in an afterword to *AQUA*'s original *tankōbon* (a bound volume which reprints a manga's serialized chapters along with extra content) are instructive. She writes that people in the current moment “focus too much on their failures” and that she wanted to help them “find that small happiness” (Amano 2002: Vol. 2, 177). *ARIA* began serialization in the early 2000s amidst the Koizumi government's neoliberal reforms and the mass casualization of Japan's labor force. One might therefore accuse *ARIA* of offering solipsistic escape from these conditions via a romanticized fantasy of work. Analyzing the rise of so-called “ambient literature” during the same period, Paul Roquet notes that many commentators in Japan condemned *iyashi* media as a kind of “mood regulation” which anesthetizes the populace with the prospect of individual self-care instead of social engagement (Roquet 2009: 107-108). I argue that

a flat rejection of the *iyashi* aesthetic constitutes another reduction of imagination to an assumed reality. Once again, attention to processes of mediated imagination allows us to see that Amano's pursuit of "that small happiness" *does* engage with neoliberal dislocation *by rejecting it*, fabricating instead a subject/world relation where the totality is clear. Her imaginative integration accentuates the junctures and flows which bind subjects to their world and to other people.

It is true that most positive imaginings of work in popular media serve to accommodate subjects to the new socioeconomic demands of capital. However, one of the key insights of autonomist Marxism is that social production is only tentatively and externally organized by the capitalist incentive (see Lazzarato 1996: 143; Hardt and Negri 2009: 137-142). This includes the mediated process of social imagination. While generally entangled in compulsions like cruel optimism or unhealthy individualism, media fictions contain the imaginative seeds of new collectivity as concepts buried in late capitalism's empire of the private. We should not immediately dismiss their fantasies as uncritical escape, nor their positive representations of working life as ideological capitulation. Even Hardt and Negri acknowledge that "the family, the corporation, and the nation do engage and mobilize the common, even if in corrupted form, and thereby provide important resources for the exodus of the multitude" (Hardt and Negri 2009: 164-165). With this search for the common in mind, we can examine an integration's potential to simulate a collectivity beyond both the neoliberal impasse and the nostalgia of cruel optimism. Though imaginative integrations can be found throughout post-millennial Japanese media, the oblique relation of anime fictions to Japan's mainstream social imaginary enable more dexterous and potentially radical amalgamations.

ARIA is one of many fantasies of social integration through work images in post-millennial Japan. Again, the drive to re-stabilize imagined horizons is not inherently reactionary. The problem is that such fantasies tend to compulsively align themselves to the configurations of the postwar family-corporate system, exhibiting the same cruel

optimism that Allison documents in social relations. This conservative impulse is often visible in the topical nature of live-action television *dorama* (lit. “drama,” serial fictional programs). Gabriella Lukács explains how certain *dorama* genres in the post-Bubble era worked to renegotiate the national community along lines of affective consumption and individualistic work-ethics (Lukács 2010: 26-27, 54-55) However, while presenting ostensibly contemporary portrayals of characters caught up in a topical situation, *dorama* often remain audiovisually invested in stable postwar horizons.

Freeter; Buy a House (Kōno and Jōhō 2010, hereafter *Freeter*), the series criticized by Perkins, serves as a clear example. It tells the story of Seiji, an indolent middle-class dropout who enters the part-time job market in order to buy a new house for his depressive mother. Seiji becomes a day laborer at a construction company, where he gradually learns the value of pride in work from his salt-of-the-earth coworkers before eventually being offered full salaried employment. To avoid misunderstanding, I agree with Perkins that the series obfuscates the exploitative conditions of precarious work in contemporary Japan. Perkins also usefully identifies how the structure of the nuclear family with the angelic mother at the center remains an immovable feature in the series’ supposedly contemporary depictions of changing conditions. My point here that this “normativity hangover” in the depiction of the family structure also permeates the depictions of work (Berlant 2011: 176-179). *Freeter*’s supposedly topical depiction of working life is based on returning the only contemporary figure – Seiji – to an older normative horizon. Played by pop idol Ninomiya Kazunari, Seiji at various points in the series occupies every problematic youth category described above: first NEET, then *hikikomori*, then freeter. He acts as a flexible marker of destabilization, which the audience is meant to view from the macroscopic position of the imagined totality endangered by his presence. His vacillations and his final recuperation into full-time employment work to smooth the instability back into the postwar imaginary. *Freeter* is not a false critical depiction of actual conditions but their fantasized integration into an outdated ideal horizon.

Freeter's reinstitution flows through multiple layers of the social image. A key scene shows the work crew riding in a truck bed as they look back on the unfinished road they have been building (Figure 2.4). Listening to the veteran workers eulogize the road's permanence and their satisfaction at making a lasting contribution to society, Seiji contemplates his own work ethic. Perkins's diagnosis of the scene as an elaboration of the series' neoliberal values engages only with its discursive aspects, ignoring the older vision of social cohesion generated through its audiovisual dimensions (Perkins 2015: 76). The shot from the truck bed matches our line of sight to the workers' view of the road glowing in the morning light, making us share in their gaze onto the work which connects them spatially and temporally to the rest of the country. While the workers' anodyne conversation conceivably connotes a neoliberal work ideology, on these imagistic levels the scene seems unaware that the neoliberal economy even exists. The road, meant to imbue their work with holistic meaning, is an example of the ubiquitous construction projects scarring the Japanese landscape with endless reapplications of postwar developmentalist policies (see Takahara 2009: 105-106). "Work," which in *Freeter*'s 2010 was already characterized by a casualized digital and service economy, is here brought back into the fold of spatially conceived growth and national unification. Attached to what Allison describes as the "old nervous system" of the family-corporate system, *Freeter* and similar *dorama* fall victim to a kind of perceptual repetition, another impasse which traps the process of reimagining collectivity in the neoliberal context. Their visions of renewed subject/world relations both inherit and produce a cognitive inability in post-millennial Japanese society to unfix itself from the stable hierarchies of the postwar era.

The mediated social imagination of anime fictions exhibits potential precisely in its departures from real conditions. As discussed in Chapter One, anime fictions participate in a shared "environment of imagination" (*sōzōryoku no kankyō*) defined by affective encounters, primarily but not entirely with characters, articulated through mutually

referential networks of tropes from anime and related media forms (Azuma 2007: 64). *ARIA* can be conceived as a mixture of two experiential conceits: the *isekai* or “other-world” fantasy of travel to a wondrous land, and the *nichijō* “everyday” fantasy of a pleasant daily life. Inheriting elements from role-playing games and fantasy fiction, the *isekai* conceit enacts a fantasy of self-reinvention wherein an unremarkable protagonist is transported to a magical world. The fantasy world acts as an intense background for the adolescent characters as they make choices and attempt to understand their new place. As *isekai* will be the main focus of Chapter Three, I will mainly discuss the *nichijō* conceit here.

As described in Chapter One, anime fictions produce concepts of the social through fluctuations of fictional horizons and everyday affects. The *nichijō* conceit is a variation of the process where the latter is taken to the extreme. *Nichijō* fictions eschew narrative development almost completely, focusing instead on the daily lives of a group of characters. Readers/viewers simply experience being together with the characters in a vicarious pattern of life. The solidified genre of *nichijō-kei* or “everyday style” is also deeply connected to character desire. The stories depict the daily lives of quirky and loveable *bishōjo* or “beautiful girl” characters. In both visual design and character backstory, *bishōjo* characters are combinations of cute, cool, or otherwise attractive traits that aim to generate the fictional intimacy known as *moe* (lit “budding”), a kind of affective continuum between erotic feelings and platonic “imaginary love” for the character (Galbraith 2009: *n.p.*). The *moe*-oriented *nichijō-kei* developed in the early 2000s within the medium of *yonkoma* manga, which are four-panel gag comics that run as side features in tech and hobby magazines. The huge success of anime adaptations, most famously Kyoto Animation’s productions of *Lucky Star/Raki Suta* (Yamamoto and Takemoto 2007) and *K-On!/Keion!* (Yamada 2009-2010), cemented *nichijō-kei* as a recognizable genre and lucrative site of media mix production.

The Rules of a Hit Nichijō-kei Anime/Nichijō-kei anime hitto no hōsoku (2011), a

group-authored critical report by Kinema Junpo Research Group (Kinema Junpo Eiga Sōgō Kenkyūsho), affiliated with the venerable film criticism magazine *Kinema Junpo*, describes how *nichijō-kei* enabled a new anime media mix business model based on the new technology of social media. *Nichijō-kei* anime's disconnected slices of life could be easily clipped and circulated as short contents on the video and commentary site *Nico Nico Dōga* and similar social viewing platforms, enabling communication between fans as a new kind of "contents" (Kinema Junpo Research Group 2011: 96-97, *c.f.* Steinberg 2019: 189-192). The group provides a useful analysis of changes in the anime industry. However, their argument suffers when it uncritically adopts the social theory of the *sekai-kei* critics described in Chapter One. The ultimate reason for *nichijō-kei*'s popularity, they claim, is that it provides fodder for male Japanese consumers hoping to escape the anxious social climate into "communication between like-minded people and the feeling of having an object to love" (*ibid.*: 78-79). The authors' view of *nichijō-kei* as therapeutic consumption in alienated Japan leads them to reject *ARIA* as an example of the style. Though they acknowledge that *ARIA* is comparable to the other *nichijō-kei* hits in terms of both feeling and fame, they brush it off on the arbitrary grounds that its daily life is not "contemporary Japan" (*ibid.*: 27-28, 100).²⁴ This rejection is significant because it exposes the limitations of subsuming the imaginative work of fiction into discursive and economic categories. The Kinema Junpo group's view of *nichijō-kei* as marketable "genre" renders them unable to consider what is *experientially* successful about the *nichijō* conceit, which is exactly what *ARIA* shares with other successful examples.

Here Komori Kentarō's notion of *moe* as a phenomenological encounter becomes pertinent. The intimacy with the character involves an experience of its lived world as a source of pleasure (Komori 2013: 46-47). The *nichijō* conceit enables intentionality toward not only the characters but also the fictional moment they inhabit. Analyzing the formation of the genre in Japan, Rayna Denison notes that *nichijō-kei* anime are defined not only by *moe* character desire but also by their hyperreal background elements which

create a “sense of an everyday that is more ordinary than ordinary” (Denison 2015: 113). Importantly, the intense “more than ordinary” feeling is generated by stringing together moments in which a social experience is detached from a normative imaginary of social productivity, most often the regimented time and space of the Japanese school system. A key example is the massively successful *nichijō-kei* franchise *K-On!*, based on a *yonkoma* manga by Kakifly (2007-2012). Ostensibly about the four members of a high school *keionbu* or high school music club, *K-On!* is defined by how little effort the girls put into their activities. The manga in particular develops by splicing little intense scenes showcasing their cute *moe* traits as they mess around in their club room, treat their instruments like toys, go on impromptu outings, anything besides seriously practicing or studying (Figure 2.5). *Nichijō*, in effect, is a celebration of not being on task.

The connection between heightened experience and idleness is evident in a foundational iteration of the form: the *yonkoma* manga *Azumanga Daioh/Azumanga daiō* by Azuma Kiyohiko (1999-2002). Both the original manga and the television adaptation (Nishikiori 2002) are noteworthy for their funny juxtapositions of the girls’ daily activities with oneiric and animetic views of their inner lives (Figure 2.6). However, the core of *nichijō* experience is distilled in the way the four-panel form magnifies mundane moments. For example, in the strip shown in Figure 2.7, the less-than professional English teacher Yukari pauses in the middle of her lecture to scream “it’s hot!” eliciting a shocked reaction from the students. The hinge is the third panel, identical to the others except that Yukari is silent and we become aware of the observing students, rendered as an undifferentiated silhouette (Azuma 2000: Vol. 1, 99). Yukari continues the lecture in the fourth panel with the students-silhouette remaining as a kind of collective recognition that what they just shared was “more than ordinary.” The sequence detaches the moment from its place in the instrumentalist time of the school curriculum. The singularity of a unique moment is allowed to exist for itself, with all the possibilities it might contain. In Figure 2.8, the imposing but shy Sakaki sits at home reading a book called *Cat Life*. The hinge

is again the third panel in which she sees an article about an alley where cats gather. Readers will know that Sakaki deeply loves cats, who all seem to hate her. Therefore, the slam of the book in third panel enacts her moment of decision for us as well. In that panel's moment, we vicariously share in her happiness at the discovery and her resolve to visit the alley. We also know that her journey will be futile. Indeed, a later four-panel set shows her return in bandages and cat-scratches (*ibid.*: Vol. 2, 74-75). Sakaki's decisive peak models an experience that is poignant and pleasurable precisely because it is unproductive. In both cases, character intimacy – both the reader's familiarity with the characters and their familiarity with each other – holds the speculative moments together.

There is hidden radicalism in the *nichijō* conceit. Within a highly schematic character and panel structure *Azumanga Daioh* generates investment in a potential reality, a fictionalized experience of intimacy as a basic building block of the social. It offers not escape but a heightened investment in an imagined autonomous moment. In its best articulations, the *nichijō* conceit can detach social time from instrumental regimes of production and allow it to exist for itself, prompting reconsiderations of the rhythms of life in larger spheres. This potential is realized in fantasy *nichijō* like *ARIA*, whose quest for affective “healing” leads them to imagine integrative working worlds that can only exist outside the extant neoliberal imaginary.

4. Imaginative Exodus

ARIA's effacement of neoliberal conditions for an innocent celebration of working life at first seems equivalent to what we saw in *Freeter*. Indeed, *ARIA* and *Freeter* are trying to produce the same thing: a holistic reintegration of individual work into a social totality. But unlike *Freeter*, *ARIA*'s totality is assembled within the pleasurable flux of a fantasized “other world.” *ARIA* is uniquely productive in its radical mixture of genres of anime fiction, synthesizing the spatial unfolding the *isekai* conceit with the temporal

rhythms of *nichijō-kei*. In the scene above, *ARIA* combines the heightened awareness of intimate moments from *nichijō-kei* with the sense of wonder and discovery from *isekai*. Akari muses at one point that she feels she has come to understand the rhythms of Neo Venezia, calling it her “little discovery” (Amano 2003: Vol. 3, 92-93). Her individual rhythms through the streets and canals flow into those of the city; manga paneling enables the juxtaposition of scenes, perspectives and emotional registers frozen in motion, generating the intimate pleasure of the character’s lifeworld, while images of characters superimposed on spectacular backgrounds stimulates an identification of the individual with larger scales of belonging (Figure 2.9). Through her work she discovers her new home’s natural and human environment while bonding with other characters whose different occupations allow the hybrid city to function. Each of *ARIA*’s iterations each produce interesting variations on these core conceits. In particular, the original anime series (Satō 2005-2006) profits from the production’s crew’s research trip to Venice, adding a layer of architectural detail to Akari’s experiences of the city and emphasizing the movement of water in the canals through animation. The series also contains original episodes which explore relationships of temporal belonging as Akari visits sites connected to the history of the Mars terraforming project, an aspect absent from the original manga.²⁵ *ARIA*’s visual rhythms produce a distilled experience of social being where work effortlessly gives form and duration to life, weaving individual and collective rhythms into an integrated whole.

Akari’s journey from Earth to Neo Venezia is an imagined recovery of a lost holism, but not the nostalgic totality assumed by *Freeter*’s vision of belonging. The cityscapes of Neo Venezia, with St Mark’s Square standing under manmade floating islands, are visible expressions of *ARIA*’s ludic drive to synthesize an authentic social experience by reassembling past and future, native and foreign. Akari meanders through spaces reminiscent of old Japan, European history and folklore, futuristic industrial structures, and non-referential pockets of cat-filled dream-spaces. *ARIA* thereby constructs an

amalgam of experiences to satisfy the emotional needs denied by Japan's increasingly atomized society without relying on the reality configurations plaguing its national imaginary. Most fruitful is the way *ARIA*'s slowness gives labor a subsidiary role within social experience. Its leisurely pace unyokes Akari's work from a profit motive and ties it to the movement of the season, her moods, and the needs of those around her. She switches between working, discovery, and bonding depending on whom she meets and where she finds herself, abruptly deciding that exploring a new district or attending to a friend counts as job training. In one evocative scene she and her partner re-structure their gondola route so that they can convince a stoic rival trainee to open up to them. (Figure 2.10). The scene's climax dissolves markers of competition and affiliation within a swirl of natural beauty, surrounding the characters in their moment of mutual recognition as equal subjects sharing the same world.

The contrast between neoliberalism's frenzied blend of work and life and Akari's self-managed pace mirrors a crux identified by the autonomists: the difference between exploitative affective labor and autonomous social production rests on who or what governs the rhythms of work and life (see Berardi 2009b: 68-69). Underlying Akari's control of her rhythms is the unstated fact that she owns her own labor. The Aria Company to which she belongs operates as a small self-managing enterprise, with an alien cat "president" serving only a symbolic role. This ingenuous erasure opens up the free play of social imagination to enact a fictional version of what autonomists call *exodus*: a removal from the capitalist context of that which is empathetic, cooperative, and collective in social production (see Virno 1996b: 195-196). Writing after the financial crash of 2008, Franco Berardi speculates on the means by which "social tasks that can no longer be conceived as a part of the economy...once again become forms of life" (Berardi 2009b: 213).

In the days to come, politics and therapy will be one and the same....Our task will be the creation of social zones of human resistance...Capitalism will not

disappear from the global landscape, but it will lose its pervasive, paradigmatic role....It will become one possible form of social organization.

(*ibid.*: 220)

Berardi imagines his own integrative subject/world relation here. The therapy of caring for others forms the central task of the new world. Simple human actions create new zones that expand outward to form the hybrid composition of the socioeconomic world as a visible totality. *ARIA* envisions a similar world, where work as profitable labor occupies a smaller portion of social life alongside “extra-economic networks” of mutual support. In her application of autonomist thought, Kathi Weeks has encouraged the development of “post-work imaginaries” in which social production is conceived outside of wage-labor relations (Weeks 2011: 29). *ARIA*’s fantasy of the everyday produces one of the closer approximations of a post-work imaginary that Japan’s popular culture is capable of giving. *ARIA* demonstrates the multiple pathways that mediated social imagination can take in times of socioeconomic change. Imagining its solution to the work-based crisis of the social imaginary on an intuitive level, it produces an integrative fantasy which maps onto the search for a post-capitalist common without the realist impetus for social critique. Though it cannot directly politicize its values of interdependence and control over work rhythms, it emotionally binds the reader to them via its institution of a subject/world relation, making us feel their necessity in imagining the social and thus providing a potential referent for what Weeks calls a “utopian demand” (*ibid.*: 175-177).

Standing as sort of a dark twin to *ARIA* is *Haibane Renmei*, sometimes translated as *Charcoal Feather Federation* (Tokoro 2002). The series concept came from a short *dōjinshi* (amateur or unofficially produced manga) by the graphic artist ABe Yoshitoshi which depicted a group of young female beings called *haibane* (lit. “ash-feathers”) who live together in an abandoned building called Old Home (Figure 2.11). The *haibane* have angel-like wings and halos and enter their world through a fantastical *isekai* transference,

hatching from cocoons with no memory of their previous lives. The *dōjinshi* only depicted the first experiences of the newest arrival, Rakka. With ABe's involvement, the anime series was built out from the simple pleasurable images of the cute and slightly supernatural *haibane* engaged in communal living. *Haibane Renmei* conforms to the *moe nichijō* form, so like *ARIA* it creates its imaginative experience via the affective link with Rakka as she is progressively initiated into the world of the *haibane* and the rhythms of their daily lives in a walled city. As in *ARIA*, the plot revolves around the rhythms of work and the emotional bonds between the characters. It also deploys animetic panoramas of a pastoral landscape incongruously lined with wind turbines, shown as the characters move through scrolling background illustrations of the countryside (Figure 2.12). Like *ARIA*'s canals, the country roads in *Haibane Renmei* generate a sense of graceful passage through space as they move from the daily activities of working and developing their interpersonal relationships. Here too, the pleasure lies in being enveloped in daily rhythms of an imagined world whose institutions fit together.

However, unlike the gondoliers in *ARIA*, the *haibane* are fundamentally unfree. The arcane religious laws of their world stipulate that *haibane* are guaranteed a basic standard of living but they are also bound by many strictures, the most salient of which are that they cannot use money and cannot own or inhabit anything new. The *haibane* all work, but receive no payment, nor are they required to pay for what they purchase in the town. In short, the *haibane* have a place in their society but not in its money economy. A materialist reading of this system could of course point out parallels to the status of historical social outcasts such as the *burakumin*, or indeed to the status of welfare recipients under Japan's communitarian social policy (Shibuya 2003: 51-53). However, *Haibane Renmei* is a highly metaphorical series, and parsing the "meaning" of its economic depictions would also have to take into account the layers of religious imagery and existential themes of the unknown and finitude. The series' coding of the town as the afterlife seems to be ABe's preferred reading (Hairston 2003). A political representational reading of the *haibanes'* work would

be extremely reductive. As Komori's effusive reading of the series notes, the brilliance of *Haibane Renmei* is to hold everything in a balance of possibilities (Komori 2013: 70-71).

Let us therefore return to the series as mediated imagination of social experience. *Haibane Renmei*'s subject/world relation is complete but comprised, the subject integrated into social belonging but in a limited and liminal position. The social totality of the walled town is visible but only as a closed system. It seems hard to call this vision a utopian one. However, *Haibane Renmei*'s integration through work is generated through the experiential force of *nichijō* affect, and it is here that its holism comes to be visible. A sense of humanity as an aftereffect of destruction is evoked in the living space; the detailed renderings of stained walls and dingy furniture in Old Home – an abandoned boarding school in which the *haibane* live – give a sense of both decay and hominess. Music is strategically omitted in key moments to highlight ambient sounds of footsteps, wind and rain, movements of bodies and objects. Tactility is also emphasized, and the sense of touch links with the abiding concern of depicting the physical and emotional care the characters give each other. After Rakka sprouts her wings in a gory process of transformation, a quiet scene follows where the older *haibane* Reki cleans the blood off her wings (Figure 2.13). The simple animation of Reki's moving hands and the sounds of her work highlight the intimacy of the scene.

Concerns of care drive the story forward. Major plot arcs revolve around a given character's mental illness and the aid the other characters attempt to give. On the ideological level "work" in the form of labor is professed as a cardinal value: "a *haibane* must work," goes the maxim. However, as an imaginative experience, we see that the characters are able to choose the content, time, and definition of their work quite freely. The official jobs the *haibane* choose to work are associated with processes of social reproduction and communal memory. Reki takes it upon herself to care for the young *haibane*; Rakka finds a job cleaning the memorials for the *haibane* who have left the world; one character works at the town library; another is an assistant to the engineer who manages local clock tower. The

work of the *haibane* feeds directly into the structuring of time and memory of the community and is bound up with the actions that maintain their social bonds. The theme of a “care deficit” is a major concern in Allison’s assessment of precarity in Japan (Allison 2013: 40-42). *Haibane Renmei*’s imagined world makes up for this deficit.

The utopian demand in *Haibane Renmei* thus seems to be an imaginary where the connection to a monetized economy and status through consumption has been completely severed, but where human productive activities still integrate the social. In a world where survival is guaranteed but the possibility of accumulating wealth does not exist, we are then allowed to / forced to focus on the daily acts of social reproduction and the endless reciprocal process of caring for each other. This concern draws a number of parallels between *ARIA* and *Haibane Renmei*. Both structure a social imaginary from images of work as sources of integration, but do so within anime fictions’ environment of imagination. Both visualize a utopia where control of the rhythms of work – the ability to switch from labor to care to bonding – are the structuring elements of imagined collectivity. *Haibane Renmei* seems to share *ARIA*’s hope that an authentic human existence can be built out of relics, but while in *ARIA* work can rebuild extinct cities and float islands in the sky; *Haibane Renmei* contents itself with communal meals in timeworn buildings.

Coda

Precarious social conditions certainly exist, as do the exploitative structures which generate them. These must be identified and criticized. But it is also important to consider what desires or visions are catalyzed when precarity interacts with ideal images of society and the mediated imaginative processes which produce them. Japan’s case draws attention to the fact that precarity is not merely another socioeconomic problem but a situation which compels fundamental reformulations of the concept of the social itself. Japan’s particular investment in the conception of work rendered individual precarity into

a crisis of its entire social imaginary. Critical fictions have power to model the precarious experience and bring to consciousness the deleteriousness of the situation. As *sekai-kei* and the *Welcome to the NHK* anime demonstrate, anime fictions can offer critical visions which are productively different from more realist forms. However, the cognitive work of *nichijō* fantasies provides a different, equally productive example of imaginative activity responding to socioeconomic destabilization. When recognized as imagination rather than representation, as speculative engagement rather than escape, anime conceits' fantasies offer responses to this experience, forming a base environment in which to reposition individual work against a desired whole while avoiding nostalgic attachment to structures of belonging in the real world. Like the vast majority of imaginative practices in the world, these everyday fantasies operate through desires – physical, emotional, social – producing pleasures within the confines they have been given. But their social visions produce more than they intend to. *ARIA* and *Haibane Renmei* articulate rhythms of work, care, discovery, and leisure which experientially conceive the possibility of a new social imaginary organized according to the post-work values of slow life, quietly questioning the inevitability of the neoliberalized world. These raw modes of imagining collectivity have as much potential as any critical fiction to feed into a larger political aesthetics. It is a question of reorienting our engagement with mediated sociality itself.

However, *ARIA* and *Haibane Renmei* are early products of Japanese neoliberalism; their imaginative exodus will become more difficult to achieve as it progresses. Once established as a normative image, precarity tends to infect any depiction of social being through work, creating an unfavorable environment for the imagination of non-nostalgic collectivity. This problem will orient the discussion of contemporary *isekai* fictions in the next chapter.

Chapter Three

“A Place for Others:”

Mediating Collectivity in Precarious *Isekai* Fictions and Beyond

The first two chapters discussed the techniques of mediated imagination which developed within anime fictions during the neoliberal turn, arguing that their fluctuations between fictional horizons and everyday affects engaged constructively with socioeconomic dislocation in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This final chapter of Part I will move the discussion to the 2010s, after casualized labor and increased dominance of flexible “cultural work” had been normalized (Sugimoto 2010: *n.p.*). In the realm of otaku media, the same time period saw what Marc Steinberg has recently described as the “managerial turn” in the anime media mix, wherein individual media works “stag[e] media operations and media management for the pleasures of viewers” (Steinberg 2020: 160). Simply put, anime fictions become representations of the business of producing and consuming anime fictions. This kind of cultural production seems to exemplify what Wendy Brown calls the “dissemination of neoliberal reason,” where fictional representations of life as part of a culturalized labor force feed into visions of the human as “*homo oeconomicus*” or “self-investing human capital” whose individuality is determined within an all-encompassing market (Brown 2015: 176-177).

Studies of “auto-theorization” within the anime media mix are concerned with how textual representations of media mix industries evoke the larger cruxes of media capitalism (Steinberg 2020: 160-161). The theories of the autonomists, discussed in the last chapter, are frequently invoked to describe the way that anime exemplifies contemporary capitalism’s shift to “immaterial labor,” that is, to affective and cognitive activities as the main sources of economic value (see Lazzarato 1996: 133-134). On the industrial side, Steinberg’s influential work describes how character-based transmedia

production and marketing exemplify Maurizio Lazzarato's theories about the production of consumer worlds within post-Fordist capitalism (Steinberg 2012: 82). On the side of fandom, otaku activities such as *dōjin* circles (groups of amateur creators) producing manga, anime, and video games based on extant characters, as well as the many conventions and fan organizations in which these unauthorized works are bought and sold, are seen as ambivalent forces within capitalism. Otaku have been analyzed by Thomas Lamarre and others as exemplary cases of Antonio Negri's distinction between the "constituent power" of self-evolving labor and the "constituted power" of capitalist systems (Lamarre 2006: 359; *c.f.* Negri 1999: 1-6). The blurring of boundaries between producer and consumer in otaku creativity offers a unique view of how their "affective labor" provides economic value while remaining an unruly social energy which must be managed and contained.

This chapter will contribute to the discussion by examining how anime fictions in the 2010s have acted as auto-theorizations – or, in the terms of this dissertation, as fictional modelings within mediated imagination – of the broader capture of social experience by neoliberal reason. My main focus will be the trope of *isekai* or "other-world," a staple of anime, manga, and light novels which depicts a character's transportation to a fantastical realm. Anime media mix production since the 2010s has been dominated by *isekai* stories featuring (usually) male youths transported to worlds resembling online fantasy role-playing games. The huge number and conventionalized style of these fictions stems from their origins in anime-influenced "net novels." Written by amateurs and submitted to free sharing sites, net novels have become an effective source of original content for media mix productions. These fictions self-consciously comment on their derivative nature, reflexively invoking their position within a crowded industrial pathway that puts the collective creativity of amateur writers and communities of fans to work.

Many of the most popular examples of the subgenre frame their protagonists as freelance jobseekers trying to make their way through a fantasy world dictated by

precarious logic, which is visualized through the tropes of online gaming. These “precarious *isekai*” model a dual capture of social production by the neoliberal logic of “*media oeconomicus*.” The fictional conceit of an “other world” for self-reinvention now serves to replicate both a real-world media business model and the capitalist realism of a precarious imaginary which defines the contours even of an *isekai*. Nevertheless, I argue that the “specters of the common” which inhabited the mediated imagination of hybrid works like *ARIA* and *Haibane Renmei* still persist within the precarious *isekai* of the 2010s (Hardt and Negri 2009: 153). Even in these valorized media forms, the tension between constituted power and constituent power plays out in the imaginative field as a tension between an “instituted” or naturalized socioeconomic form and the “instituting” power of the radical imaginary to question and alter that naturalized environment into new forms (Castoriadis 1987: 108 *et passim*).

As before, I am looking for the potential of mediated techniques of imagination to simulate modes of collectivity beyond the impasses of neoliberalism. The 2010s *isekai* fictions’ techniques come from many sources: audiovisual conventions from online gaming, the alienated narrative voice of the net novel’s “*bocchi*” or “loner” protagonist, the affective intimacy of *moe* characters, and the cultural figure of the freeter which had come to permeate both artistic and popular media in Japan. As I hope to show, the main impasse faced by precarious *isekai* fictions is the cynicism that comes from their reflexive depictions of their media-labor matrix, which is geared to portray the “liquid” social experience of individual movement through an unending landscape of isolated encounters (Bauman 2000: 96-97). However, they are still anime fictions, defined by an orientation away from realistic representation and towards bursts of mediated affect within the shared “environment of imagination” of otaku media (Azuma 2007: 64). Their mediated imagination produces endless tiny variations of a virtual social in the abstract, any of which may inadvertently tap into social imagination’s power for to institute, or in Negri’s terms, the “faculty” of humankind to construct their own social and political arrangements

(Negri 1999: 35).

This chapter will therefore lead to a close examination of certain precarious *isekai* fictions which show their characters forming new socioeconomic collectives from out of the atomized *isekai* worlds they enter.²⁶ What is interesting is that these collectives become possible for the characters through the mixed visualities of their subgenre. Strategic “gamer imagination” mixes with anime clichés and *moe* desire to revitalize otherwise tired images of communal life and work, providing waypoints for the characters’ actions. The utopian urge within them pushes these shared media techniques into imaginative spaces beyond their alienating conditions of production. I will argue that we can see a similar deployment of anime images in the publicity of grassroots initiatives in the anime industry to address the precarious conditions of young animators. The shared methods of these movements and the precarious *isekai* point to the continued importance of imagination and fiction, which are the sources of orienting social images that provide temporary coherences of desires, aspirations, and demands that aim to preserve human modes of social being within neoliberal reason.

1. Anime Media Mix and the Autonomist Crux

The field of anime studies has responded to the increasing “industrial reflexivity” of in anime and related popular media through approaches which focus on how the immaterial elements of media works simultaneously reflect and enable their industrial conditions (see Hartzheim 2019). Marc Steinberg’s influential *Anime’s Media Mix* (2012), touched on in Chapter One, describes how the economic success of anime-based media ecologies is due to the “the dynamically immobile character image” which “creates a certain resonance between and across media types” (Steinberg 2012: 68). As we have seen, the attractive character is not simply an object of desire but the point of contact for a larger virtual social experience. For Steinberg, this “gravitational pull” of anime

characters extends to the material world of transmedia market synergy. Since the character retains its image and attraction across multiple media forms, it is able to create connections between “heterogeneous media forms, attracting commodities and media” to form media ecologies that surround users as consumable environments (*ibid.*: 80-84).

Importantly for this chapter, Steinberg sees the anime media mix as evidence for the autonomist school of Marxism’s view of “a shift from formal to real subsumption” within post-Fordist capitalism (Steinberg 2012: 166). Drawing on Maurizio Lazzarato’s thesis that advanced capitalism is the production and management of multiple “worlds” of consumption, Steinberg argues that the anime media mix “offers the promise of belonging to a particular world, and to multiple worlds” (*ibid.*: 183-187). He draws parallels between Lazzarato and Japanese critic Ōtsuka Eiji’s writing on “narrative consumption” (*monogatari shōhiron*), also discussed in Chapter One. Ōtsuka’s work shows that by the 1980s anime and related media had built modes of consumption based on an overarching fictional “worldview” (*sekaikan*) which consumers accessed in pieces through the various products within a transmedia franchise (Ōtsuka 2010: 107-108). The potentially addictive consumption of “world and variation” created by the system also enabled the creative practices of *dōjinshi* and other fan-made derivative works, which Ōtsuka sees as leading to a system where established producers have little direct control over cultural production (*ibid.*: 113). As Steinberg demonstrates, anime media mix business has responded by channeling and managing the abundance of creative production within anime-based media culture into consumable character-based worlds.

Any tensions between the creative energies of anime media mix culture and the commercial processes which organize them are therefore sites of politicization. They are potential fissures in the post-Fordist process of accumulation which subsumes communication and creativity only by externalizing itself (see Negri 1989: 116-126). This idea is present in Thomas Lamarre’s early work on “otaku movement” which informed his later theories. As Lamarre hypothesizes, “*otaku* activities recall [Antonio] Negri’s idea

about a constituent power at the heart of labor” (Lamarre 2006: 360). Otaku activities at least in places hint at “autonomous movement within capitalism that differs from it” (*ibid.*: 385). Lamarre argues that these activities constantly oscillate between capitalist “discipline” and non-monetizable forms of “self-cultivation,” thus highlighting the fundamental indeterminacy within contemporary capitalism (*ibid.*: 372).²⁷ Thiam Huat Kam has explored the tension from a sociological perspective, analyzing how social labelling processes in Japan tend to affix the negative label “otaku” to those habits of anime and manga consumption which are not directly productive of capitalist value (Kam 2013: 56). Kam also relates stories of industry professionals lamenting that many amateur producers refuse professional work, which he sees as manifestations of the Japanese culture industries’ anxieties about their dependence on a form of creative production that is fundamentally autonomous.

As Lamarre’s work illustrates, the autonomous potential of otaku movement originates in its “feverish activity and productivity in the reception and dissemination of images” (Lamarre 2006: 369). Building on the Deleuzian influences in autonomist theory, Lamarre locates the radicality of anime’s flow of images in their ability to dissolve fixed subjectivities within the anime distributive field’s de-hierarchizing plane of immanence (*ibid.*: 366). However, as indicated in the previous chapter, there is another way to politicize the autonomist crux within anime images. Within the flux of image-affect, anime-based transmedia overwhelmingly operate by constructing *fictions* – imaginative mediations of people, actions, and events within social spaces. These creative and “human” elements of social production are also sources of valorization. They are structured and managed by capital but not reducible to it, as Lazzarato specifically acknowledges in his seminal theory of immaterial labor:

The subjugation of this form...to capitalist logic does not take away the autonomy of the constitution and meaning of immaterial labor. On the contrary, it opens up antagonisms and contradictions that, to use once again a Marxist

formula, demand at least a “new form of exposition.” (Lazzarato 1996: 143)

And, specifically about creative work:

The transformation of its products into commodities does not abolish the specificity of aesthetic production, that is to say, the creative relationship between author and audience. (*ibid.*: 144)

Steinberg touches on the imaginative tensions between autonomy and capture within his own close reading of the original anime *Re:Creators* (Aoki 2017), which he sees as an exceptionally clear “metamodel” of “the crucial intersection between media mix planning, franchise management, and government control” in contemporary anime business (Steinberg 2020: 178-179). *Re:Creators* is a metafictional story in which the superhuman protagonists of different fictional worlds from anime-based transmedia works are thrown together in the world of their creators: the “real” world of contemporary Japan. This supernatural event threatens to destroy the world, because our reality is not able to contain the multiple possible worlds that the fictional characters bring with them. To avert catastrophe, the Japanese government initiates a project in which the creators of these characters collaborate on a multimedia fictional project, which will merge and thereby manage the tensions between the worlds. For Steinberg, *Re:Creators* is unique as “a reflection of a particular reality of the government involvement in the promotion of Japanese media mix” (*ibid.*: 169). Steinberg describes how *Re:Creators* models both the fantasy and the danger of government involvement, including the possibility for population control and the top-down exploitation of workers in creative industries.

As Steinberg describes, however, “*Re:Creators* also figures its fictional audience according to a form of democratic participatory culture that functions according to a viewer consent model, or viewer belief model” (Steinberg 2020: 173). In other words, the autonomous energies of the audience are still a force that cannot completely be contained by the managerial dream of government and industry control. What is not present in Steinberg’s analysis is the fact that the government-media industries collaboration in

Re:Creators gets underway only in the second half of the series, after the fictional dramas between the otherworldly characters' epic battles and transcendent confrontations with their creators have played out. The metamodel of the managerial force within anime media mix can only gain purchase by first allowing the fictional horizons embodied in the characters to enact their power and charm on our world. "The creative relationship between author and audience" which recognizes and enjoys the shared imaginative environment is thus a key part of social production which management hopes to valorize (Lazzarato 1996: 144).²⁸ If the view of the anime media mix as the epitome of immaterial labor and post-Fordist subsumption holds, then the auto-theorizations which Steinberg identifies in the contemporary media mix fictions extend beyond new managerial practices to the tension between the constitutive power of collective imagination and the constituted power of neoliberal reason. Each fictional "modelization" is a story of autonomy and capture (Schaeffer 2010: 172, see Chapter Two). Nowhere is this more evident than in the *isekai* fictions of the 2010s.

2. Gamelike *Isekai* and the Modeling of Transmedia Extraction

Narratives of a fantastic journey to an *isekai* or "other world" have long existed in anime and manga, reflecting a legacy of cross-pollination between anime and manga, fantasy novels, and tabletop roleplaying games (Ōtsuka 2003: 168-173). The conceit is that of a "normal" protagonist from modern Japan mysteriously transported to a magical world in which he/she is imbued with supernatural abilities and embroiled in a grandiose conflict. *Isekai* arguably solidified into a clear genre conceit in the 1990s. Some of the major titles of this era featured female protagonists and were designed for cross-gender appeal. In *The Vision of Escaflowne/Tenkū no Esukafurōne* (Akane 1996), a high school girl named Hitomi is transported to the planet Gaea, gaining clairvoyant powers and a royal love interest (Figure 3.1). *Magic Knight Rayearth/Majikku Naito Reiāsu* (Hirano

1994-1995), based on a manga by the all-female team CLAMP, features a trio of teenage girls summoned to the land of Cephiro, where they are given magical weapons to combat a force that will destroy the world. Others featured mixed groups. The *El Hazard/Eru hazādo* franchise (Hayashi 1995-1996) features the *isekai* adventures of three high school students and their history teacher. The raunchy comedy *Those Who Hunt Elves/Erufu o karu monotachi* (Katayama 1996) features an ensemble of otaku character types traveling an *isekai* in a Japan Self-Defense Force tank, harassing the titular elves as they search for a way back home.

Though *isekai* fictions share obvious links with fantasy fiction, they differ from Western fantasy dynamics of “world immersion,” as described by Mark Wolf. The contours and “rules” of *isekai* realms are expounded in detail, but not for fans to “gather large amounts of world information...into ever-greater understanding and more complete mental images” of an expansive, sovereign world (Wolf 2017: 211). Wolf’s concept of world immersion is similar to Ōtsuka’s concept of narrative consumption described above. *Isekai* fictions, on the other hand, are more aligned with the “database consumption” that Azuma Hiroki sees as arising in the 1990s. They do not create unique and original fantasy worlds but instead playfully combine recognizable fantasy elements from out of a shared stock of transmedia affects (Azuma 2001: 77-79). However, they are organized at the level of imagination, because all invocations feed into the virtual experience of exploring a new and exciting realm. The often-clichéd tropes of the fantasy world form an intense background against which the adolescent character(s)’ coming-of-age experiences gain fantastical resonance. *Isekai* thus serve primarily to enact the imaginative situation of a subjective encounter with a strange world as part of a fantasy of self-reinvention. As the summaries above indicate, the 1990s *isekai* fictions were porous in composition and flexible in terms of intended audience, which arguably contributed to the adaptation of the conceit within the fantasy *nichijō* described in Chapter Two.

By the 2010s, however, “*isekai*” came to refer almost exclusively to the huge output

of anime-related fictions featuring a male gamer, usually marked as a *hikikomori* or other social outcast, who finds himself transported to a world resembling that of an online fantasy game. Explicitly designed to feed teenage male heterosexuality, with the male lead surrounded by attractive female characters in scanty fantasy outfits, their standardized narratives enact a self-reinvention fantasy in which the socially awkward protagonist's knowledge of games becomes the key to survival in the new world. The dominance of this subgenre stems in part from the digital migration of otaku culture throughout the 2000s. Online platforms enabled new forms of fan interactions and story conceits, as did synergies between anime and manga with online gaming. In particular, online multiplayer role-playing games became the primary site to encounter the tropes of fantasy fiction. These new media-cultural forms were streamlined by anime media mix businesses through a new production pathway based on amateur-produced online "net novels."

As discussed in Chapter One, the anime-oriented print narratives known as light novels (*raito noberu*) became a salient part of otaku media from the mid-1990s onward, providing source material for major transmedia successes such as *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya/Suzumiya Haruhi no Yūutsu* (Tanigawa 2003). In the print model, light novels are published through imprints of established publishers or new media conglomerates, who solicit new talent through "first-novel" contests (Enomoto 2008: 25-26). The rise of user-generated novel websites has produced an exponentially more efficient version of the process. As Satomi Saito summarizes, "these sites allow registered users to publish their original stories [in chapter installments] and further to (re)classify the published stories according to a variety of attributes, including plot structure, genre, character, setup, and world" (Saito 2015: 159). Readers can search by keyword tags for genre names, anime character types, and story clichés, and also comment on published stories. Saito explains that the grassroots system results in a kind of fine-grained work of categorization that is carried out collectively by fans and amateur creators (*ibid.*).

Saito remarks that the rise of light novels and net novels as sources of original material for media mix productions is a “curious return from audio-visual media to older text media” (Saito 2015: 144). Considered from autonomist perspectives, however, the reason becomes fairly clear. They are an ideal site of subsumption where creative and communicative processes can be “put to work” as immaterial labor (Lazzarato 1996: 145). The most famous amateur novel submission site is *Shōsetsu ka ni narō* (*Let’s become a novelist*, 2003-present), which at the time of this writing has over 900,000 submitted novels and over 2,000,000 registered users, essentially providing media mix industries with both a reserve army of affective labor and a self-generating market research system.²⁹ Novels submitted to *Shōsetsu ka ni narō* have provided the source material for the vast majority of the *isekai* and fantasy franchises of the 2010s, to the point that such works are sometimes called *narō-kei* or “*narō* style.” In addition to the keyword classifications and comment systems, the site also holds its own annual *Shōsetsu ni Narō kon taishō* contest to select the most interesting works from out of this vast pool (Tai 2017). The chosen few will get a print installation in a light novel publishing imprint, which serves as another filtering process for selecting candidates for further media iterations, the holy grail being an anime adaptation with the potential for further media iterations and product tie-ins.

The *isekai* fictions of the 2010s rise out of and are shaped by this industrial pathway. Ōtsuka’s writing on the “character novel” – his own term for light novels and similar forms of print narrative – describes the creative process as a formula of abstraction in which a character is made to incorporate the story’s world-setting and narrative patterns as visualizable attributes (Ōtsuka 2003: 55-61). The novel’s text thus functions a springboard for anime images (*ibid.*: 19-21). In the *narō-kei isekai* novels, this imagistic writing is put to work as a kind of pitch, where the prose acts like a script proposal for the anime it hopes to become. The *isekai* entrance scene from Akatsuki Natsume’s *Konosuba: God’s Blessings on this Wonderful World!/Kono subarashī sekai ni shukufuku o!* (2013-

2020, hereafter *Konosuba*), discussed later in the chapter, can provide an indication of the style:

Horse-drawn carts make noises as they go down cobbled streets.

“It’s an *isekai*. Hey, hey, it’s a real *isekai*. What? Really? Am I really going to use magic and go on adventures in this world?”

I spoke with a trembling voice as I looked in excitement at the scene in front of my eyes: a European street view (*machinami*) lined with brick houses. No cars or motorcycles; no telephone poles or antenna towers.

“Oh! Ohhhhh! Ohhhhh!”

My eyes jolted back and forth as I observed the city and the people going by.

“*Kemono-mimi* [human characters with anime ears]! There are *kemono-mimi*. There are elves! They’re pretty, and they’re *elves*!”

(Akatsuki 2013: Vol. 1, 21-22).

Short descriptive sentences set the scene for minutely represented spoken dialogue, mimicking a potential anime scene. Even internal monologues are geared to be replicated in anime version through voiceovers and comedic timing. While they are not quite examples of conscious “industrial reflexivity” described by Bryan Hikari Hartzheim (2019), they have a built-in awareness of their place in the media mix; the fiction is meant to be understood as part of collective imagination as structured by an economic model.

Isekai reflexively invoke the net novel to anime pathway in more obvious ways as well. In the character-based, serially released form, readers’ enjoyment arises from becoming attached to the characters amid their many little adventures. A successful novel is one that quickly establishes a *sekaikan* (world setting) – Ōtsuka describes it as the “world as seen through the eyes of the character” – that can potentially continue forever (Ōtsuka 2003: 221). While many net novels and light novels do bring their stories to an eventual end, even the most popular anime runs will rarely reach them. Thus, the success of a novel is based on creating a catchy world/story/character arrangement within an

initial story arc that can be encapsulated in one season, while also leaving the potential for a second or third series. For example, *Konosuba* finished serialization in 2020 with seventeen printed volumes of the main story, as well as several spinoff novels. The two 11-episode anime series roughly correspond to the first four printed volumes of the novel. *Isekai* fictions compete for attention within the vast pool of online works by adhering to this framework, self-consciously evoking the sites' popular trends in quirky combinations, an art of distinction through subtle differences that draws attention to their use of common clichés.

References to shared environments of online gaming and communication technology are key elements, as evidenced by titles like *In Another World with My Smartphone/Isekai wa sumātofon to tomo ni* (Fuyuhara 2013-present) or *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 years and Maxed Out My Level/Suraimu taoshite 300nen, shiranai uchi ni reberu MAX ni nattemashita* (Morita 2016-present). The clichés of these media environments are reflexively invoked by characters as easy “givens” for setting up the story concept, which the protagonists accept with familiarity. Similar to the *Konosuba* excerpt, in the *I've been Killings Slimes* anime (Kimura 2021), the newly-reincarnated main character encounters a “slime,” a common low-level game monster, and casually remarks, “a slime? So this is definitely an *isekai*” (*isekai kakutei ka na*). The entry into the “other world” is no longer a fantastic movement to new experiences, but a change to a different mediated landscape whose contours are understood beforehand. The game *isekai* of the 2010s can thus be said to model the capture of their own creative process within a socioeconomic media ecology.

However, this does not empty them of social content. The resulting complex of anxiety and desire is well-calibrated to dramatize the experience of non-elite young men, and more recently of young women, facing the countless micro-competitions that have come to characterize adult life after the normalization of non-standard labor. “Precarious *isekai*” are also reflexive mediations on the macroscopic capture of socioeconomic experience and social imagination within neoliberal capitalism. As we will see, the

neoliberal traps of cynicism, solipsism, and nostalgia discussed in Chapter Two impede their social imagination even more intensely.

3. Precarious *Isekai* and the Limits of Cynical Reflexivity

As touched on in Chapter Two, images of youth workers were invoked throughout Japan's crisis of work – stagnation in the recessionary 1990s; fluidity in the neoliberal 2000s. The rise of non-standard labor at the turn of the millennium was problematized through the half-academic/half-journalistic discourse of *wakamonoron* (youth theory), which explains social change in terms of shifts in youth psychology (see Ogawa 2017: 64-65). Neoliberal destabilization was sublimated into character portraits of figures like the reclusive *hikikomori* (shut-in) and the irresponsible *furītā* or “freeter” (unaffiliated part-time worker) whose supposed rejection of adult life was posed as a cause of socioeconomic problems. However, this view began to fade as job market rationalization proceeded and rising inequality became impossible to ignore (Nihei 2014: 311-312). By 2010, one out of every three employees was employed in some form of non-standardized labor (with much higher rates among women workers) as companies increasingly shifted to contracts and temporary positions. As Yoshio Sugimoto has indicated, the rise in labor casualization was connected to market differentiation and the rise of the “mega-sector” of “cultural capitalism” (Sugimoto 2010: *n.p.*). In Japan as elsewhere, communication, entertainment, and service jobs collectively came to outrank industrial and infrastructure jobs. The easily outsourceable and casualizable cultural jobs became the driving force of socioeconomic activity and the primary (in many cases the only) aspirational careers for the emerging labor force. Throughout the 2000s the presence of an underclass of unstable workers became a common-sense fact of life (Arai 2005: 32).

In the 2000s, the deepening of the crisis of work was processed through images of destabilizing transference: a previously stable subject, youth or otherwise, is posed as the

victim of a dislocating transportation to a precarious lifeworld. Invoked in a wide variety of media, the image reflected how shifting economic relations had disrupted cultural patterns organized around lifetime employment and uniform career paths, forcing people to radically alter their life scripts. The film *Tokyo Sonata* (Kurosawa 2008) discussed in Chapter Two, is an example of the destabilizing transference image, in that Ryūhei's dismissal from his company throws him into a completely different urban space than he had known. Also touched in in Chapter Two is the 2006 NHK documentary *Working Poor/Wākingu Pua* (Kamada 2007 [2006]), often cited as a milestone in bringing poverty and social instability into the public discourse (Yuasa 2012: 93; Allison 2013: 47; Kotani 2017: 13). The program follows several members of the working poor in their daily struggles, including a homeless temp worker, a tailor in a decaying market street, a rural family of strawberry farmers, and an ex-full timer father working several part-time jobs. While claiming to present their lives "as they are" (*ari no mama*), *Working Poor* is a highly stylized production that makes use of cinematic techniques to empathetically capture the lifeworlds of its subjects. Most of the people featured in the documentary held stable work or at least prospects for it at one time. Interspersing the painfulness of their current conditions are photographs of their old selves – wearing suits, going on vacation, being part of a family. The contrasts mark these individuals as transposed subjects, falling from "our society" to a heretofore unknown space of precarity lurking within Japan.

The fluidized economy strongly impacted young adults, since the institutional networks of support meant to guide them through public education into occupation-based "social locations" no longer functioned (Brinton 2011: xv-xvi). Women workers were especially harried in the new environment by dual imperatives from the government to enter to the work force for "gender equality" but also to strike a "work/life balance," in other words, to have children and increase the birthrate (Ueno 2013: 31-32). Meanwhile, the actual work available to young women were unstable contact jobs that precluded both possibilities. (*ibid.*: 85). In his widely read *Society of Unequal Hope* (*Kibō kakusa shakai*

2004: 121-122), sociologist Yamada Masahiro attempts to capture the strangeness of the conditions in which young Japanese found themselves via an image of “prismatic refraction” (*purizumu henkutsu*, Figure 3.2). The entrance into adult life, Yamada imagines, entails a refraction through strange geometry onto to a theretofore invisible stage. The *narō-kei* style is uniquely suited to literalize this image via the trope of the *isekai*, wherein the protagonist is transported to an economized game world.

The fantasy realms of these “precarious *isekai*” bear visible marks of a flexible economy – want ads, contracts, work scarcity, and homelessness (Figure 3.3). Characters interface with these conditions through what we might call a “gamer imagination.” Building on Azuma Hiroki’s theories of “gamelike realism” (*gēmuteki riarizumu*) in light novels, Selen Çalik Bedir invokes the *isekai* trend to describe how “gamelikeness” and its features of repeatable and looping narratives have come to function as base referents for a wide variety of fiction (Bedir 2020: 45). However, in the fictional worlds of the genre, “gamelikeness” takes a descriptive rather than narrative form. Visual cues of game perspective, where the field of vision is augmented with data menus (Figure 3.4), mark out and stimulate an instrumentalist worldview which seeks to strategically systemize one’s field of action. Game skills of referencing, cataloguing, and deploying data elements – the tools by which these fictions make their way in their media ecology – become tools to chart a socioeconomic path in neoliberalism at large.

Most importantly, their narrative structures situate the *isekai* adventurer as a gig worker engaging in risky labor for uncertain economic gain. Fusing the media-form’s episodic and open-world dynamics with the eternally anxious present of neoliberal “politics of survival” (Allison 2013: 83-84), the world unfolds through repetitive activities like killing enemies for rewards or “leveling up” one’s cache of skills. For example, *Grimgar: Ash and Illusions/Hai to Gensō no Gurimugaru* (Nakamura 2016, hereafter *Grimgar*), depicts a group of new arrivals to an *isekai* who make their living by killing goblins on commission. The sequence of their first kill in Episode 2 is emblematic.

The fight scene is simultaneously intense and pathetic; gravity-conscious animation embodies the desperation in their frantic unskilled movements. After the gory killing scene, the episode returns from commercial to a close-up still of the small sum earned from the job, followed by a scene of the party disbanding for the day, exchanging the tired line of “again tomorrow.” The sequence condenses their repeated actions on the margins of survival, organized by the pivotal symbol of exchange.

Alienated distance is cultivated through the “*bocchi*” (loner) narrative voice of light novels; plot events are ironically commented on by the cynical-yet-vulnerable main character/narrator who is used to not having any friends (see Hato’oka 2013). A good example is the *Konosuba* anime (Kanasaki 2016-2017) and its depiction of the humorous misadventures of a *hikikomori* named Kazuma. Reincarnated into a game-like *isekai* after an embarrassing death, Kazuma is forced to accept humiliating and dangerous quests with his similarly pathetic comrades. *Konosuba* imagines alienation in the precarious world through absurdist humor and schizophrenic fluctuations made possible by the layering of images in anime. In the first episode, for example, Kazuma’s first forays into the *isekai* job market moves through a montage of work rhythms framed as fulfilling and meaningful but which the viewer easily recognizes as the hand-to-mouth life of a precarious laborer (Figure 3.5). The montage romanticizes the minutest movements – a stream of drunken vomit takes the form of a rainbow – before ending with Kazuma awakening on his bed of straw in a squalid stable to scream “this is wrong!” The romantic image of a holistic social place appears as a kind of erroneous brain state, belied by harsh realities and constituting an object of ridicule. Fusing cultural imaginative structures with their own media genre tropes, “precarious *isekai*” fictions map life paths within neoliberalism in an intensified form, apprehending precarious conditions and transmediation as equally constitutive.

Precarious *isekai* are therefore critical depictions like those discussed in Chapter Two. *Grimgar* and *Konosuba* resemble *Tokyo Sonata* in eviscerating cruel optimism and

providing an “affective mapping” of neoliberal life as unsafe, absurd, and harmful (Shaviro 2010: 4-5). However, as in *Tokyo Sonata*, investment in criticality means that even the transformative realm of the *isekai* reinforces capitalist realism. By writing neoliberal conditions into the physical structure of the world and alienated distance into the subjective worldview, precarious *isekai* fall prey to the atomized individualism so amenable to neoliberal hegemony. Gamer imagination often legitimates what autonomist theorist Paulo Virno calls “sentiments of disenchantment:” half-understood motives of opportunism, fear, and cynicism that orient social interaction in post-Fordist economies (Virno 1996a: 13). Some precarious *isekai* fictions utilize game strategy as tutorials for competitive neoliberal thinking, such as in *No Game, No Life* (Ishizuka 2014), in which Sora and Shiro, a brother-sister duo of *hikikomori* gamers, are transferred to an *isekai* whose power struggles are organized through contractually binding games. Every inhabitant is marked as *homo oeconomicus* in the flesh; a glowing symbol of a bet appears on a person’s skin (Figure 3.6). The siblings’ devious strategies learned from years of gaming at home fuel their ascent to the top of the world’s hierarchy of mythical races. Numerous other works deploy a similar structure of “rising to the top” of worlds which have individual competition built into their ontological structure.

A relatively thoughtful example of the genre, *Grimgar* works to show the misery of its gig-ified world, depicting the realistic death of a main character within the initial concept-building arc. *Grimgar* manifests its alienation in moments of elegiac meditation, with traumatized characters framed against impressionist backgrounds of vaguely European towns blending into the landscape (Figure 3.7). The violence of their socioeconomic condition is inextricable from the beauty of the environment, which feeds the story’s themes of finding a livelihood and companionship in a harsh world. While a touch of the common is present in the way that the new arrivals survive by depending on each other, their makeshift family simply replicates privatized modes of care. We cannot see, as we can in *ARIA* (Amano 2002-2008) and to a lesser extent in *Haibane Renmei*

(Tokoro 2002), any traces of Kathi Weeks' "utopian demand" for "a more substantial transformation of the present configuration of social relations" (Weeks 2011: 176, *c.f.* Chapter Two). In contrast, *Konosuba*'s protagonists comically repeat cycles of boom and bust as the money gained from completing quests is inevitably lost, forcing them back to the "quest board" to survey the unattractive options (Figure 3.3). The entertainment in their picaresque rhythms is precisely the imaginative impasse of both economic and mediated horizons. Life and work exist as either a laughable cycle of disappointments or an endless repetition of struggle within an impenetrable totality that nonetheless governs the rationality of their choices (Foucault 2008: 277-278).

Precarious *isekai* fictions bypass cruel optimism only to remain trapped by their own critical reflexivity, thereby negating the *isekai*'s transformative power as a constructible world. Indeed, the focus on neoliberal alienation sometimes causes the subgenres' orientation toward heterosexual male desire to slide into outright sexism. As Ueno Chizuko observes, the gender envy of destabilized male workers has functioned to reinforce Japanese neoliberalism's regimes of production and domination (Ueno 2013: 25). While works like *Konosuba* take care to ironically situate depictions of male resentment, others devolve into misogynistic delusion. The recent *Rising of the Shield Hero/Tate yūsha no nariagari* (Abo 2019), for example, begins with the protagonist's ostracization from the *isekai* society due to a false rape charge.

While they are sometimes more objectionable than other examples, precarious *isekai* are nonetheless critical depictions. Their successes lie in imagining "what it feels like to live in the 21st Century" from different subjective positions (Shaviro 2010: 1-3). Critical depiction in precarious *isekai* articulates not only Japanese (male) youth workers' situated vision but also the global reality in which neoliberal conditions are inseparable from conditions of transmediation. Their failures – cynicism, sexism, inability to provide solutions – stem from their very success at mediating the precarious complexity of those conditions. Within neoliberalism's liquified social, critical depiction does not necessarily

lead to systemic critique or alternative sociality. Yet even in its current place within a fully valorized media ecology, the *isekai* conceit and its fantasies of spatial discovery and self-reinvention retain the promise of new imaginative integrations. The end-credit reel of the *Konosuba* anime closes each episode with *ARIA*-like tableaux of characters working peacefully against idyllic backdrops. The creators seem to get what is experientially successful about the core imaginative experience which the media mix business has put to work. It is not the invocation of shared media references, but the glimpses of an autonomous life hidden in the interstices of the pessimistic neoliberal world.

4. Mediating Collectivity in the *Isekai*

As elaborated in Chapter Two, imaginative fantasies of social reintegration have their own pitfalls. In fiction and in public discourse, attempts to rethink social arrangements outside of neoliberalism easily fall back onto nostalgia for older forms of cohesion (*c.f.* Akahori and Iwasa 2010: 7-8). Integrations can also serve to accommodate workers to changes within capitalism by focusing on individual relocation within a naturalized totality. We can see such forces at play within the cultural rhetoric of lifestyle diversity which accompanied the solidification of neoliberal reason within Japan. One notable articulation is *The Happy Youth of a Desperate Country/Zetsubō no kuni no kōfuku na wakamonotachi* by sociologist Furuichi Noritoshi (2011). Building on older *wakamonoron* theories, Furuichi asserted that the young people who were teenagers or college students in the late 2000s had acclimated to the instability of their socioeconomic prospects. Rejecting older aspirational goals of wealth and professional success in favor of basic living standards and communication with friends, they were able to find joy amid the anxiety of nonstandard work (Furuichi 2011: 251-253).

Furuichi's thesis has been reasonably criticized as a legitimization discourse that provided cover for economic elites worried about social inequality but resistant to change

(Allison 2013: 91, Kotani 2017:17-20). However, it has value as an example of the way in which social horizons were being renegotiated in post-millennial Japan. We can see an analogue to Furuichi's ideas in the media depiction of freeters. A loanword which condenses the longer *furī arubaito* or "free part-time work," the term evoked an image of a young worker who switches freely between temporary part-time jobs as they pursue their hobbies or artistic pursuits. Takahara Motoaki describes how the discourse of freeter work as self-discovery was actually produced by industry and policy makers during the 1980s to amass a flexible labor force from the ranks of the younger generation (Takahara 2006: 83). As discussed, the freeter shifted into a scapegoat for socioeconomic problems during the millennial period, even though most new part-time workers were doing so because they had no other options. Government discourses of "self-governance" and "inner cultivation" were disseminated through education programs to encourage proactive individual responses to the unstable labor conditions (Arai 2005 3; Ogawa 2015: 18). Throughout the 2000s, literary and media images of freeters served as sites for discourses about "good" and "bad" ways to be an unaffiliated laborer in neoliberalized Japan (Driscoll 2007: 173-176). Recuperations of the freeter figure take many forms across different media. In contrast to the paternalistic vision in *Freeter Buy a House* (see Chapter Two), libertarian depictions in such films as Miki Satoshi's *Adrift in Tokyo/Tenten* (2007) or Tanada Yuki's *One-Million Yen Girl/Hyakuman-en to nigamushi onna* (2008) focus on the freeter as the source of a new subject/world relation. Liberated from the strictures that come with a stable social location, the young part-timer in these fictions embarks on a journey that unfolds the totality of Japanese society in a new and interesting way.

Of these, *One-Million Yen Girl* is interesting for its similarities to the anime fictions discussed here. Using the techniques of cinema, *One Million Yen Girl* meticulously weaves a holistic subject/world relation from stylized images of the protagonist's peculiar work rhythms. Her career prospects destroyed by a criminal conviction, young freeter

Suzuko moves around Japan, working a temporary job in each place until she earns one million yen, at which point she departs for another location. Elegant camerawork actualizes Suzuko's experiences inside a lush cycle of work and movement. Travel scenes show her on solitary bus rides through flows of landscape as voiceover narration provides philosophical pathos. The camera then establishes her picturesquely in the new setting, after which she moves into her new temporary rhythm of work and life (Figure 3.8). Yet Suzuko's freedom relies on the same expired unity as *Freeter, Buy a House*. Her rhythms gain their sense of beauty and belonging by assembling established Japanese filmic archetypes – idyllic rural towns, lovable locals, conventionalized coming-of-age scenes – as eternal harbors for the casualized worker. In the end, her liberty to discover newness simply unveils once more the fantasy of an unchanged Japan.

A similar limitation can be seen in a strand of *narō-kei* fictions that we can call “slow life *isekai*,” which arise out of the net novel ecology somewhat later than the precarious *isekai* described above. The fictions of this subgenre feature a protagonist who has been worked to death and reincarnated in a gamelike *isekai*, where they take up farming or other slow-paced forms of employment. They are composited in the same way as other *isekai*, reflexively invoking their media-ecological origins and real-world economic forces. The plot focuses on the pleasurable slowness of the protagonist's new life. Interestingly, this subgenre often features female protagonists, as in the aforementioned *I've Been Killing Slimes*. These fictions capitalize more fully on the *isekai* self-reinvention fantasy to imagine ways of living outside the pressures of corporate employment, where *karōshi* or death by overwork is indeed a possibility. In this way, they productively take up the cognitive work in the earlier *nichijō* fantasies we saw in Chapter Two. However, the game *isekai* conventions provide a pre-recognized and privatized horizon; they simply place the protagonist in a more comfortable position within it. The innovative socioeconomic worlds in *ARIA* or *Haibane Renmei* are replaced by ready-made game *isekai* which confirm individualized modes of satisfaction, without regard to

how that satisfaction might be widely shared. Both *One Million Yen Girl* and these slow life *isekai* effectively simulate the possible affects and horizons of a life not bound to profit margins. Yet they can only imagine them as individual movement within a preconceived and naturalized totality. In *One-Million Yen Girl*, it is the cinematic stock of an expired national image; in *I've Been Killing Slimes*, it is the gamified *isekai* ecology.

Isekai collectivity is possible. *Log Horizon* (Ishihara 2013-2015), one of the earlier examples of precarious *isekai* fiction and certainly one of the most innovative, uses the conceit to imagine the re-institution of collective order within conditions of neoliberal atomism. The story follows Shiroe, one of 30,000 Japanese gamers who suddenly find themselves in the world of the fantasy RPG *Elder Tale*, physically embodied in the forms of their characters. *Log Horizon's* *isekai* is manifestly neoliberal. Not only are the competitive impetuses of gaming – levelling, bonuses, player-killing etc. – physicalized as economic activities, the world itself is monetized. As narrated in the original net novel by Tōnō Mamare, every “building and plot of ground is an object for sale” (Tōnō 2010: *n.p.*). While they are effectively immortal, the absence of any visible purpose beyond the transactions of daily life breeds anomie among the stranded players. Like the actual precarious Japan, the adventurers' labor is dislocated from meaningful social locations and incapable of structuring a visualization of the whole. Some players numbly perform quests to pay for daily expenses while others descend into robbing, kidnapping, or forcing younger players into sweatshop-style labor.

In developing this critical depiction *Log Horizon* remains faithful to its environment of imagination, systematically unfolding the *isekai* as a game world and adhering closely to the images and processes of role-playing games. It makes pivotal use of gamer imagination, showing Shiro cataloguing and testing the various phenomena using the augmented reality of the display which manifests in front of players as they interact. (Figure 3.4). As we saw in *No Game No Life*, gamer imagination can work to reinforce the neoliberal sentiments of disenchantment. However, as Virno theorizes, these negative

emotions are simply the capitalist distortion of a cognitive “degree zero:” our intuition that in postindustrial society “our relation to the world tends to articulate itself through possibilities...instead of according to linear and univocal directions” (Virno 1996a: 23). Properly reoriented, this degree zero can stimulate a drive toward common production instead of neoliberal atomization. *Log Horizon*’s gamer imagination perceives a split between the pleasures and goals given by the game system and those specific to the agency of the individual gamer, who may manipulate the rules of system to achieve a desired effect. The result is a subject/world relation in which the totality reveals itself as an *artificial* system, comprehensible and malleable to human effort.

The systemic rules of *Log Horizon*’s *isekai* are defined by a logic of self-interest and endless competition which most adventurers simply accept, thereby devolving into either the liquid malaise of precarious subjectivity or into more savage forms of exploitation. Shiroe instead manipulates these parameters in the service of a plan to institute a cooperative society among the dissolute players. Initially a typical alienated *bocchi*, Shiroe slowly develops a holistic subject/world relation by “treasuring community” (*komyuniti o taisetsu ni suru*), as he puts it. *Log Horizon*’s achievement is to enact his drive towards a new collective through the multiple dimensions of its imaginative modelling: the affective gratifications of experiential visuality from anime, the strategic mapping of space from role-playing games, and the critical correlation with socioeconomic feelings of precarity. As Shiroe’s gamer imagination maps and learns to influence the *isekai*’s laws and other players’ behavior, he regularly encounters panoramic moments of the fantastic landscape, such as the titular “log horizon” he and his companions discover. Like in *ARIA*, these moments of shared pathos stimulate both emotional identification with the totality and intimacy with those sharing in it, providing a kind of affective guide for Shiroe as he proceeds to develop his plan.

A scene in Episode 7 concisely shows the different techniques of imagination harmonizing into collectivity. (Figure 3.9). We see flashbacks of Shiroe mapping the

isekai salable zones, a montage of buildings with status displays. We are then treated to lavish background art of a defamiliarized urban scene where Shiroe meets his friends to share his plan. Shiroe reflects, “I came to see that making a place for others creates a place for yourself.” The moment of intimacy between the players shifts back to strategy as they plan together. Through this “media mix” of perspectives and feelings, Shiroe slowly positions his own existence within a widening network of cooperation. What is more, while limited by the subgenre’s gender predilections, in *Log Horizon* the female characters’ roles in the coalition lead to more detailed depictions of their skills and motivations. It is not quite that *Log Horizon* is more consciously gender progressive; rather, it opens onto recognitions of others’ agencies by striving toward its new collective.

The founding story arc culminates with Shiroe’s coalition manipulating the self-interested leaders of major guilds into forming into a round-table government that will protect weaker players and the *isekai*’s native population against exploitation. When one of the guild leaders’ quips that there are no laws against exploiting younger players, he responds, “In this world up to now, there have been no laws...only phenomena....Laws are what people create and recognize.” This cute pronouncement unexpectedly resonates with the “self-instituting society” of Cornelius Castoriadis’ theory of social imaginaries (Castoriadis 1987: 108). Neoliberal reason is the “instituted society” in its sickest form, the social world reduced to a set of economic parameters operating outside of human intention. For Castoriadis, liberation from an instituted order must recover a sense of the radical imaginary, through which a society “recognizes itself as instituting.... as the source of its own otherness” (*ibid.*: 215). In *Log Horizon*, the coalition’s move to institute order in the *isekai* touches, consciously or not, on the will to autonomy and the recovery of “bare democracy” (Brown 2015: 201).

Through alternating imaginative textures of strategy and intimacy, *Log Horizon* produces a subject/world relation that neither clings to an assumed real-world collectivity, nor embraces neoliberal cynicism and opportunism, nor contents itself with a personal

journey through an unknowable totality. Its promiscuous deployment of mediated visualities forces collective social being into view from out of the opacity of the precarious imaginative environment. *Log Horizon* begins from the strategic necessity of first visualizing the existing totality in its inadequacy, then models the affective movements by which a new totality might be instituted. The work of reorienting the totality situates the subject in that very process. Shiroe's revolution is therefore less interesting as an analogue of a particular utopian demand than as a methodology for social imagination in media-saturated societies. It models a process by which media-imaging techniques can be mapped onto the social world, generating models of action and communication which can question an existing order while also producing a new one. It seems like a suggestion to the ranks of alienated gamers that their reclusive play in fact contains the very cognitive faculties that might allow them not only to survive in the world but to change it.

A different *isekai* mediation of collectivity can be found in the more recent *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime/Tensei shitara suraimu ni natta ken* (Kikuchi and Nakayama 2018-present, hereafter *Tensura*), in which a murdered salaryman is reincarnated in an *iseki* as a sentient "slime:" those mobile balls of jelly that occupy the lowest rank of video game monsters. His abject appearance masks his status as an "overpowered" (ludicrously powerful) character. These gamelike *isekai* "skills" include a strategic inner voice called the Great Sage (*daikenja*), visualized in the anime as status updates appearing within a field of geometric graphics, and an ability to absorb in amoeba-like fashion any object or creature to gain its powers. Armed with this impressive skillset and his amiable personality, he takes the name Rimuru (a reference to a character in a classic *isekai* anime) and navigates the *isekai*, uniting different monster races towards the goal of building a town where they can live peacefully together. As their town grows and prospers, it begins to attract the attention of human nations in the *isekai* world.

On a basic level, *Tensura* enacts a standard Japanese developmentalist fantasy,

wherein an underdog nation becomes strong through construction and trade. The town Rimuru and his friends build is obviously modelled on traditional Japan, complete with hot spring, and its food and accoutrements become the envy of the entire *isekai*. Later arcs also show Limuru exercising his old salaryman skills in his dealings with the human nations. In addition, it indulges freely in the well-worn “harem anime” trope of an unremarkable male protagonist in a living situation with several beautiful girl characters. Even with his slime body, Rimuru is fawned over by an ever-expanding group of buxom *isekai* women, and respected as an older brother figure by the male monsters. However, the mode of collectivization, which is *Tensura*’s “*uri*” or marketable distinction within the sea of *narō-kei* fictions, is noteworthy. As he befriends goblins, ogres, lizardmen, orcs, and other weak monster races that have been pushed to margins by human kingdoms, Rimuru uses a magical ability to give them individual names. The naming magic causes them to change shape, mixing their monstrous traits into human forms that invariably evoke one or more beloved character types from the otaku “database” (Azuma 2001). By sharing this fictional horizon, the abject creatures become part of Rimuru’s multiracial kingdom as it rises to compete with the human nations. Rimuru is also immersed, as his absorptions eventually give him a beautiful androgynous body with which he/she interfaces with the human world (Figure 3.10).

With *Tensura*, the insatiable search for desirable characters in otaku media is used as a technique of making-familiar, visualizing the process of recognition by which alien others become recognizable as part of a shared project. Character tropes harmonize the creatures’ separate physical existences by linking them to visual elements in a shared environment of experience, forming a collective of hybrid bodies which can build and inhabit something like a town. It is almost like a limited, subcultural version of Hardt and Negri’s “monstrous flesh of the multitude:” the way that manifestly different bodies can form planes of recognition through the commonalities of corporeality, desire, and “capacity for transformation” (Hardt and Negri 2004: 192-194). Though not as politically

innovative, *Tensura* shares the ethos of “creating a place for others” that motivates Shiroe in *Log Horizon*. The developmentalist fantasy of building a kingdom is reinvigorated in *Tensura*. A successful town is built not through individual or national ambition, but through the libidinal desire to interact with new and different bodies, to see traces of common experiences and enjoyments in them, and finally to share a living space with them. In this way, the valorized cultural production that governs the anime media mix can make perceivable a shared collective project.

Coda

2010s *isekai* fictions speak to the enduring possibilities of anime fictions even within the current moment. From the affects of their valorized ecology, they are able to reflexively model the contours of neoliberal reason on a variety of levels, and even provide hints of how different collectivities maybe emphatically imagined through the very conditions of transmediation which organize life in neoliberal capitalism. *Log Horizon*'s visualities of strategy and empathy provide hints towards the self-institution of society, while *Tensura*'s imaginative integration, even when yoked to male heterosexual desire, opens onto recognitions simply by striving toward assemblage. Because anime images are reflexive of an entire socioeconomic and media ecology, their imaginative use is not limited to fictional works. In closing Part I of this dissertation, I want to briefly speculate on how analyses of mediated social imagination might be applied to the function of anime images in their larger cultural spheres. For Lamarre, it is the non-hierarchical and serializing tendencies of anime images and their subcultures which contain the potential for autonomy within capitalist media cultures (Lamarre 2006: 369). However, recent political theories of social imagination indicate that human collectivities require resonant imaginative forms around which to coalesce (Bottici 2014: 94-97). As we have seen, imaginative integration in anime fictions are uniquely able to make visible desired

forms of life within neoliberalism. They can therefore be mobilized to articulate and motivate moves toward autonomous collectivity among people who identify with them.

One pertinent example concerns a response to working conditions in the anime industry itself. In the last decade the anime industry has gained notoriety for the prevalence of “black” (*burakku*, *i.e.* unjust or exploitative) studios which abuse their casualized workforces, even prompting NHK special documentaries that treat it as a full-fledged national issue (see Sherman 2017). Younger and low-ranking animators, paid almost entirely on commission, are particularly vulnerable. The precarity of these creators is manifested in the response section of a Survey of Young Animators conducted by the nonprofit group AEYAC, which reads like Allison’s case studies. Lack of living security appears as a widely shared fear. As one respondent laments, “I just want enough of a guaranteed salary for the minimum standard of living. Just a 30,000-yen allowance would put my heart at ease” (AEYAC 2017: 67). Other refrains include the inability to save for the future, the absence of opportunities to share knowledge or build skills, and the lack of control over time. The Animator Dormitory Project started in 2015 as a crowdfunded solution to these industry concerns. The project solicits funds from global fan communities in order to maintain several apartments in the Tokyo metropolitan area where young animators can apply for residence (*N.P.O Animator Supporters* 2019). These “dormitories” are organized around skill-building as well as security; residents regularly conduct workshops with experienced animators and carry out collaborative media projects which promote the idea of self-management in the anime industry (*ibid.*). They also have a Youtube channel which releases simple anime videos about conditions of animators, including recent videos about the impact of Covid-19 (*Animator Dormitory Channel* 2021).

I am in not a position to comment on the efficacy of the Animator Dormitory Project as an industrial initiative. My interest lies in the way the project makes use of anime images. Illustrations from the young animators are regularly used in online promotion and

as donor rewards. Crucially, visions of life within the dormitories feature prominently on the project homepage and are the focus of the top-tier rewards. Some of them are endearing maps of the room layouts; others are abstracted images of pleasurable collaborative activities – working, cooking, studying – within an idyllic anime space populated by recognizable characters, motifs, and subgenres (Figure 3.11). Each one of these illustrations is a miniature anime fiction, mediating the image of work in neoliberal Japan in a way that hopes to evoke the sense of a different way of doing it. The participants in the Animator Dormitory project visualize their own activities through the transmedia environment of imagination, building a subject/world relation of the individual animator to the totality of the industry with anime-esque assemblages of pleasurable life scenes that convey the possibility of a synergy between industrial production and social reproduction. In these images lies a kind utopian demand that the universe of anime-based expression and wholesome labor conditions mutually produce each other. These articulations of the social are central to the project’s rhetoric, the explication of its vision of anime production in society, and its quest for funding. A full field analysis is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, I believe the case of the Animator Dormitory project provides an interest prospect for understanding the links between fiction and praxis that flow through the transversal processes of mediated imagination.

Part II

Shock Images:

Genres of Violence and their Geopolitical Fictions

Chapter Four

The Anime Fiction of the World:

Genres of Violence and Global Imagination in the Post-Cold War

In Part I of this dissertation, I discussed how anime fictions in post-millennial Japan articulated a mode of mediated imagination that provided alternative ways of thinking through the problems of social experience caused by neoliberalism. Their increasing focus on attractive characters and mediated communication were not escape routes but modes of engagement which continue to exhibit latent potential in the present day. Part II will continue the discussion with regard to geopolitics in the neoliberal age. Depictions of geopolitics in anime and related media overwhelmingly appear in what we can broadly call “genres of violence:” types of fiction which revolve around scenes of violent spectacle and relatively realistic death. Throughout the millennial period these genres, closely connected to the otaku legacy, depicted national and global political issues using the new techniques of imagination developed in anime’s neoliberal convergence (see Chapter One). They imagine the global, not as an abstract metaphorical totality (Zahlten 2014: 488), but as a concrete space composed through power struggles between material and mediated entities. Unsurprisingly, their geopolitical landscape is a space of bloody conflicts. An image of the world as inherently violent, in any media form, can easily feed into reactionary ideology. However, this chapter will look at how imaginary violence can be productive of social thinking, in this case, of a global imagination.

These genres of violence articulate globalized space at a time when anime, manga, and related cultural forms were becoming salient elements within real-life globalization. Numerous reasons for anime's global popularity have been proposed: the lack of identifiably Japanese characters or motifs in early anime exports, which mark anime as one of the *mukokuseki* or “nation-less” products of Japan’s postwar marketing strategy,

(Iwabuchi 2002: 28); anime's production of a "fantasyscape" which allows fans in Japan and abroad to experiment with alternative identities (Napier 2005: xii, 25-26); or the synthesis in anime's interlinking media products of a virtual "capitalist imagination" that resonates across borders (Allison 2006: 23-24). My addition to this list, developed across the following chapters, is that the multiple levels of anime fictions – the cognitive activities enabled by media forms, the audiovisual techniques of making non-present entities perceivable, and the interactions of these activities with sociocultural backgrounds – comprise an inherently *geopolitical* imagination which is constantly being re-nationalized and/or depoliticized. This deterritorializing/reterritorializing movement mirrors the paradox of contemporary global space itself. Since the end of the Cold War "the global" has become a vividly conceivable imaginary field, promising supranational vantage points from which to critique official narratives along with new spaces of diversity and deliberation (Steger 2009: 9-10). Yet since this field becomes visible only as an aftereffect of power, it is always already being congealed into managerial schemas and extant hierarchies (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 502-504).

Media forms within Japan's neoliberal turn were affected by elite discourses which enjoined citizens to respond to economic and political challenges from abroad, naturally, in terms conveniently dictated by government and business authority (Yoda 2006: 22-23). The global imaginary they produced was a highly managed one, in which all global events fit within the parameters of a single world market and free trade "democracy" guaranteed and enforced by authoritarian nation-states (Harvey 2005: 79-80). At the same time, rapid changes encouraged liberatory predictions of the waning of nation-state power and the rise of new forms of globalized public culture based on mixture, migration, and mediation. During Japan's millennial period, academics and artists strove to conceptualize how the failure of the postwar national model could potentially open onto a more inclusive "publicness" (*kōkyōsei*) (Kang and Yoshimi, 2013[1999-2000]: 151). In this chapter I will look at fictions which participate in this common imagining, identifying how their

techniques of imagination negotiate the multiple virtual terrains of globalization: the managed space of “international contribution” promulgated by elite discourse and mass media outlets (Ōishi and Yamamoto 2006: 27), the “impossible totality” of global capital lying behind it (Jameson 1991: 37), and the potential new “publicness” produced therefrom.

With geopolitics, too, the aspects of anime fictions that detach them from responsible representation of “real” conditions are precisely what allow them to model the intensities of media-saturated social experience in innovative ways. As I will detail below, anime fictions enable the reinvention of a key concept from cultural globalization studies: that of global imagination as articulated through “contestation.” In its original formulation, the global media field is figured as “a symbolic space characterized by social imaginaries...which people around the world share, but...simultaneously compete and struggle over” (Orgad 2012: 47). While the concept is meant to identify egalitarian forces within cultural globalization, its view of global interactions tends to be limited to narrative or rhetorical practices, inadvertently managing the visceral tensions of the multiplicity it means to articulate. Anime fictions’ mediations of large-scale economic and political horizons can help overcome such limitations by forcing us to consider global imagination outside of representation. I argue that anime fictions and their mediated imagination make visible a kind of political agency that is not premised on a rhetorical subject and that will help in the future to draw transnational links between fictions and people who are contesting the neoliberal-national global imaginary in seemingly incommensurable ways. Violence and characters embody an “animetic” form of imaginative agency within geopolitics, which contributes to their own globalization (Lamarre 2009: xxvi).

While I touch on a number of works in the chapter, my extended case study will be *Black Lagoon* (Hiroe 2002-present), a *seinen* (targeted to a young-adult readership) manga about contemporary piracy and international crime, as well as its anime adaptation (Katabuchi 2006-2007, 2010). Both versions integrate a wealth of real-world political

information via the methods of image-thinking and passionate learning that developed within the otaku modes of adult fandom in connection with new media technologies (Okada 1996: 47-48). These methods include the use of character images as “attractors” to amalgamate a variety of concepts (Steinberg 2012: 43), the fabrication of intense bursts of sensory stimulation through media clichés, and the fictionalizing pursuit of niche bodies of knowledge. With reference to interviews with the manga’s creator Hiroe Rei, I will show that *Black Lagoon* simultaneously is produced by and produces the geopolitical imagination which arises through otaku modes of knowledge. Through its indulgences, *Black Lagoon* resonantly visualizes both the “objective violence” at the heart of global neoliberalism and the exhilarating disjunctive publics that might arise from it (Žižek 2008: 2). It does so not as a rhetorical process of self-representation, but as an enactive and extended process of mediated imagination that weaves through globalized media and political environments onto moments of fictional coherence. Its rhythms of destruction enact the pleasure of experiencing a de-nationalized global horizon, of being freed from old categories of belonging and sharing encounters with previously impossible entities. Though certain inequalities remain beyond its understanding, it also opens onto the knowledge that such imaginings emanate from a relatively privileged position within actual world politics. In this way, *Black Lagoon* and similar examples of the genres of violence model not only the potentials and the limits of their medium, but also those of “the global” itself as an imaginative space for new configurations of imagined collectivity within the age of neoliberalism.

1. Geopolitical Space in the Post-Cold War Era

Contemporary globalization discourses originate in the fall of the Soviet Union and the effective incorporation of the world into a single market. During this time, neoliberal economics became the unquestioned logic of global organization. Military actions by rich

countries were carried out under the label “humanitarian intervention,” maintaining the façade of a harmonious cosmopolitan order against increased worldwide violence (Hardt and Negri 2004: 27). The new struggles for social justice that emerged out of the volatile new conditions were disparate, not recognizing their particular objects of protest as different manifestations of global capitalism (Dyer-Witherford 1999: 7-11). As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri propose in *Empire* (2000), in this period “the globe” becomes synonymous with neoliberalism, and monetization becomes the *a priori* source of juridical definitions for supranational order (Hardt and Negri 2001: 7-8), Hardt and Negri’s analysis is corroborated by fact that the discourses of financial and business elites specifically framed globalization as synonymous with the spread of neoliberal markets, euphemized as “free trade” or “democracy” (Harvey 2005: 80-81; Kiely 2005: 81-84). At its material base “the global” of the post-Cold War era is the geopolitical spatiality of neoliberalism itself.

However, the invisible power of neoliberal globalization also brought into view accelerating sociocultural crossflows which the Cold War had hidden. The social sciences paid increased attention to ground-up sociocultural globalization, drawing on poststructuralist ideas to identify processes of increasing diversity and fragmentation (*e.g.* Featherstone 1990; Hannerz 1996; Appiah 2006). Koichi Iwabuchi’s influential analysis (2002) of Japan is pertinent here. Iwabuchi characterizes the global ascension of Japanese cultural products like anime as the result of a shift from American universalism to a de-centered “global modern gaze....Japanese cultural power has become conspicuous as the absolute symbolic center no longer belongs to a particular country” (Iwabuchi 2002: 45). Iwabuchi therefore sees in the circulation of popular media in East Asia as a way of articulating a progressive regionalism, wherein national forms “expose the juxtaposed similarity and difference among contemporaneous ‘Asian’ modernities” (Iwabuchi 2004: 3). Outside of the academy were the diverse actions of alter-globalization movements, who modelled horizontal forms of global organization in their local movement practices,

a technique described as “prefiguration” (Maeckelbergh 2009: 66-68). Theory and practice were both attempting to articulate and encourage the implicit possibility that the globalized world, while an effect of exploitative forces, was also a space of new connections which could open onto radical re-distributions of collective being through globalized processes, including processes of imagination.

The concept of global imagination was pioneered by Arjun Appadurai in his theory of globalization as a state of “disjuncture” in which “people, machinery, money, images, and ideas now follow increasingly nonisomorphic paths” (Appadurai 1996: 37). In Appadurai’s theory, “mediascapes” – interconnected flows of media contents and infrastructures – and “ideoscapes,” – flows of political ideas and rhetoric detached from their original context – provide “complex repertoires of images, narratives, and ethnoscapes” for people to construct “imagined worlds.” Fictional and real landscapes blur into each other based on one’s proximity to the objects in question. For Appadurai, the disjunctive global space normalizes imagination as social practice within “a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern” (*ibid.*: 4). Whereas in previous eras imagination had been the domain of the sacred or private fantasy, heightened encounters with difference and the increased possibility (or necessity) of movement forced people to live “through the prisms of possible lives offered by the mass media in all their forms” making fantasy part of the quotidian work of social life (*ibid.*: 53-54).³⁰ Appadurai sees imagination as the source of human agency in globalization; through it, regular people “are able to contest and sometimes even subvert the imagined worlds of the official mind and of the entrepreneurial mentality that surrounds them” (*ibid.*: 35).

Shani Orgad’s *Media Representation and the Global Imagination* (2012), touched on in Part I, builds on Appadurai’s ideas about imagination and media. Orgad develops her concept of imagination through readings of Appadurai, Cornelius Castoriadis, and social imaginaries theorists like Charles Taylor and Dilip Gaonkar to contest the view of

media representations as mere inscriptions of power relations or sociocultural roles (see Chapter Two). As sites of imagination, media representations are simultaneously conservative and transformative, and are constantly open to individual and collective re-interpretation (Orgad 2012: 49). Orgad offers detailed analyses of how different types of global media genres offer their viewers and creators “explanatory frameworks” about others, themselves, and other possible worlds or lives (*ibid.*: 41). The endless proliferation of conflicting frameworks “cultivate an imaginary of the world as a common space peopled by strangers; they bring us closer, symbolically, to distant others and they propel the imagining of the possibility of pursuing alternative lives” (*ibid.*: 8). She retains Appadurai’s optimism that global imagination will create spaces beyond both nations and normative cosmopolitan order in which individual and collective experiences can creatively interact, contest, and change. She even speculates that the availability of different interpretative frameworks in global media can produce “estrangement effects” which encourage viewers to reject the manipulative narratives of national outlets (*ibid.*: 88-91). However, Appadurai’s and Orgad’s ideas of global agency are undermined by the fact that on both representative and discursive levels of media culture, alternative visions of globalization have tended to be eclipsed by official versions. Millennial Japan is a case in point.

2. Neoliberal-National Order and the Impossible Totality of the Global

As Tomiko Yoda eloquently phrases it, though “neoliberals speak of globalization as a radical new chapter in human history...their rhetoric also relies heavily on the conceptualization of the world and of a subject that harkens back to the regime of the nation-state, imperialism, and colonialism” (Yoda 2006: 24; *c.f.* Harmes 2013: 60). When Japanese neoliberals invoked globalization as the reason for deregulation and structural reform, they did so through a language of national interest which “simultaneously reifies

and marginalizes Japan, reproducing national unity and insularity through this dual gesture” (*ibid.*: 23-24). Concurrently, nationalist discourses of a return to cultural values or “strong Japan” inevitably pictured Japan asserting itself on the geopolitical stage, ironically as a subordinate actor within the US imperium (Yoda 2006: 27; *c.f.* Katzenstein 2008). The overwhelming success of the complementary neoliberal and nationalist narratives within millennial Japan’s public culture was due in no small part to the domestic anxieties described in the previous chapters. The absence of major competing discourses after the marginalization of leftist ideas in the last decades of the 20th century was another important factor.³¹ In addition, the volatility of contemporary geopolitical events, as well as the increased visibility of how Japan was implicated in them, lent credence to admonitions from the political, business, and media classes that globalization indeed meant giving up economic stability for national competitiveness and accepting that Japanese soldiers would enter the world’s battlefields.

Liberatory articulations of globalization were also in play, however. In the late 1990s, a series of discussions by progressive intellectuals in the journal *Sekai* sought to question the inevitability of nationalist responses to globalization and to theorize a more open approach. A key sample was the collaboration between political scientist Kang Sanjun and sociologist Yoshimi Shun’ya, which were later compiled into the book *The Perspective of Globalization/Gurōbaruka no enkinhō* (2013). Merging early globalization studies with cultural studies, Kang and Yoshimi attempt to articulate global space as a polyphonic and multi-perspectival arena of spectacles that erode borders between different social sites (Kang and Yoshimi 2013: 33-34). One focus is Tokyo as a “global city,” a locus of national dis-aggregation, ethnic mixture, and struggle over information (*ibid.*: 106). In their view, globalization necessitates a pluralist model of public participation where speech, identity, and action can be flexibly articulated along local/global and unified/pluralist axes (*ibid.*: 57). A similar exchange in *Sekai* was conducted with Takahashi Tetsuya, a longtime critic of Japanese state nationalism (Ishida

et al. 2000). Such projects argued against the dominant discourse by theoretically articulating the ambience of expanded horizons behind the neoliberal-neonationalist imaginary. Yoda's own project combats the neoliberal-neonationalist model of globalization by delineating how the constructed image of a unified "Japan Inc." had masked the many accommodations Japanese institutions had been making to the changing demands of global capitalism in the decades before the crises of the 1990s (Yoda 2006: 29).

The realms of the arts and popular culture naturally served as outlets for nascent global imagination. As two young artists expressed in a discussion published in *Sekai*, the breakdown of traditional institutions since the 1990s seemed to birth new forms of diversity and rebellion, which included a new openness to the world (Kina and Sugok 1998, quoted in Leheny 2018: 100). The slowly normalizing otaku phenomenon was also posed as part of the new global-ness of Japanese culture, due to increasing recognition that anime and manga were popular outside of Japan. One of the most famous exponents of otaku during the 1990s, the self-professed "Otaking" Okada Toshio, enthusiastically described the existence of non-Japanese otaku as evidence that otaku culture constituted a new advanced form of consumer vision (Okada 1996: 52-55). Critics and practitioners alike seized on the raw sense that destabilization was enabling the breakdown of old hierarchies and borders, that more open modes of social being were becoming imaginable.

The cinema of millennial Japan was also filled with creative depictions of the globalized nation which fed into the sense of a renewed international presence for Japanese art films. Mika Ko has described how films from renowned directors like Miike Takashi and Iwai Shunji depicted ethnic minorities as chaotic and creative forces within a disorganized Japanese society (Ko 2010: 2-3, 33). Miike's *City of Lost Souls/Hyōrugai* (2000) can serve as a condensed example. Featuring a multiracial cast, it tells the story of a Brazilian-Japanese criminal and his Chinese girlfriend as they attempt to amass a fortune and escape Japan before they are captured by either the police or the Chinese

gangs which rule Tokyo's underworld. *City of Lost Souls*'s Japan is visualized in Miike's hallucinogenic style, with scenes of drug deals in underground caverns and cock-fighting amphitheatres through which the racially ambiguous hero and heroine move stylishly. A scene where Mario breaks Kei out of jail is perhaps most emblematic. Presumably taking place in Japan, the escape is shot as a grandiose shootout and car chase through the American southwest, which cuts abruptly to urban Tokyo (Figure 4.1). Through the actions of these larger-than-life mixed Japanese, Japan is transected by other locations as it explodes onto the world stage.

The events from the September 11 terrorist attacks through the US-led Iraq War worked to obfuscate liberatory visions of the global landscape in favor of an imaginary of nationally managed "humanitarian" violence. In Japan, the latter was embodied in the foreign policy of the Koizumi administration (2001-2006). Koizumi's domestic agenda of privatization and deregulation was echoed on the international scale with the deployment of Self-Defense Forces to Iraq and the adoption of US-influenced counter-terrorism policies (Leheny 2006: 121-123). Increased military and police power was accompanied by aggressive media campaigns working to legitimize them, reifying neoliberal economics and national authority through the re-institution of a "pseudo-Cold War" (*gijireisen taisei*) (Oguma 2014: 546-547). A major turning point occurred in 2004 when three Japanese humanitarian volunteers were taken hostage by Iraqi resistance forces. As the official narrative went, the volunteers were interfering with the SDF's "humanitarian" mission, as well as placing a burden on taxpayers for their rescue (McCormack 2007: 71-72; Driscoll 2007: 180-182). Individual political action abroad was irresponsible; supporting the nationally mobilized armed forces was the proper way to participate on the global stage. The icy welcome the hostages received upon return was a great victory for Koizumi's authoritarian neoliberalism and its message of "self-responsibility" (*jiko sekinin*) at home and national obedience abroad (Hook and Takeda 2007: 122-123; Takahashi and Lee 2007: *n.p.*).

Yet the dominance of managed global imaginaries is not just the result of a successful manufacturing of consent by the powerful. It is also a response to the basic conceptual impasse in the face of the complexities of global flows impinging upon us and the media environments through which we attempt to process them. For Marxian thinkers, the impasse stems from the fact that all global flows are partial manifestations of capital's "smooth space" of placeless sovereignty (Hardt and Negri 2000: 189). Frederic Jameson's now-classic "postmodern sublime" evokes the non-representability of "the impossible totality of the contemporary world system...that enormous and threatening...dimly perceivable, other reality of economic and social institutions" (Jameson 1991: 36-37). Japanese invocations of postmodern society's "opacity" (*futōmeisei*, lit. "unclearness") can be seen as another version of this idea (Ōsawa 2011: 204). Even without the terms of the Marxist framework, we can recognize that the sum total of contemporary human activity is essentially "hyper," that is, massively and incomprehensibly distributed, to any given vantage point, and yet continues to exist for us as "an object in its own right" (Morton 2013: 2). The global that arises in the post-Cold War era and the neoliberal convergence is perhaps unique for the intensity of its double pull; it has exponentially more interlocking pieces, all of them stressing the emergence of a newer and larger totality that is more unimaginable than ever.

It is therefore all too easy for interested articulators, even those acting from an earnest desire to meaningfully represent its liberatory potential, to default to extant frameworks. Mika Ko has identified that the core metaphor of a *kokutai* or national body underwrites the displays of diversity in the 1990s films. Foreign elements are presented as spectacles to be consumed by a "benevolent" Japan which "allows them to thrive here" (Ko 2010: 62). In *City of Lost Souls* the subsuming national gaze is performed by the yakuza enforcer Fushimi and the police detective Kuwata, who act as bemused commentators on the actions of the foreigners they pursue.³² Analogously, Okada's excitement about international otaku takes back what it gives; the breakaway from mainstream Japanese

culture that he sees in otaku practices is ultimately attributed to their status as the “legitimate heirs” of Japanese traditional culture (Okada 2015: 94-97). Otaku cultural production enters the global stage framed as a representative of an essentialized Japanese culture. A similar rhetoric defines artist Murakami Takashi’s Superflat movement, which gained global renown in this period. Superflat art adopts motifs from anime, manga, and otaku culture and puts them in the context of gallery artwork. At his worldwide exhibitions, Murakami argued that anime, manga, and otaku were simultaneously direct descendants of Edo-era Japanese and products of an infantilized masculinity that developed in postwar Japan as a result of the defeat in World War II and the ensuing American domination (see Lamarre 2009: 111-118).³³ These discourses encouraged government officials to integrate otaku into national branding policies (Iwabuchi 2002: 19; Leheny 2018: 101-107).

On a more abstract level, even the theories of global imagination reflect an assumed normative milieu. Appadurai and Orgad see mediated imagination in the interactionist sense; social subjects use media forms as “frameworks and scripts” for imaginative engagement with the social sites of self, other, nation, and world (Orgad 2012: 10). As discussed in Chapter One, the interactionist perspective of media as “resources” is premised on a stable social subject which can critically organize and interpret more or less coherent media representations. Orgad’s global imagination is especially dependent on the image of a narrative subject and a view of media representation as rhetorical statements. These assumptions are manifested by her near-exclusive focus on either wide-reach televised news broadcasts and public events or on rhetorical genres of small-reach media like blogs and confessional videos (*ibid.*: 163-164). This limits her attempt to articulate a model of democratic pluralism through media contestation. She cogently describes the immediacy of audiovisual media and the “lack of narrativity” in media environments as serious problems for sociological approaches, but her prescriptions for action nonetheless presume rhetorical forms of organization and critique, as when she

applies the old Brechtian view of estrangement to the global media environment. Against its best intentions, the interactionist approach bureaucratizes global space, limiting its view of meaningful participation to patterns associated with the rational cosmopolitanism Orgad means to reject. If imagination is only conceived in semiotic terms, then the only kinds of contestation that can happen in global imagination are those which conform to accepted rhetorical forms within organized public practices, either the “responsible” media works with recognizable messages or the sanctioned public spheres of electoral politics, social media campaigns, and orderly public demonstrations. Vast realms of humans’ imaginative lives are left out here.

Nonetheless, Appadurai’s view of imagination in global politics, drawn from the work of Castoriadis and other post-Marxist thinkers, remains valuable for describing the forms of agency that arise out of disjuncture. It is within our practices of imagination that the impossible totality becomes “ours,” however temporarily and inadequately. In making the impossible objects of globalization present to conscious, imagination also creates the temporary spaces to reorganize what is given (Gosetti-Ferencei 2018: 5). In these imagined worlds, we do have some possibility to “contest and sometimes even subvert the official mind” and its “entrepreneurial mentality” (Appadurai 1996: 33). Therefore, we should conceive imaginative contestation as broadly as we can. For Appadurai, globalization creates practices of imagination which weave “the world of emotion and affect” and “the world of language and self-representation” into complex patterns of response which are not reducible either to primal reactions or to ideological symptoms (*ibid*: 144-149). Though Appadurai puts imagination squarely within the “world of language,” we can follow his spirit of pursuing a “fine-grained” analysis by not reducing the mediated process of imagination to semiotics. Appadurai’s core ideas can be amplified by recent cognitive and phenomenological models which suggest that both affective reactions and reflective consciousness are extended and enacted within “landscapes of affordances” (Rietveld *et al.* 2018: 57). “Affordances” include any “possibilities for

action provided to us by the environment” (*ibid.*: 41). They are also “not dependent on the abilities of a particular individual, but on the abilities available in the form of life as a whole; in the entire ecological niche or social or cultural practice” (*ibid.*). Raw neurobiological response and interpretative cultural response are part of the same ecological system through which raw sense data is turned into an interconnected phenomenological world. Affect and emotion are “cognitive episodes...bodily ways of making sense of the situation” which can be modeled through imagination (Colombetti 2018: 575-577). Consequently, our affective engagement with environments – physical and mediated – need not be filtered into the rhetorical world of language to be cognitively innovative.

Appadurai’s view of imagination as “an organized field of social practices” becomes richer here. A given imagining arises out of an “intersubjectively extended process” which “simulates the engagement with external objects and environment,” (Jansen 2016: 150-151). Since our minds are part of an environmental network of feeling and thinking, imagination occurs on multiple registers, engaging affect and cognition within an interplay of pressures and affordances (Poulsgaard and Malafouris 2017: 286-287). His description of media as “cinematic and social tools” also gains wider significance within these ecological models, wherein technological and cultural objects act as extended thought processes that “augment” or “amplify” human cognition (Appadurai 1996: 63; Clark 2005: 236, 239). It is not a series of separate steps, where we perceive a media representation, react to it emotionally, and then incorporate into our semiotic identities and social practices. Rather, the components of audiovisual culture are links in a developing web of thinking, elaborated not only through narratives, discourses, and scripts, but also in images and sounds, in bursts of sensation and affective response, in half-understood perceptions of space and time. Global imagination incorporates these registers through our immersion in bodily-mental-media-social matrixes, but it is not reducible to a flow of affect. A higher process like imagination means “a break in the

flow of action” in which subjective agency is temporarily separated from the cognitive ecology, a moment of self-coherence as we creatively model non-present entities and experiences (Cowley and Vallée-Torganeau 2017: 2-4). Of course, these moments of agentic speculation are stimulated and shaped by the socioculturally enacted landscape of affordances, but they are also capable of feeding something new back into it. The function of media fictions is greater; they are not merely products or resources of global imagination but enacted “agential perspectives” within it (Medina 2013: 332). This perspective gives us a new view of the genres of violence as modulations of affective and cognitive agency within anime fictions’ latent geopolitical imagination. They contest the managerial version of globalization by modelling their own exhilarant versions of it. Moreover, they do so via the affective logic of “otaku knowledge:” a shared set of techniques for thinking through media environments.

3. Otaku Knowledge and Geopolitical Imagination

Black Lagoon/Burakku Lagūn is a *seinen* (young adult-targeted) manga series by Hiroe Rei. It is part of a lineage of works sometimes categorized as “gun action” (*gan akushon*), a rough label for fictions whose stories revolve around stylized firefights with realistically drawn weapons. Other practitioners of the style include manga authors Hirano Kōta, Itō Akihiro, and Sonoda Ken’ichi, who Hiroe cites as influences (Hiroe, Shōgakukan 2009: 28-29). *Black Lagoon* is serialized in the *seinen* manga magazine *Monthly Sunday GX*, regularly from 2001 to 2010 and sporadically since then. A Japanese salaryman, Okajima Rokurō, is sent to deliver a package overseas but is kidnapped by the crew of the smuggler boat Black Lagoon. His superiors write him off as dead, since the package contains information about their company’s illegal collaboration in an arms development project. Okajima then joins the crew of Black Lagoon, taking the nickname Rock. The story follows Rock’s adventures with the “Lagoon Company” in the fictional

Thai city of Roanapur (*Roanapura*), depicted as a hub for international criminal organizations. *Black Lagoon's* selling point is that this relatively realist setting is punctuated by gun battles between cartoonishly powerful female characters.

One emblematic scene occurs at the end of an early story arc (Hiroe 2001: Vol. 1, 182-185). Levy, the Chinese-American gunwoman of the Lagoon crew, faces off against Roberta, a Columbian ex-FARC assassin dressed incongruously in the French maid costume had become the emblematic uniform of the otaku-targeted “maid cafés” in Tokyo’s Akihabara district (Galbraith 2010: 229n). The two women have been developed throughout the arc as expert killers, setting the stage for the action trope of two unstoppable forces colliding. The explosions of their gunfight spread across crisscrossed panels, dissecting the scene into its immediate sights and sounds (Figure 4.2). They are stopped by the arrival of the exquisitely disfigured Balalaika, an ex-Soviet Special Forces officer who heads the regional branch of the Russian mafia (Figure 4.3). Watching from the sidelines, Rock and the other *Black Lagoon* crew members comment that “the three most dangerous women in the world” have assembled and that the dock is now “ground zero.” Of course, this all amounts to a classic piece of action affect, a gratuitous rush of erotic violence. But the way in which this preposterous scene is put into shape exemplifies the particular form of geopolitical imagination found in *Black Lagoon* and in the modes of otaku knowledge acquisition that it utilizes.

Political themes in anime and manga are nothing new. Mediations of Japan’s role in global politics are central to celebrated cinematic anime like Ōtomo Katsuhiro’s *Akira* (1988) and Oshii Mamoru’s *Patlabor the Movie 2* (1993). These auteurist works emanate from popular *mecha* (lit. “mechanical”) genres of fighting robots and related tropes and their postwar role as safe spaces to depict war themes (Ueno 1998). Elsewhere, the *gekiga* (lit. “dramatic pictures”) form of politicized action manga served as a countercultural medium in the 1950s and 1960s (Suzuki 2018: 275-276). The *seinen* action genres to which *Black Lagoon* belongs retain elements of *gekiga's* themes of masculinist rebellion

against conformity, as well as anger at American domination (Penney 2009: *n.p.*). As touched on in Part I, the rise of media-centric “otaku” modes of fandom from the 1980s onward is often framed by Japanese cultural critics as a steady retreat from ideological politics into an “age of fictions” (*kyokō no jidai*, Ōsawa 2009: 75 *et passim*), and with the rise of the internet, into microcosms of media communication (Uno 2008: 42-43). In the genres of violence, however, political themes have remained strong, though the method changes.

In addition to *Black Lagoon*, anime fictions throughout the millennial period engaged with new global realities through the vantage points of globalized Japanese youth characters. Certain anime series made by Production I.G., a prestigious studio with ties to Oshii, were especially didactic. For example, *Blood +* (Fujisaku 2005-2006) depicts its vampire heroine Saya’s journey beyond the boundaries of Japan to uncover a worldwide corporate-military conspiracy. Ian Condry reads the series as anti-nationalist, since Saya rejects her vampiric “blood” ties in favor of “transnational communities of intimacy” (Condry 2008: *n.p.*). *Eden of the East/Higashi no Eden* (2009) an original concept by director Kamiyama Kenji, purposefully constructs a proactive image of globally-savvy Japanese youth, depicting two college students who meet by chance in Washington D.C. – described as “the center of the world” – and return home to solve the mystery behind a series of unexplained missile attacks on Japan (Figure 4.3).

A different de-nationalization is found in the series trilogy *Noir/Nowāru* (Mashimo 2001), *Madlax/Madorakkusu* (Mashimo 2004), and *El Cazador de la Bruja/Eru Kazado* (Mashimo 2007). Produced by Bee Train, a smaller studio run by director Mashimo Kōichi, this trilogy of gun action anime is linked by stories of female characters who fight together in different romanticized global locations and share emotional bonds with Sapphic undertones. Scene direction, closely coordinated with the music of composer Kajiura Yuki, appears almost like an extended music video. The first installment *Noir* sets the trilogy’s premise: a *moe*-designed teenaged Japanese assassin joins with an older

French partner to recover her lost memories. Another successful franchise is the light novel series *Full Metal Panic!/Furumetaru Panikku!* (Gatō 1998-2011) and its anime adaptations (Chigara 2002; Takemoto 2003, 2005). The highly conventionalized story features a Japanese teen soldier named Sōsuke. Raised abroad by a private anti-terrorist military organization, Sōsuke must return to regular Japanese school life in order to guard a female high schooler named Kaname who is targeted by terrorists. As these summaries suggest, the political content in each of these works is refracted through the reflexive, media-saturated, cliché-friendly, and character-centric modes that had come to characterize otaku media by the time of the neoliberal convergence (see Chapter One). I see *Black Lagoon* as one of the most instructive results of this chaotic interaction because of how clearly it displays its own techniques of imagination as they explore the “landscape of affordances” that constitute its media environment.

Attention to creators’ descriptions of their creative processes can help to clarify how shared techniques of imagination fabricate the non-present space of geopolitics. In the case of *Black Lagoon*, descriptions are readily found in a series of dialogues between mangaka Hiroe Rei and his editor which were serialized semi-regularly alongside *Black Lagoon* in *Sunday GX*.³⁴ In these dialogues, provocatively titled *Hetare no chiheisen* or “A Loser’s Horizon,” the notoriously unproductive Hiroe details his many passing interests, erratic reading and viewing patterns, character design preferences, and so on, explaining how these different stimulations inform *Black Lagoon* and his other works. Hiroe emerges as an exemplary specimen of the otaku modes of spectatorship and knowledge acquisition which attracted early commentators.

As described in the Introduction, the term “otaku” designated not only adult fans of anime and manga but also a passionate orientation towards the new abundance of mediated information from the late 20th century onward. This includes the media images themselves, the characters and worlds they show, and the technologies that produce them. A specific pattern of what we might call “otaku knowledge” developed out of this

orientation, a kind of affective knowledge-seeking that starts with otaku media but can be applied to any body of information. The basic pattern is that of an attraction to certain core images which stimulates a path of “research” onto an increasing range of idiosyncratic topics (see Kikuchi 2015: 155-159). Okada Toshio’s “otakuology” (*otakugaku*) describes otaku as people who pride themselves in their wealth of impractical or childish knowledge (Okada 1996: 121). It also a process of “fictionalizing objects of desire,” not only sexual objects but anything that generates interest (Saitō 2000: 33). In social psychological terms, the otaku “loop of imagination” is triggered by a particular arresting image provided within an cultural-environmental context, and builds a body of knowledge and other images around it as it feeds the imaginative syntheses back into lived practice (Zittoun and Gillespie 2016: 41-44). The problem with the early explicators in Japan was that they characterized such activities as symptoms of a new psychological or social type in Japan. The normative and essentialist flaws of their descriptions have been justly criticized (see Lamarre 2009: 255-257, Aida 2015: 110-111).³⁵ Instead, I argue that these methods of passionately interacting with information as sources of both visceral and intellectual pleasure can be seen as intersubjective techniques of imagination. They are shareable modes of speculative thinking, feeling, and doing that aid in “optimal grip” within image and information-rich environments (Rieltveld and Brouwers 2017: 548). These techniques have been made possible by the widely shared experiences of intensifying media networks and destabilizing socioeconomic conditions, and therefore can enable cognitive work beyond their assumed sphere of interest.

Hiroe’s range of otaku topics is perhaps broader than others’, including Hollywood and Hong Kong cinema, classic horror novels, Soviet realism, tech business, Brazilian favela culture, and others, but is unified through his passionate pursuit of minutia and hidden information which stimulate the sense of something larger. In one typical anecdote, he describes a rare Soviet underwater submachine gun that appears in *Black Lagoon*, expressing his love for the impossible ambitions of the USSR which led them to produce

“weird guns” (*hentaijū*) and conduct studies on “superpowers” (*chōnōryoku*), a reference to de-classified CIA documents about Soviet ESP research (Hiroe, Shōgakukan 2009: 85). The concept of imagination developed in this chapter sees such pursuits as “possibilities for action” within a socioculturally determined cognitive environment. They are mutually recognizable methods for approaching the vastness that impinges on us through the various pathways of our media environments. Characters, weapons, uniforms, poses, and many other cues act as equally powerful “solicitations” that become present to consciousness as opportunities to engage with a given affective-cognitive landscape of affordances (Rietveld *et al.* 2018: 52). Crucially, Hiroe applies this method of knowledge acquisition directly in the creation of his manga. He explains how characters and plotlines emerge as responses to impressive scenes from movies or from stimulating news stories. The resulting violent character or situation the prompts further “research” which builds up ethnic and political backgrounds (Hiroe, Shōgakukan 2009: 100-102, 133). The inspiration for *Black Lagoon* arose as part of his daydreaming while reading cases of Japanese freighters being robbed by pirates in the South China Sea (*ibid.*: 22). *Black Lagoon* thus embodies the cognitive process which brought it into being, the movement of global imagination tracing out imagined geopolitical landscapes using the “cinematic and social tools” at its disposal (Appadurai 1996: 63).

Like the *sekai-kei* fictions in Chapter One, *Black Lagoon* models global visibility through different viewing positions. While Rock is the stand-in for the implied reader’s “normal” sensibilities, it is Levy who embodies imaginative movement through the global space of violence. Composed in both look and personality from an amalgam of previous action heroes, her sexy character design is of course meant for a heterosexual male gaze, but as we have seen in previous chapters, the associative structure of anime fictions require that we also gaze *with* her. The action paneling of the manga, which is closely replicated in the anime version, lacks the reflective distance that informs cinematic theories of the gaze. The separated fractions of intense moments must be pieced together

as part of our own experience for the scene to cohere; we must experience it with and as Levy. Not only her movements but also her eyes and facial expressions guide the action through an intermedia space explicitly imagined as beyond Japan. For example, in Figure 4.5 she destroys a fleet of pursuing boats while listening to a song by the American band White Zombie (Hiroe 2001: Vol. 1, 98-99). In Figure 4.6 she fights alongside an homage to actor Chow Yun Fat's characters in Hong Kong action films (Hiroe 2003: Vol. 3, 88-89). As Levy gleefully dispatches enemies in these scenes, the panels switch rapidly between voyeuristic angles, explosions, snatches of physical movement, and close-ups of Levy's joy at her own superhuman movement. The pathways of Levy's violence model the euphoria of a consciousness blasting through intense theaters of the global mediascape, picking up political and cultural referents as it goes and mixing them into its mobile simulation.

The peak moments are complimented by a different kind of movement elicited by the narrative arcs' dense geopolitical references. In a story arc wherein the Lagoon crew aids a currency counterfeiter's escape, a scene features the counterfeiter, another hyperbolically attractive female character, passionately describing the details of her trade as the other characters listen impatiently (Hiroe 2006: Vol. 6, 25-29). Informed readers will immediately understand this as a moment of "otaku talk." The world of counterfeiting becomes briefly recognizable by being put onto a framework of passionate learning whose attraction is not communicable to others. Moments like these act as solicitations for global imagination. *Black Lagoon's* world opens up through tantalizing kernels of information about past dictatorships, private militias, technical or nautical data, illegal financial procedures, the list goes on. Each one is a stimulus to research more deeply by hinting at a deeper background of more forbidden knowledge. In Thomas Lamarre's animetic theory, this would be a "subjectile" form of media engagement, in which "otaku 'freeness' moves toward an articulation of thoughts and actions within media networks...wherein lines of sight replace viewing positions...not a transcendent subject

but a projected or projectile subject pursuing lines of sight” (Lamarre 2009: 128). However, the knowledge kernels in *Black Lagoon* gain their force from the tacit assumption that the reader can at least potentially follow-up on the information by themselves, amassing a better picture of the world. Each one solicits the possibility of research and knowledge acquisition, and in their multiplicity they model an individual relation to the vastness of stimuli within mediated geopolitical space in the 21st century. By no means transcendent, the assumed spectator is posed as *situated* in an embodied, limited context, and therefore poised to gain pleasure and a degree of control from imagining what lies beyond that position.

Black Lagoon's two forms of imaginative exploration work together in the face-off between Levy, Roberta, and Balalaika. Fighting female characters are longtime features of anime and manga, in particular the image of the *sentō bishōjo* or “beautiful fighting girl:” a pubescent girl character endowed with superhuman fighting abilities. The prevalence and innumerable variations of these girl characters give them a central role in Azuma Hiroki's theory of otaku culture as “database consumption.” The *bishōjo* character image functions as a site for the assembly of different visual elements from the vast stock of recognizable anime tropes, which aim to stimulate the “*moe*” feeling of erotic or romantic attachment (see Azuma 2001: 64-67). Saitō Tamaki's Lacanian psychoanalysis of otaku gives *sentō bishōjo* a different central role; the “phallic girl” figure of the fighting girl grounds the otaku subject's relation to Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real realms, enabling a new kind of heterosexual normalization within media-saturated society (Saitō 2011a: see esp. 170-172). Saitō poses the innocent and invincible *sentō bishōjo* as a Japanese invention opposed to the “Amazonian” fighting women of western comics (*ibid.* 47). If so, *Black Lagoon*'s confident, mature, and wounded figures would be “western,” and indeed, Hiroe's inspiration for them includes American comics and movies. This exposes the limits of Saitō's psychoanalytic view, since the *Black Lagoon* women are very obviously created by modes of database assembly, the passionate learning of otaku

knowledge, and the fictionalizing forms of desire that he himself identifies as otaku activities.³⁶ In particular, they are aligned with the rising trend of *gijinka* (personification) in otaku imagery from the late 1990s onward, through which diverse entities or concepts are represented as cute or sexy girl characters (see Saitō 2011b: 177-179).

With the *Black Lagoon* women, the assemblage extends far beyond recognized otaku tropes, incorporating cinematic and sociopolitical elements from beyond Japan. The battle described above is the peak of a complicated story arc of global kidnapping involving failed leftist movements, drug cartels, and rare mineral extraction rights. The violent battle between evocative characters is the not simply the reader's reward for tracing these lines of illicit commerce from around the world to the city; it is also the means by which the global flows become visible as objects of pleasurable knowledge in their own right. The characters' backstories, which are all in some way connected to the underside of Cold War politics and their subsequent diffusion after the fall of the USSR, are subsumed into their visual design. In the figures above, elements like Levy's tank top – a nod to Linda Hamilton's character in *Terminator 2* – or Balalaika's scar and jacket – traces of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan – compress and flatten the different fictional and historical kernels into parts of their larger-than-life personas. They do not “represent” any one concept, but instead condense different cultural, aesthetic, and political forces into their erotic gravity. Their battles become “ground zero” for exploding the shadowy elements of geopolitical forces into view, evoking a borderless map of global flows of monetized violence that lies behind official narratives of national and legal authority. *Black Lagoon's* irresponsible movements thereby open onto glimpses at the “impossible totality” of neoliberal capitalism's global reach, modeling both the structural violence that composes it and the possibilities for realignment that arise as its aftereffects.

4. Objective Violence and the Shape of Global Agency

In his book *Violence* (2008), Slavoj Žižek departs somewhat from his Lacanian foundations to invoke conceits of visibility and standpoint. Violence in modern society takes three forms: subjective violence, which are actions attributable to a particular actor, and two kinds of objective violence: symbolic violence, oppression built into language and other semiotic structures; and systemic violence, the forms of violence necessary for the smooth functioning of a socioeconomic system. As Žižek explains,

Subjective and objective violence cannot be perceived from the same standpoint.... The violence inherent in this "normal state of things... has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be "rational" explosions of subjective violence. A particular crisis only explodes into media visibility as the result of a complex struggle. (Žižek 2008: 2).

Writing in the wake of the Iraq War and the height of free market hegemony, Žižek means for his concept of objective violence to break through the neoliberal consensus and the cosmopolitan world order, which represent non-state violence as "irrational" aberrations (*ibid.*: 36). In their own intuitive manner, *Black Lagoon* and other examples of the genres of violence undertake a similar enterprise. Generic structure and official discourse lead them to imagine the world as violent. Their work is to reimagine *the way in which* it is violent as means of discovering other globalizations within which to relocate agency.

Again, they succeed in simulating new geopolitical experiences to the degree that they reject responsible representation. As described above, the "hyperobject" of global capitalism's "impossible totality" frustrates attempts to politically represent it, forcing attempts to do so into extant frameworks (Morton 2013: 1-3; Jameson 1991: 36-37). Fictions which attempt critical depiction of actual conditions slide unconsciously back into the managerial global imaginary, most often that of the nationalized subject. This is visible in the Production I.G. anime. *Eden of the East* director Kamiyama Kenji has

claimed that he was responding to what he saw as widespread feelings of aimless among Japanese young people in the 2000s, and that he wanted to give them something to think about (Seraki 2019: *n.p.*). Indeed, many of the Production I.G. anime from this time exhibit a similar desire to inspire Japanese youth to be more proactive social agents. This of course is a commendable feeling. However, in making the anime into rhetorical models for interacting with the world, these creators end up resorting to neoliberal-national backgrounds of inter-national productivity and belonging. Both *Blood+* and *Eden of the East* return their globe-trotting main characters back to Japan, figured in *Blood+* as an idyllic hometown in Okinawa and in *East of Eden* as a troubled urban Tokyo that they must work to save. The time outside the border is a virtual study-abroad program, after which the globally educated youth returns to work in their “proper” national location. This fantasy of Japanese youth being free and comfortable on the global stage unconsciously feeds into the “global human resources” (*gurōbaru jinzai*) discourse circulated by business gurus and bureaucrats as an idea for invigorating labor pools and improving the global competitiveness of Japanese corporations (see Yonezawa 2014: 40-41).

The irresponsibility that structures the mediated imagination of anime fictions offers different modes of engagement with the global landscape. *Noir* and the other Bee Train anime veer productively in the opposite direction to the Production I.G. works. They fully embrace the subjectile flows of animetic visuality described by Lamarre (2009: 199 *et passim*), flattening vague political conspiracies and hordes of enemies into moving dioramas whose main purpose is to reflect the fluctuations of female characters’ inner worlds and affections for each other (Figure 4.7). Synchronized to the atmospheric soundtrack, the global space of violence is abstracted to the point where its components are simply modulations of their sublimated eros. This takes them far away from the realist legacy of genres of violence, with the later series incorporating mystical elements. While these techniques do not quite engage with the post-Cold War geopolitics which are the

topic of this chapter, they do innovatively reinscribe anime's "girls with guns" images and worldwide action genres at large within new emotional and sexually fluid realms.

Full Metal Panic! is nearer to *Black Lagoon*, blending topical sociopolitical references with media clichés and body humor as sources of enjoyment. Actual military hardware and references to real-world hotspots feed into violent scenes of well-trod anime tropes like giant fighting robots and superpowered children. The strategic jargon of Sōsuke and his international military team flips over to slapstick *manzai*-style comedy dialogue in his fights with Kaname (Figure 4.8). Like the *sekai-kei* fictions described in Chapter One, its imagined world is composed of fluctuations of transmedia images which find temporary coherence through an interplay of fictionalized horizons and everyday feelings. In their own way, *Full-Metal Panic!*'s mediated techniques of imagination are doing similar work to the environmentalist art described by ecocritic Ursula Heise, which deploy satellites photos and other planetary imaging techniques as allegories for global connectedness (Heise 2008: 65-67). By being condensed into the physical lives of characters and the affective cues of an animetic lifeworld, the immensity of geopolitical activity is made "perceivable and experience-able" (*ibid.*: 63). Of course, *Full-Metal Panic!*'s friendly incorporation of military organizations and themes might be seen as supporting rightwing discourses of international contribution through military involvement (Ōishi and Yamamoto 2006: 27). But this is not necessarily the case. Through the lens of performance studies, Stevie Suan describes *Full Metal Panic!*'s self-conscious performance of anime clichés as responses to the globalization of anime fandom (Suan 2016: 13-5). This performance, Suan argues, extends to the real-life themes of anti-terrorism and military deployment, so that the series self-consciously performs Japanese defense agency rhetoric as clichés themselves. *Full Metal Panic!* is thereby able to figure the official geopolitical order and anime's place within it as an arbitrary arrangement that need not be taken seriously (*ibid.*: 18-19).

Within this kind of mediated imagination, a simple genre choice can result in very

different geopolitical fields. *Full Metal Panic!*'s imaginings are embedded in military fiction and thus are limited to defense rhetoric's ideological maps, even as clichés. *Black Lagoon*, however, is embedded in crime genres, and is structurally committed to visualizing a world beyond the peaceful world-order. The story plays on news stories about hijackings of Japanese boats, as well as kidnapping cases of Japanese businessmen abroad. From the late 1990s, publicity campaigns by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (which, ironically, included a series of anime-inspired animated videos) pushed the message that "outside" was not safe for Japanese workers, who needed to be extremely careful when venturing beyond the government's protection (see Leheny 2006: 139-143). *Black Lagoon* turns this injunction on its head, using it as the springboard for Rock to witness both the "objective violence" and potential for multi-polarity in the post-Cold War world.

The *Black Lagoon* anime (Katabuchi 2006-2007) is extremely faithful to Hiroe's manga, often replicating scenes on a panel-to-frame basis. The few departures often usefully highlight latent structural elements in the story, as in one important sequence where Rock describes Roanapur as a "capital of evil, born in the gaps of the Cold War and raised by the drug-as-weapon strategies of the great nations." His narration overlays scenes of gruesome criminal activities and views of the nighttime cityscape. This explicit framing of Roanapur as a "capital of evil" is presumably a result of the broadcast version needing to inject a measure of moralism into what is otherwise a celebration of lawlessness. However, the montage also makes explicit *Black Lagoon*'s underlying premise that Roanapur itself is a database character, an imaginary condensation of extralegal economic forces which are not reducible to a particular location. Cuts between blurred stills of the cityscape and docks, back alleys, and wetwork rooms present Roanapur as a perverse image of Kang and Yoshimi's "global city," a major node in the global network of money and exploitation that erodes the foundations of national sovereignty (Figure 4.9). The city-character centralizes the imaginative exploration of the

fallout of the end of the Cold War and the new forms of capital flow it enabled. In the anime montage scene, Rock is shown walking through the streets flanked by the larger-than-life Lagoon crew members. Insulated by the story conceit, he and the assumed viewer bear witness to the underlying flows of violent commerce which official discourse attempts to obfuscate, and which his former company, a representative of Japan's managerial globalization, was involved deeply enough to sacrifice him to.

Black Lagoon's fantastical characters, cartoonish violence, and dense geopolitical references bring the different elements of capital flows onto the same plane. Stereotypes and *gijinka* feed into brief but resonant glimpses of real conflicts and exploitation. Besides Roberta's arc, a gruesome example occurs in a horror-movie inspired arc where the city is thrown into crisis by assassinations which have been carried out by two young twins. The twins are rendered in the ornate 19th-century clothes and creepy innocence which characterizes the Goth Lolita aesthetic of anime, manga, and subcultural fashion. Their cartoonish dementia moves the plot along like a campy slasher story, until it is revealed that the two children are survivors of the human trafficking which was reported in former Soviet states. One impossible but interesting confluence occurs where the crew, carrying documents from a Chinese triad boss to CIA operatives, is targeted by Islamist terrorists who are working in conjunction with an old veteran of the Japanese radical leftist movement. Each party is businesslike, including the initially stereotypical terrorist leader, who is depicted as a stressed middle-manager trying to get his project through. Through these pastiches a geopolitical picture is assembled where the operative logic of commerce traces out the objective similarities between state, corporate, criminal, and ideological violence.

Black Lagoon does not simply revel in seeing the evils of the post-Cold War world. Through these same techniques, the new publicness comes into view, if only partially and temporarily. As a non-hierarchical theater of endless "contestation," Roanapur begins to expose potential gaps in the US-led world order through which Japan maintains its safe

but stagnant position (McCormack 2007). Geopolitical realignment is comically illustrated when the representative from an American crime syndicate hires local assassins to dispatch a character under the protection of the Lagoon Company but is unable to control his new employees. The representative, ludicrously rendered as a tacky cowboy, expects to be treated as a leader but is instead mocked, cheated, and threatened by the multiethnic group of cartoonish assassins under his pay. In its ludic and hormonal way *Black Lagoon* is participating in the same dream of “decentered” global space as Appadurai and Iwabuchi, wherein “the US is no longer the puppeteer of a world system of images but is only one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes” (Appadurai 1996: 31). They share in one of the inaugural predictions of global imagination, namely, that the US monopoly on violence and order was breaking up amid the rising energies of sociocultural disjunction, leading to the possibility of previously peripheral entities breaking out of old roles and beginning to participate more equally in the creative destruction of the globalizing world.

Rock’s de-nationalized vantage point not only allows imaginative access to these changes but the chance to join in them, as in a major arc where Rock must track down a crazed Roberta before she kills a planted American special forces team (since her doing so would bring the wrath of US national security apparatus onto Roanapur) while also getting justice for the victims of a political assassination carried out by the American team in Latin America. This arc contains another moment when the anime version is able to reflexively manifest the imaginative techniques that the manga employs. Repeated scenes, not appearing in the original, show a sleepless Rock plotting out charts and memos on the wall of his room as he tries to track down the complex political scenario that brought the Americans to Roanapur (Figure 4.10). This conspiracy theorist image gently mocks the process of production and consumption that *Black Lagoon* pushes to the fullest, the affective-cognitive explorations of geopolitical knowledge which will openly open onto violent intensities which put things into clarity, even for a moment.

Since any imaginative modeling of social experience implies a situated position, the method contains its peculiar structural limitations. There are key points where *Black Lagoon* cannot break from the managerial inter-national framework of geopolitical space. Most telling are its benevolent depictions of Roberta's employer, an old member of Venezuelan aristocracy. Japan's national blind spot puts certain regions of geopolitical violence out of thought; *Black Lagoon* cannot look directly at the historical legacies of colonial violence the way that it can with US imperialism or corporate malfeasance. In addition, its eagerness to simulate a cacophonous global space sometimes leads the characterization to deploy stereotypes or ethnic slurs of foreign languages and cultures without an understanding of their implications. However, *Black Lagoon* is uniquely aware of the comfortable spot from which it explores the mediated flows of geopolitical violence. Originally conceived, under editorial pressure, as a mere stand-in for the reader (Hiroe, Shōgakukan 2009: 29), Rock's character develops through vacillations regarding his new life of crime and his ambivalent renunciation of Japan, which come to a head in a story arc where he returns to translate for Balalaika as the Russian mafia negotiates a deal with a yakuza syndicate. The Japan of his return is figured neither as a home nor even as an articulated cultural space. Filled out by hotels, business conference rooms, and empty parks, it is visualized as a relatively fortunate example of the innumerable "non places" within global commerce, a space for passing through rather than staying (see Shaviro 2010: 46-50). Even the nostalgic carnival he visits with Levy is a rundown distraction within the urban space, signaling an old national affect fading into global similitude (Hiroe 2005: Vol. 4, 33-40).

The deal inevitably falls through, resulting in the destruction of the yakuza. Rock's ambivalent role is tested by his sympathy for the young leader of the ill-fated yakuza syndicate, whose school outfit and demure speech simultaneously mark an idealized Japanese femininity and nod to the late-Shōwa cinematic trope of a schoolgirl-turned-yakuza boss (See Zahlten 2017b: 127-128). Rejecting his offer of help, she lambasts him

for remaining in the “twilight” (*yūyami*). “You don’t want to save me,” she yells, “If you let me die, you’ll lose the last bits of your memories of Japan. You’re not shouldering anything. You’re still holding the fantasies of normal life you pretend to reject” (Hiroe 2004: Vol. 5, 51-52). Her denunciation resonates beyond the overt themes, bringing to the fore an attachment to a feminized “Japan” lingering within otaku media, which the fiction itself ultimately remains embedded within. Using the same character-based visualities with which it explores the hidden depredations and potentialities of post-Cold War ideoscapes and mediascapes, *Black Lagoon* briefly discovers that it too remains in the twilight, ultimately glimpsing at the imagined worlds from the safety of an Imperial protectorate within neoliberal globalization, fantasizing about new scales of understanding and action but unable to part from certain cores of libidinal attachment that bind it to its location (Appadurai 1996: 35-37).

Coda

Black Lagoon is no radical work of alter-globalization; it does not, and probably cannot, “prefigure” a horizontal global public (Maeckelbergh 2009: 66-68). If anything, it accurately models the imaginative processes of aimless and atomized neoliberal subjects. But this is why its ability to map the virtual terrain of globalization in ways that link with both Marxist and democratic pluralist projects is noteworthy. Like most lay imaginations, it approaches geopolitics like an amateur, imagining the macroscopic scale imperfectly within the confines of its limitations and predilections. However, in doing so, it provides a clearer model of what Appadurai calls the “quotidian work” of global imagination: a kind of selective openness to a vast landscape of affective and cognitive affordances that can coagulate into moments of conscious understanding. Without recourse to a coherent political rhetoric, it nonetheless contests the dominant internationalist discourse to envision a geopolitical space fraught with both enabling and

disempowering forms of socioeconomic, political, physical, and aesthetic violence. The techniques articulate the tenuous construction of a global imagination felt in the guts, where core images condense otherwise daunting scales of space, complexity, and power into perceptible forms that can be responded to with human-scale thoughts, feelings, and actions. Agency emerges out of the process as a temporary resonance within the fictionalized horizon. It also can resonate across borders. The anime version of *Black Lagoon* continues to rank among the most popular titles outside of Japan.³⁷ Hiroe and his editor produced an English version of *Hetare no chiheisen* as an homage to these fans abroad. In it, the editor describes his bemusement at “a lady from a French publisher” approaching him at an international meeting to say she is “a fan of Levy,” presumably surprised at *Black Lagoon*’s cross-gender appeal (Hiroe, Shōgakukan 2009: 134). Perhaps more interestingly, it is cited as a go-to “leftist anime recommendation” in lists compiled by online commenters.³⁸ As will be discussed Chapter Six, anime and otaku culture have come to be associated with the political right in Japan and abroad. The existence of such lists hints at other uses.

A more general and encouraging example was seen during the 2019 anti-neoliberal protests in Chile, wherein amid the many thousands of youth protestors were signs decorated with famous anime characters, with speech bubbles mouthing mixtures of their set lines and the movement’s slogans (Pearson 2019). It is interesting that the most used image was a character from the anime *Demon Slayer/Kimetsu no Yaiba* (Sotozaki 2020) (Figure 4.11). While *Demon Slayer* is a mainstream *shōnen* anime whose main goal is to depict a youthful hero coming into his own, it is uniquely close in structure to the genres of violence described in this chapter. Protagonist Tanjirō’s journey from weakness to power is enacted through violent scenes of bloody combat and exhilarant movement through spaces composed of multiple “conventions” of design and historical motifs (see Suan 2021). This latent sense of enacted agency is arguably what gets integrated into Latin American youth culture as a “metaphor of collective political power” (Pino 2018:

201). Though a cross-cultural analysis is beyond my scope here, it seems promising to consider *Black Lagoon*'s engagement with its time and place in neoliberalism with that of the anime-using Chilean protestors as part of a similar enterprise within "the global" as an enabling fiction.

Chapter Five

Screens, Clichés, and Revolutions:

Code Geass and the Mediated Imagination of Change

The last chapter discussed how genres of violence in anime and manga engaged with the post-Cold War geopolitical landscape as a space of violence. It also described how anime fictions' techniques of imagination produces a "global imagination" that differs from the neoliberal-nationalist imaginary purveyed by elite discourse in Japan. Of course, agentic global imagination is not actionable in itself. Like most imaginations in the contemporary world, anime fictions are deeply immersed in the "liquid times" of global neoliberalism, where the processing of "essentially infinite" connections and permutations of information is foisted on the individual (Bauman 2007: 3-6). Globalized networks of information reinforce the individualist imperative by creating "mediated intimacy at a distance." We perceive newsworthy events happening "next to us" and relating to us "as individuals on an individual level," which cements a concept that the self is the only possible site of transformation (Orgad 2012: 79). The model of action in liquid modernity is that of a flexible individual constantly reshaping its identity to adapt to ever-changing networks of exchange which operate independently of political will (Bauman 2007: 4). It almost goes without saying that these conditions have tended to efface democratic principles of collective self-determination, replacing political imagination with economic flexibility (Brown 2015: 41 *et passim*). We are back to the issue of capitalist realism which occupied Part I, here on the geopolitical scale. How does collective change get imagined from within conditions of atomized transmediation?

This chapter will continue examining genres of violence and geopolitical imagination in the 2000s. I will focus on the well-known *mecha* or "real robot" (*riaru robotto*) genre of anime, which features anthropomorphic fighting robots piloted by humans in the

context of a fictional conflict.³⁹ Throughout the postwar period, *mecha* anime offered a space within popular culture to engage with issues of war and national identity (see Ueno 1998, Mizuno 2007, Kojima 2019). These preoccupations made the genre particularly sensitive to the volatile political atmosphere of the US-led “war on terror” and the Japanese complicity therein. As discussed in the previous chapter, millennial Japan’s public culture during that time was permeated with discourses of inevitability which argued that Japan and its theretofore sheltered citizens now had no choice but to enter global conflicts. These sentiments were often assimilated into popular media, including *mecha* anime, as a nationalized search for “a new role for Japan” within the global space of violence. These were not automatically reactionary; in fact, many of them hoped to chart a national path away from U.S. influence and toward regional cooperation.

Crucially, the *mecha* fictions of the time also partook in the mediated social imagination which arose in otaku media through the neoliberal turn, the convergence of new and old media forms, and the legacy of the great anti-*mecha* *Neon Genesis Evangelion/Shinseiki Evangerion* (Anno 1995-1996, hereafter *Eva*). The *mecha* of this time often behave like *sekai-kei* fictions, simulating individual viewing positions and psychological states within flows of transmedia images. To repeat my argument from Chapter One, this is an active engagement of mediated imagination with a new set of experiential forces, producing affective-cognitive machines for exploring the feelings and possibilities of the 21st century (see Shaviro 2010). When their machines integrate geopolitics, what is fed back to us will not be critical depiction. Pedagogically speaking, it will be irresponsible, a fictionalized – and commercialized – mixture of recognizable images, sensations, and ideas from throughout the media field, organized by affects of gratification and wish fulfillment. But it will simply not be hegemonic reality either. These fictions make perceivable the “neutral kernels” of experience in our mediated environments, and so their violence can punctuate our ambient desire for change (Virno 1996a: 13). As we saw in Chapter Three, their power is to help us perceive, not precisely

how to change the world in actuality, but *how we imagine* change might become possible by selling us a resonant experience of it.

I will elaborate this process through a close examination of *Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion/Kōdo giasu: hangyaku no rurūshu* (Taniguchi 2006-2008), a large-scale series produced by Sunrise, which is the studio responsible for the iconic *Mobile Suit Gundam/Kidō Senshi Gandamu* franchise and other hits of the *mecha* genre. With its sweeping story of a young revolutionary setting off a global conflict, *Code Geass* earned popular and critical success during its time and continues to generate sequels and spinoffs to the present day.⁴⁰ It is an almost ludicrously syncretic series which showcases an abundance of otaku media clichés in melodramatic fashion, most notably the individualized *sekai-kei* vision of its anti-hero protagonist Lelouch (see Chapter One). It also integrates pointed references to the tense political climate, including images of a Japanese nationalist rebellion. While critics in Japan tended to pick up on these national themes, those in the western world viewed *Code Geass* more as a critique of the Iraq War. The divergence highlights *Code Geass*'s amorphousness, which has led some critics to dismiss the series as a venal commercial venture hawking “something for everyone” (Choo and Koh 2016: 302).

I will argue that *Code Geass* does something entirely different with media and politics than these representationalist readings can account for. Both Lelouch the character and *Code Geass* the fiction orchestrate series of escalating “shock images” made of transmedia clichés, subverting any potential realism to the thrilling simulation of escalating geopolitical change and individual empowerment. However, *Code Geass*'s excesses are carefully enacted within the conditions of possibility of its real-world media environment. Lelouch's global revolution becomes perceivable through the series' “metamodeling” of the media-ecological and geopolitical “infrastructure complex” of the mid-2000s (Lamarre 2018: 29). Lelouch and his supernatural “Geass” gaze model a fantasy of mediated empowerment wherein tapping into the global flow of images

through the “small screens” of new media technologies can disrupt the techno-social forms of official power which depend on mass media. It is a fantasy closely in tune with the dreams of media activism during the “network” age of media infrastructure, which would be closed up by the mid-2010s with the rise of proprietary media “platforms” (Steinberg 2019: 22). But *Code Geass* enacts imaginary change on a deeper level as well. Its orchestration of shock images dissolves extant political discourses and identities into the endless differential production of images that constitutes the “radical imaginary” of a society (Castoriadis 1987: 127). Japan’s “new role” in the revolution becomes that of a place marker in a series of provisional experiments in collective organization mediated through anime’s fast-paced image-thinking. Without precisely aiming to, *Code Geass* exemplifies the capacity of anime fictions to generate pleasure in the communal “refusal of closure” that is the prerequisite for a democratic social imaginary (Castoriadis 1991: 20-21).

Code Geass is instructive as much for the fundamental limitations of its imagination as for its insights. Despite all its violence to existing forms, *Code Geass* cannot touch the gendered core of individual masculinity that undergirds the *mecha* genre, and indeed otaku media at large. Consequently its imagined change slides back into stasis. It is common in cultural criticism to treat such regressions as evidence of a fundamental ideological orientation. I will suggest that they are better viewed as what Cornelius Castoriadis calls “instituted heteronomy:” when an element of social life is placed outside the imaginary process of collective enunciation as “nature” (Castoriadis 1991: 146). The process by which “radical imagination...seeps through the successive layers of the social armor” is inevitably partial; the radical reformulation of one layer puts a different one out of thought. Any one articulation of change – in fictions, in minds, in organizations – is almost guaranteed to leave something important untouched. *Code Geass* and other anime fictions help us understand how in contemporary mediated imagination, these heteronomies are *genre-based*; technical and aesthetic dimensions of media forms and

their infrastructures determine our collective imaginaries as strongly as identities and ideologies do. We can see different but analogous internal limits on imagined change elsewhere in anime, and also in political movements throughout the media field. Their apparent failures, I ultimately argue, actually provide valuable insights for thinking about the parameters for articulating and sustaining collective movement within the mediated worlds of 21st century capitalism.

1. *Mecha* Anime's Political Mediations

Anime and manga have been depicting war from their 20th century origins to the present day.⁴¹ As will be detailed in Chapter Six, Ōtsuka Eiji has even described otaku aesthetics as a kind of wartime technology (Ōtsuka 2005: 10). After the American occupation and the rise of Japan's ostensibly pacifist developmentalist state, anime and manga genres of violence served as sanctioned spaces to depict the visceral thrills of war eschewed by the rest of popular culture. *Mecha* anime in particular performed a powerful role during the late postwar as forms for depicting both the realities of violent conflict and the problems of national identity (Ueno 1998; Condry 2013: 126-127). The success of politically charged franchises like *Space Battleship Yamato/Uchū senkan Yamato* (Matsumoto 1974-1975) and *Mobile Suit Gundam/Kidō senshi Gandamu* (Tomino 1979-1980) gave birth to the so-called "real robot" subgenre, which depicted fighting robots as mass-produced military vehicles functioning in relatively realistic world-settings (Ikeda 2019: 21-22). Hiromi Mizuno has argued that anime like *Space Battleship Yamato* helped male viewers negotiate "ambivalence and tensions around national and masculine desires of pacifist Japan" (Mizuno 2007: 105). Kimura Shisei also suggests that the depictions of youthful characters struggling within fictional military organizations helped young Japanese men process their doubts about giving their lives over to the corporations that employed them (Kimura 2019: 81-82). The *mecha* genre thus condensed the web of

institutional attachments and anxieties comprising Japan's postwar imaginary into an identifiable form.

Real robot anime often critically depicted postwar pacifism, providing reminders of the ugly realities of global conflict which Japan's sheltered populace watched from a distance. An exemplary scene occurs in Episode 34 of the original *Mobile Suit Gundam* anime when the protagonists are engaged in a battle outside the neutral space colony Side 6, an obvious metaphor for prosperous 1970s Japan. Scenes of the battle are interspersed with broadcasts from inside Side 6, with an announcer providing commentary while assuring the audience that "this isn't a drama, this is real war" (Figure 5.1). A montage of stills shows the colony residents viewing the broadcast from various locations, while the character Char chastises the broadcast for treating war like a TV show. The image of a social sphere watching global violence from a safe distance appears throughout the numerous *Gundam* sequels. As should be evident, the scene is not an outright endorsement of military action. The influence of creator Tomino Yoshiyuki's original vision has led most subsequent versions to adopt the standardized position that while postwar Japan's view of violence is naïve, war itself is something to be avoided if at all possible.

Even as they put forth their political commentary, *mecha* anime were fueling the modes of viewing and consumption that would develop into the otaku "environment of imagination" discussed in the previous chapters (Azuma 2007: 64). *Mecha* anime induced forms of "narrative consumption" wherein fans deepened their relationships to the fictional worlds of *mecha* franchises by consuming their transmedia iterations, building models of the robots, and creating derivative fan works based on the original's characters and settings (Ōtsuka 2010: 107-108; Steinberg 2012: 178-183). Their role in the character-based media fantasy of otaku desire would be highlighted in the mid-1990s with the success of *Eva*. As discussed in the Introduction, *Eva*'s innovation was to turn *mecha* tropes into explicit metaphors for both human psychology in general and also the otaku

subject's specific relation to media images (Maejima 2010: 44). As the series progresses, the cockpit of the Eva biomech starts to function like a screen, ensnaring the subject inside its own mediated psyche and turning *mecha* action into isolated pairs of eyes staring at flows of conspiratorial images.

One iconic scene occurs in Episode 16. Battling one of the otherworldly monsters called Angels, protagonist Shinji is absorbed through it into an extra-dimensional "Sea of Dirac." There he remains alone in his cockpit, faced with his own thoughts and the prospect of his death. The cockpit's background begins to reflect geometric patterns that slide into memories and distorted dramatizations of his self-image (Figure 5.2). As Thomas Lamarre details, *Eva* was game-changing because it fully exploited limited cel animation as a medium uniquely suited for depicting the interlinked nature of media and human thought. In *Eva*, "existential crisis is technical crisis, and vice versa" (Lamarre 2009: 182). Through *Eva*'s success, *mecha* conflicts became visual nodes in the negotiation of media, mind, and politics within subsequent anime fictions. *Eva*'s isolated and expanded vision directly influences *sekai-kei* (see Chapter One). It also spawned a slew of "post-*Eva*" *mecha* anime from the late 1990s through the 2000s. *Gasaraki* (1998-1999), a creation of real robot pioneer Takahashi Ryōsuke, attempts to incorporate *Eva*-like religious themes while retaining the genre's realistic depictions of military organizations. *RaXephon/Rāzefon* (Izubuchi 2002) is one of many works which follow *Eva*'s aesthetic so closely as to draw accusations of plagiarism from some reviewers (e.g. Nutt 2005). *Eureka Seven/Kōkyōshihen Eureka Sebun* (Kyōda 2005) mixes *Eva*'s themes of planetary conspiracy with a happier *sekai-kei* romance between the male lead Renton and the alien girl Eureka. While none of these matched *Eva*'s impact, they were all characterized by tensions between the *mecha* genre's legacy of realist war representation and the individualized psychosexual-media flows which had come to dominate otaku culture through *Eva*.

It was through these genre-based tensions that *mecha* anime engaged with the

neoliberal turn, the normalization of globalized and privatized risk, and the new geopolitical order of the US-led “war on terror.” While ratified largely on the terms of nationalist and neoliberal elites, discourses of inevitability nonetheless spoke to a growing realization from the 1990s onward that individuals and states alike were in fact already caught up in aggressive global systems of power, money, and conflict which ordinary people could no longer ignore (see Leheny 2006: 165-170). Socioeconomic dissatisfaction also contributed to a widespread sense that things were not right as they stood; something needed to change. This ambient understanding was amplified through politically charged rhetoric within intensifying media networks to form the imaginary field of the global space of violence. “In the post-Cold War terrain and the global logic of humanitarian war,” explains Tomiko Yoda, “Japan's inability to send its military force abroad to participate in the global police force... lost the aura of pacifism” (Yoda 2006: 27). A move began within public culture to find a “new role for Japan” on the world stage, which war-related genres of popular media imbibed wholeheartedly. Some scholars have pointed to the rise in national and military-themed films in the mid-2000s as a cause for concern (Sudō 2013: 166-167). Even before that, however, works like the *gekiga* manga of Kawaguchi Kaiji, especially *Silent Service/Chinmoku no Kantai* (1988-1996) used military settings to inquire into future national identity. Hiromi Mizuno describes the anime adaptation of *Silent Service* as a turning point in the way war genres dealt with national identity and masculinity, commenting that its “post-cold war Japanese desires to create a new identity, new direction, and new leadership role” allow the text to critique elite Japanese politics and US nuclear hegemony” (Mizuno 2007: 117).

Interrogations of Japan’s global identity appeared in genres of violence in cinema and anime even within the media blitz during the Iraq War. A somewhat ham-fisted but interesting example is *Battle Royale II* (2003), the sequel to the late Fukasaku’s Kinji controversial *Battle Royale* (2000), finished by his son Kenta. *Battle*

Royale II attempts to globalize the franchise's concept of an unruly middle-school class forced by the Japanese government to kill each other in a last-man-standing battle. Early in the film the class's teacher, played to campy effect by yakuza film actor Takeuchi Riki, writes Japan's name on a chalkboard along with the other countries throughout the world which American bombs have dropped on. In this version, the recalcitrant youth take on the accoutrements of Islamist terrorists: headscarves, video statements in front of flags, and brandished AK-47's. Monologues by the young leader Nanahara Shūya, "the emblem of guerilla fighters all across the world," are heard over on-location footage of Middle Eastern markets as he speaks passionately against the "dogshit peace...decided arbitrarily by a handful of countries." *Battle Royale II* places the troubled youth of Japan in the imaginary field of global conflict, feeding domestic issues and historical national identity into the realignments of the post-September 11 world.

A more sophisticated mediation of Iraq War-era geopolitical tension is seen in the Production I.G. anime *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex/Kōkaku Kidōtai Stand Alone Complex* (Kamiyama 2002-2005). While this longstanding franchise is best known through Oshii Mamoru's 1995 cinematic anime, the Production I.G. series remains closer to original manga's (Masamune 1989-1991) aesthetic of cyberpunk police fiction with political undertones. It is composed of stories of political intrigue in a post-nuclear war world where Japan has attained a dominant position, which it maintains through competing intelligence bureaus and elite police task forces. The second season was planned and produced in the buildup to the Iraq War, which several of the series' creators have described as a political awakening (Scaly *et al.* 2009: 333). Director Kamiyama Kenji, also mentioned in the previous chapter, has commented that "nationalism was in the air and I wanted to do whatever I could to stop this tendency toward war.....My desperateness was expressed in the series" (Kamiyama *n.d.*). The second season visualizes the Iraq War buildup through a fiction of political tensions

surrounding a vast refugee population which resides in the artificially expanded Dejima Island in Nagasaki. The story arc follows the government agency Section 9 as they uncover a plot by a rival intelligence bureau to touch off a secession by the refugee district and plunge Japan and the world into chaos. The Section 9 team ends up fighting the Self-Defense Forces to avoid the conflagration. The franchise's imagery of technological embodiment, most represented in the iconic female cyborg Kusanagi Motoko, are here adjusted to show the digitalized social environment being manipulated by institutional power into consent for war.

The ambivalent layers of these fictions indicate that the rise of national and military motifs was not resurgent nationalism as such. Rather, an ambient desire for collective change was being funneled through the framework of national interest. As touched on in Chapter Four, the mission to newly imagine Japanese identity seems to have also circulated among anime producers in the early 2000s. Before *Code Geass*, Sunrise explicitly took on such a mission with the series *Gundam SEED* (Fukuda 2002-2003). *Gundam SEED* more or less replays the narrative of the original *Gundam* series in a new fictional war between genetically enhanced "Coordinators" living in space colonies and unmodified "Naturals" living on Earth. Director Fukuda Mitsuo claimed to continue the *Gundam* franchise's legacy of providing "answers" and "morality" for "humanity's future" in a 21st century context (Sunrise/Mainichi Hōsō 2002: *n.p.*). In particular, the World Trade Center attacks, which occurred during the early planning stages, became a central theme of project. Fukuda comments that he and the other creators wanted to engage with "the cycle of hatred" between Islam and the west, as well as to present the question of "how one would go about creating a world with no war" (*ibid.*).

Gundam SEED solves this riddle for its viewers by showing heroes from both sides of the conflict forming a "third force" (*daisanseiryoku*) to intervene in key battles and end the conflict. Analyzing numerous works of the *Gundam* franchise according to categorizations of war in international law, Kojima Nobuyuki remarks that such plot

twists reflect the growing belief in a supra-national arbiter of peace and war after the Cold War and the rise of neoliberal globalization (Kojima 2019: 126-128). However, one of the primary actors in *Gundam SEED*'s third force is a country called Orb, a neutral nation whose "advanced technological sector" develops the Gundam robots in the first place. Obviously, Orb is a metaphor for Japan. The sympathetic characters in Orb's leadership, who fight to preserve their non-aggression principle, places *Gundam SEED* squarely on one side of the so-called "pacifist -realist" axis in Japanese politics which had reignited after the first Gulf War (Oguma 2014: 538-539; *c.f.* Richards 2013). As in many anime, these values are espoused in characters' emotional voice-overs set against still images that depict iconic tableaux of peaceful life, in in this case, Orb's cheerful urban settings that resemble typical downtown areas of contemporary Japanese cities (Figure 5.3). Orb's neutral idealism – and Japan's postwar national identity– is revitalized on the 21st-Century global stage as the moral force which can make possible "a world without war."

Of course, the idea of Japan as global warrior for peace requires significant obfuscation, and *Gundam SEED*'s romanticism would seem increasingly naïve into the 2000s. This was apparently not lost on producers in the Sunrise studio; Kasai Kiyoshi and other critics detail how *Code Geass*, as the next Sunrise *mecha* epic, uses character and *mecha* design to attack its predecessor's idealism (Kasai 2009: 52-53). As I will argue, however, *Code Geass*'s attacks extend to Kasai and to other critics seeking some kind of consistent national or international representation within it. If *Code Geass* can be said to have a coherent politics, it is articulated on the level of mediated imagination.

2. The Political Orchestration of Clichés

Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion depicts a fantasy world war set in an alternative modern timeline. The world superpower is the Holy Britannia Empire, a thinly veiled metaphor for US imperialism but visualized through the romanticized imagery of 18th

Century European courts that come from *shōjo* manga, that is, manga ostensibly targeted to *shōjo* or “young girls” but which actually target a broader readership and feature themes of passionate romance, often between same-sex partners (Shamoon 2007: 3-4). Conquered by Britannia for its “sakuradite” mineral resources, Japan has been stripped of its name to become “Area 11” and occupied as a colonial hub. The story revolves around two friends: Lelouch, an exiled Britannian prince living in hiding with his paralyzed sister, and Suzaku, a son of the last Japanese prime minister who has joined the Britannian military. Lelouch encounters an immortal witch named CC, who gives him a power called “Geass” (*giasu*, from the “geis” legend of Celtic mythology) which allows him to control the minds of others. Filled with resentment for his homeland, Lelouch begins to use the Geass and his latent strategic genius to manipulate the Japanese resistance factions in Area 11 into following him. Assuming the alter ego of the masked hero “Zero,” he forms a paramilitary group called the Black Knights, whose visual style is reminiscent of postwar *tokusatsu* (lit. “special effects”) TV programs, which feature teams of masked superheroes who strike poses as they fight rubber-suited monsters (see Allison 2006: 94-96). Lelouch/Zero and the Black Knights mount a rebellion against Britannia and trigger a massive geopolitical realignment.

Code Geass is unique among *mecha* for several reasons. The first is the melodrama of both its narrative and audiovisual aesthetic, which is extreme even for the already hyperbolic medium of anime. The stagey quality of the main voice performances matches the angular long-limbed character designs and the exaggerated poses which mark the countless climaxes of reveals, twists, and betrayals that structure the sprawling 50-episode series (Figure 5.4). The second, evident from the summary above, is the sheer density of its generic elements, to the point it where has been commented how “it’s amazing that it holds together” (Animate Times 2019: *n.p.*). The third is the directness of its political references, which show Japanese citizens taking up arms and trafficking in nationalist symbols. *Code Geass*’s strange mixture turned out to be a commercial and

critical success at the time of airing. Consequently, it has prompted critical commentary in both Japanese and English which gravitate to very different aspects of the series.

Japanese critics have tended to focus on *Code Geass*'s national themes, an understandable approach given how the series winks at nationalist reveries of a resurgent Japan. Kasai Kiyoshi's reading, touched on in Chapter One, is pertinent here. Kasai thoroughly explains how *Code Geass* inherits the tropes of *sekai-kei* and the neoliberal "state of exception" in which the atomized subject must make its own friend/enemy distinctions (Kasai 2009: 59). However, he goes on to claim that *Code Geass*'s "real" critique is of postwar Japan and its form of pacifism, which are facing their end in the new century (*ibid.*: 53-55). For Kasai, *Code Geass* is just a more radical version of the "new role for Japan" theme of *Gundam SEED* and others. Ōsawa Masachi's poststructuralist reading also highlights the *sekai-kei* elements, citing Lelouch's twin goals of destroying Britannia and protecting his sister as exemplary *sekai-kei*/postmodern forms of solipsistic agency which conflate "the universal and the particular" without a social intermediary (Ōsawa 2011: 204-205). Ōsawa claims that this semiotic mechanism fuels the rise of both otaku culture and neonationalism, albeit in different ways (*ibid.*: 197-198).

Reading *Code Geass* solely in terms of Japanese identity and the postwar legacy ignores how situated it is within its geopolitical climate of the post-Iraq war insurgencies, the US-led "war on terror," and the slavish acceptance of these conditions by Japan and other wealthy countries. Area 11 stands in just as easily for colonized Iraq, the fantasy of abasement not a licking of nationalist wounds but a thought experiment exploring what it feels like to be on the receiving end of 21st century neoliberal imperialism. English-language critics have picked up on these elements more than the nationalist ones. As one reviewer emphasizes, *Code Geass* embodies "the realization that old, rich, powerful people have screwed up the world and that the young are helpless to do anything about" (Santos 2008: *n.p.*). More interestingly, Aaron Choo and Wilson Koh describe how *Code*

Geass uses intermedia references to mock news global reports of terrorism, and, by depicting Lelouch's terrorism as a rationally motivated strategy, "presents a constant and explicit renunciation of metanarratives regarding terrorism" (Choo and Koh 2016: 300). However, Choo and Koh ultimately denounce the series, saying that like other mass-media products, it exploits the serious issue of terrorism for commercial gain. By depicting terrorist attacks and anti-government rebellion alongside sexy characters, stylized duels, and schoolyard comedy, it fails to show the complex consequences of terrorism as a political tool and "ultimately end[s] up saying nothing worthwhile about terrorism" (*ibid.*: 308).

Both interpretations usefully explicate different aspects of the series. However, their mutually exclusive conclusions about what *Code Geass* "ultimately" means exposes the limited view that representationalism can bring to this kind of fiction. By their own standards Choo and Koh are correct; those looking for accurate depictions of real-life terrorism should go elsewhere. However, the standard itself exposes a fundamental naïveté about not only anime but media fictions at large. Expecting *Code Geass* to give a political science lesson is to hold it up to a false standard. Kasai and Ōsawa's more nuanced critiques nonetheless reduce *Code Geass* to the semiotics of a unified narrative; they find an underlying meaning only stripping away the audiovisual and serial characteristics that define *Code Geass* as an anime fiction. *Code Geass* is not ultimately "about" a concrete social referent, and the irresponsible dissolution of real-world elements into a sea of media affect is the actual site of *Geass*'s cognitive work.

Code Geass was a hugely collaborative enterprise, with well-known creators brought together to showcase of the gamut of anime-based transmedia in the mid-2000s. Director Taniguchi Gorō, known for hard sci-fi series like *Infinite Ryvius/Mugen no Ribaiasu* (1999-2000) and *Planetes/ Puranetesu* (2003-2004), has explained that to compose the more hybrid *Code Geass* he called on "specialists in action, in *mecha* design, in *moe*-style, in romance" to join the production team (Animate Times 2019: *n.p.*). The most celebrated

“specialists” were the all-female manga team CLAMP, whose character designs aimed “to have something for everyone,” including sources of erotic attraction for male and female viewers (quoted in Choo and Koh 2016: 302). In addition, the story was organized around moments of peak intensity rather than chronological narrative development. Taniguchi explains that the series composition team set “starts and goals at the beginning” and thought out “the routes between” while in production. This open and collective production method, which Stevie Suan calls anime’s “dispersed agency,” is a major component in the mediated imagination we have seen so far (Suan 2018b: 13). Enabled by the resources of the major studio Sunrise, *Code Geass* orchestrates a massive assemblage of clichés from the otaku database and beyond to provide diverse forms of stimulation, a super-machine for generating anime affect (Shaviro 2010).

The method of image assembly applies equally to the series’ political content. Taniguchi expresses dislike for directly stated political views in fiction, explaining that he prefers to drop in political elements as small hints which allow the audience to “imagine various things” regardless of the director’s intention (Animate Times 2019). Political referents are little “triggers” for social imagination dissolved into *Geass*’s orchestration of transmedia clichés and the shifting allegiances of the vast cast of characters (Zittoun *et al.* 2020 149-152). Appearing in background art, in character costumes, and in dialogue, each kernel means to briefly pique the emotions of certain political persuasions only to be undercut by the next. For example, in one scene we see a background still of a strip-mined Mount Fuji. The voiceover narration of an old Japanese resistance leader claims that the view represents the “true face” of “a Japan that “continues to be shamed after submitting to the Empire” (Figure 5.5). The nationalist sentiment superimposed over the fantastic image can resonate with the resurgent right, but also with the old “progressive” or anti-Imperialist nationalisms, which were resurfacing amid Japan’s complicity in the Iraq War (see Gayle 2001). However, the thematic scene quickly erupts into action when Lelouch/Zero ambushes the leader.

Through his “Knightmare” *mecha*’s amplifier he chides “Your strategies and thoughts are old! That’s why you can’t win.” Another scene depicts an execution of Japanese resistors while a stylized Britannian noble looks on. The nobleman then archly declares such treatment “is not discrimination but differentiation” (*sabetsu de wa naku kubetsu da*), a talking point of the Japanese right wing with regard to Korean nationals. The oppressive force shifts in a single line from western powers to Japanese racists. This grant-reject movement occurs throughout the series; the tenor of a particular ideological narrative is allowed to resonate for a moment before being replaced by a shock of new stimulation.

As part of the Sunrise legacy, *Code Geass* follows the narrative logic of the *mecha* genre developed through the *Gundam* franchise and other popular titles. It is a logic of escalation through technological advancement (Kojima 2019: 125). Throughout the series different factions in the war develop increasingly advanced giant robots for the main characters to pilot, each one having greater combat ability and a flashier design than the former. The scale of the conflict escalates in conjunction with the *mecha* development, unfolding onto ever wider battlefields with ever greater stakes, accompanied by ever higher casualties, all leading to a final all-out battle. The many thematic arguments between Lelouch and Suzaku about Japan’s fate and the ethics of violence should be understood within the pattern. While one could certainly treat all the little exchanges in the series as a unified philosophical debate, in an episodic context they effectively appear in isolation to each other. They primarily serve as narrative voiceover during important battle scenes, adding intellectual weight to the visceral action. The critique of postwar ideology and the ethics of violence in atomized society, which Kasai treats as the “real critique” or ultimate referent of *Code Geass*’s fictional world, are in fact part of its background noise, single notes in its orchestration of transmedia and geopolitical clichés. As in other chapters, I see this neither as postmodern aimlessness nor as the cynical “blockbuster terrorism” derided by Choo and Koh. Within commercial networks, creators aim to entertain. To do so they must plug into shared processes of mediated social

imagination which have potential to exceed their instituted forms. *Code Geass*'s irresponsible image-assembly is nonetheless grounded in earnest practices of looking which, consciously or not, trace out the conditions of possibility for action within transmedia infrastructures, and ultimately for collective re-formulation.

3. Shock Images: Infrastructure Complexes and Imagination

Ōsawa and Kasai correctly point out the legacy of *Eva* and *sekai-kei* in *Code Geass*. Moreover, Ōsawa's notion of the collapse of universal and particular is accurate in a basic sense; fictions of the post-*Eva* legacy negotiate a relationship between a viewing subject and a world in the absence of defined institutions. Like most anime, *Code Geass* functions at base as wish fulfillment. It develops from a core fantasy of empowerment in which individual action can change the world on a global scale. But that fantasy has to actually be put into a "perceivable and experienceable" form, using recognizable materials that give it coherence (Heise 2008: 63). It must provide a circuit of thinking, connecting, and acting that make it possible for the individual to imagine themselves acting geopolitically. *Code Geass*'s plausibility emanates from one of the series' few sustained concerns: the act of media viewing as it relates to political agency. *Code Geass*'s world is populated by innumerable screens, frames, and windows through which characters and viewers apprehend plot events. Several pivotal scenes occur in galleries or museums whose exhibits contain resonant stock images of history (Figure 5.6). The varied and repeated emphasis on the act of looking speaks to a core seriousness within *Code Geass*'s assemblage of provocative clichés, an injunction to actively engage with the media-social environment as a something like an agent.

Here I turn to Thomas Lamarre's *The Anime Ecology*, which develops a theory of anime as "metamodels" of their media ecologies (Lamarre 2018: 29). Simplifying Lamarre's work somewhat, we can say that a metamodeling is when a media work's

fictional conceits visualize the networks of media and social power that create it. In doing so, it also displays the tensions and potential disruptions within them. *Code Geass*'s affective machinery is precisely calibrated to present a fictionalized pathway through its media ecologies toward systemic change. Its metamodel is located in the specific context of the mid-2000s. In Japan as elsewhere, the creation of neoliberal-national consensus was aided by an increasingly spectacle-driven news media. Rising viewer interest in serious political issues prompted “wide shows” (*waido shō*) – talk shows with rotating guests that discuss a “wide” variety of topics including gossip, daily news, and lifestyle advice – to increase their focus on hard news topics (Taniguchi 2013: 458). To compete, traditional news media began to take cues from entertainment journalism to compete in the ratings (*ibid.*). Public figures adapted their media affect to the new paradigm, the most successful being Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō, who used television expertly to garner support for his neoliberal reforms (*ibid.*: 462-463). The Koizumi administration's agenda of deploying the Japanese Self-Defense Forces to Iraq War was also aided by the enthusiasm of media institutions, who were jumping at the chance to produce emotional war broadcasts of “our soldiers” going to the front (McCormack 2007: 65-67). The blurring of distinctions between intimate and political, entertainment and information within Japan's early 21st century media-political infrastructure could be harnessed by the controllers of broadcast media to manage the “new visibility” of globalization and reinforce official discourse (Thompson 2005: 42).

As discussed in previous chapters, however, the neoliberal convergence also entailed the intensification of media environments through new kinds of screen interfaces which complicated the one-to-many information flow of television-based media. Lamarre characterizes the power dynamics of this period as a relation between “big screen ecologies” – the centralized infrastructures and mass dissemination of broadcast media – and “small screen ecologies” – the new forms of portable network-based technology. As Lamarre describes it, the latter transform the former by “loosening the hold of [their]

procedures of segmentation” (Lamarre 2018: 300). On the infrastructural level, the proliferation of cable and satellite throughout the 1990s led to less centralized control of television (Hirano 2003: 218-220). Perhaps more importantly, interactions between extant media and the burgeoning internet culture developed intricate feedback loops of real-time commentary, ideological contestation, and affective flow. Such relationships inform Kitada Akihiro’s analysis of the “cynical nationalism” of the online bulletin board *2Channel* in the early 2000s. Kitada describes how the users’ inflammatory communication was based on the obsessive attention the mainstream media that was cultivated on the platform. Ironic practices of reading national and global news stories against the grain became formalized as self-perpetuating communication (Kitada 2005: 197-198). The “conspiracy outlook” and “romanticism” with which the so-called net right wing (*netto uyoku*) interacted with political news was thus another (less pleasant) mode of global imagination that arose out of the neoliberal convergence (Kitada 2005: 209-210; Sakamoto 2011: *n.p.*).⁴² The entire media-political field of the millennial period developed through similar tensions between totalizing and individualizing information flows within an interlinked “infrastructure complex” (Lamarre 2018: 186).

Code Geass’s political drama develops through the interaction between the two screen ecologies. Britannia exerts power through big-screen ecologies, visualized as skyscraper-sized TV screens and multimedia-equipped command centers (Figure 5.7). The occupation dominates through broadcast techniques: public announcements, coverage of the royal personas, and media blackouts to cover up atrocities. In contrast, Lelouch relies on portable communication devices. His *keitai* (mobile phone) is essential in moving his plot and *Code Geass*’s plot forward, allowing him to cross-reference Britannia’s announcements, coordinate anonymously with his diverse group of subordinates, and deceive people. The internet-enabled PC is idealized as Lelouch’s direct connection to global media information and meaningful action. Moreover, the Nightmare *mecha* themselves are figured as mobile consoles in which keyboard strokes

effect change (Figure 5.8). The prevalence of these “small screens” throughout *Code Geass* allow communication between characters separated across the world, enabling the fiction of a diverse political movement unfolding in front of Lelouch’s individual vantage point, while also simulating the global simultaneity of the media environment that they bring into existence.

The plot moves forward as Lelouch/Zero, aided by the small screen networks, creates public spectacles to disrupt Britannian hegemony. Appearing in his cape and mask, he speaks to the viewing public in melodramatic flourishes reminiscent of old television superheroes. Using the mass media’s own spectacle against it, Lelouch partakes in the 1990s resistance art of “culture jamming” (DeLaure and Fink 2017: 6). In other situations, his group functions like guerilla journalists, recording and disseminating incriminating footage of adversaries. Surveying the footage of a bloody massacre of Elevens, one of the Black Knights comments, “It’s a good thing there are so many recordings.” Another replies, “We’ll edit them together and upload it worldwide. People will see who represents justice.” The media-ecological base of *Code Geass*’s fantasy of rebellion should look familiar to us now. It foreshadows the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, and later the SEALDS movement in Japan (see Slater *et al.* 2015). It is the fantasy of small-screen activism the early 21st century, the idea that tech-savvy and culturally literate individuals can use the new media tools to self-organize, disrupt the consensus apparatus of mass media, and mobilize other dissatisfied individuals through network connections and shareable pop-cultural motifs.

By itself, this fantasy follows the interactionist “media as resources” perspective discussed in the previous chapter, where individual access to multiple media forms can produce “estrangement effects” to undermine the narratives of national outlets (Orgad 2012: 88-89). As Lamarre emphasizes, though, mediation is more complex than a relationship between viewing subjects and media objects. Before they crystallize into inter-actions, media ecologies first create pathways of “intra-action” that underlie and

transect the different entities which are put into relation through them (Lamarre 2018: 114-115). *Code Geass* models this deeper ecology through the device of the Geass power, which allows Lelouch to give a one-time command to another person. Scenes of Lelouch invoking it appear throughout the series as reliable peak moments. Appearing as an aliform design in his eye, it flies out to enter the eye of the victim, at which point the screen cuts to an image of neon-colored circuits deflecting to the right, which signals that the victim's brain has been altered and that person must obey Lelouch's command (Figure 5.9). On the surface, the conceit seems like another of the many adolescent delusions of grandeur that anime fictions offer.⁴³ But the Geass power is not Lelouch's alone.

The collective nature of the Geass is first visible during an early climax in Episode 11, where Suzaku has cornered the masked Lelouch. As the two engage in yet another thematic argument, the *bishōjo* witch CC appears and touches Suzaku's Nightmare, prompting the circuit schematic that signals the Geass working. It sends a flood of information into Suzaku, which we see as a high-speed intermedia montage of images: black and white remediations of 20th century war footage, sci-fi renderings of ancient cults and extra-planetary spaces, memories of CC's past lives in a Europe-like setting, Tibetan mandalas, realist shots of everyday objects like flower vases, homages to 1990s horror films like *Ring/Ringu* (Nakata 1998), and scenes of Suzaku with his dead father. The rapid orchestration of transmedia clichés culminates in line-drawn scenes which any basically literate anime fan will recognize as copies of the existential scenes in *Eva*. After Suzaku breaks into screams, CC says that "I just showed him a shock image (*shokku imēji*).” Touching CC, Lelouch begins to share the audiovisual barrage, and the three are temporarily immobilized in its flow. Lelouch and CC manage to break away and escape.

Participating in the post-*Eva* legacy of *mecha*, the Geass trope literalizes what Lamarre calls a "screen-brain apparatus:" an open system of material interflow between media contents and devices, human cognitive processes, and social institutions (Lamarre

2018: 59). To apply Lamarre's thesis, the metamodel evoked through the Geass is not an "allegory" of the deeper layer of experience but an "actual qualitative expression" of it, a "composition of sensations, affording an experience" of it (*ibid.*: 72-72). In the terms of this dissertation, it is a technique of imagination by which this non present, barely inferred force in our lives becomes a visible component of the conscious experience of the fiction. For Lamarre, such elements are valuable because they get us closer to the "stuff of blink," the indeterminate fabric of media-material connections between living and nonliving beings. (*ibid.*: 90). As mentioned in previous chapters, Lamarre explicates anime's potential for transindividual experience as part of a posthuman politics of "signaleptic animism" (*ibid.*: 355-357). However, *Code Geass* is another instance where I see animetic imagination resisting Deleuzian or neo-materialist perspectives, this time in an explicitly political context (see Chapter One). In *Code Geass*, awareness of our "screen-brain" connection to the oceanic flow of media and psychic images becomes valuable on the level of the social, that is, in its possibility of use by an actor towards collective purpose. In the "shock image" scene, tapping into it re-sets the institutional context, breaking the action out of both the diegetic impasse – the potential revelation of Lelouch's identity – and the thematic impasse – the ultimate unresolvability of Lelouch and Suzaku's stock ethical debate. Lelouch's own use of the Geass works similarly, including in pivotal moments when it goes out of his control. Each time, a pulse within the deep layer of media experience radiates outward to disrupt the current state of affairs, set new things in motion, open up new dangers and possibilities. It is the engine by which Lelouch and his circle of associates drive the world-changing conflict through the channels of the media ecologies. The Geass conceit visualizes the trans-individual plane of mediated totality as a superhuman force that shapes experiences and institutions, but also as something we might temporarily get hold of and use intentionally.

It is important that the shock images are *images* which pertain either diegetically or thematically to *Code Geass*'s world. They are not merely signals but recognizable pieces

of fictional and non-fictional experience presumed as recognizable to the viewer. The flow of information becomes useful as part of a shared articulation of experience-in-process. Inside of the exigencies of media ecologies and political institutions, the agentic force of imagination is still able to make objects present to consciousness and thereby manipulate them (Gosetti-Ferencei 2018: 5). This force does not reside in one individual but resonates throughout intersubjective relations, as well as through the media networks and social institutions that direct and limit our actions. The right pulse of information, the right mixture of fictional and nonfictional experiences dissolved into an exhilarating flow, might lead to a re-imagination of the entire system. Such an optimism, I suggest, is what arises from the orchestration of clichés and affective peaks that define the series. Anime fictions imagine social landscapes as infinitely malleable terrain; this is what draws the accusations of solipsism. But their techniques of imagination and the collective stock of images they draw from are shared. Therefore, when the elements of geopolitical experience and media infrastructure are thrown into an experiential simulation of change, the fantasy of changing the world can act as a platform to open up our received social institutions for questioning.

4. Visualizing the Cascade: Autonomy and Limitation

Early in the series Lelouch, enraged at an initial defeat, vows to CC, “I’ll create an army, a people, a nation!” While in terms of Lelouch’s character it is a grotesque delusion of grandeur, this frantic listing of collective institutions accurately encapsulates the logic of social imagination that structures *Code Geass* itself. Here I will return once more to Cornelius Castoriadis’s foundational theories in *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1987), in particular his conception of “institutions,” broadly defined as any organizing form within a society. Castoriadis views the role of imagination in society as a tension between “instituted” and “instituting” imaginary significations, that is, between set

representations within a naturalized imaginary of social institutions and the surplus of imaginative activity through which human life constantly alters the former (Castoriadis 1987: 127-131). For Castoriadis, institutions have an innate tendency to become “heteronomous,” that is, external to the social process of creating significance through shared images. Instituted social forms are reference points for internal changes but are not seen to change themselves. This naturalization is often the work of ideology, but Castoriadis argues that even in the absence of an explicitly coercive structure the institution will always tend to “negate the temporality...the time of otherness-alternation...that makes it exist as a society” (*ibid.*: 213). The intrinsic need for stability externalizes the fundamentally democratic process that having a society entails. The hegemony of capitalist realism is due in no small part to neoliberalism’s superlative ability to exploit our self-alienating tendencies.

Reflecting his roots in pre-autonomist thought, Castoriadis’s work attempts to outline a non-programmatic project for political autonomy in terms of a recovery of the instituting character of collective imagination (Castoriadis 1997: 30).

The project of collective autonomy means that the collectivity, which can only exist as instituted, recognizes and recovers its instituting character explicitly, and questions itself and its own activities....Democracy is the project of breaking the closure at the collective level.

(Castoriadis 1991: 20-21).

As discussed here and in the previous chapter, the millennial period was filled with discourses that interrogated national identity within globalization, in which the “new role for Japan” fictions participate. Overwhelmingly, Japan as sovereign nation is a heteronomous institution within them, an inviolable core beyond the reach of the interrogation.⁴⁴ In *Gundam SEED*, for example, Orb/Japan and its neutral stance act as a third force within the two-sided conflict between Naturals and Coordinators by virtue of its being a sovereign body governed by benevolent leaders. The unit of geopolitical

change is still the naturalized nation-state; its composition is not open for debate. *Battle Royale II*'s play at redrawing transnational and generational lines of conflict quickly becomes a rehearsal of Japan's postwar subordination to the United States. As the young fighters prepare to fight against the puppet Japanese government, the nihilistic tension in the first half of the film dissolves into sentimentalism and nationalist images of brave young Japanese facing certain death. In *Ghost in the Shell: Stand-Alone Complex*, Kusanagi and Section 9's job is to weave through institutional rot to solve problems in secret so that the façade of stability is maintained. The characters and presumably their creators are ambivalent about this situation, but that is their place in their respective systems. Their heroic achievement in averting the crisis amounts to maintaining a tense peace between different coercive state apparatuses, an imagined geopolitical stasis whose only difference from our current world is that the Japanese state happens to occupy a stronger position within it. At the base of *Battle Royale II*, *Gundam SEED*, and *Ghost in the Shell: Stand-Alone Complex* is instituted national sovereignty; "Japan" is a heteronomous entity perpetuated amidst the crises of geopolitical change. Any imagined change must move around this immovable core.

As Kasai argues, *Code Geass* seizes on a sense that the neoliberal turn and globalization mark the end of a postwar concept of Japan (Kasai 2009: 55). For Kasai this is a simple matter of death and rebirth; change means substituting the outdated national concept for a new monolith. *Code Geass*'s animetic imagination, however, seizes on the deeper complexity of the situation. One of the key analytical shifts in early globalization studies was from the political "event" – a cause-effect relationship between more or less stable national actors – to the "cascade" – a flow of intermingling "sequences of action" moving through locations and systems. "As a cascade gathers momentum and drags in wider circles of actors.... each change adds further complexity and dynamism to the interdependent structures" (Rosenau 1990: 301). Lelouch's escalating rebellion, couched in terms of *mecha* narrative logic, works to produce a cascade through which geopolitical

change happens. Through melodramatic plot twists, allegiances change both inside and outside Japan, often multiple times in a single episode. The cascade gains in scope and intensity as the rebellion touches off global unrest, causing different fictional nations to break away from their alignments.

The cascade is visualized through a succession of speculative world maps shown through both the “big screen” ecologies of public televisions and the netizen spaces of layered windows. Each map appears for just long enough to act as a cue that geopolitical composition has changed and to stimulate a moment of speculation. For example, the map in Figure 5.10 is shown as part of a news broadcast announcing the formation of a new “United Federation of Nations” (*chōgasshūku*), shown in red, a network of newly independent countries ready to confront Britannia, with the Black Knights – now a massive military corporation with multi-ethnic leadership – acting as its supranational defense contractor. This map and the ensuing montage of stylized state-formation scenes solicit the imagining of possible political relationships and power balances, some of which are hopeful, others terrifying. However, after only four minutes of screen time the multipolar map is erased when the cartoonishly authoritarian Emperor Charles reappears on the world’s screens after a presumed death. The scene cuts to another world map slowly being dyed with the familiar blue/red schema of Cold War-era visualizations. Geopolitical alignments are shown as solvent entities within an intensifying cascade, providing the viewer with both exhilaration and food for thought by keeping them in constant expectation. The world is perceived as a surge of change in which any stable geopolitical formation is impossible.

Kasai’s entreaty that Japan should start anew is realized over and over again in *Code Geass* through the animetic logic of recombination. As the cascade picks up force, “Japan” is continuously reimagined: as a city-state when the Black Knights aim to claim Tokyo as an “independent nation-state” (*dokuritsu kokka*); as a Hong Kong-like “special administrative zone” (*tokubetsu gyōka kuiki*) which is part of a project by sympathetic

Britannians; as a fantastical Japanese diaspora when a million residents flee the territorial border all wearing the Zero costume (Figure 5.11), and as a futuristic mobile island fortress. Each of these exists temporarily as a short thought experiment, a flash of coherence within the process of geopolitical imagination, only to be undercut by the next one. By the time the narrative reaches the United Federation of Nations, collective formations agglomerate on a supranational scale. “Japan” is no longer the default totality for a representation but a site for possible rearrangements of political groupings through mediated affect. The exhilaration of changing circumstances and the fantasy of empowerment through media networks which permeate *Code Geass* resonate with a kind of questioning of the nature of sovereignty itself. We might remember Taniguchi's comment about political elements as hints through which audiences can “imagine various things” (Animate Times 2019: *n.p.*). This is of course a commercially savvy strategy, but it also implies a faith in animetic forms of mediated social imagination, and also in the people who participate in them, to come up with ideas beyond those of the producers though the process of fictional co-creation (Quinlin and Mars 2020: 468-469). Whether intentionally or not, the social imagination deployed here strains toward democracy, not the postwar Japan version, but as Castoriadis's refusal of closure through which a collective questions its core assumptions.

The affective topos of anime character designs, discussed in Chapter Four, enables one of the more interesting provisional imaginaries in the story. The fictional Chinese Federation and its political revolution is one of the series' major diegetic spaces, and its victorious heroes are part of the major cast of characters. During the scene at the formation of the United Federation of Nations, a broadcast message introduces the Black Knights to the global viewing public, showing a group photo of the members behind a credit reel listing the characters' roles in the organization (Figure 5.12). This single image rivals the Geass movement in terms of its centrality to the geopolitical imagination articulated in the series. The Chinese officers appear prominently alongside the fictionalized Zero as

well as with Japanese military archetypes. Amid the height of “threat of China” (*chūgoku kyōiron*) discourse in the mass media and right-wing press at that time, this is something of a daring imaginative maneuver for a commercial franchise (see Ōishi and Yamamoto 2006: 31-35; Takahara 2006: 86-87, 91-92). China is understood as a contiguous *animetic* space and set of images that should be at home alongside Japanese ones as part of a common imaginary.

However, *Code Geass* also exhibits one of the central limitations in otaku techniques of imagination. While Lelouch is shamed, foiled, and distraught at various points, his core image as an ego-ideal for male alienation remains untouched. As in any boy’s genre, he is impressive to male characters and attractive to female characters. Even in the shock image scene, which is supposed to dissolve the static situation into intersubjective flows of media images, Lelouch’s entry into their collective vision is coded as CC “opening up” to him. Suzaku is penetrated by CC through the shock images, but it is Lelouch’s privilege as the male anti-hero to enact the ultimate penetration. Throughout *Code Geass*’s denunciations of old national ideology, certain archetypal figures are kept safe: the stoic Japanese resistance leader Tōdō, an embodiment of an idealized samurai spirit, is allowed to join the Black Knights after Zero destroys the old Japanese nationalist resistance groups. The dependable corporate masculinity of Black Knights officer Ōgi is similarly irreproachable throughout the series. Culturally coded images of masculine strength, morality, and desirability that lay at the core of 20th century Japanese national myths are thus kept safe from the destabilizing cascade. *Code Geass*’s depictions of destructive invention must revolve around them.

The limitations imposed by this sanctification of individual masculinity become glaring in the second season. As the cascade intensifies, female poses become noticeably more suggestive, clothing more revealing. As argued in the previous chapter, the modes of engagement solicited by female anime characters are more complex than a detached male gaze. However, in *Code Geass* the flurry of breasts and explosions that comprise the

final epic battles seem like compensation for its inability to put what really counts into the mix. This givenness of gendered authority is damaging to the newness on the collective level as well; without a dismantling of the patriarchal core of nation-based identity, the Chinese Federation arc and its potential for a shared East Asian imaginary too easily closes up into a re-hashing of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere ideology. The series' potentials to articulate an open democratic questioning gets closed up by generic parameters of male heroes. It is a framework that *Code Geass*'s brand of mediated imagination cannot easily move beyond.

This may seem like a corroboration of Lamarre's view that the politicization of mediated experience in anime should be based on a radical immanence, a search for forms that can visualize the "unmaking of received patterns of sociosexual development" (Lamarre 2006: 390). However, fictions which open the intimate elements of sociality to animetic questioning end up naturalizing other institutions. As an example, I will briefly take up the series *Penguindrum/Mawaru pinguatoramu* (Ikuhara 2011), which enacts a very different fantasy of social empowerment from within the plane of media immanence. The first episode begins with a girl Himari dying of a terminal illness before being miraculously brought back to life. Her brothers Kanba and Shōma are then taken to a neon dream space where a spiritual being, possessing Himari's body, tells them that if they want to keep their sister alive, they must find an item called the penguindrum. Kanba and Shoma embark on a series of criminal activities to find the item, traversing extra-dimensional spaces and crossing different temporalities amid a widening cast of characters as they search for a way to reverse the lines of fate and save Himari.

Penguindrum draws on different elements from the database than *Code Geass*. It bears the authorial touch of its director and head writer Ikuhara Kunihiko, who is known for projects which mix themes of cross-dressing and homoeroticism from *shōjo* genres within plot settings more typical of *shōnen* boys' genres, including depictions of revolution (see Aso 2010: 160-161). His series are rare in television anime in that they

have a recognizable visual style, which incorporates elements of pop art, urban design, and the decorative arts into the scene composition. Despite their differences, the two series share a similar organizing logic in that they balance an earnest orientation towards social agency while being productively irresponsible in the image-assembly by which they perceive a transmediated social. The world of *Penguindrum* is Tokyo, a recognizable public space which the brothers must navigate, but one that is shorn of most of its social character. The urban landscape is composed through disjointed series of signs, train announcement boards, mise en abymes of advertisements, and pedestrians as stick figures (Figure 5.13). It is an urban space held together by media signals rather than by concrete human relations. Kanba and Shoma become actors by tapping into the deep layer of its media experience. Like Lelouch's relationship with CC, they are granted access and agency by entering with the female deity – the possessed Himari – into a hyper-dimensional animetic plane visualized through colorful patterns of *shōjo* genres. Their interaction in this realm is reminiscent of magical change scenes, in which a young girl character undergoes a stylized transformation into order combat evil (see Allison 2006: 129).

In *Penguindrum*, it is the boys who are opened up. The Himari being shifts to dominatrix garb, striding down a flight of stairs to look down on the two boys, who are handcuffed in a compromised posture. She gives them orders before dropping one of them down a shaft and penetrating the other by stabbing her hand into his chest in a romanticized silhouette (Figure 5.14). This humiliating magical change repeats throughout the series as an induction to new twists in the plot. *Penguindrum* thus enacts a fantasy of empowerment predicated on the opening of male self-identity up to new psychosexual relations. Here, breaking through stasis and changing the world is an effect of more radical internal decomposition and re-compositing. For Lamarre, these decompositions of self and other within mediation are what constitute anime's social dynamism. I generally agree, insofar as any theory of the social must account for the

unfixed, cascading nature of experience within media environments.

However, it is less clear to me how the intimate “alternative social formations” like those in *Penguindrum* or those Lamarre describes in the series *Persona 4: The Animation* evolve beyond the immediate sphere of affective relations or express wide-ranging and sustained agency in the form of a utopian demand (Lamarre 2018: 333-334). *Penguindrum* is manifestly critical of capitalism and traditional forms of authority, but, like the precarious *isekai* fictions in Chapter Three, it naturalizes them as the harsh background of life. In *Penguindrum*'s imaginary, they are the heteronomous institutions that lie beyond social imagination. The remaking of psychosexual and familial relations exist only as micro-changes within them. The lens of mediated social imagination offers a way of thinking about these incommensurable blind spots that pop up whenever media fictions seek to visualize a change in social relations. As described at the beginning of this chapter, the “breaking of closure” that would allow for a radically new collective enunciation is itself a collective process, not something that can be articulated by a single act of imagination, mediated or otherwise (Castoriadis 1991: 20-21). Each simulation will put different “layers of the social armor” in and out of view based on the techniques of imagination at its disposal (Castoriadis 1991: 146).⁴⁵ Anime fictions help us to see such strictures as *genre based*. Fictions like *Penguindrum* and *Persona 4* are able to unmake patterns of sociosexual development because their genre predilections confine their horizons to the intimate sphere. The legacy of political realism in the genres of violence exert the potential to visualize large-scale reinventions of collectivity, however temporary and limited by their tendency towards a gendered slide into national stagnation. The lens mediated imagination offers a method which sees their different potentials and limits as modulations of the same process, which seems more flexible than a search for one specific form of media ontology.

Coda

The Geass power is a saleable fantasy of change. Genres of violence and all the anime fictions related to them are thoroughly commercial products, selling feelings of movement, newness, and the sense of power that comes from embracing the raw enjoyment of cascading change through our screen perspectives. These imaginative experiences must be put together, and our extant social relations cannot provide enough material. Each genre or conceit puts as many pieces of screen and flesh into the blender of imagination as possible, so that as many people as possible can enjoy the image-thinking rising out of it. Each one edges semi- or unconsciously toward the recovery of the “instituting character,” the collective imagining of our state in transition (Castoriadis 1991: 21). Inevitably, they run up against certain internal limits and fall back into extant horizons. But they are not complete statements. They are iterations of the larger ongoing process of affective speculation transversally developing throughout the media field.

I believe that this is more than a matter of how to engage politically with media texts. As Lamarre’s groundbreaking work illustrates, anime’s metamodelings are not comments on a given situation but concrete instances of media, thoughts, relations, and institutions generating conditions of possibility given within their infrastructures. An orchestration of images within a fiction is therefore not dissimilar to orchestrations in contemporary social movements, which fundamentally rely on pre-existing forms of media-based performance. Movements like the punk influenced *Ikisaseero!* (Let us live!) demonstrations promoted by activist Amamiya Karin during the period of labor casualization or the anti-Abe demonstrations of the student group SEALDS during the mid-2010s thrived by incorporating performative elements of cultural consumption (see Amamiya 2009: 145-146; Slater *et al.* 2015: *n.p.*). In consequence, their movements took on the life cycle of the consumer trend, surging to visible prominence and claiming a space in the imaginary for a short time before fading away. Similarly, the fantasy that animates *Code Geass* and

early alter-globalization, namely, that trolling the mass media or disseminating videos will shake up the system, now seems naïve in our SNS political world and its monetized flows of outrage and misinformation. Every imagined change is formed and dissolved according to the mediated conditions of our liquid times. Therefore, a comparative analysis of imagination between fictions and movements might help to get a better sense of our broader conditions of possibility and articulate a larger sense of what is being changed and what is being left untouched.

Chapter Six

Nationalism Digested:

Imaginative Ecologies and Collective Experience in *Moe*-Military and Beyond

As discussed in Chapter Three, Japan's media culture from the mid-2000s through the 2010s was defined by the normalization of neoliberal reason. This period also saw the increased penetration of "authoritarian-neoliberal forms" in capitalist core countries after the post-2008 global recession (Gallo 2021: 3). Throughout the world, neoliberalism's foundational links with authoritarian political forces intensified in reaction to the recession, resulting in more conservative, nation-based market management and use of cultural nationalism to "legitimize the adoption of coercive social policies in neoliberal contexts" (*ibid.*: 6). In Japan's case, the lackluster results of the centrist Democratic Party of Japan's short stay in power and the cataclysmic events of the Great East Japan Earthquake ended a brief period of potential change. The neoliberal-neonationalist nexus returned with a vengeance in the second administration of Abe Shinzō (2012-2020), whose pro-corporate "Abenomics" were accompanied by agendas of constitutional revision and rightist narratives of national strength and cultural heritage (Repeta and Jones 2015: 312-315).

Cultural branding initiatives like the heavily publicized "Cool Japan" strategy have been important components of Japanese authoritarian neoliberalism (see Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry 2018). With the aim of globally promoting cultural products and services in Japan under the umbrella of "Japanese culture," these initiatives are supposed to function not only as economic stimuli but also as methods of sociocultural consolidation. The outwardly projected image of "Cool Japan" also works inwardly, smoothing over internal divisions and roping divergent cultural practices into a homogenous identity (Iwabuchi 2015: 13-17). The circulation of images and narratives

about Japanese culture in terms of its global marketability formulates a social imaginary in which the nation is imagined “as a product for consumption, rather than as a democratic community” (Valaskivi 2013: 486, 499). Anime and related media have become central components of the branded national imaginary and the corporate-government initiatives through which it is articulated (deWinter 2017: 47). As Sudō Noriko details, otaku media is now referenced in national economic policy documents as “our country’s media arts” (*wa ga kuni no media geijutsu*), effacing any lingering subcultural status under the rubric of national culture (Sudō 2018: 176-180). Though often ridiculed, Cool Japan discourse has been remarkably successful in its mission of cultural consolidation; anime production in the 2010s can be seen internalizing its nationalized position, to the point where works begin to reflexively depict their role as objects in government-media partnerships (Steinberg 2020: 168-171). The 2010s thus seem to mark the last squeezing of alternative imagination from the types of anime fictions which arose from the instability of the millennial period, as text and context are subsumed into the authoritarian-neoliberal imaginary of Abe-era Japan.

In this final chapter, I hope to demonstrate that anime fictions continue to think the social differently, even within an increasingly captured national imaginary, toward both good and bad ends. My primary object will be the controversial trope known as “*moe*-military” (*moe miritari*). As explained in previous chapters, “*moe*” refers to feelings of intimacy in response to anime’s *bishōjo* or “beautiful girl” characters, who are themselves amalgams of visual elements meaning to evoke this response. *Moe*-military fictions revolve around images of *bishōjo* characters either using or personifying the machines, uniforms, and other accoutrements of national militaries. *Moe*-military franchises have been hotly debated in the context of Abe-era politics, since their depictions of Imperial-era armaments raise suspicions about new consumer forms of militarist propaganda. The difficulty is that *moe*-military fictions are not overtly ideological. As Akiko Sugawa-Shimada has phrased it, *moe*-military is “playing with

militarism,” deploying military affects as sources of enjoyment in absence of a defined political stance (Sugawa-Shimada 2019: 53). Journalistic and scholarly debate has centered on whether the assumedly unpolitical consumption of cute anime characters is being manipulated by government and corporate interests to feed into a vaguely authoritarian “national mood” (Sudō 2016: 140).

While the frame of cultural nationalism in contemporary Japan certainly addresses important concerns, I argue that the social imagination of *moe*-military fictions articulates a more amorphous concept of “nation,” pointing to deeper shifts in the way collectivity is imagined within 21st-century media environments. Notions of “play” notwithstanding, *moe*-military elaborates a complex and engaged ecology of thinking that encompasses multiple historical militaries and their nations, which a focus on character consumption and Japanese identity is not equipped to describe. Furthermore, previous analyses have ignored important continuities between the *moe*-military trend and anime-based transmedia as a whole. *Moe*-military is a concentrated example of how certain anime fictions “digest” national experience into the distributive geopolitics of animetic image-thinking (see Chapter Four). Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s classic notion of “imagined community,” I will show how nation-ness acts as a mobile conceptual formation for the agentic perception of large-scale social spaces, times, and collectives (Anderson 2006). *Moe*-military’s imaginative experiences are those which a national imaginary is supposed to afford – gestalts of teleological purpose, social cohesion, and collective movement in space and time – but detached from any unified imagined community or national narrative and invoked at will throughout the “imaginative ecologies” of anime-based transmedia fiction.

This is not to defend the many problematic elements of *moe*-military. In fact, I will argue that in its worst moments *moe*-military articulates something more insidious than resurgent Japanese nationalism: a transposable militarist structure of feeling that can graft onto any reactionary project in the world. *Moe*-military is implicated less in a new

Japanese nationalist project and more in the globalized “strange nationalisms” that have arisen out of the neoliberal dissolution of socioeconomic life and the rise of globalized media networks as organizers of experience (Yamazaki 2015a: 15). They speak to a new danger of our age, namely, that reactionary ideas and movements traditionally associated with nationalism no longer need to rely on fixed national prejudices to do their damage.

However, the digestion of national experience is exactly what allows anime fictions to continue to think nation-ness differently within our current moment. New dangers and potentials only become visible if we treat the full range of imaginative experience they offer. Both *moe*-military fictions and their fan practices contain dynamic tensions of collective experience which are occluded by previous studies’ focus on postmodern character consumption. More importantly, the ubiquity of military and national images throughout anime and otaku media allows them to serve diverse articulations of collective experience. While the debates on *moe*-military have focused on its risk of creating affective attachments to Japanese militarism, I will show how other fictions have used the same imaginative techniques of *bishōjo* characters and military aesthetics to explore the feeling of newly achieved peace, thereby revitalizing a pacifist imaginary as a fulfilling horizon. These imaginative modes, helpful and harmful, overflow the boundaries of the branded national imaginary, yet still emanate from a concept of interacting national communities moving through “homogeneous empty time” (Anderson 2006: 24). The dangers and potentials of anime fictions’ digested nationalism are therefore those of “the nation” itself, which remains the primary structure for articulating large-scale collectivity within the ever-shifting mediated horizons of global capitalism.

1. Debating *Moe*-Military: National Branding vs. Database Origins

Moe-military is a fictional conceit in which a *bishōjo* character wears, uses, or otherwise incorporates military weapons and uniforms, specifically those which belonged

to historical national militaries. Character images are often combined with a newer technique of *moe gijinka* or “cute personification,” where the *bishōjo* character acts as a softened and fictionalized symbol of the real-world weapon, vehicle, or country (see Saitō 2011b: 177-179). A key figure is illustrator Shimada Fumikane, whose *dōjinshi* (independently produced manga and illustrative works) of *bishōjo* characters in *mecha* or “machine” suits based on World War II-era fighter planes became the basis for one of the first successful *moe*-military franchises, *Strike Witches/Sutoraiku uichizu* (anime series Takamura 2008, see Figure 6.1).⁴⁶ *Moe*-military received nationwide attention in the mid-2010s with the breakout success of two titles: *Girls & Panzer/Gāruzu ando pantsā* (Mizushima 2012, hereafter *Garupan*), an anime featuring teams of *bishōjo* characters competing in mock tank battles, and *Kantai Collection/Kantai korekushon* (C2 Kikan 2013-present, hereafter *Kankore*), a browser game in which players collect *bishōjo* versions of World War II-era warships.

Both *Garupan* and *Kankore* were part of large media-mix franchises with iterations in anime, manga, video games, and tie-in products, as well as real-world collaborations with businesses and government organizations. *Garupan* was especially synergistic, featuring a series of collaborations with the town of Ōarai in Ibaragi Prefecture, the setting for the anime. Their success created a kind of self-perpetuating “cultural sphere” (*bunkaken*) around *Garupan*, and the town remains a major destination for “anime pilgrimage” (*anime seichi junrei*) – the fan practice of visiting real-world sites connected to an anime work (Sudō 2016: 160). More controversially, *Garupan*’s production team consulted with the Japan Self Defense Force (JSDF) offices for its depictions of tank battles, and the JSDF participated in some of the early Ōarai events (Yamamura 2017: 8-11). While *Kankore* did not initially include official JSDF collaboration, its popularity induced a wave of unofficial cosplay tourism to military sites in Japan (Sugawa-Shimada 2019), and official tie-ins were created for the Marine JSDF’s “Fleet Week” event at Yokosuka port in 2019 (Ministry of Defense 2019). Against the background of the second

Abe administration, it is understandable that suspicions were raised about these lighthearted depictions of the military. The collaboration between the franchises' producers and the JSDF only served to deepen suspicion.⁴⁷ The popularity of *Kankore* and *Garupan* set off a string of debates among journalists and cultural critics. Some saw them as pop-culture analogues to the growing hawkishness of the Abe administration (Kubota 2014), others as symptoms of the Japanese public being accommodated to increased military presence in Japan through media (Kasai and Fujita 2015: 126-127). Still others saw such interpretations as needless moral panic that was over-reading the political significance of entertainment media (Akimoto 2014; Furuya 2015). Commentators took sides in the debate depending on their specific interests, in effect replicating longstanding debates about pacifism and militarism within Japanese cultural politics.

Building on these debates, recent scholarly works have interrogated *moe*-military as a site of interaction between media, fans, business, and government. The common recognition through their different perspectives is that *moe*-military fundamentally *fictionalizes* war, rendering its ugly realities into safe fantasies. An axis of disagreement forms around the binary issue of whether *moe*-military's "playing with militarism" represents a new form of propaganda for an increasingly militaristic Japanese state or just another product of Japan's fantastical consumer culture. One side argues that *moe*-military's detachment of military images from their historical context leads the fans unwittingly into an affective connection with the authoritarian structures of national culture. Sudō Noriko calls this a "national mood" (*nashonaru na mūdo*) in which "an obedient and energetic totalitarian-like trend" slowly feeds into identification with a commercialized Japanese-ness that is convenient for state power (Sudō 2016: 140). Along similar lines, Akiko Sugawa-Shimada is concerned with *moe*-military's gender dynamics and their propensity to nurture "soft" militarism. She warns that male fans' abiding desire for intimacy with girl characters is being harnessed by government and military

collaborations which “drive feelings of intimacy towards the JSDF” (Sugawa-Shimada 2020: 396).

The other side of the argument emphasizes the de-politicizing effects of the transmedia contents business, suggesting that they can dilute the power of militarist nationalism. As Takayoshi Yamamura argues, “what is happening in Japan today is a fantasization (or contentsization) and consumption of the military, rather than a ‘drift to the right’ or resurgence of militarism” (Yamamura 2017: 19-20). Vlateri Vuorikoski asserts that while *Kankore* does contain oblique references to Japan’s colonial empire “there are no components that make it *necessary* to pay attention to this element” (Vuorikoski 2017: 17). Vuorikoski’s research on fan-made *Kankore* derivative works highlights the flexibility of audience reception, as most fan-authors “emphasized themes such as loyalty between friends and implicitly criticized state authority” (*ibid.*: 21). In this line of thinking, the displacement of militarism into fictional media play obstructs rather than creates an ideological pathway to Japanese nationalism.

It is not my intention to undermine the valuable insights of these previous works, nor to take a side in the debate. However, I feel that the terms of the debate itself limit our aesthetic and political engagement with both texts and contexts by bouncing us back and forth between otaku postmodern consumption on the one hand and Japanese national identity on the other. Whether they criticize from the standpoint of academic liberalism or emphasize character play over nationalist elements, the interpretations of *moe*-military within debates on cultural nationalism end up reinforcing an image of anime within the branded imaginary of Japan. In addition, the controversial nature of the topic has led commentators to treat the large *moe*-military franchises in isolation, as if the conceit is a unique creation of Cool Japan engineers. As we will see, the elements that compose *moe*-military have a much older and broader role within anime fictions. The lens of mediated imagination allows us to examine the fantasy of collectivity that comes to inhabit *moe*-military outside of its potential cooptation by state agencies. We can also highlight its

continuities with anime-based transmedia as a whole and also its location within broader geopolitical shifts.

These continuities are numerous. First, *moe*-military fictions play with the military and national imagery of *many* nations, organizing them according to their own fictional logic. Many fans prefer to grow intimate with non-Japanese ones, including Japan's World War II rivals.⁴⁸ Second, playing with national and military accoutrements is not at all unique to *moe*-military. Throughout the gamut of anime fictions, we see national and military images blended into fictional armed collectives with various degrees of declination from actual historical referents. Some easy examples include the global mega-hit *Attack on Titan/Shingeki no kyōjin* (Araki 2013-present), which intricately details the workings of fictional military units in a walled nation besieged by monsters, or the mainstream *shōnen* manga series *Naruto* (Kishimoto 1999-2014), whose world is composed of "shinobi countries," hierarchically organized nations of ninja armies which are differentiated through elemental symbolism. Finally, while *moe-military* is surely convenient for organizations like the JSDF, it was not created by them. Like most of the salient tropes of anime-based transmedia fiction, it arose out of an interaction between creators, fans, and small media outlets before gaining enough recognition to be harvested by larger actors. The aforementioned Shimada Fumikane began his *moe*-military illustrations as part of an online group, while also maintaining a personal website and producing his own *dōjinshi* before being approached by the media conglomerate Konami (Marumoto 2020). More centrally, the small-circulation hobby publisher Ikaros Publications (*Ikarosu shuppan*) acted as a print nexus for *moe*-military fandom with its illustrated book series *Moeyo! Tank School (Moeyo! Sensha gakkō)*, Tamura and Nogami 2005-present) and the serial magazine *MC Axis* (Ikaros Publications 2006-present). These publications brought together creators like Shimada who would go on to work on large-scale projects like *Kankore* and *Garupan*.

In short, *moe*-military arises out of that massive recombinatory process of anime-

based transmedia production theorized by Azuma Hiroki first as “database production” and later as an “environment of imagination” (Azuma 2001: 77-79; 2007: 60-64). As described throughout this dissertation, images of desirable characters act as “meta-narrative nodal points” within this environment which can link to “the imagination of any other narrative” (Steinberg 2012: 190). The database concept informs Christopher Smith’s recent analysis of *Kankore* as “database nationalism” (Smith 2020: 213). Following Azuma’s theory closely, Smith describes how the game’s personified “shipgirls” (*kansumu*) disaggregate national and military symbols and mix them onto the character surface with other recognizable anime character traits (Figure 6.2). “Symbols of the nation have been stripped of signification and retained only for affect; they are transmitters of intensities rather than meaning” (*ibid.*: 211). Smith argues that shipgirls cannot be advocates for the “regeneration of the national community” which is the object of ideological nationalism, but rather are ambivalent postmodern texts that dangerously “carnivalize” memories of World War II while also potentially delegitimizing nationalist narratives (*ibid.*: 219-220).

However, the imaginative techniques seen in *moe*-military exceed the postmodern ambivalence of a semiotic database reading.⁴⁹ In fact, the fusion of *bishōjo* characters with military elements is not arbitrary, but the result of a long history of interactions between different forms of fandom in the otaku environment of imagination. Their novelty is that “*moe*” character affection is put in a specific relationship with the “military” passion of military hobbyists and war history buffs. Cultural historian Sakata Kenji explains that military model kits (*puramoderu*) in postwar Japan generated “an alternative mechanism of war-knowledge acquisition” that continues today. It is a technical form of knowledge which conspicuously lacks “the physicality of death” (Sakata 2011: 195). Pursuing details of war-machines through model-building grants a technological view of global war history. It is also connected to the broader history of “war fantasy” genres in postwar Japan, which depict what-if scenarios for 20th-century wars. As Matthew Penney

has described, war fantasy is an imaginative mapping of contemporary tensions onto the past which mixes wish fulfillment and critical examination (Penney 2008: 48-49). Throughout the media ecology of military fandom, details of war are shown through diagrams and blueprints, maps of army movements, names of military units and commanders, catalogues of regalia, and other “databases” of information. This quest for strategic views through media objects constitutes another network of otaku knowledge, a method of passionately learning about war machines, wars, and the historical nations that fight them (see Chapter Four). The development of *moe*-military was the result of a desire among creators and publishers to create a new “entrance” (*nyūmon*) to military fandom by incorporating attractive girl characters and the immersive qualities of video games (Hori 2009). Shimada’s *dōjinshi* illustrations, seen in Figure 6.3, make clear how technical *mecha* design and national regalia are condensed into the *bishōjo* character, whose human body opens up a vista of historical combat experience, in of course a fictionalized and eroticized form. Rather than removing war-machines from “the wartime context” (Shimada-Sugawa 2019: 57), the fusion of military hobbyism with the affective structure of character desire perversely gives a body to these highly statistical “war-friendly” forms of historical knowledge. Both can therefore act as overlapping solicitations in an imaginative landscape of affordances (Rietveld *et al.* 2018: 44-45).

Juxtapositions of cartoonish characters with detailed military armaments have even older roots in anime and manga. The continuity of *moe*-military with their wider environment of imagination speaks to Ōtsuka Eiji’s writings on the “fascist origins of otaku culture” (Ōtsuka 2013a: 252). Ōtsuka’s historical research draws connections between early animation and pre-war avant-garde movements’ experiments with Russian constructivism and American cartoons, which fuse into wartime anime and manga as a “unification of Eisenstein and Disney under conditions of fascism” (*ibid.*: 275). Combinations of Disney-like characters and the scientific realism of detailed technical illustrations became part of imperial programs for militaristic youth education using

popular culture (Ōtsuka 2013b: 154-162). These elements, Ōtsuka argues, continue to define anime and manga aesthetics to the present day. Ōtsuka constructs his thesis as a challenge to accounts which locate anime's origins in traditional Japanese art or in 1980s postmodernism. His denunciations of the former obliquely refer to the rhetoric of Superflat artist Murakami Takashi; the latter to Azuma's work. Ōtsuka sees both interpretative frameworks as contributing to the rise of the "ridiculous 'Cool Japan' strategy being pursued by the Japanese government" (Ōtsuka 2015: xxvi). Ōtsuka's research provides the necessary historical context to see that the character-machine-military-nation nexus is not just a contemporary trend but is deeply embedded in the environment of imagination of anime, manga, and all related forms. Nonetheless, *moe*-military and similar contemporary fictions are doing something new. They are seizing on a shift in the national concept which is not localizable in anime or in Japan but which permeates the mediated environments of global neoliberalism.

2. The National Framework Digested

The divergence of opinion in the scholarship discussed above arises from the fact that *moe*-military does not produce a stable national identification. As Smith indicates, incorporating national images into the database of otaku media dissociates them from a unified structure of symbolic belonging which would be needed for ideological nationalism (Smith 2020: 213). However, nationalism as an ideological project is neither the beginning nor the end of nationalized thinking. Again, we need to step away from the assumed background of Abe-era Japan and think more broadly about what the imaginative structure of a "nation" can do. To do this, we can return to Benedict Anderson's (2006 [1983]) influential concept of nations as "imagined communities." While it is easy to fixate on affective dimensions – belonging, solidarity, chauvinism, xenophobia, etc. – what gives the imagined communities concept its enduring purchase are its conceptual

dimensions. Anderson opens by proposing that “nationality... [n]ation-ness...as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind” which enable certain forms of imagining the world (Anderson 2006: 4). Like religion before it, nation-ness is a structure for thinking the social on a grand scale. The national idea is that of “a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous empty time” which encourages the members to conceive themselves and their unseen fellows as “a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history” with “complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity.” (Anderson 2006: 24-26). Nation is thus a conceptual framework that grants accessibility to and engagement with social spaces and times beyond individual experience, not only for one’s own nation but for the imagined nation-ness of other groups.

Craig Calhoun writes that “nationalism matters not least because it has offered such a deeply influential and compelling account of large-scale identities and structures in the world...The world has never matched this imagining, but that does not deprive the nationalist imaginary of influence” (Calhoun 2007: 8). (Calhoun uses “nationalism” here in the sense I have described, that is, as a form of thinking and feeling the social on the grand scale.) The persuasiveness of the national concept informs its political uses. The project of political nationalism has historically been to filter the disparate elements of human life through the nation’s emotional and conceptual framework into a binary identification between each individual and the nation-state (see Gellner 1983: 3-4, 32). Whether one views them cynically as “invented traditions” or lends them some credence as “symbolic cultivation,” nationalism’s repeated practices, slogans, and symbols work by offering the individual a transcendental sense of continuity beyond the limits of their own position (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 1-2; Smith 2009: 48-50). This is certainly true for modern Japan, as detailed in Kang Sanjun’s (2018 [2001]) historical study of the *kokutai* or “national body” discourse which has been elaborated by cultural elites since the formation of the modern Japanese nation-state. The *kokutai* is evoked in numerous

variations which share a sense of the nation as a limitless expanse but also as a single physical “body” (*shintaisei*) united by benevolent authority (Kang 2018: 16-17, 57-59). Kang identifies how *kokutai* rhetoric frames national identification as a pre-political private experience with transcendent nature (*ibid.*: 55-56). A similar totalizing identification, expressed as a “motivation towards the public” (*kō e no dōki*), serves a common rhetorical tool of contemporary political nationalists (Hirano 2016: 26-27). These include both elite conservative groups like Abe’s Japan Conference (Nihon Kaigi) and right-wing populists like manga author Kobayashi Yoshinori (*ibid.*). Far from a right-wing concept, however, the *kokutai* aesthetic can encompass different political alignments, including those of Murayama Masao and other postwar liberal thinkers (Kang 2018: 122-123). National identification lies underneath political identity and guarantees whatever state project invokes it.⁵⁰

As is well understood by now, neoliberal globalization fundamentally complicates national identification. The increasing complexity of interacting media ecologies, transnational flows of money, technology, and ideas, as well as increasing diversity and inequality within populations, all undermine the stability of the identity-granting binary relationship of the nationalist framework. Kang and Yoshimi Shun’ya see the proliferation of individual/society discourses within millennial Japan’s public culture as evidence that the structures for maintaining national identification had come undone (Kang and Yoshimi 2013: 146). Of course, nations and nationalism have not left the capitalist core; they are as relevant as ever (Calhoun 2007: 8). They just cease to act as encompassing horizons for individual and collective experience. Nation-ness becomes dispersed and pluralized, operating across many theaters in and different contexts. We can see in this in the proliferation of studies on various adjectival nationalisms in Japan: the “petite” (*puchi*) nationalism of mainstream culture (Kayama 2002); the “healing” (*iyashi*) nationalism of revisionist groups (Oguma and Ueno 2003); the “laughing” or “cynical” (*warau*) nationalism of online communities (Kitada 2005); the “uneasy” (*fuan-gata*)

nationalism of precarious classes (Takahara 2006), the list goes on. These studies point to a common realization that nation and nationalism work differently in the 21st century. Political scientist Yamazaki Nozomu has set these phenomena in a global context of “strange nationalisms” (*kimyō na nashonarizumu*) arising from neoliberal globalization. They are “strange” because they “do not seek to produce nations,” that is, to unify a group in a coherent imagined community, but instead produce endless border-operations between volatile horizons of enemies. (Yamazaki 2015a: 15). Following Hardt and Negri, Yamazaki hypothesizes that the universal of strange nationalisms is the flux of Empire itself, with nationalist images reduced to creating particularities within its flow (Yamazaki 2015b: 284-285).

Media networks and commercial incentives play major roles in dissolving national frameworks. Fujiki Hideaki has detailed how intellectuals and government officials discursively figured cinema audiences as stand-ins for the national public throughout modern Japanese history (Fujiki 2019: 11-14 *et passim*). However, as both Fujiki and Alexander Zahlten have explained, this role pluralized and dispersed throughout the later 20th and early 21st centuries as a result of new media and economic infrastructures, with cinema industries and audiences splitting into competing national times and forms of citizenship (Zahlten 2017b: 8; Fujiki 2019: 398-405). Satō Takumi has detailed a similar nationalizing discourse on television in the mid-20th century (Satō 2008). The proliferation of channels and other news sources, discussed in the last chapter, led to mixed national messages. Especially from the 1990s, commemorative articles, historical documentaries, and similar “memory projects” from different mass media outlets purporting to offer a coherent historical narrative of Japan’s 20th century have actually produced even more “tangled versions” of history, “fusing different meanings, actions, and consequences” and inevitably reinforcing “separate preoccupations of the trauma of defeat” (Hashimoto 2015: 65-66). In addition, tourist initiatives and publicity campaigns have tended to tweak the history of local sites to fit market demands, in effect warping

national history in the service of media and tourist economies (Fukuma and Yamaguchi 2015; Picard and Roth 2020).

In such conditions, media forms invested in producing national identification end up strangely contorting themselves. The 2000s saw a push to reinvigorate cinema as a national media form, as Aaron Gerow and Sudō Noriko have identified in the spate of big-budget films with nationalist themes from 2005 and beyond (Gerow 2006; Sudō 2013). Sudō sees them as a result of the normalization of JSDF deployment after the Iraq War, and expresses concern that the trope of an individual giving their life for their country was also becoming normalized (Sudō 2013: 193). Gerow, however, explains how films like *Aegis/Bōkoku no Ījisu* (Sakamoto 2005) and *Lorelei: Witch of the Pacific Ocean/Rōrerai* (Higuchi 2005) display a “warped and tortured” nationalism that must take “convoluted paths” to display national pride to a diverse and ambivalent public (Gerow 2006: *n.p.*). Based on books by pro-JSDF novelist Fukui Harutoshi, both films proceed through character-driven conflict; the shouting matches between character mouthpieces for different idealist and humanist versions of Japanese nationalism are meant to display possibilities for national and military identity in the 21st century. What results instead is a cacophony of indecisive ideological positions and national identifications that default into ambivalence as characters change their minds, lose their nerve, or are unceremoniously killed in the service of the plot. As these films struggle to offer as many palatable versions of national affect as possible, their cinematic national identification only functions “by becoming a zero-sign...without having much substance” (*ibid.*). Gerow also explains that the nationalist energy which these films pursue is more deeply complicated on the industrial level. They are examples of the Japanese film industry’s post-millennial attempts to attract new audiences by mimicking Hollywood-style big budget action in a Japanese context. Their nationalist pathos is paradoxically enacted by copying the mediation techniques of American films.⁵¹

Even more paradoxically, overt nationalist ideologies are especially susceptible to

media imperatives. Kitada Akihiro's famous study of the "cynical nationalism" (*warau nashonarizumu*) on early online bulletin boards has shown that the actual political content of these "net right-wingers" (*netto uyoku*) constantly shifts position, often into sentiments that are not right wing or nationalist at all (Kitada 2005: 209, 218). Kitada cites their dependence on the formal irony of their online communication and the unstable feedback between their online community and the established media outlets they criticize (*ibid.*: 197-199). More recently, Kurihashi Kōhei has shown how the boutique industries of right-wing media work together not as an ideological program but as a participatory "convergence culture" through the cross-referencing of figures, ideas, and slogans across the different media forms (Kurihashi 2018: 31-32, 221-22). The dissolution of national identification into media flow is even visible in the notorious *On War/Sensōron* (1998) series by right-wing manga author Kobayashi Yoshinori, specifically in sequences where Kobayashi attempts to delineate the aforementioned right-wing talking point of the individual's (*ko*) need for a unified public (*kō*). The sheer number of contemporary of phenomena he tries to depict prevent a uniform picture. His panels race through images of people and places, concept maps, diagrams, and hallucinogenic silhouettes (Figure 6.4). Each claim to visualize the need for a nationalized public, only to abortively slide into the next fragment. The sights and experiences of contemporary Japan are constantly exceeding Kobayashi's simplistic vision of totality; diversity and complexity invade his monolithic ideal from too many access points.

Moe-military does something different. As with other anime fictions, it engages with fluid and mediated social horizons as experiences in their own right. It embraces, rather than struggles against, the immersion of collective imagination into media flow. To use an organic metaphor, it "digests" the conceptual form of imagined nation-ness, discarding the fibers of identification to freely exploit its "nutrients" – the ability to imagine oneself participating in collective movement through grand scales of space and time – within a mediated geopolitical imaginary of conflict.

3. Imaginative Ecologies and Trans-Nationalist Experience

Sociologist Tsuji Izumi has described the history of otaku practices as an “entrusting” of imagination to “concrete objects.” Models of ships, seaplanes, and later trains were mediums for boys to “focus their powers of imagination” toward temporal and spatial expanses (Tsuji 2012b: 11-12). Tsuji’s work merges well with the extended, ecological concept of imagination established in Chapter Four; the toy-machine is a cultural object that “triggers” and “mediates human cognitive process” that would not be possible without it (Malafouris 2013: 10). Within a culturally instituted ecology of mental, material, and media elements, the toy-machine affords the imagining of the spaces it can traverse and the sociohistorical systems that bring it into existence (Rietveld *et al.* 2018: 48-52). The character can be understood as a powerful new object for this process (Tsuji 2012b: 23). As we saw with Shimada’s *dōjinshi* illustrations, both military vehicles and *bishōjo* characters act as solicitations to imaginatively engage with interacting bodies of knowledge related to global conflicts, with nation and military reinforcing each other. The mediated imagination of anime fictions after the neoliberal turn uses this process to digest national identification, opening onto axes of reaction and progress that exceed any national framework.

I will illustrate this through a comparison of scenes from the *Garupan* anime and the live-action film *The Eternal Zero/Eien no zero* (Yamazaki 2013). A memorial to the *tokkōtai* (lit. “special attack groups”) or kamikaze fighter pilots, *The Eternal Zero* was one of the major works that attracted controversy as potential “right wing entertainment” (Schilling 2014). We should note that *The Eternal Zero* film is not a right-wing ideological project, strictly speaking. Much of the original negative press on the film likely arises from a bias based on its source material: a novel by right-wing sympathizer and Abe coauthor Hyakuta Naoki. The director of the 2013 film, Yamazaki Takashi, explicitly rejected the idea that the film glorifies war, saying that he intended to portray war as a

“complete tragedy” (*ibid.*). This does not absolve it of nationalist sentiment, of course. A cursory auteurist reading puts *Eternal Zero* within the same structure of feeling as Yamazaki’s previous hit, the nostalgia drama *Always: Sunset on Third Street/ Ōruweizu: San-chōme no yūhi* (2005). In *Always*, wistful views of the humanist parts of the postwar period become universalized into a watered-down patriotic affect felt on intimate levels. What *Always* does with the postwar recovery, *The Eternal Zero* does with military failure. Using different parts of 20th history, both of Yamazaki’s films are invested in national identification.

The Eternal Zero’s narrative follows a grandson and granddaughter piecing together the story of their biological grandfather, who died in a kamikaze mission, shifting between their interviews with surviving veterans and flashbacks of their grandfather’s wartime experience. Through these alternating timelines *The Eternal Zero* doggedly pursues a *kokutai*-style national identification, framed as the search for a blood relation to the past. The journey of historical discovery, which lasts the entirety of the film, culminates in a fantastical finale wherein the grandson looks out over a pedestrian bridge in modern Tokyo and sees a vision of his grandfather’s Zero flying past him (Figure 6.5). In slow motion the grandson breaks down crying and the diegesis cuts to the final scene, the grandfather’s suicide run. The whole film builds towards this fulfillment of a desire to see the force of history as it bears down upon the banality of the everyday to grant historical Japanese identity. It is a high-commitment imaginative modeling of collectivity, both in terms of time and emotional investment, which can only work if it fixes the intended subject within a historical and territorial position.

We can see a contrasting journey of discovery, or rather many of them, in *Girls & Panzer* or *Garupan* (Mizushima 2012), one of the successful *moe*-military franchises described above. *Garupan* depicts a fantasy present wherein *senshadō* or “way of the tank” is a ladylike art similar to tea ceremony or flower arrangement. The *senshadō* teams of all-girl high schools, each of which personifies a different country and historical military,

compete in mock battles which are about as dangerous as a normal contact sport. (This is the “playing with militarism” which worries some analysts.) Miho, the daughter of a storied *senshadō* family, transfers to Ōarai Girls’ School to escape a traumatic experience. When Ōarai must resurrect its defunct *senshadō* team to avoid school closure, Miho and her friends take the lead. Some of the most entertaining scenes depict the girls combing their school grounds and the surrounding town, which inexplicably rests on a massive oceangoing ship, in order to find the lost tanks of the old program. Pursuing the tanks of various countries doubly opens onto space and time; tank facts are voluptuously spouted by Yukari, Ōarai’s resident military hobbyist, while the girls’ journeys take them to over mountains, into lakes and caves, and down into the forgotten bulwarks of the town-ship itself. In many cases, the tanks are in pieces, used as laundry poles or dissolving into the environment around them (see Figure 6.6). In *Garupan*, visions of expansive pathos accessed by the war-machine, which fictions like *The Eternal Zero* take whole film lengths to build, are deployed frequently and freely as happy romps opening onto unseen vistas and forgotten places which cut easily to the next scene. Senses of belonging are directed to the intimate relations between the characters (and by extension the viewer,) as well as to the tank knowledge itself, which is mixed in with character tropes and other otaku clichés. The media invocation of national time is digested into the imaginative environment of everyday affections and temporary fictionalized horizons.

Here we might again recall Komori Kentarō’s phenomenological reading of *moe* as a fictionalized “affective intentionality” (see Chapter Two). A desirable character activates “the constant editing of a horizon by consciousness” (Komori 2013: 46-47). Similar to the fantasy *nichijō* fictions of Chapter Two, the sense of discovery, knowledge, enjoyment, and social cohesiveness in the girls’ searches for the lost tanks are not reducible to the characters’ *moe* traits, but instead arise through their movement within the background of fictionalized military history. This is not an undifferentiated “affect” in which elements are infinitely replaceable. The national feelings and concepts have a

specific organizing role; they are just not grounded in a particular national timeline. They are instead dissolved into the fictional environment as knots of social-historical discovery afforded by toy-machines and characters. The experience is not a journey to a totalizing identity, but an ambulatory phenomenology weaving through multiple theaters of geopolitical expanse, each one of them granted an erotic or intimate physicality by the *bishōjo* figure.

The formula is found well before *Garupan* or *Kankore* in the foundational *moe*-military magazine *MC AXIS* (2006-present). Figure 6.7 shows a spread from a feature called “World Battlefield Satellite”/*Wārudo batorufīrudo saterito* (Ikaros Publications 2007: Vol. 4, 34-35). The imaginary encounter is articulated through multiple layers of visual and textual information. The reader’s eyes are first drawn to the full-page illustration of the characters, who provide an intimate lived context for the scene, then can move to the realistic drawing of the war vehicle, the maps of combat maneuvers, to the colored dialogue box, or to the dry historical synopsis that forms the back layer of this deepening field of solicitations. You are free to explore as deeply or as shallowly as you wish. Characters and war machines are initial waypoints in the explorations, evoking promises of not just intimacy but also knowledge, experiential depth, or indeed, thrilling violence. Whether each one is followed up or not is beside the point; the image itself contains the implication of its background information and therefore the sense of an encounter with some new space of enjoyment and knowledge. Both are felt and thought; both evoke intimate bodily sensations while “making perceive-able” the grand vistas of war history which the reader may step into from any number of entry points (Heise 2008: 63).

Like most anime-based transmedia, the fictional ecology always at least potentially inhabits the physical and social world the forms of models, figures, fan spaces, and the newer phenomenon of contents-based tourism (see Yamamura 2014; Sugawa 2020). *Moe*-military experiences flow naturally into the tourism projects discussed earlier. I would

also emphasize the latent element of “virtual tourism;” even the faraway European destinations which were theaters of battle are conceived as a least potentially visit-able through the *moe* horizon. *Moe*-military produces an embodied and extended network of speculative thinking in terms of militarized collectives. To reiterate a point made in earlier chapters, the “environment of imagination” (*sōzōryoku no kankyō*) looks less like Azuma’s semiotic database and more like what contemporary theories of cognition refer to as a “cognitive ecology,” wherein “artefacts, circulating in human ecologies, function to entangle human cognition and behavior into coherent environmental relationships” (Azuma 2007: 64; Aston 2017: 215). Within *moe*-military, nation-ness becomes imagined not ideologically but ecologically, a fluctuating path through martially organized imagined communities which all temporarily afford the conceptual horizons that nationalism promises.

Michael Billig’s influential study of “banal” nationalism points out that “nationalist thinking involves more than a commitment to a group...A whole way of thinking about the world is implicated” (Billig 1995: 61). An imagined community is inevitably conceived within a network similar sovereign imagined communities interacting *through conflict*, civil or otherwise (Benner 2006: 11-15). This informs the inter-nationalism of *moe*-military in particular and of anime fictions in general. A clear example is found in the popular *moe*-military-adjacent franchise *Hetalia: Axis Powers*, in which the World War II powers and their historical antecedents are personified as handsome male characters. The opening scene of the first *Hetalia* anime (Shirohata 2009-2010) shows the personified nations at an international conference as they squabble amongst each other through animetic layers of jerky linear movements (Figure 6.8). Alongside the character desire, or rather, solicited and enabled through it, is an imaginative urge to inhabit and participate in an exciting cacophonous space of conflicting national characters, an encounter which may not be socially or economically available in fans’ physical lives.

Unfortunately, the geopolitical scale is where the reactionary potential of the conceit

is most darkly engaged. *MC Axis*, for example, contains features on the ideological and military projects of a diverse variety of historical military projects, from well-known ones like the Nazis and the Soviets to lesser-known ones like the Indian National Army (see Figure 6.9). In them the reader is allowed to temporarily inhabit the nationalist fervor, the military zeal, even the racism of any given national militaristic project, including projects directed against Japan. The object of ideological identification in *MC Axis* is not any particular nation but the evolving ecology of digested nation-ness as an open whole. A running column in the early issues called “After-School World War”/*Hokagō wārudo uō* takes the form of a mock UN club where the major powers of World War II, again personified as *bishōjo* characters, debate a *moe*-fied version of war history. In the first installment, the dialogue is framed by topic tabs which claim that “no one wanted war” and that every nation involved was acting “to defend [their] country” (Ikaros Publications 2006: Vol. 1, 120-121). The feature thus mounts an extremely problematic defense not only of Japanese military history but the motives of every imperial power and military action in World War II. All historical violence is justified in the service of perpetuating the exhilarating, erotic, and (to the fan) edifying imaginative ecology of transposable nationalized experiences.

Consequently, *moe*-military transports easily across national borders. Sugawa-Shimada notes that there are examples of *bishōjo* warships in Taiwan which preceded *Kankore* by several years (Sugawa-Shimada 2020: 395). A more recent example is the mobile game *Azur Lane* (2017-present), made by Chinese developers Manjū and Yongshi for a global player base. *Azur Lane*’s core concept is an intensified version of *Kankore*: players acquire, build, and deploy World War II-era battleships personified as *bishōjo* characters, only with more interface menus and data sets, more ships, more eroticism, and indeed more national information digested throughout, as *Azur Lane* features an inter-nationalized array of shipgirls from Allied and Axis powers alike. Figure 6.10 shows one of *Azur Lane*’s many loading screens which share fact sheets on the

fictionalized nations, dictated in the most flattering terms for each one. In the figure, the American analogue “Union” is a “democratic federated republic on the new continent, with overwhelming manufacturing capability and excellent scientific knowledge.” Each national project is a toy-machine in itself.

Moe-military’s popularity with certain audiences inside and outside Japan lies in its promise of a social-historical world accessed and explored by fighting, with the girl character lending a body to one’s own sexualized ambition at the center of it all (see Figure 6.11). Again, *moe*-military is merely a concentrated version of certain core conceits in anime and manga which have spread through global media channels into the rhetoric of right-wing groups around the world. An infamous tweet by American white nationalist leader Richard Spencer claiming that anime “has done more to advance European civilization than the Republican Party” highlights the nature of the problem.⁵² My fear is that we may be seeing a trans-nationalist fulfillment of Ōtsuka’s misgivings about these “aesthetics formed under fascism” (Ōtsuka 2013a: 276), where anime serves as an affective machine for global reaction, generating a nationalist fervor for any and every nation, a military zeal for any and every military, an imperialist ambition for any and every empire.

We can draw comparisons here with the current spread of Trumpism and QAnon conspiracy theory in Japan (Reuters Staff 2021). These are dangers we miss by continuing to treat media fictions like those in *moe*-military as sublimated representations of their national cultures. Japanese Trumpists and Spencer’s anime white nationalism similarly arise through mediated and globalized imaginaries of reaction through which alienated neoliberal subjects weave freely. The strange nationalisms of Empire need not rely on territorial or ethnic identity to offer imaginative fulfilment, nor culminate in state projects to do their damages. I fully agree with Sudō and Sugawa-Shimada that collaborations between anime industries and the Self-Defense Forces are causes for concern. However, we need to take care that our attempts to trace the links between anime’s mediated

imagination and national cultural policy do not block our view of its fundamentally geopolitical character and its relation to global developments. In fact, by understanding the character-military matrix outside of Japanese historical identity, we can identify multiple instances of anime fictions modelling nation-ness for progressive articulations of collectivity as well.

4. “Relief at War’s End:” Further Digestions of the Nation

The mediated imagination in *moe*-military and similar anime fictions are deeply bound up with global neoliberal convergence in the 21st century. In their worse moments, they create elements that which are easily coopt-able by both branded national imaginaries and global strange nationalisms. However, they are not the projects themselves. As explorations of reality and possibility, they are not in the business of cementing permanent identity formations or imaginary institutions, which will always put them in tension with programmatic systems. Yamamura notes that fictions like *Kankore* or *Garupan* are never “fundamentally pro-war” and often “cynically depict politics and the military” (Yamamura 2017: 22). Vuorikoski’s analysis of *Kankore dōjinshi* indicate that these subversive elements are what fan-creators pick up on. “When [*dōjinshi*] explicitly commented on the political aspects of the original works,” he summarizes, “interpretations of the franchise were that responsibility towards friends trumps responsibility towards the state” (Vuorikoski 2017: 21).

Of course, this works both ways. The critical views cited earlier share a concern that the cute depictions of military images separate them “from the war memories that they *are supposed to be* closely associated with” (Sugawa-Shimada 2019: 45, italics added). The problem here is that memories, even correct ones, do not exist publicly without broadly shared narratives and imaginaries, in this case, the legacy of postwar democracy and pacifism. Military and national images in anime are sources of anxiety because they

manifest the dilution of Japan's main countervailing imaginary within the economic fluidity and intensified mediation of our age. They speak to the fact that there are ever fewer guards to prevent social experience from being herded into authoritarian neoliberalism (be it the "ridiculous" branded nation of Cool Japan or the more sinister "strong Japan" of Abe's right-wing cohort) on the one hand, or exploding into new strange nationalisms on the other. *Moe*-military, and indeed most anime fictions, are unlikely to inform the kind of liberal civics that would call for a rational interrogation of history against these forces. But, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, this is not the only positive experience we can look for in them. They are collectivity in process, in which "nation" is differentially conceived. Attention to the richness and unfixed nature of mediated imagination leads to more potential sites of political intervention where we can identify both new dangers and new potentials.

When we recognize that the pleasure of *moe*-military fictions is not simply character desire but an environmental experience of nationalized movement, we can politicize the way speed and collectivity work together within them. *Garupan's* action scenes are neither particularly violent nor particularly sexual. They are simply "busy," as the tank teams on both sides of the match cling to their tanks, shake with the force of cannon fire, and roll in and out of formation. Each tank and team add to a larger flow of cute acceleration, the diegetic competition merging into exhilarating spectacles of cooperative bodies in motion. For brief moments the conflict dissolves into an undifferentiated celebration of moving collectivity. The rival team inevitably arises from the cute acceleration more humanized, its characters more likeable, and their team now on good terms with the Ōarai team. These spectacles are continuous with the wider field of anime fictions as a whole. For example, in *Saga of Tanya the Evil/ Yōjo Senki* (Uemura 2017), the aggressive individual movement of the main character, an embodiment of neoliberal self-interest, is easily subsumed into military organization. Conversely, in *Kabaneri of the Iron Fortress/Kōtetsujō no Kabaneri* (Araki 2016) the titular fortress train becomes a

melting pot of social castes and even ethnicities through the spectacles of the group's escape from zombie hordes. Across works and genres, the military-nation-character nexus plays out tensions between free collective movement and totalitarian structure.

The experience of *moe*-military contents tourism is another potential site we can politicize in terms of imaginative exodus and capture. Sugawa-Shimada is right to worry when anime tourism is connected to JSDF sites, because the tourists' visit and their interpretation of what they see will be curated by the military organization running it (Sugawa-Shimada 2020: 396). However, the imaginative exploration that plays out at sites not directly connected to a military site, like the *Garupan* town of Ōarai tourism, seems to encourage local and regional visions of belonging. In addition to ethnographic fieldwork, a potential place to look are the myriad anime tourism blogs posted online. While an extended survey must remain a future prospect, a cursory examination of the Ōarai blogs reveals highly personalized journeys, as photos and commentary of *Garupan*-related sites mix with other local attractions and points of interest. Comments that seem to be patriotic tend to be limited to the friendliness of the local people, the resilience of people after the tsunami, or amazement at the way the characters make the town a piece of national attention. Sudō's own fieldwork of the *Garupan* tourism boom details how it revitalized the town of Ōarai's businesses and local civic networks, while also bringing fans into cross-generational relationships with the townspeople. (Sudō 2016: 142-147). Her ultimate condemnation of the *Garupan* movement as *sekai-kei*-influenced otaku fascism closes up these potential battle lines (*ibid.* 163-164).⁵³

For my part, I want to look for imaginative solutions to the concern behind the *moe*-military controversy. Oguma Eiji and Ueno Yōko attribute the rise of historical revisionist groups from the 1990s in part to the ossification of liberal democracy and pacifism (Oguma and Ueno 2003: 216). Tomiko Yoda describes a similar problem in relation to military deployment (Yoda 2006: 27). There is a general sense that pacifist imaginaries are in need of revitalization in the era of global neoliberalism. It is therefore encouraging

to see fictions in which *bishōjo* character affect and military accoutrements are used to synthesize the intimate experience of a nation-like horizon, but saturated with the relieved feeling of peacetime as something worth feeling and building.

One of these is *Sound of the Sky/Sora no oto* (Kanbe 2010), part of the *Anime no Chikara* (“The Power of Anime”) project of studio A-1 Pictures and TV Tokyo which aimed to create original anime for older audiences. *Sound of the Sky* fuses the burgeoning *moe*-military conceit with the slow pace and intimate “healing” (*iyashi*) affects of the *nichijō-kei* genre (see Chapter Two). The story follows Kanata, a freshman military trumpeter stationed with four other *bishōjo* soldiers in a disused military outpost next to a provincial town. Director Kanbe Mamoru has commented that he wanted to link the producers’ request for a relaxing “before bedtime” anime with the expansive feeling of a “continuous landscape” (*chituzuki*). The production team seized on armistice and the “sense of relief at war’s end” (*shūsen no andokan*) as the means to this end (Watanabe 2010: *n.p.*). In other words, the feeling of peacetime was seen as an enticing way to expand the popular *nichijō* feeling to a broader imaginary horizon.

Kanata’s arrival to the town enacts not only a release of tension but also an opening of new cultural spaces and human connections thanks to the end of a conflict. The military post is an institutional relic of the long-running war. Aside from climatic scenes where war might be rekindled, the series proceeds through *nichijō* vignettes of the girls’ daily lives as they go through the routines of military service while getting to know the people and culture of the idyllic town. The fictional town is modelled on the World Heritage Site of Cuenca in Spain. As in the *ARIA* anime, the production team travelled to Cuenca for research, so that episode direction follows the layout of the actual town. Like *ARIA* it enacts a kind of virtual tourism; background art in the anime explicitly model popular photo spots in Cuenca, giving the assumed viewer imaginative access to a place many are not likely to experience in the flesh. (Figure 6.12). The experience is also fictionalized, as the series weaves Japanese cultural elements into the townscape and its local culture,

creating a virtual “commonality-in-difference” that allows the intended viewer a comfortable familiarity within foreignness; a kind of first foray into a new imagined community (Suan 2020b: 40-41).

Sound of the Sky feeds the geopolitical solicitation of *moe*-military into its unique world creation through what we might call “well-digested” national encounters. The girls’ military uniforms are worn casually, tokenistic adherences to a military order that keeps them together and gives them a pretext for their leisurely explorations of the town, which is the true purpose and pleasure of the series. Throughout the background art are images of futuristic war machines buried into the landscape (Figure 6.13). These indexes of expansive and destructive military conflict do not exude objective force in themselves but instead jut out from the landscape to impart a sense of time and events beyond the diegetic moment, allowing a sense of deep time and formative trauma. Digested nation-ness thus grounds the modelling of a fictional collective that bridges the familiar and foreign. *Sound of the Sky*’s very world structure is premised on the idea that the relief at war’s end is an opening of the world to imagination just as much as war is, and that explorations of faraway places can be more easily conceived in a peaceful context.

A more recent and more famous example is Kyoto Animation’s hit series *Violet Evergarden/Vaioretto Evagāden* (Ishidate 2018), which deploys the same “relief at war’s end” structure of feeling in tandem with the rich animation and more polished *bishōjo* affect that have become trademarks of the studio. *Violet Evergarden* was one of the studio’s last hits before its tragic arson case, winning awards at the Tokyo Anime Arts Festival among others (Pineda 2021). Set in a vague analogue of early 20th-century Europe, the series depicts an international order being re-woven after a destructive war as seen through the eyes of the titular Violet, an ex-child soldier who is slowly being integrated into society. The Andersonian structure of the series is on display in the opening sequence: Violet is seen writing a letter from a hospital bed. A gust of wind blows the letter out the window. It flies across a battle-scarred landscape to wind through busy city

streets, catching glimpses of passersby, and finally floats into a port where a ship is being welcomed by an anonymous crowd (Figure 6.14). The scene condenses the structure of feeling developed throughout the series, a pathos-charged experience of a homogenous social organism moving forward in time, with its wealth of anonymous and simultaneous activity unified by the medium of letter, an essential form of communication in the fictional world. This is pure digested national feeling, the virtual experience of a collective saturated with hope and life. Again, the hope is something that becomes believable from out of the “real” setting of a just-ended war.

Like in *Sound of the Sky*, military relics and damaged landscapes are features of the background art. More important is Violet herself. Violet’s experience in the war has left her maimed; both hands were blown off in a final battle, though they are replaced with fully functional mechanical prostheses. She is also figured as emotionally empty from her war trauma, without an understanding of human motivations. To reintegrate, Violet takes a job as “letter writing doll,” a combination of typist and ghost writer for written communications which are central to social relations in the fictional world. Her work takes her around the different nations to help mend personal and political relations as she learns the import of human communication for herself. Flashbacks of her experiences in the brutal war are setbacks in her reeducation. Though her detailed character rendering does not resemble the simple globular designs of other works discussed in this chapter, Violet is nonetheless a quintessential *bishōjo*-as-weapon character. Images of her metal hands on the keyboard fuse her with the machine, while repeated close-ups of anime liquidity of her eyes pose her as an affective receptor for intimate attachment and a link to our own subjective vision of expansive landscapes (Figure 6.15). Violet is simultaneously the new national subject of this virtual inter-national order and the medium binding it together. Such an orientation is possible precisely because she appears first a weapon. Violet’s military accoutrements are the affordances that allow for the imaginative access to the grand scales of human movement implied within the national

way of thinking the world. We should also not forget the context of neoliberalism. *Violet Evergarden* reroutes the digested nationalism used by the *moe*-military texts into an affective-cognitive exploration of rebuilding and healing, where the “relief at wars end” is the enabling kernel of experience around which mediated imagination begins to envision alternatives to the current atomized order. Consciously or not, *Violet Evergarden* achieves a powerful metamodeling of conditions of possibility within anime’s mediated social imagination. Violet’s rehabilitation is an experiment – judging from the critical and commercial response to the series, a successful one – about whether aesthetics forged under conditions of fascism are capable of doing new things.

This rehabilitation might also extend to the national concept at large. *Violet Evergarden* and *Sound of the Sky* lend a bit of credence to Craig Calhoun’s somewhat aging claim that nations still have progressive potential as “mediating structures” between individuals and globalization (Calhoun 2007: 148-152). In the mid-2000s, Calhoun argued that the nation remained a valuable collective imaginary for providing the “structures of integration” and “cultural capacities for communication” needed for large-scale democratic resistance to the ravages of neoliberalism (*ibid.*). To me, the open markets, closed borders ethos of authoritarian neoliberalism in the present day undermines the possibility for a reformed nationalism in the real world. As fuel for imagined integrations within anime fictions, however, nations still seem to have this power.

Coda

The case of *moe*-military is interesting because draws attention to progressive humanities scholars’ search for effective sites of politicization in contemporary media culture. What I have attempted to show here and throughout the dissertation is that there is much to be gained from taking processes of mediated imagination on their own terms

rather than reducing them to representations of “real” structures like sexual pathology, social identity, or industrial networks. Such analyses have inestimable value, of course, but when faced with a media form that pokes at the most complex problems and uncertainties of our times, they tend to leave us either condemning from the sidelines or wallowing in postmodern ambivalence. If cultural criticism aims to intervene in the mediated flows between popular culture and politics, we must sometimes immerse ourselves in the fictional imaginaries, where we have a chance to locate details and expound on the alternate energies which even their critics admit seem to be there. This will sometimes involve provisionally abandoning our received notions of what a progressive imaginary looks like.

This last point is important for the study of the national concept in relation to media culture. The progressive humanities have recently been occupied with attempts to resist national frameworks by locating regional and transnational forms of mediated collectivity (e.g. Iwabuchi 2014; Lamarre 2015). However, the very possibility of national branding means that nations are still resonant structures in human experience. Calhoun has a point when he claims that even if we ultimately reject national views of the world, “we should take them seriously and see how deeply imbricated they are in our conceptual frameworks rather than trying to wish them away” (Calhoun 2007: 8). What anime fictions make clear is that digested nation-ness is extremely plastic; national horizons can be pulled in many directions. Both *Sound of the Sky* and *Violet Evergarden* are thinking in terms of the nation, not as a particular ideological identification but as decomposed, digested, and reconstitute-able experiences of imagined collectivity. The legacy of their environment of imagination leads them to play with militarism, but in their separate ways they use that legacy to imagine the fulfillment in exploring newly peaceful worlds. Both series hint at new ways we might begin to engage both aesthetically and politically with the type of thinking that permeates anime and spreads beyond it: that kind of collective framework that we still call “national.”

Conclusion: A Prelude to Pedagogy

This dissertation has followed anime fictions through Japan's age of neoliberalism, from the anxious convergence in the late 1990s through the branded cultural economy of the 2010s, tracing out their operations within a larger process of mediated imagination. It has aimed to contribute to anime studies by offering specific sociocultural analysis which takes into account both anime's transmedia conditions and the complexities of socioeconomic experience that have accompanied neoliberalism into the digital age. One of my main goals throughout has been to complicate sociological readings which pose anime and related media as "graphic representations" of actual Japan (Rosenbaum 2015: 147-148). In anime and in neoliberalism, imagination is what allows a view beyond the limiting rubric of critical representation vs. ideological obfuscation. Conversely, I have also tried to complicate postmodernist interpretations of anime as an escape from social representation. These include ideas that anime fictions' emphasis on attractive characters precludes narrative or social thinking (Azuma 2001: 100) or that the content of an anime can be reduced to the communication it produces among fans (Kinema Junpo 2011: 78-79). Regardless of artistic quality or authorial intent, anime fictions imaginatively engage with neoliberalism as an experiential content, and do so in ways that differ productively from other media forms. As I have indicated throughout, these concepts have implications beyond the study of anime. In what follows, I will attempt to clarify the possible impact of my dissertation for the fields of Japan area studies, cinema and media studies, and in the progressive humanities broadly conceived.

The first impact concerns Japan area studies. The two parts of my dissertation can be seen as interrogations of two widely accepted historical narratives regarding Japanese media and culture over the last two decades. Part I dealt mainly with the domestic scale of the so-called "lost decade" of the 1990s and the reorganization of socioeconomic relations after large-scale labor casualization. This shift is often characterized as the

traumatic end of the structured “family nation” which the organized postwar economy had enabled (Kelly and White 2006: 66). Popular media forms have overwhelmingly been discussed as symptoms of this national trauma which either express its directionless anomie or provide an escape into “a recursive worldview and a timeless, endless play that is addictively, narcissistically fun” (Allison 2009: 106). The descriptions of anime fictions and their techniques of imagination offered in my chapters show a more complex response on the level of media culture. We have seen diverse methods of imaginative engagement with the technological and socioeconomic changes in post-millennial Japan. Differences are found between and within media forms, genres, and even iterations of a single work. None of these are reducible to melancholy on the one hand or mindless gratification on the other. What we saw in anime fictions especially was the use of characters as loci for imagining media-social niches in which a fulfilling social totality might be possible. Moreover, most of these niches exist “beyond Japan” in one way or another.

Part I’s chapters show how the different engagements of media fictions become visible once we abandon the idea of a uniform national experience occurring outside mediation. Chapter One challenged the prevailing opinion of the *sekai-kei* genre as an example of millennial solipsism by setting it in the context of transmedia convergences within the neoliberal turn. We saw that *sekai-kei* fictions modelled perception within the media environments of global neoliberal risk in ways that differed not only from semiotic postmodernism but also from related anime genres which depicted media experience through an aesthetics of posthumanism. Above all, *sekai-kei* was invested in delineating new conditions for human contact within destabilized social horizons. Chapter Two showed how anime fictions necessitate a broader understanding of what counts as an engagement with neoliberal precarity. The cognitive impasses of neoliberal de-socialization impede critical representation across genre and medium, as we saw with both *Tokyo Sonata* and *Welcome to the NHK*. In contrast, the affective healing offered by the *nichijō* conceit can isolate what feels good about a nonproductive experience. When

mixed with other conceits in a ludic environment of imagination, it can orient a speculative vision of the common, as we saw with the fantasy *nichijō* worlds in *ARIA* and *Haibane Renmei*. Chapter Three continued this line of inquiry with the precarious *isekai* fictions of the 2010s, showing that the cognitive potential of anime fictions does not lie in the accurate representation of Japanese youth problems but in the mediated imagination of how those problems can be newly perceived and perhaps overcome. These different potentials and limitations become visible after we dispense with the view of popular media as symptoms of homogenous national trauma to consider their small-scale negotiations of reality and possibility within an imaginary field that is both culturally and technologically constituted (Couldry and Hepp 2016: 37).

Part II dealt with the renegotiation of international imaginaries in the 21st century. The standard narrative about Japan here is that the destabilizing effects of neoliberal globalization and the loss of a secure geopolitical position after the Cold War led to a resurgence of “illiberal” nationalism in both politics and popular culture (Nakano 2016: 165). As discussed in the chapters, otaku media has often been implicated in a presumed “turn to the right” among Japanese youth (Kayano 2011: 37-38). However, the anime fictions discussed here exhibit a geopolitical imaginary that is simultaneously larger and smaller than the given national totality of Japan. Even anime fictions which overtly display nationalized imagery tend to dissolve their political characteristics into abstracted geopolitical agency and large-scale collective movement. If indeed anime fictions and otaku media were part of the nationalized response to neoliberal globalization, then that response itself was always differential, contingent, and filled with potential divergences.

The fictions discussed throughout Part II display a thickly populated geopolitical imagination that is constantly being funneled into a managed inter-national framework. Chapter Four discussed how genres of violence dealt with the different imaginaries of globalization the post-Cold War era. Through *Black Lagoon* and other fictions we saw a productive interaction between the privatized, globalized visuality of otaku knowledge

and the political realism that had characterized these genres in previous decades. The agentic global imagination which it produces, while directionless and therefore vulnerable, is nonetheless able to visualize geopolitical landscapes beyond the managerial images which dominated Japan's official discourse on globalization. In Chapter Five, the popularity of an amorphous fiction like *Code Geass* indicates that there was no single unified cultural or political response to the tumultuous global climate in the 2000s. *Code Geass* created pleasurable experiences by dissolving conceptions of national and geopolitical order into a mediated cascade, capitalizing on inchoate desires to see collective change. Limited by gender and genre predilections, that desire for change could only be partially articulated before sliding back into a presumed national culture. But the desire and its limitation are not the same thing. Finally in Chapter Six, anime fictions continue to pervert national images even after being incorporated into the engineered project of the Cool Japan and its imaginary of the "branded nation" (Valaskivi 2013: 499). Perversion takes positive and negative forms. In the *moe*-military fictions we saw that national ideology is not the endpoint of national commodification; the dissolved national experience can feed into schizophrenic post-national forms of reaction or be stretched into fresh articulations of pacifism. All of these examples go to show that media fictions created neither a simple nationalist response to globalization nor a new national imaginary, but instead offered global indeterminacy as dispersed imaginative experiences which interacted with the instituted entity called "Japan" in different ways.

The second impact concerns contemporary film and media studies, particularly the concepts of media subjectivity that underlie our evaluative methods. Throughout the dissertation I have developed the concept of mediated imagination to describe the relationships between media images, mental activities, and social conditions. If my argument that anime fictions are functions of imagination holds, then we are faced with an image-thinking process which resonates with the major models of media subjectivity that have been brought to bear on texts yet differs from all of them in key places (see

Figure 0.3). Anime fictions therefore encourage us to develop critical methods that can move between models of media subjectivity.

In the first place, imagination offers a strong counter to the ideological model of media subjectivity which has informed the radical bent in film and media studies since the 1960s onward (Rushton 2013: 35-41). The ideological model presumes a flow of information from a hegemonic cultural framework through a more or less organized media industry into the individual, who is thereby structured as an ideological subject. In this model, all but the most radical forms of media production are complicit in the coordinated fabrication of hegemonic reality. The efficacy of the ideological model has long been contested by notions of the active audience in cultural studies (Fiske 2011 [1989]: 37 *et passim*) and more recently in transmedia fan studies (Jenkins 2006: 258-259). However, the ideological model persists in critical studies as an assumption that a non-hegemonic media text must offer a radical critique, as we saw with the precarity studies approaches in Chapter Two or the cultural policy studies in Chapter Six. Critical projects in film, media, and cultural studies still tend to conceive of themselves as attempts to disrupt the one-way flow from power to people at the site of the media text.

Attention to imagination as social process exposes problems with the ideological model on two levels. First, the normative background of the social imaginary is revealed not as a static symbolic order but as an unfinished space of contestation. Even without a definite political intention, media fictions can reveal the multiplicity of any imagined background, as we saw with different versions of the global space of violence in Chapter Four or with the transmedia horizon of global risk in Chapter One. Second, the techniques of imagination that structure a given medium, not to mention the industrial processes that actually produce it, are themselves sites of multiple interactions. The collaborative, “dispersed agency” that produces anime fictions is a primary example, be they the coordinated orchestration of teams of “specialists” that produced *Code Geass* in Chapter Five or the near-infinite permutations of a common stock of video game conceits that

produced the *isekai* fictions in Chapter Three (see Suan 2018b: 13). On both the level of sociocultural background and that of shared techniques, media culture is composed of multiple processes of creation, all of them traversed by active and engaged processes of speculative thinking which simultaneously confirm and contest (Orgad 2012: 34-39). Even in a single media experience multiple ways of thinking are being made available to us, offering differential solutions to common problems. The either/or of ideology needs to evolve to consider the multidirectional processes of imagination.

This active version of mediated experience seems to be akin to the second model of media subjectivity, which I have called “interactionist.” In it, situated social subjects process the information provided to them from a globalized media field, interpreting the images and ideas according to the “everyday” experiences granted by their local identities (Silverstone 2007: 5). Media representations are “resources” providing frameworks and scripts about the world, feeding into these subjects’ projects of self-formation (Orgad 2012: 41-42). The interactionist model offers a two-way flow of determination. Even granting the unequal distribution of power in media networks, individuals and collectives do have some capacity to compare, interpret, and produce media sources. In idealistic versions, these rhetorical forms of media participation can contest official narratives (Appadurai 1996: 33). This kind of optimism is seen in Henry Jenkins’ recent collaborative work on the “civic imagination” of creative fan practices which utilize popular media as “shared vocabulary” to contribute to a mediated public sphere (Jenkins *et al.* 2020: 14).

However, there is no clean separation between media and social spheres in the otaku knowledge that structures the geopolitical genres of violence in Chapters Four and Six, nor in the mediated techniques of perception which structure the social experience of *sekai-kei* in Chapter One, or the gamer imagination of the *isekai* in Chapter Three. The fact that such fictions are possible means that media-forms are not simply “resources.” Rooted in liberal conceptions of selfhood, the interactionist model does not take into

account the realm of material engagement; the grey zone between thought, material, media, and social forms where thinking is structured and amplified within cognitive ecologies (Aston 2017: 215). With a closed model of consciousness, the only media forms that become politically valuable are those which can be seen as rhetorical statements confirming an already recognized social identity or ideological position. This was the limitation of the globalization studies approaches to imagination and agency discussed in Chapter Four. Similarly, the case studies in Jenkins and company's project, despite emphasizing popular culture's role in articulating "nascent cultural desires," overwhelmingly feature already organized youth activists working with media texts which were consciously produced to speak to topical issues of social justice (see esp. Jenkins *et al.* 2020: 21-26). This is not at all to say that the struggles they address are unimportant. Rather, the activities Jenkins and company celebrate are not "nascent desire" but already articulated forms of public participation within defined cultural, class, and educational contexts. Even granting their success, direct mobilization through rhetorical uses of popular culture seems like a rare exception.

In view of our minds' fundamental openness to the flows of media and social power, the pessimism of the ideological model is often warranted. The proliferation of media images and their dominance in our social lives means that the possibility for the subject to examine and contest in a mutually agreed-upon public sphere is compromised. The vague political feelings of anime fictions articulate a different, arguably more widely shared experience within media environments. The healing post-work imaginaries of *ARIA* in Chapter Two and the clichéd revolutions of *Code Geass* in Chapter Five are examples of how media fictions generate pleasure in change without a preconceived political framework. They offer not a rhetorical process of contestation between extant social identities but a rawer process of reformulation taking place in miniscule increments. The agency presumed by interactionist studies of media will be better served once we recognize it outside of sanctioned public performance and in the perceptual fabric of

media-social environments.

Finally, the model of imagination proposed here also differs from its adjacent Deleuzian or neomaterialist models of media subjectivity, which locate the source of all determination on the pre-personal field of material engagement. If we follow these models to the letter, then the traversal processes of imagination I have described are merely half-hearted deterritorializations, lying somewhere between arboreal forms of social identity and the rhizomatic plane of media and material immanence (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 3-10). Here we might point out a kind of ultimatum which informs Deleuze and Guattari's ideas, as well as the neomaterialist approaches they influence. As detailed in *Anti-Oedipus* (1983), capital will coopt all forms of desiring production within its ever-expanding and "englobing" flow. Since capitalism is schizoid, Deleuze and Guattari perceive, the two options are to retreat into reterritorialization (nationalism and related ideologies) or give oneself over to the schiz, deterritorializing further and faster than capitalism (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 236-240). This opposition is repeated in recent thinkers, including in Lamarre's discussion of anime as ecological versus environmental thinking (Lamarre 2018: 115). However, subjectivity and agency may not require an ultimatum between governed individual subject and ungovernable lines of flight.

As I have argued throughout my chapters, we have to account for the centrality of fictions within anime's flatness and fluidity. In all of the works described, image-affect coalesces into image-thinking (imagination) which articulates the possibility of a *social* in the abstract. In Chapter One we saw the primacy of moments of coherence in the *sekai-kei* fictions and in *Suzumiya Haruhi*. In Chapters Two and Three we saw the building of subject/world relations within the experiential frameworks of *nichijō* and *isekai*, as well as analogues in the real-world anime industry. In Chapters Four and Six we saw geopolitical referents passionately organized through otaku knowledge. In Chapter Five we saw the experience of media immanence being encapsulated in the possibility of use by a social actor via *Code Geass*. As functions of imagination, anime fictions are

constructive, not as completed statements but as differential simulations of coherent social life. In all cases, the lens of mediated imagination shows that each of the major models of media subjectivity leaves out at least one defining element of anime fictions. This is not to pose “imagination theory” as an alternative model. Rather, it is to show that media, fiction, criticism, and theory are all modes of thinking within a vast and indeterminate project, and that attention to processes of imagination can help identify which parts of each mode are not reducible to the others.

The final impact concerns the larger role of the progressive humanities as the bearers of a spirit of questioning against the self-evidence of capitalism. Shibuya Nozomu, an early explicator of neoliberal reason in Japan, argued that the first job of contemporary cultural studies was to understand how the left “lost the power game” in the latter part of the 20th century (Shibuya 2003: 10-14). Perhaps we do not have to take his pessimism so completely, but he does speak to the fact that neoliberal reason has been manifestly successful at coopting, erasing, or otherwise nullifying leftist models of political contestation. Cornelius Castoriadis expressed a similar concern some years earlier. Discussing what he perceived as the failures of Marxist and radical democratic movements in the 20th century, he offered that while a revolutionary *project* as the pursuit of an unalienated society still exists, a revolutionary *program* does not (Castoriadis 1997: 31). Again, we do not have to follow him completely to understand the import of his point for the study of culture. This is why throughout this dissertation I have taken issue with critical approaches that hold anime fictions up to an assumed program of resistance against capitalism, nationalism, or imperialism. We need to think more flexibly about how the project of imagining beyond alienation can be nurtured without recourse to a single program. It is also why I have tried to describe the potential of very different scales of imagined worlds with regard to neoliberalism. The point is not to find the most progressive form of collectivity to advocate, but rather to examine how all extant frameworks are malleable, for both good and ill, simply by being plugged into processes

of mediated imagination like those in anime fictions.

In the two parts of this dissertation, I have linked elements of anime fictions to very different critiques of capitalism. Part I was mainly informed by the theories of autonomist Marxism, which were helpful in delineating how social imagination remains present in media and culture even when subsumed into neoliberalism. In Chapters Two and Three especially, I discussed how the pleasurable affects of character-based fiction worked to remove social experience from neoliberal reason, and therefore could be fed into autonomist-influenced political projects of “exodus” (Virno 1996a: 33) or the reinstatement of a “common” (Hardt and Negri 2009: viii-x). Part II was informed by a mixture of political perspectives, including the interactionism of liberal globalization studies, the radical democracy of Castoriadis or Wendy Brown, and the agonist strain of post-Marxist thought. This mixture enabled a view of the perversions that nations and other large-scale collectivities undergo within the anime environment of imagination. Even potentially reactionary subcultural fictions make the nation into a question, whether they want to or not. It can easily be objected that the autonomist and radical democratic perspectives are at odds with each other (see Mouffe 2013: 71-75), or that interactionism ignores or outright rejects the role of ideological subject formation that inform the other two perspectives (Thompson 1995: 8-9). However, it is precisely this piecemeal approach that is encouraged by the imagination within anime fictions, whose social content is distinctly unprogrammable.

Programmable approaches are defined by all-or-nothing attitudes to cultural production, where divergences are evidence of an underlying complicity with power. The fact that *Code Geass* does not treat the full complexities of real-world conflict means that it says “ultimately” says “nothing worthwhile” about the geopolitical climate (Choo and Koh 2016: 308). The abundance of girl characters in *moe* fictions betrays them as patriarchal vehicles for recuperating the loss of male authority in society (Naitō 2010: 329; *c.f.* Lamarre 2013: 135). In failing to measure up to a total program of liberation,

they are assumed to be in the service of the other side. What I have labored to describe here is the way in which anime fictions are primarily on the “side” of *elation* which is simultaneously visceral and conceptual. Their imaginative movement arises within the commodified and hierarchical worlds of media capitalism. But these worlds can only develop by harnessing different social desires which strive thoughtlessly towards autonomy in different ways. Despite their subsumption, they are iterations of the larger ongoing process of affective speculation occurring throughout human life. The political aesthetics of imagined collectivity therefore gravitates toward a criticism of collaboration, an aesthetic of “that’s pretty good; here’s what else can be thought.” It is a politics that begins with recognizing the active, engaged imaginative work that is going on in them, and only then pointing out how one seeming source of pleasure is blocking a greater enjoyment that might be sought.

In short, the way anime fictions imagine large-scale social being and action is very similar to the way that the vast majority of flesh and blood subjects of capitalism do: as flashes of mutuality and agency articulated through the clichéd images, lines, and sounds that are always flowing past us, as tentatively constructed imagined orders. These are not merely disembodied postmodern subjectivities, either. They deal in sensation and, for better or worse, are marketed to the body. Most importantly, they retain a promise of constructing a situated social experience on small and large scales. Anime fictions speak to the possibility and the necessity of moving flexibly between different conceptions of media-social environments and their political enunciation. That is what human imaginations will have to do in mass if any progressive collectivity – the new global proletariat, the multitude, the cosmopolitan public sphere, the demos – is to be articulated from within neoliberalism, or rather, from within whatever neoliberalism is becoming.

In March of 2021, with the Covid-19 pandemic in its continual slow burn in Japan and my dissertation research stymied by library closures and travel difficulties, I masked up and went to my local AEON mall theater to watch the fourth and final installment of the *Rebuild of Evangelion/Evangerion Shin Gekijōban* movies, *Thrice upon a Time*. Begun in 2007, these films were director Anno Hideaki's attempts to reinterpret his original series with his new studio Khara. It is well known that Anno and other members of *Eva*'s creative team were not happy with the effect the original series had on the world of anime, particularly its contribution to the *moe* phenomenon and the orientation of the industry to adult otaku consumers. The *Rebuild* films were apparently meant to provoke anime creativity to expand in new directions, but their impact suffered from delayed releases due to various production issues of which Covid was only the most recent. Perhaps because of its release during the pandemic, this last film did finally seem like an event. Without delving into a detailed description, I will say that Anno and his team made it expertly clear that *Thrice upon a Time* aimed to exorcise the otaku demons which the original had helped release into the world. After a climatic "goodbye to all the Evangelions," the film ends with Shinji as a well-adjusted adult rendezvousing with his girlfriend, a new female pilot created for the films, on a train platform in the real world.

The paternalism so often expressed by famous anime creators irritates me, and I instinctively scoffed at the repeat of the decades-old "otaku grow up" message in 2021. However, after a moment it dawned on me how apt this end to "all the Evangelions" was. Sitting in the social distanced and monitored theater, I realized that my project on "contemporary anime" was in fact a study of the past. This was not because anime fictions were going to undergo some radical shift due to the end of the *Eva* franchise, but because the social forms which had made the series a resonant force and propelled anime fictions in the last two decades had begun an irrevocable process of change. In Japan and around the world, the age of neoliberalism was turning into something else. Of course, the end of neoliberalism has been announced numerous times only to be met by more neoliberal

projects. Even the authoritarian politics of the second Abe administration, which had seemed like an ominous new phase, had faded ignominiously away into new political alignments around the governments' laissez-faire pandemic response and stubborn pursuit of the Tokyo Olympics. What was happening was that neoliberal reason and its de-socializing forms of individual self-management were providing the base layer for new kinds of compartmentalization and mutually exclusive mandates: closed borders and digital cloisters on the one hand, government-subsidized plague zones on the other. These changes had started before Covid, arguably since the rise of "platform capitalism," which, as Marc Steinberg describes, has all but closed up the relatively free "networks" of early digital capitalism into the highly structured and policed territories of Amazon, Facebook, and the like (Steinberg 2019: 17-21). In addition to these trends, there is also our growing global realization that climate disaster is no longer a future fear but a current reality. The pandemic simply was bringing the change into view, the same way that the crises of the mid-1990s had apparently done. The presence of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* at both ends, while probably not substantial, was certainly poetic.

Anime fictions had already begun to shift years before as well, most notably with the rise of Netflix, Amazon Prime, and other streaming services as distribution vehicles. Another important change was the gradual encroachment of international social network sites like Youtube and Twitter onto the Japanese digital ecology of Nico Nico Dōga and 2Channel, which had shaped otaku culture in the age of neoliberalism. It is not that otaku genres are disappearing in these new globalized platform economies; on the contrary, character-based fiction has found vibrant new outlets in form of virtual Youtubers, online events, and other forms of "2.5D" culture, while the previously unapproachable late-night TV genres like *isekai* or *nichijō* now are easily binged alongside mainstream titles via the streaming platforms. What has been changing is the particular relationship of their techniques of imagination to the larger imaginaries of nation, globalization, capitalism, etc. What exactly that relationship will become remains unclear, but there is no doubt that

it will be attuned to the new experiential structures that are being layered over the “ruins of neoliberalism” in the post-pandemic world (Brown 2019). These techniques will surely come to differ from those described in this dissertation.

On the other hand, this can all be seen as just a new version of a longstanding problem. Risking the cliché of invoking Walter Benjamin in a dissertation conclusion, I cannot help but recall his writing on the modern experience as one “for which the shock experience has become the norm” (Benjamin 1999: 162-164). The problem has always been the question of what thinking becomes under these endlessly intensifying modern shocks generated through the successive phases of capitalism. For all our tech-savviness, we still have not grasped how to think in these conditions, and therefore we cannot think through them. To me, the situation seems to affirm the primacy of imagination. Imagination is speculative thinking as process, and responds actively to new shocks. This is why certain of our communicative artifacts, especially but not exclusively fiction, retain philosophical and cognitive value in and of themselves, regardless of creators’ intentions, modes of production, or immediate audience reception. They offer possible models of agentic thinking within shock. The unfinished job is to figure out how to link these kinds of image-thinking to political forms of reflection. If we do so, we will be in a better position to organize bodies of thought and mobilizable human collectives in ways that lead somewhere besides destruction.

After *Thrice upon a Time* finished, I was happy to notice that most of the other audience members were not aging male nerds like me (though a few of us were there) but small groups of high school and college-aged young people, both men and women. As we funneled out, two meters apart, I enjoyed listening to the different groups discuss what they’d seen, friends helping each other piece together *Eva*’s ever-impenetrable storylines and imagery. I would have liked to jump in and offer a perspective on animetic imagination at the crux of neoliberalism and Covid, but that of course would have been weird. All the same, the experience reconfirmed for me the role of critical approaches in

the humanities. If, as Deleuze and Guattari say, art constructs blocs of sensation and philosophy creates concepts, then we might say that criticism constructs modes of engagement (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 11, 164). The success of identity-based cultural criticism over the last few decades has stemmed in no small part from its ability to offer an enabling mode of engagement with media and social forms within its historical context. Criticism is always a kind of pedagogy, not merely that between a teacher and student or between groups of academics, but also between friends, colleagues, fans, and sometimes even political groups, people working together to figure out how to make sense of the things impinging on their shared awareness.

I think a mode of engagement based on imagination may go some way toward preparing for the shocks of the coming socioeconomic horizon. Imagination is about refusing to engage just with what *is there*, which is almost always alienation. Making regular practice of teaching and talking about what *might be there*, what *could be there*, or what *we would like to be there* as a shared mode of engagement with media environments can bring different desires and aspirations into communication and help projects for material change find common ground more easily. The media forms of the past can help in such negotiations as well. The anime fictions of the age of neoliberalism provide models of thought and action that can be useful throughout the coming mess. We will need all the help we can get.

NOTES

¹ Note on Japanese names and terms. This dissertation will follow Japanese naming conventions and apply macrons in transliteration, except in the case where a Japanese author's publication is originally in English. In this case, the name will appear as it does in the original publication. The Japanese titles of media works will be italicized in the text, as will any general Japanese language-terms. However, names, including those of organizations, will not be italicized. In addition, terms like "anime," "manga," and "otaku," which are key terms for the entire dissertation and have a generally wide recognition outside of Japan, will not be italicized. In the case where an existing English translation of a Japanese work is used in the text, the translation will be cited separately from the original Japanese publication. Otherwise, English translations of Japanese text, terms, and concepts are my own.

² In Japan, the term "subcultural work" (*sabukaruchā sakuhin*) is often invoked to describe fictional works related to the otaku subculture. This is certainly a convenient term for describing these works' continuity with a wider "environment of imagination" regardless of whether they appear in anime, manga, light novels, or games (see Azuma 2007: 60-65). However, I have opted not to use this term because "subcultural" runs the risk of drawing unneeded connections with its nuances in Anglophone scholarship. Parsing out the difference between British cultural studies' understanding of subculture and that in Japanese criticism would take this dissertation away from its focus on media and image-thinking. (For a concise summary of the term "subculture" in Japanese cultural criticism, see Yoda 2006: 36-37.) Zoltán Kacsuk has offered the term AMO (anime, manga, and otaku) as a way of unifying cross-cultural academic research focusing on different aspects of this transmedia ecology within a "common discursive field" (Kacsuk 2016: 275). However, I will continue with "anime" as the catch-all term for fictions within this transmedia ecology, first for the sake of simplicity, and second for the role played by anime images in structuring the other media forms. As Komori

Kentarō notes, the fictions greenlit for an anime version will be those deemed to have a strong base of popularity within the “otaku field” of the time, so that by focusing on anime, one can get a general view (*mitōshi*) of the whole (Komori 2013: 17). Furthermore, as Lamarre suggests, “animetic” image logic has come to determine character design and movement across forms, shifting manga and novels into anime-like forms (Lamarre 2009: 298-299). Anime’s role as the apex medium, so to speak, in this transmedia ecology also informs my leaning toward anime versions of a transmedia fiction. However, as we will see in the chapters, certain fictions are deeply implicated with the image techniques of a particular medium or else to the imagination of certain creators. In any case, throughout the dissertation I will try to give an indication of how each fiction, as a unit of imagination, is articulated through different transmedia iterations.

³ There are so many scholarly treatments of *Eva* that is impossible to cite them all here. Many early studies discuss it as an authorial text, for example, Azuma’s praise of Anno as a “Godard” of anime (Azuma *n.d.*), or Susan Napier’s analysis of *Eva* as a postmodernist meditation on technological identity (Napier 2002). Others undertake psychoanalytic readings of Shinji’s process of ego-formation (Kotani 1997). There are of course negative readings in the same vein, such as Uno Tsunehiro’s denunciation of the “reclusive psychologism” (*hikikomori/shinrishugi*) that *Eva* would instill in subsequent works (Uno 2008: 20). More recent treatments have offered new insights into the potentials of *Eva*’s complex imagery. For example, Christophe Thouny has examined *Eva*’s depictions of apocalypse as radical re-articulations of time and collectivity, which resonates with the goals of this dissertation (Thouny 2009). Most recently, Stevie Suan has re-thought *Eva*’s controversial endings through the philosophical lens of Timothy Morton’s ecological object-oriented ontology, giving the 1995 anime new relevance within contemporary discourses on climate change (Suan 2020a). In this way, *Eva* has indeed become like literature, in that its invention far outpaces its creators’ intentions and its sociocultural moment, allowing for reconceptualization within new

sociohistorical contexts. However, except for a few moments where it directly concerns the focus of a chapter, *Eva* remains something of an absent presence in this dissertation. While a full treatment of *Eva* as mediated imagination is an exciting future prospect, I have avoided doing so here, precisely because its influence has tended to act like a teleological endpoint for anime and otaku media. Here I want to focus on what happens in anime fictions after *Eva* as part of an ongoing historical context.

⁴ For example, Shibuya claims that neoliberal rhetoric can be seen in state policy documents from the early 1980s (Shibuya 2003: 57). Akahori Masashige and Iwasa Takuya argue that at least in terms of attitudes to labor, the breakup of Japan National Railways by the Nakasone administration (1982-1987) can be seen as the beginnings of Japanese neoliberalism (Akahori and Iwasa 2010: 2-3). In contrast, Harvey's Japanese translator and explicator Watanabe Osamu argues that true neoliberalism came with the Koizumi administration in 2001 (Watanabe 2007: 317-318). Nihei Norihiro seconds this interpretation, arguing that the period of the 1990s can be seen as laying the groundwork for Koizumi's austerity measures, which mark the start of Japanese neoliberalism in earnest (Nihei 2014: 297-298). Andrea Arai takes in both views, recognizing the Nakasone government as a kind of first attempt at US/UK style neoliberalism in Japan which failed to gain traction until the crises of the 1990s (Arai 2005: 15-17). This dissertation will follow Watanabe and Nihei's timeline, with the late 1990s and early 2000s as the focal period in which neoliberal reason began to disseminate into public life. Japan's neoliberalization process has its own anomalies. Hattori Shigeru notes that the 20th century developmentalist mindset has persisted in key government policies throughout the neoliberal period, such as in construction initiatives (Hattori 2013: 40). Nihei also suggests that the policies disseminated throughout the Heisei period were never the "ideal" (*rinenteki*) neoliberalism of western powers but a dysfunctional (*kinō fuzen*) mixture of neoliberal austerity and privatization with new public-private universalist programs (Nihei 2014: 334, 348). However, this dissertation is concerned not with policy but with the spread of neoliberal

reason through media culture; in this field, Japan's neoliberal turn is exemplary.

⁵ Amy Kind, cited here, describes imagination's "primitive" or base essence as a "mental state type" (Kind 2016: 2). This view of imagination as a "mental state" is the dominant one in analytic philosophy. Philosophical work on imagination in this discipline is concerned with differentiating and cataloguing different variations of these states, as well as their differences from other forms of mental activity (see Gendler 2013). In a different but analogous pursuit, studies based in contemporary neurobiology seek to map the neural pathways of "mental imagery" in relation to sensory faculties and other neural processes (Berger 2020: 258). Both of these disciplines share the goal of detailing the minute variations of imagination within "the mind" or "the brain" as a total and self-sufficient system that is influenced by but fundamentally separate from the external world (see Malafouris 2013: 25-26). In contrast, my interdisciplinary focus in this dissertation is on a general process of imagination as speculative thinking as it flows across material, media, and sociocultural contexts. Therefore, the analytic and neurobiological accounts will largely be excluded from my discussion in favor of enactivist, phenomenological, social psychological, anthropological, and political philosophical accounts of imagination as happening "in the world." The focus here is not what imagination *is* but what it *does* (Koukouti and Malafouris 2020: 30). This syncretic approach has its own risks, of course. There are many important differences in the conceptions of imagination across the different fields which I refer to in this dissertation, some of whose practitioners would likely resist being conflated together. One central point of contention would be the location of mental processes like imagination in relation to media and material objects: is imagination "structurally coupled" to the objects, which is the premise of enactivist views of cognition (see Poulsgaard and Malafouris 2017: 299-300), or do the objects merely function as external "resources" or "triggers" for intersubjective cognition, which is the social psychological view? (Zittoun and Gillespie 2016: 43, 60). I see this as a difference of degree rather than of kind; though different fields might debate the precise relation between minds,

media, materials, and environments, the common understanding is that the actualized thought processes that make up our human lives do not and cannot exist outside of these interrelations. There are also important disputes within the specific field of 4E cognition described in the Introduction, including between the more functionalist cognition-based views and more phenomenological “sense-making” views (see Colombetti 2018), or between enactivism and the Gibson-influenced ecological psychology of affordances (see Heft and Richardson 2013). Here too, I have tried to take the most moderate view possible, namely, that our encounters with mediated environments are not discrete subject/object relations but some form or other of systemic integration, but that this does not diminish the role of subjective experience and agency within it. This is a key difference between my dissertation and the Lamarre’s use of cognitive science in *The Anime Ecology* (2018: see esp. 97, 186-187). As will be discussed in Chapter Four, another potential point of dispute is between rhetorical views of imagination based on semiotic conceptions of social identity and the affect-based views of subjectivity which I employ throughout the dissertation. As I explain in the chapter, however, these two views are not mutually exclusive. Despite these differences, a general point of consensus across disciplines is that imagination is a diverse object which defies easy definition. My aim here is not to present a unified theory of imagination through anime fictions, but rather to use common insights from different schools of thought in order to highlight what our dominant models of subjectivity within film and media studies have missed by ignoring the imaginative dimensions of anime fictions specifically and of mediated social experience as a whole.

⁶ As Steinberg’s (2012) term “media mix” indicates, anime fictions are defined by the integration of different media modes within and across texts. Their sociality emanates from their manipulation of these different modes of mediated imagination toward the production of a viable social image.

⁷ I should make it clear that questions of individual and collective imagination as a sociopolitical force are not foreign projects to Japan. They concerned the philosophers of the Kyoto School as well as post-war intellectuals Yoshimoto Taka'aki and Nakamura Yūjiro (see Krummel 2017). The western approaches are useful to this dissertation simply because they are more directly implicated in the global discussion of late capitalism which informs the concern with neoliberalism here. A comparative project integrating the broader cross-cultural thought on imagination will be one of my endeavors for the future.

⁸ Working in the psychoanalytic tradition, Castoriadis argued that the Imaginary-Symbolic relation in Lacan was only possible as a product of an “elementary capacity of evoking images” that operated across individuals and collectives, “an unceasing and essentially undetermined (social-historical and psychical) creations of figures/forms/images,” which he referred to as the “radical imaginary” (1987: 3, 127). Neither fully individual nor fully collective, the radical imaginary is like a “magma of signification” which precedes and makes possible the systems of signification that produce individual psyches and social imaginaries (*ibid.*: 321-329). Imaginary signification “leans on” the material and physical conditions of life while organizing differentially from them (*ibid.*: 236). Social and psychic formations are accidents of the process of imagination rather than organizers of it. Castoriadis’s polemic was that the determinism in Western thought, both capitalist rationality and Marxist dialectics, worked to suppress the imaginative process by means of which a society “recognizes itself as instituting.... as the source of its own otherness” (*ibid.*: 215). There are elements of Castoriadis’s thought which must be rejected. First and foremost is his unconscious Eurocentric bias, which includes an almost nationalistic idolization of ancient Athenian democracy, and the monolithic conception of “society” that stems from it (see Gaonkar 2002). His rejection of Marxism should also be bracketed within its historical context. It is an understandable response to the state of European socialist institutions in the second half of the 20th century which also addresses important concerns about the potential for dogmatism in

Marxist politics at large. However, it does not speak to the full range of Marxist thought, nor to the obvious need for Marx in our present world. Finally, his grounding in Lacanian psychoanalysis means that for him imagination is at base a semiotic process. His innovative idea of the magma of signification – that there is some deeper and more fluid layer to mental activity than chains of language-like elements – gets closer to contemporary understanding of the of the mind as biologically and environmentally situated. However, he is a 20th century continental philosopher at heart. Even with these qualifications, his philosophy of imagination deftly encapsulates the way that human endeavors both produce and inhibit their own dynamism. Moreover, his view of the radical imaginary as a non-localizable structuring force finds corroboration in the contemporary views of imagination as an enactive, extended, and intersubjective process (Jansen 2016: 145-152). As will be discussed, the instituted/instituting tension of the social imaginary can easily be understood in tandem with the theories of constituent and constituted power in the work of autonomist thinkers like Antonio Negri (Negri 1999: 1-6 *et passim*). Castoriadis therefore enables an organizational politics within discussions of imagination as a source of human agency and freedom.

⁹ As I will argue in later chapters, attention to the ecological connections that underlie mental or cultural forms does not necessitate a devaluation of subjective experience. The recent work in cognitive science described through this dissertation seems to indicate that the open distributed cognition of the mind with regard to its environment is nonetheless geared to enable the free synthesis of conscious reflection, and in fact is likely enabled by the “congruence” that the latter provides (Hutchins 2010: 445-447). In other words, at the level of thinking the individual subject is not an aftereffect but the enabled form of the ecologies in which it is situated. The functional moments of order it provides do not have to be reterritorializations. As I hope to demonstrate in the chapters, one benefit of a focus on imagination is the location of a cognitive space between flow and solid, where enabling forms of subjecthood and environmental unity can be provisionally granted, including that of the individual as a

functional fiction allowing for collective movement within a shared environment. Though a detailed exposition is behind my scope here, I believe that the qualified humanism implied by imagination can point to more practical instances of resistance to schizoid capitalism than the rhizome can (Deleuze and Guattari 1983; 1987). In particular, the context of neoliberal precarity makes embodied subjectivity more salient than infra-individual energy cascades, and coherent systems of support more attractive than lines of flight. My thinking here takes from sociologists Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp's criticism of network theories, which they argue "lose touch with what remains at stake for everyday actors in *interpreting* the spaces of interaction ('the social') in which we are entangled. 'The social' is not a space, necessarily, of order; but it is a space *where order is at stake*, and where the absence of order brings severe costs." (Couldry and Hepp 2016: 9-10, italics in original). Put simply, a person facing eviction has little interest in becoming-animal.

¹⁰ As Rayna Denison's genre-studies analysis demonstrates, anime genres are defined within fandom through their constant re-contextualization and negotiation, including "anime" itself as an overarching meta-genre whose meaning shifts as its travels over national borders (Denison 2015: 24 *et passim*). Anime is genre-in-negotiation. My organization of "genres" in the dissertation should therefore be understood as a generalized schema of patterns with numerous overlaps and variations. In addition, there are many genres, conceits, and images which were salient during the period in question but do not appear in this dissertation. Most notably, the *gaku*en or "school life" genres featuring the lives and relationships of Japanese high school students are not treated in detail. These somewhat more realist forms, many of which are connected to female-targeted *shōjo* ("young girl") manga genres, have their own unique forms of mediated social imagination. However, the fantasy and science-fictional forms I discuss here engage more directly with the global issues of neoliberalism. Also, I only briefly treat samples of the hugely popular *shōnen* ("young boy") franchises based on manga series from the magazine *Weekly Shonen Jump/Shūkan shōnen jyanpu* (1968-present). While

ostensibly targeted to boys in late elementary school/early junior high school, *Shonen Jump* enjoys a huge readership of diverse ages and identities both inside and outside Japan (see Denison 2015: 85 *et passim*). Popular *Jump* stories inevitably feature plucky young heroes fighting their way to the top of a fictional hierarchy of warriors while making friends and learning life lessons. The anime versions of these titles are recognizable around the world. While there is often overlap between *Jump* titles and the otaku-influenced anime fictions discussed here, the former's orientation toward a broad mainstream audience, as well as their collective status as a veritable Japanese institution, engender significantly different techniques and environments of imagination.

¹¹ This chapter is based on a chapter article I have contributed to the edited book *Transmedia Storytelling in East Asia: The Age of Digital Media* (2020), edited by Dal Yong Jin and published by Routledge.

¹² For more detailed explanation and criticism of Miyadai's ideas in the context of Japanese capitalism, see Takahara 2006: 110-115; Yoda 2006: 35-40.

¹³ *Bishōjo gēmu* is only one of many names for these story-based video games. The explicitly pornographic ones are usually called *ero gēmu* or “erotic games,” while non-erotic versions with more complex storylines are sometimes called *noberu gēmu* or “novel games.” The same kind of game targeted to female consumers is called an *otome gēmu* or “maiden game.” In English fandom these are referred to as “visual novels” or “dating simulations.”

¹⁴ There is a pertinent anecdote about *Lain* which regards producer Ueda Yasuyuki's comments in an interview with an American fan magazine (Anime Jump 2006). Ueda claimed that he conceived the series as a way of criticizing the uncritical assimilation of American values by postwar Japan. *Lain* was supposed to display quintessentially Japanese themes, which would

cause American viewers to react differently to it than Japanese audiences. Ueda claimed that he expected negative American reactions and positive Japanese reactions to create a “culture war” of interpretation, which he hoped would lead to productive dialogue between the two national fan cultures. However, during a US visit he was disappointed to find that there was little divergence of opinion; American fans interpreted *Lain* “in very Japanese ways.” Out of the many possible extrapolations from Ueda’s story, I wish to indicate how it highlights the autonomy of media images. Like the *sekai-kei* critics and many of others of his generation, Ueda was looking at culture in terms of strict national horizons, where texts reflect specific ethnocentric cultural values, or else their disruption by modern consumerism. In contrast, the fiction exceeded these horizons and elicited a common response across borders. It is unlikely that by watching anime the American fans had started to watch “in Japanese ways.” More likely, it is a combination of two factors which relate to the topics of this dissertation. First, the media form of anime makes particular viewing patterns available that begin to shape the perceptual responses of fans, regardless of where they are from. Second, *Lain*’s themes of media saturation and social dislocation are transcultural experiences of contemporary capitalism, regardless of whatever cultural spin Ueda was hoping to put on them. It is easy to laugh at Ueda’s naïve culturalism and his quaint disappointment that fictions are not reducible to their creators’ intentions. However, we can also see in this anecdote a validation of textual criticism against reception theory. While it is certainly true that different audiences often interpret a text in different ways, and that these differences often have important implications, the commonality of *Lain* audiences reminds us that media form is not infinitely plastic. Particular techniques of image and story-making bring into the world particular modes of perception, and when they engage with common problematics of experience – the pangs of media capitalism, for instance – they produce mediations which contribute to the collective engagement of a global problem. Ueda’s disappointment therefore re-centers the importance of close attention to the structure of mediated imagination, to what in older times was called “the text itself.”

¹⁵ In this, *sekai-kei*'s visualizations of media-social anxiety have their most pertinent live-action analogue in the famous Japanese horror films which captured the techno-social anxieties of millennial Japan by repurposing classic *onryō* or vengeful ghost stories. Films like Nakata Hideo's *The Ring/Ringu* (1998) and Shimizu Takashi's *Ju-On: The Grudge/Ju-on* (2002) were successful because they were able to generate feelings of mounting terror from within atmospheric depictions of ordinary Japanese spaces. As Jay McRoy notes, the *Ju-On* films are particularly effective at using filmic techniques to break up the unity of home interiors, with the horrific images appearing in the interstices (McRoy 2010: 97). The viewer's gaze is manipulated into frantically searching the everyday objects and environments for signs of existential evil. In both *The Ring* and *Ju-On*, media become conduits to the supernatural at the moment of failure. Evidence of a ghostly presence is given through frozen TV images, deformed photographs, or pixelated screens. Media objects have come to constitute the everyday environment; they are part of the normal horizon of mediated social perception. The problem is that this normative horizon has come to decompose, thus allowing glimpses of an alien and hostile totality. I see this strategy as very similar to that in *sekai-kei*. But as McRoy and others have indicated, the totality in Japanese horror is a national one. Analyses of millennial horror often resemble the *sekai-kei* critics in reducing all forms of perception in the films to representations of identity instability or changing family and gender roles in Japan (Iles 2005: *n.p.*; Balmain 2009: 171). However, there is little question that Japanese millennial horror "is about" contemporary Japan, be it Nakata's patriarchal view of single mothers in *The Ring* and in *Dark Water/Honogurai mizu no soko kara* (2005), the disdain of Japanese celebrity culture in Sono Shion's *Suicide Circle/Jisatsu sākuru* (2001), or the art-house anomie at the internet communication in Kurosawa Kiyoshi's *Pulse/Kairo* (2001). Perhaps a little different is Shimizu, with his obvious desire to mimic the codes of classic American horror in a Japanese context. Even with Shimizu, though, the specific context of Japanese homes and neighborhoods tends to limit decomposition to a national frame. It is telling that even the

American remakes of *Ju-On* are set in Japan.

¹⁶ For the sake of clarity, we should differentiate Shaviro's affect-theory invocation of "flatness" from that of the Superflat movement of artist Murakami Takashi and his collaborators, which will be touched on in Chapter Four. Murakami's concept of otaku flatness is very much in the Japanese postmodernist vein. Lamarre's discussion of Superflat in *The Anime Machine* offers the best assessment of the movement as it pertains to the content of this chapter (see Lamarre 2009: 111-118).

¹⁷ Portions of this chapter and the following chapter are scheduled to appear in an article accepted for publication in the journal *positions: asia critique*, editor Tani Barlow, with a tentative publishing date in late 2022.

¹⁸ My definitions of "work" and "labor" are different from those in the theories of autonomist Marxism which I invoke throughout the chapter. For the autonomists, "labor" means the agentic actions of workers and the social value they produce, while "work" means the capture of that social production into the exploitative relations of the wage system (see Weeks 2011: 14-16). I do not follow these definitions simply because I am working with the image of these relations as perceived within popular media culture. Therefore "labor" or *rōdō* in Japanese refers here to the economic conditions of wage labor and employment, while "work" refers to the image of those conditions within a broader social and cultural setting. This resonates with the general Japanese word for work, *shigoto*, which can also transliterate as "things to do."

¹⁹ Paul Ricœur (1986) offers a useful perspective on the constitutive function of normative imagination through his reading of Louis Althusser's concept of ideology. Althusser famously describes ideology as an "imaginary distortion" that structures an individual's relationship to social conditions (Althusser 1971: 165). For Ricœur, Althusser's view of ideology as distortion

is misled because it negates the very idea of “imagined relationship” – the experiential structures of life – on which the concept is based (Ricœur 1986: 145). If the imagined relationship to social conditions is constitutive (Ricœur agrees) then there must be a part of that constitution which integrates the necessary functions of intersubjective understanding and memory (*ibid.*: 257-261). “Ideology” in its fullness is therefore the preservation of order as a whole; “ideology” in the Althusserian sense is a distortion of that imagined relationship which benefits the rulers at the expense of the ruled. Returning to the chapter’s discussion, the social imaginary as an “instituted” or given social landscape is simultaneously integrative and exploitative; it allows for the coordination of human life while also naturalizing alienation.

²⁰ Writing in 2010, Rosenbaum claims that “the increasing social disparities in Japan have seen the emergence of a new class consciousness,” which he corroborates by noting that 1920s proletarian literature was enjoying a revival at the time. In this context, he argues, *Tokyo Sonata* fails by not showing “the alternative political legacy of left-wing politics in Japan with its tradition of emphasizing dissent, social mobility, and social conflict” (Rosenbaum 2010: 133-134). After the failure of the Democratic Party of Japan and the dominance of nationalist narratives in the 2010s, Rosenbaum’s demand that Japanese film take up the old call to arms in an emergent new class war seems less than promising. His writing at this time seems to have misunderstood the qualitative difference between the capitalist regimes, thinking that inequality can be similarly represented across all eras. 21st-century neoliberalism is a different animal, and its mediations must also be dealt with differently.

²¹ Tellingly, Takimoto’s novels are among the texts condemned by Uno Tsunehiro as “the old imagination” (*furui sōzōryoku*) of the 1990s (Uno 2008: 33-34).

²² *Welcome to the NHK* is also one of the rare fictional works mentioned by Allison in *Precarious Japan*, again with reference to its supposedly accurate depictions of real conditions (Allison

2013: 3).

²³ A new *ARIA* cinematic anime is scheduled for a theater release in winter 2021 (*ARIA* company 2021).

²⁴ What becomes clear later in the group's analysis is that "contemporary Japan" defines *nichijō-kei* for them because local settings allow for types of domestic consumption such as contents-based tourism. *The Rules of a Hit Nichijō-kei Anime* thus devolves into "otaku business"-style of cultural criticism. This mode of popular and industrial writing on anime and related media strips fictions of all the experiential qualities besides the character in order to treat them as wonderfully marketable commodities within a celebratory picture of capitalist economics (see Kam 2013: 51-52). The influence of the "thought of the aughts" is also evident, since every element of the fiction is reducible to the therapeutic consumption of character affect. In a certain sense, they are closer to the point than Azuma and the earlier theorists of the aughts, since they recognize that *nichijō* centers on creating a "place" (*basho*). However, they limit that "place" to solipsistic networks of fans and consumers in anxiety-ridden Japan.

²⁵ Though the original anime series does fall within the time period covered in this chapter, I have focused my discussion on Amano's manga for several reasons: first, because of the cohesiveness inherent in a short manga series by a single author; second, because Amano's masterful linework and paneling make visible both the reason for *ARIA*'s original success and its connections to other kinds of *nichijō* manga discussed in the chapter; and third, in order to highlight the central role played by women creators in the *moe* phenomenon, which is too often misunderstood to be an exclusively male form of creative production.

²⁶ Except where noted, the discussion of individual works in this chapter will be based on the anime versions of a larger transmedia franchise. Even though the original versions of these

fictions are the text-based narratives, I feel this choice is justified. As I will detail within the chapter, textual and audiovisual versions of *isekai* fiction are exceptionally interrelated even in comparison with the rest of otaku media. Not only are the novel versions dependent on readers' common understanding of the visual repertoire of video games and anime characters, but the writing style itself is meant to prefigure the anime that it will hopefully become. The anime versions can be considered a fully realized form of the imaginative techniques which originate in the novels. There would certainly be value in an adaptation-theory based approach which considers the differences between the more "organic" amateur texts and the polished anime versions. However, the goal of this dissertation is to describe the common imaginative process and speculative social experiences across different forms that the transmedial environment of imagination makes possible.

²⁷ The summary in the chapter text is a drastic simplification of Lamarre's complex thought process in his essay, which proceeds through a deconstruction of the "Gainax discourse" – Lamarre's term for the legacy of postmodernist interpretations of the otaku phenomenon. These start with the creators associated with the *Evangelion* studio Gainax, Okada Toshio and Anno Hideaki, and later include artistic adaptors like Murakami Takashi and critical interlocutors like Azuma Hiroki. Lamarre poses the Gainax discourse as a kind of missed opportunity. Okada, Azuma, and others seize on the de-hierarchization of both image and production within anime and otaku culture as a refusal of disciplinary forms of cultural production. However, they ultimately retreat back into notions of otaku as a postmodern "break" from Western modernity towards an idealized Japanese postmodernity. As Lamarre states it, "What began as a raid on hierarchies, subject positions, and identities turns into a defense of precisely these hierarchies, positions, and identities" (Lamarre 2006: 387). Lamarre connects this contradiction within the Gainax discourse to a wide range of issues within contemporary thought, including the ontological status of media images and their relation to sexuality and gender hierarchy (*ibid.*: 384-385), the debate between postmodernism as

emergence versus as break (*ibid.*: 387), and of course the possibility of refusal within mediated societies of control (*ibid.*: 371). For Lamarre, the way to capitalize on the insights of the Gainax discourse without reproducing their impasses is to seize on the de-hierarchizing power of anime images as a “distributive field” which can articulate a politics of immanence and the “unmaking of received patterns of sociosexual development, knowledge production, and labor” (*ibid.*: 390). My criticism in Chapter One of the “otaku as Japanese postmodernism” in the thought of the aughts is indebted to Lamarre’s critique in this essay. As discussed here and throughout the dissertation, however, I believe that anime’s political aesthetics refuse the kind of radical immanence advocated by his Deleuzian approach in key places. Their mediated imagination constantly works to re-stabilize imaginative frameworks of social experience from out of that de-hierarchization in ways which do not necessarily reinforce the hierarchies assumed by the Gainax discourse.

²⁸ Anecdotally, when I talked with some Japanese students about *Re:Creators*, they commented that while they liked the series as a whole, they felt disappointed by the second half of the series, which became “boring” (*tsumaranai*) and “unbelievable” (*shinjigatai*). For them, the fantastical metafiction of colliding possible worlds in the first half was preferable in terms of both enjoyment and believability to the topical metamodeling of actual media industries in the second half. Apparently, the reflexive media staging of media operations does not constitute a source of pleasure for all anime fans.

²⁹ Accessed September 23, 2021 at <https://syosetu.com/>.

³⁰ Though Appadurai proposes it somewhat intuitively, this view is borne out by recent analytic work demonstrating that the “imaginative” mental activities which enable fantasy and escape are on a general level the same as those which enable practical speculative thinking (see Kind and Kung 2016). What globalization and mediation have done, as Appadurai describes, is to

render invalid the institutional separation of these analogous mental activities, which earlier forms of social organization were able to maintain.

³¹ A full history of this process is far beyond the scope of my dissertation. However, in the context of this and the following chapter a few salient factors are worth mentioning. Firstly, the failure of radical leftist movements after the 1970s had effectively silenced explicit Marxist discourse outside of small academic circles. In the 1990s, the administration of the Japanese Socialist Party's Prime Minister Murayama (1994-1996), which fatally vacillated on the party positions it began with, marked the demise of the JSP as a coherent left voice (see Leheny 2006; Richards 2013). The ensuing rise of the Democratic Party of Japan formed a new two-party system of competing interventionist and marketist parties, one of the key components of any neoliberal project (Watanabe 2007). More generally, the rhetoric of pacifism and liberal democracy had ossified, allowing the resurgent right to self-position as fighting institutional power. Oguma Eiji and Ueno Yōko argue that right-wing voices gained traction after the Bubble burst because they were able to equate the actual failure of the postwar developmentalist economy with a perceived failure of postwar democracy. This was possible in part because invocations of "democracy" had taken on the form of institutional blather which seemed empty against the lack of real democracy in social life (Oguma and Ueno 2003: 35-36). Similarly, the institutionalization of pacifism fueled populist nationalist discourses of Japan as *heiwa boke* or "made stupid by peace." According to groups such as the Society for History Textbook Reform and the burgeoning sphere of online nationalism, Japan's people had been lulled into apathy by the stable postwar society and had grown so averse to conflict that they were no longer able to recognize and respond to immediate threats. These populist rantings fed conveniently into the elite discourses of global competition and remilitarization. Finally, there are the shifts in the self-organizing citizen activist movements. These groups had been the platforms for resistance to the Japanese involvement in the Vietnam War, as well as for local and regional environmental activism. In their postwar forms, their practices and

rhetoric could conceivably have served as vessels for organized alter-globalization movements. As described by Simon Avenell in *Making Japanese Citizens* (2010), most of their energies had been integrated into government apparatuses or devolved into consumption-based lifestyle activism by the time of the post-Bubble neoliberal turn. As Fujiki Hideaki (2019) argues, however, the natural and nuclear disasters of 2011 have prompted a revival of the citizen concept in the form of local film-viewing events which serve as forums for discussing environmental and nuclear issues.

³² Ko recognizes the innovation of Miike's work during this period. She asserts that its influx of foreign characters, scenes of dismemberment, and diegetic breaks work to visualize the breakup of the "national body" of Japan without being xenophobic (Ko 2010: 60-62). She faults Miike for reveling in the destruction of national identity as an end itself, where foreigners simply signify breakup without constructing anything new. My perspective is somewhat different. Ko's cultural studies-based approach to "culture as a site of political struggle" leads her into the traps of political representationalism discussed in Chapter Two. She requires deployments of identity in films to index the struggle for identity-based justice in the real world. Representationalism's reliance on semiotic concepts of identity misses the fact that, as audiovisual experiences, Mario and Kei *do* construct something. They embody a kind of potential viewing position that splits open the Japanese diegetic spaces into a multilayered "global perspective" (Kang and Yoshimi 2013: 57). However, in the end this is still limited. Just as the jail break occurs only for an exhilarating few minutes before the necessities of filming location bring the imaginary space back into urban Japan, *City of Lost Souls*' dissection of national perspective can only appear as well-orchestrated moments within the filmic style of an innovative director whose fame is tied to a Japanese national image outside its borders. Then again, as Aaron Gerow has noted, the association of Miike's films with the international marketing of "Cool Japan" film tends to mask the elements of Miike's stylistic "homelessness" within them (Gerow 2009: 24). *City of Lost Souls*'

particular limitation is perhaps less ideological complacency than a technical limit upon the imaginative horizons of national cinema's production and consumption.

³³ As Azuma Hiroki notes, Murakami's attempts to convert otaku images and activities into postmodern Japanese art were generally met with either indifference or outright dislike by otaku fans and practitioners (Azuma 2001: 92-94). Azuma astutely criticizes the "Japan as the future of the world" rhetoric of Okada and Murakami, though as argued in Chapter One, his own postmodern theories of otaku also assume a national background, albeit one emptied of historical meaning. There are also critiques of Murakami's Superflat discourse from the perspective of media studies (see Lamarre 2009: 111-118), and from Japanese art studies (see Thorsten 2018: 118-123).

³⁴ The exchanges were compiled by *Sunday GX* in a commemorative illustrated book celebrating the third season of the *Black Lagoon* anime, titled *Rei's Hiroe's Book of Venom/Burakku ragūn doppon* (Hiroe, Shōgakukan 2009). The citations in the chapter come from this book.

³⁵ The ways that the early Japanese commentators essentialize otaku are related to their specific approach to social problems in late-modern Japan. Critic Okada Toshio reifies them as a new kind of "artisan culture" that reinvigorates older Japanese traditions (Okada 2015: 96). Sociologist Miyadai Shinji categorizes them as "unbalanced specialists" in his typology of non-communicative youth social groups within late-modern Japan (Miyadai 1994: 54). Otaku and similar types are versatile with small range of topics and inept at all others. Saitō Tamaki's psychoanalysis of otaku describes their practices of desire and fictionalization as a form of perversion in the Freudian sense (Saitō 2000: 33). Patrick Galbraith and others have shown that the emergence of "otaku" as a social category in Japan is the result of a social labeling process through which broad social problems were condensed into specific images of troubled youth (Galbraith *et al.* 2015: 10-14). As described in the chapter text, the modes of otaku knowledge do not define a given social or psychological type, nor is a person who engages in

them bound to use them at all times. In principle, these techniques can be and are applied to any part of any media environment, as Hiroe's variety of interests shows. In addition, people who have never identified as otaku can and do use them; arguably, the number of people who do so is increasing every day as our lives are increasingly penetrated by media systems. We can say that a particularly effective (*i.e.* generative of enjoyable and meaningful imaginative experiences) landscape of affordances based on these techniques developed in Japan around shared affections for anime and related forms, which through other social processes became labeled "otaku."

³⁶ In addition, mature female fighters have a similarly strong legacy as sources of perception and desire in Japanese anime and manga – particularly in the original video animation (OVA) productions of the 1980s and 1990s (see Introduction). These influences are also seen in *Black Lagoon*. The intercultural and temporal cross-referencing of these mediated female types is complex, which complicates Saitō's ideas on an aesthetic level as well as on a psychological one.

³⁷ According to the long-running news and review site Anime News Network, a major reference source for anime culture in the English-speaking world, *Black Lagoon* ranks 48th in the "Most Popular" category, created out of ratings from the site's database of thousands of titles over different eras. Accessed September 19, 2021 at <https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/encyclopedia/ratings-anime.php?top50=popular>.

³⁸ For example, *Black Lagoon* features in videos by Weeb Revolution, a Youtube channel devoted to identifying leftist themes in anime, which are further circulated on the subculture channels of the social media site Reddit. See for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1PzqJB4PU>, Accessed September 19, 2021.

³⁹ There is some intercultural slippage regarding the term “*mecha*.” In western fandom it refers specifically to the iconic Japanese images of giant anthropomorphic robots manned by human pilots. In this chapter I will follow this usage; “*mecha*” here exclusively refers to the fictions that feature these kinds of rideable robot fighting machines. In Japan, however, “*mecha*” can refer also to cyberpunk-inspired images of computerized armor that attaches to human bodies. Ueno Toshiya’s influential critical work *Red Metal Suits/Kurenai no Metarusūtsu* (1998), for example, treats the two as analogous. As will be touched on in Chapter Six, *mecha* can also refer to any kind of technological equipment or vehicle, including real-life military vehicles, as rendered by anime and manga design styles (see Clements 2013: 146-147). The more specific term in Japanese would be *kyodai robotto* or “giant robot” fictions, which include both the “super robots” (*supā robotto*) of children’s television shows which feature heroic young pilots and their one-of-a-kind superpowered robots, as well as the later “real robot” (*riaru robotto*) genres featuring these machines as mass-produced combat equipment (Ikeda 2019: 19-22). Real robot will be the implied “genre of violence” in this chapter.

⁴⁰ For example, a series of films was released in 2019, and a new spinoff has been greenlit at the time of writing in 2021 (Sunrise/Project Z-Geass 2021). In an interview with Director Taniguchi Gorō, the interviewer comments on the high viewing numbers of *Code Geass*, lamenting that after *Code Geass*, there have been no big giant robot hits (Animate Times 2019).

⁴¹ Space does not permit me adequately review the full range of studies on anime and manga’s interfaces with war. The essays in *Mechademia Volume 4: War/Time* provide the most accessible introduction in English (Lunning 2009). The more recent *The Representation of Japanese Politics in Manga: The Visual Literacy of Statecraft* (Rosenbaum 2020), while weighted toward manga, also covers a broad range of war-related topics.

⁴² While Kitada analyzes the practices of the *netto uyoku* or “online far right” through a kind of discourse analysis, the framework developed in the previous chapters allows us to understand them as results of material convergences between media forms and the new complexes of knowledge acquisition, new affective encounters with mediated sociality, and new modes of subject formation thereby produced. Importantly, though perhaps the most conspicuous, *netto uyoku* was not the only subjective mode which Japan’s early internet culture produced. Its unfortunate dominance was due to synergies with broader right-wing projects including the elite rightist factions of the Liberal Democratic Party, its ability to merge with other spheres of online culture through linking (Higuchi 2014: 138), and arguably, the scandalized reaction to it in mainstream journalism both in Japan and abroad, which used it to reinforce a narrative of rising nationalism in Japan. (See Sakamoto 2011).

⁴³ These fantasies of empowerment are so common in otaku media that they have turned into a comic cliché known *chūnibyō* or “second year of junior high school disease,” referring to the notion that this is the age when socially awkward teenagers will try to escape their situation by imagining themselves as the protagonist of their own anime-influenced epic story. Though *Code Geass*’s empowerment is meant to be serious in the 2000s, the *chūnibyō* character is now a reliable source of reflexive humor in anime fictions.

⁴⁴ Of course, in reality Japan, along with every other postindustrial nation-state, had been being disaggregated by capitalist processes for decades, and neoliberal globalization simply accelerated the disaggregation (see Yoda 2006; Kang and Yoshimi 2013). This is not what is being discussed. The difference between critical depiction and imaginative integration described in Chapter Two is applicable here. We are not looking at the degree to which a fantasy of national or geopolitical change accurately describes the socioeconomic forces that drive change in the real world; rather, we are looking at the way that a mediated thought process seeking to imagine new social forms interacts with the entrenched normative structures

in an extant social imaginary. The question is about how our media-cultural forms help us or hinder us in thinking beyond our experienced social horizons.

⁴⁵ This includes Castoriadis's own thought, which is hampered in key places by his fetishization of the Greek polis, to the point where he was chastised for it in conversation by Paul Ricœur (see Adams 2017: 4). Analogously, Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd have pointed out the heteronomy of gender in Spinoza's philosophy of bodily monism, which forms a key element in both Deleuze and Negri's thought (Gatens and Lloyd 1999: 114). This is not meant to be combative. Rather, it goes to show that even the most carefully reasoned and comprehensive systems of thought are fundamentally partial. There is always something put out of view, but that limitation itself forms the stimulus for its re-imagining by others. Our view of media fictions should also be based on such an understanding. Incompleteness or regression in a fiction is not evidence of a dead end but an opportunity for new and potentially better fictions (see Gatens and Lloyd 1999: 33).

⁴⁶ In this chapter, the term "*mecha*" is invoked in its more general usage in Japanese as "machine," especially war machines, when they are used as design elements in anime, manga, and related media. This is different from the specific English usage in Chapter Five, which narrowly refers to the genre of rideable fighting robots (see note 39).

⁴⁷ Takayoshi Yamamura's tourism studies-based contribution to the *moe*-military debate provides a detailed historical analysis of collaboration between anime producers and the JSDF. As Yamamura explains, JSDF involvement in anime production usually takes the form of simple technical consultation, where anime producers approach an office of the JSDF to ask for their advice in making military depictions more realistic. He argues that the role of the JSDF in these relationships is not particularly active; they agree to be listed as consultants as a way of passively gaining "benefits accrued from image improvement" (Yamamura 2017:18).

However, he also notes that in recent years they have agreed to more active roles in creating and promoting anime, which he sees as a result of increasing public approval of the JSDF in the 2010s following their role in providing rescue and aid after the March 11, 2011 tragedies.

⁴⁸ One amusing account of this is found in a travel blog about one fan's pilgrimage to the *Garupan* town of Ōarai. The blogger includes a photo of one of his souvenirs: a bathmat with the design of the flag of Saint Gloriana Girls' College, The Great Britain analogue in the anime. He writes that he actually wanted the mat/flag of Pravda High School, the USSR analogue, but since it closely resembles the actual hammer & sickle flag, he was afraid his parents would think he'd become a radicalized communist, and he chickened out.

⁴⁹ As indicated in Chapter One, the problem with the strict database interpretation is that it closes off further inquiry, reducing every movement of imagination to a symptom of postmodern ambivalence against an assumed national background. In fact, it is this same focus on postmodern character consumption which others use to link otaku media directly to contemporary Japanese nationalism. Sudō perfunctorily traces *Garupan*'s "national mood" back to Azuma's view of *sekai-kei* as the solipsistic consumption of a transcendent self-image (Sudō 2016: 163-164). Elsewhere, Kohki Watabe analyzes *Tōken Ranbu*, a *Kankore*-influenced game marketed to women, as a nationalist "historical amnesia" which "displays a collection of arbitrarily chosen images of the past, in which players can indulge in 'database consumption'" (Watabe 2021: *n.p.*). We should recognize this as the old "decline of symbolic efficiency" narrative of psychoanalytic Marxism (see Flisfeder 2019: 24-26). As symbolic efficiency declines, representation fails, and detached anomie defines the postmodern capitalist subject. A commodified form of national identity then fills the void of signification. What is strange is that Sudō and Watabe's treatments seem to see nationalism as a kind of default master code, as if national identity is the one form of collectivity that remains

unproblematically solid when incorporated into capitalism. In this way, their criticism ends up reifying the commodified national framework they mean to critique.

⁵⁰ As Calhoun acknowledges here, discourses of national identity inevitably include processes of exclusion. The goal of this chapter is not to explain how the national concept matches or does not match real collective formations. Rather, we are looking at the power of the national concept – or perhaps its convenience, given the lack of alternatives in contemporary political imagination – to organize the imagined worlds of media fictions and sociopolitical projects. For summaries of the many identities and realities conveniently ignored by national discourses in modern and contemporary Japan, see Morris-Suzuki 1997; Willis and Murphy-Shigematsu 2008; Befu 2009.

⁵¹ In *Aegis* especially, the influence of 1990s high-concept military suspense films like *Under Siege* (1992) and *The Rock* (1996) is evident not only in its story of terrorist forces hijacking state-of-the-art military technology, but also in its utilization of real Marine JSDF ships, facilities, and consultation. Most interestingly, Gerow draws attention to the film's use of an American sound design team to deliver the depth and reverberation that signify scale in Hollywood action films (Gerow 2006: *n.p.*).

⁵² Accessed October 5, 2021 at <https://twitter.com/richardbspencer/status/689692099009097729>.

⁵³ One of the most extended and interesting tourism logs of Ōarai I have found so far is the *Feeling Garupan/Garupan no kibun* blog (Hoshino 2015-present). Managed by a military hobbyist and anime fan who presumably lives near Ōarai, the blog features regular updates on their routine visits to the town and surrounding areas. Using the standard photo/commentary format, the blogger comments in detail on their experiences wandering the town, moving away from *Garupan*-related sites to old historical markers, local architecture and shops' interior

decoration, and other increasingly minute points with each visit. Conversations with locals and other tourists are described. As the blog progresses far after the initial tourist boom in the mid-2010s, it begins to ruminate on how the *Garupan*-related sites are weathering the drop in fame. *Garupan* is the blogger's impetus for an extended meditation on immediacy and continuity, with the horizon shifting depending on the photo-worthy object in view. Affection for *Garupan* acts not as an invitation to identify with "the nation" as an encompassing framework, but as anchor points in socialization on personal, local, and regional levels. It is unlikely that this will resolve into a sustainable "national mood" which will fix the consumer/traveler/imaginer as a willing national subject (Sudō 2016: 140). Of course, the problem with the dissolved forms of nationalism is that they do not need to be permanent to cause social damage. A rallying of national feeling during a push for legislation or a temporary spat of hate-speech incidents to create a climate of division, even if the participants reject those feelings a month later, might be all that is needed to put a society on a destructive course. But this new danger itself necessitates a different kind of political aesthetics than the consumption-as-ideology perspective that Sudō persists with.

FIGURES

Figure 0.1: The young pilots prepare for battle in *Eva* (Anno 1995-1996).



Figure 0.2: Shinji's psyche flattened into animetic images in *Eva* (Anno 1995-1996).



Figure 0.3: Functional sites of imagination and dominant theories of media subjectivity.

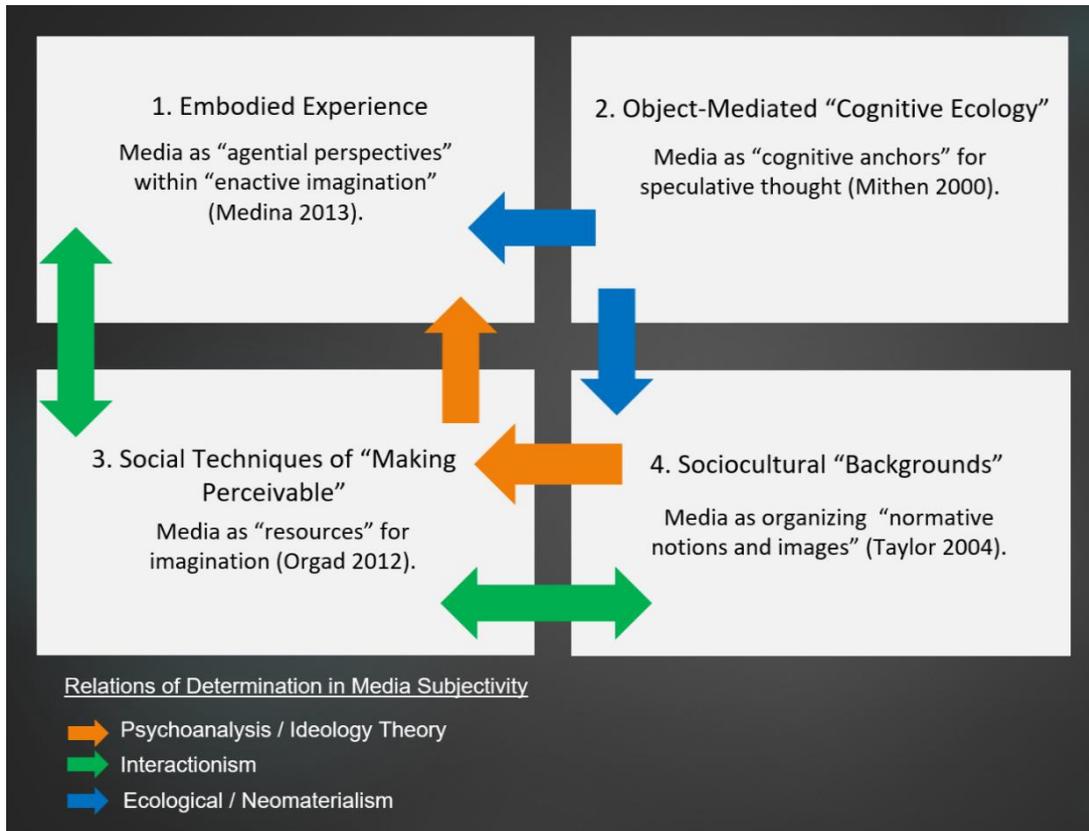


Figure 1.1: Critic Satō Shin’s map of the transmedia environment of imagination (in Azuma 2004).

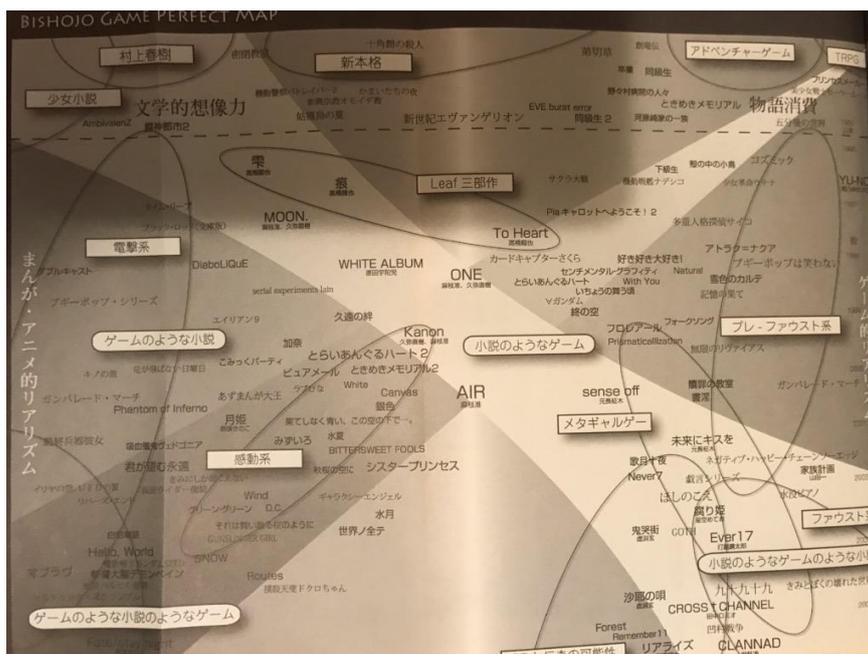


Figure 1.2: Shūji and his mother catch a glimpse of war in *Saikano* (Takahashi 2001: Vol. 3, 206-207).



Figure 1.3: Chise's systems begin spying on Shūji in *Saikano* (Takahashi 2000: Vol. 3, 120-121).



Figure 1.4: The mediated cityscape in *Serial Experiments Lain* (Nakamura 1998).



Figure 1.5: Mikako floats sits alone in the depths of space in *Hoshi no Koe* (Shinkai 2002).



Figure 1.6: Naoyuki's phallic attempt at resuscitating Kana in the *Irya no Sora* OVA (Itō 2002).



Figure 1.7: Shūji and Chise's missed encounter in *Saikano* (Takahashi 2000: Vol. 1: 222-223).



Figure 1.8: Chise bites Shūji in the *Saikano* anime (Kase 2002).



Figure 1.9: Haruhi's mysterious logo unleashes havoc in the *Haruhi* anime.



Figure 1.10: An episode of stillness in the *Haruhi* anime (Ishihara 2006).



Figure 2.1: Ryūhei falls into garbage in *Tokyo Sonata* (Kurosawa 2008).



Figure 2.2: The pornographic whaling trip in the *Welcome to the NHK* anime (Yamamoto 2006).



Figure 2.3: Akari navigates a waterway in the *ARIA* manga series (Amano 2002: Vol. 2, 181, 164).

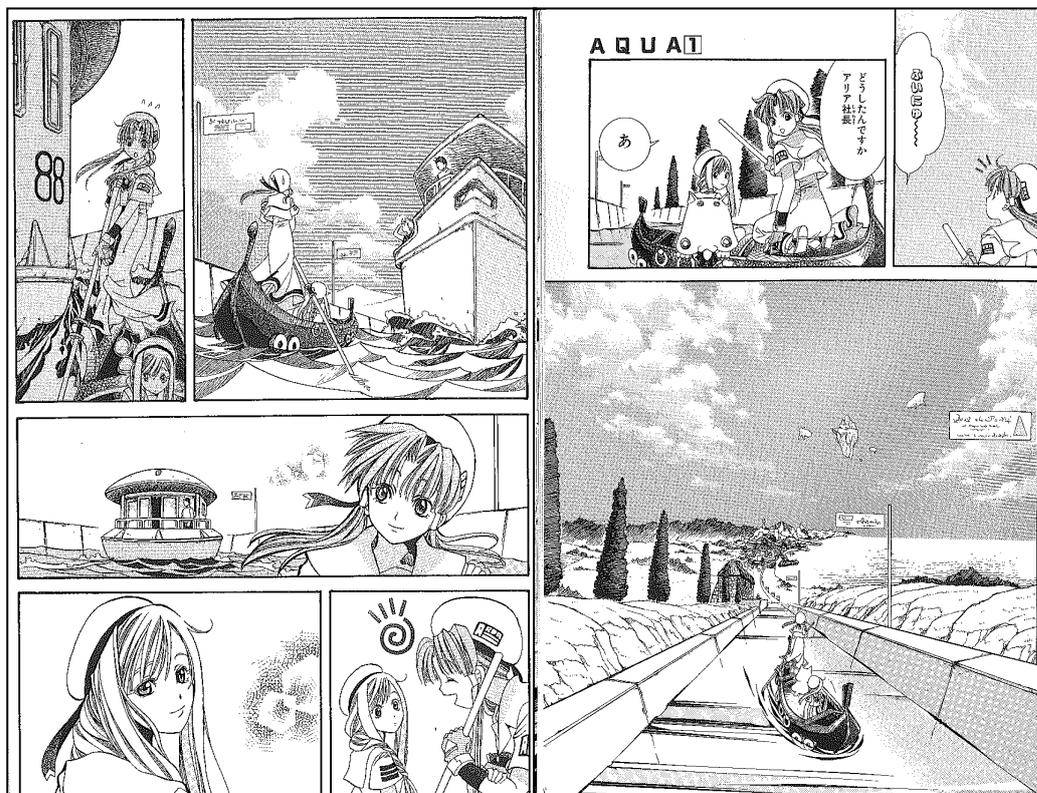


Figure 2.4: The road scene in *Freeter, Buy a House* (Kōno and Jōhō 2010).



Figure 2.5: The non-serious music club in *K-On!* (Kakifly 2008: Vol. 1, 49).



Figure 2.6: The animetic daily dream world in the *Azumanga Daioh* anime (Nishikiori 2002).



Figure 2.7 (left): Yukari's moment in the *Azumanga Daioh* comic (Azuma 2000: Vol. 1, 99).

Figure 2.8 (right): Sakaki's decision in the *Azumanga Daioh* comic (Azuma 2000: Vol. 2, 73).



Figure 2.9: A panorama of Neo Venezia in *ARIA* (Amano 2005: Vol. 5, 134-135).



Figure 2.10: Work dissolves into care in *ARIA* (Amano 2003: Vol. 3, 32-33).

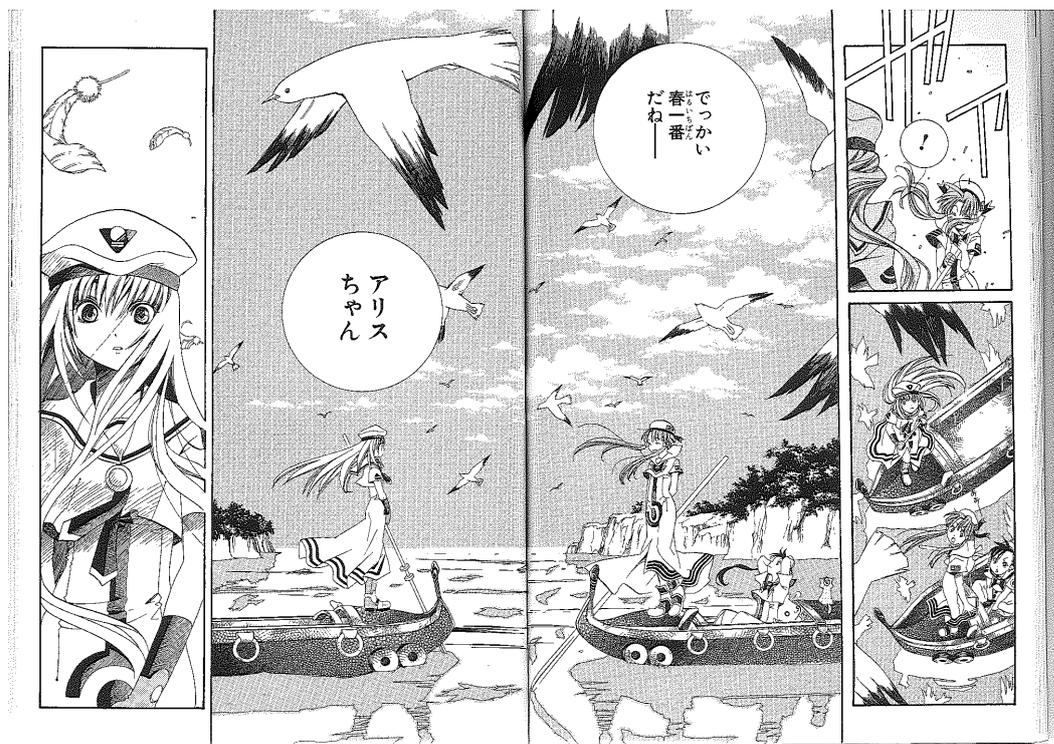


Figure 2.11: The cover of the original *dōjinshi* (ABe 2001).



Figure 2.12: Characters travel by bicycle down rural roads in *Haibane Renmei* (Tokoro 2002).



Figure 2.13: Reki cleans Rakka's wings in *Haibane Renmei* (Tokoro 2002).



Figure 3.1: A young woman is transported to an *isekai* in *The Vision of Escaflowne* (Akane 1996).



Figure 3.2: Yamada's "prismatic refraction," English translated added (Yamada 2004: 121-122).

図表 5-5 プリズム屈折
Prismatic Refraction

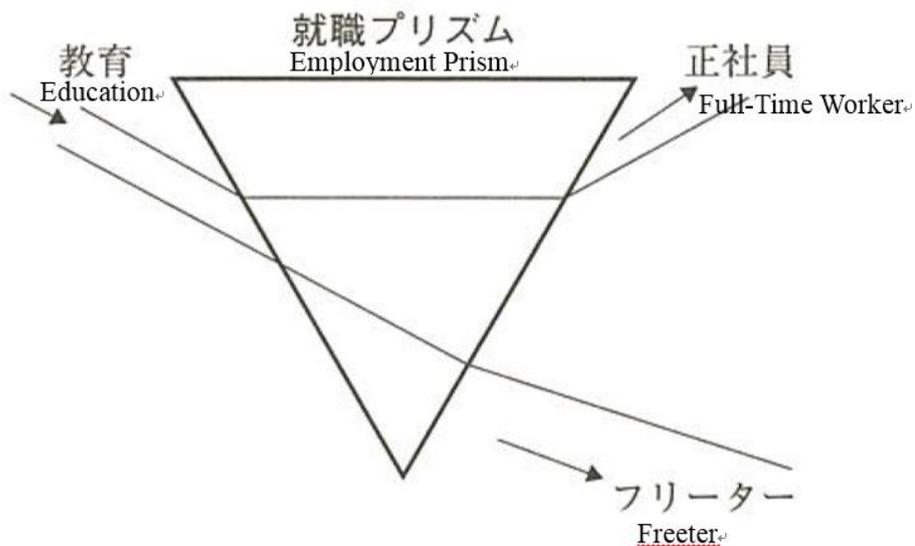


Figure 3.3: Kazuma and his companions look for jobs in *Konosuba* (Kanasaki 2016).



Figure 3.4: The strategic view of gamer imagination in *Log Horizon* (Ishihara 2013).



Figure 3.5: (clockwise from top left): Precarious rhythms in *Konosuba* (Kanasaki 2016).



Figure 3.6: Sora makes a bet in *No Game No Life* (Ishizuka 2014).



Figure 3.7: The elegiac landscape of *Grimgar* (Nakamura 2016).



Figure 3.8: Suzuko placed in a new location in *One-Million-Yen Girl* (Tanada 2008).



Figure 3.9: (clockwise from top left): Mediated visualities coalesce into a plan in *Log Horizon* (Ishihara 2013).



Figure 3.10: Rimuru's two bodies in *Tensura* (Kikuchi 2018).



Figure 3.11: Mediated images of collective living in the Anime Dormitory Project (ADP 2019).



Figure 4.1: Mario and Kei's border-breaking escape in *City of Lost Souls* (Miike 2000).



Figure 4.2: Levy and Roberta face off in *Black Lagoon* (Hiroe 2001: Vol. 1, 182-183).



Figure 4.3: Balalaika and her forces arrive in *Black Lagoon* (Hiroe 2001: Vol. 1, 184-185).

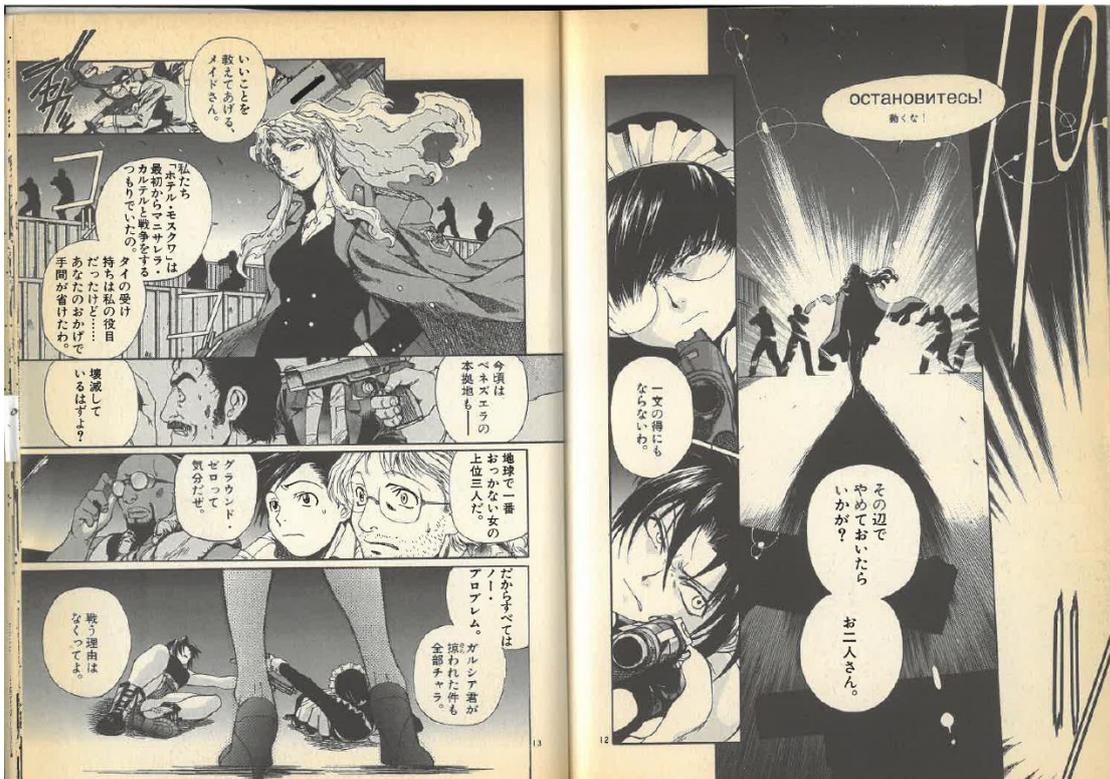


Figure 4.4: Japanese youth at “the center of the world” in *Eden of the East* (Kamiyama 2009).



Figure 4.5: Levy's rampage set to music in *Black Lagoon* (Hiroe 2001: Vol. 1: 98-99).

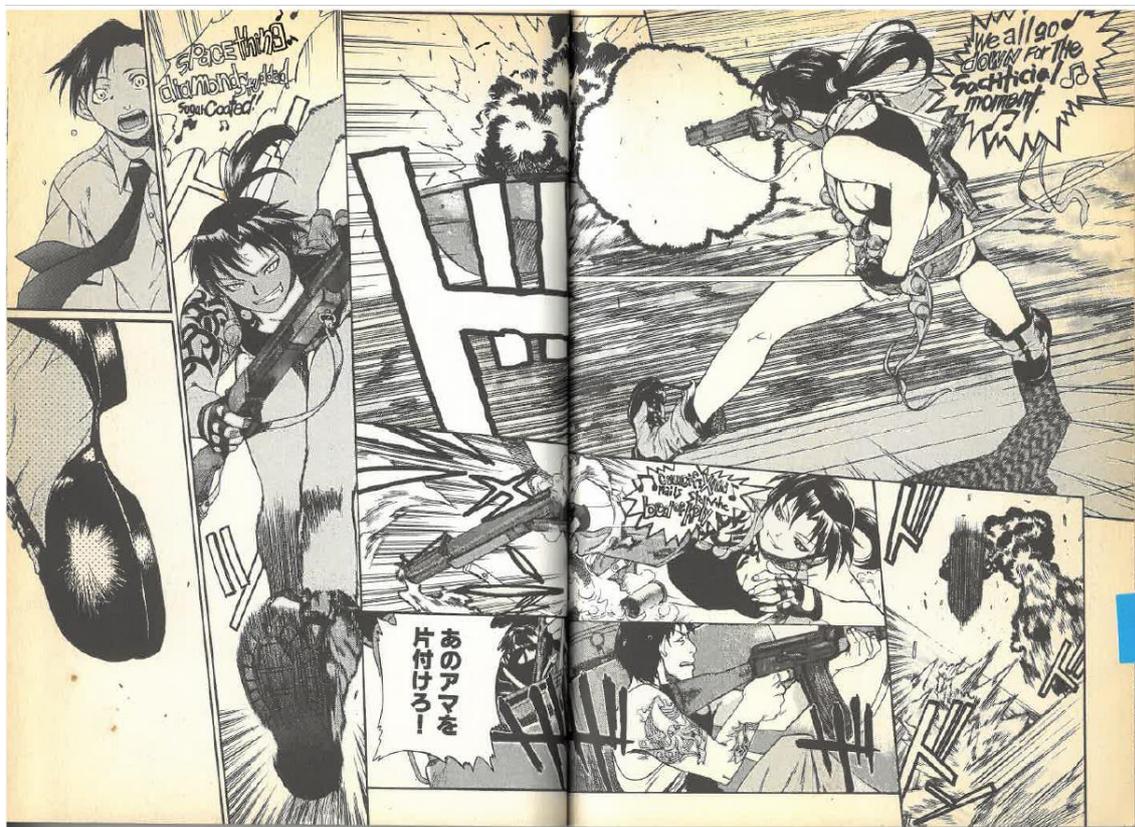


Figure 4.6: Homage to Hong Kong action scenes in *Black Lagoon* (Hiroe 2003, Vol. 3: 88-89)

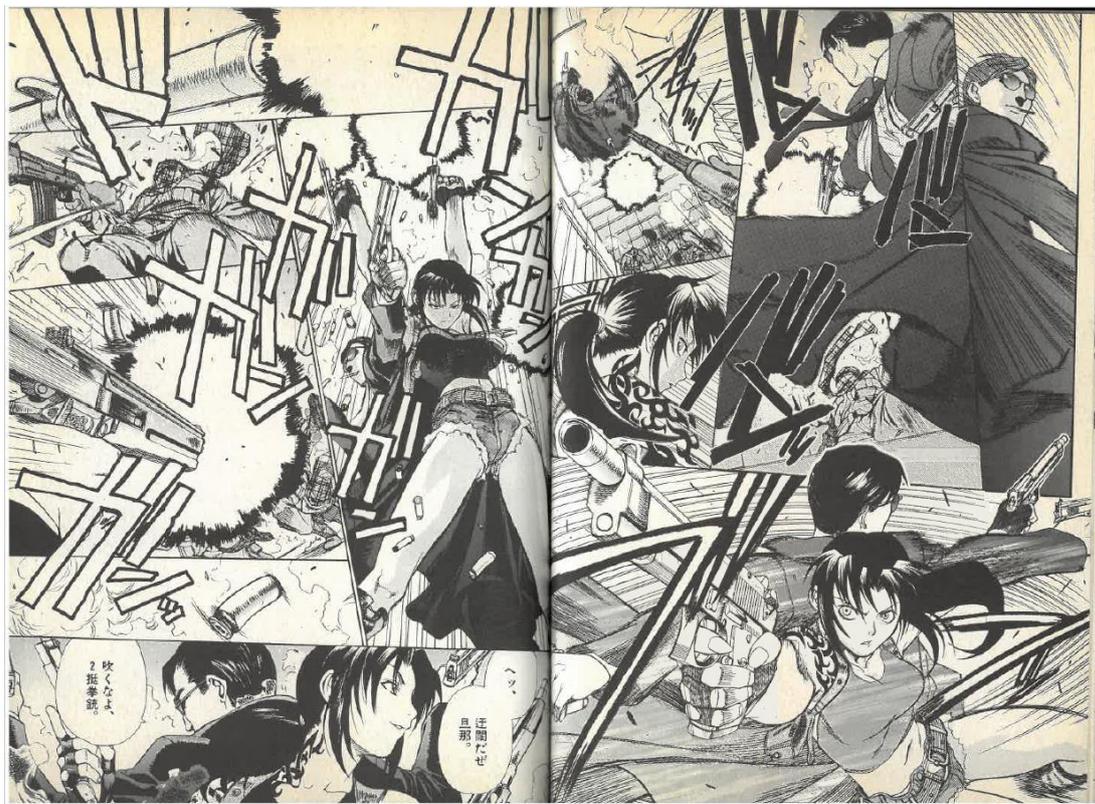


Figure 4.7: The affective inner worlds of female assassins in *Noir* (Mashimo 2001)

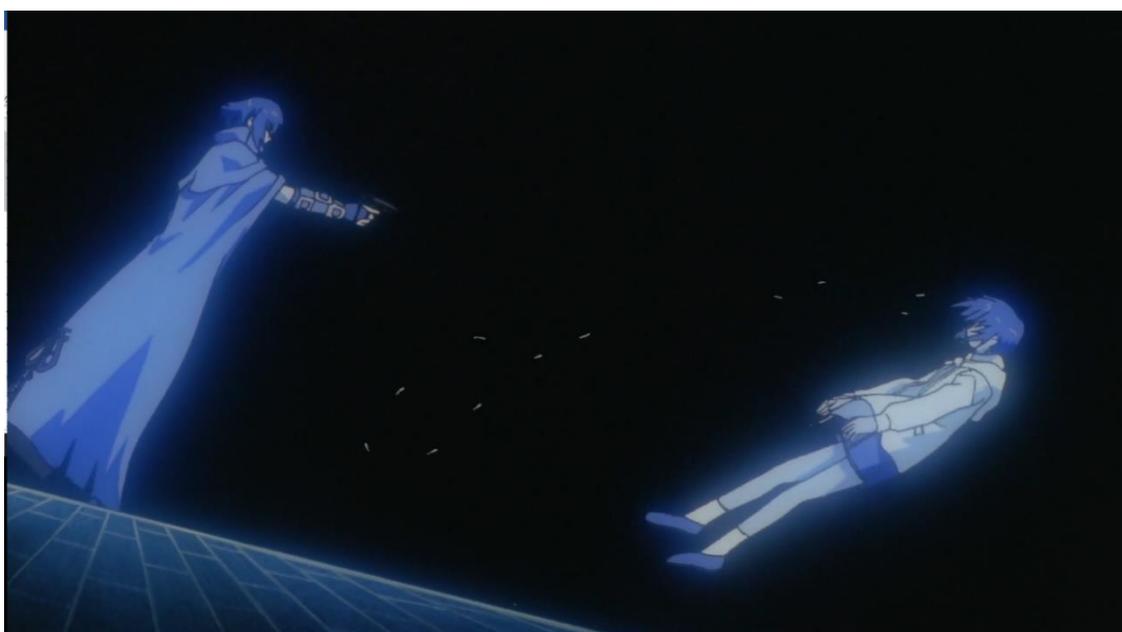


Figure 4.8: Military and comedy clichés in *Full Metal Panic!* (Mashimo 2003)



Figure 4.9: The global city of violence in the *Black Lagoon* anime (Katabuchi 2007).



Figure 4.10: Rock tries to trace global movements *Black Lagoon* anime (Katabuchi 2009).



Figure 4.11: Chilean protest art featuring *Demon Slayer* (in Pearson 2019).



Figure 5.1: Colonists watch the war coverage in *Mobile Suit Gundam* (Tomino 1979-1980).



Figure 5.2: Media, mind, and *mecha* fuse in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Anno 1995-1996).



Figure 5.3: Orb, a metaphor for national persistence in *Gundam SEED* (Fukuda 2002-2003).



Figure 5.4: Lelouch/Zero in a typical melodramatic pose in *Code Geass* (Taniguchi 2006-2008).



Figure 5.5: A strip-mined Mt. Fuji in *Code Geass* (Taniguchi 2006-2008).



Figure 5.6: Museum viewing in *Code Geass* (Taniguchi 2006-2008).

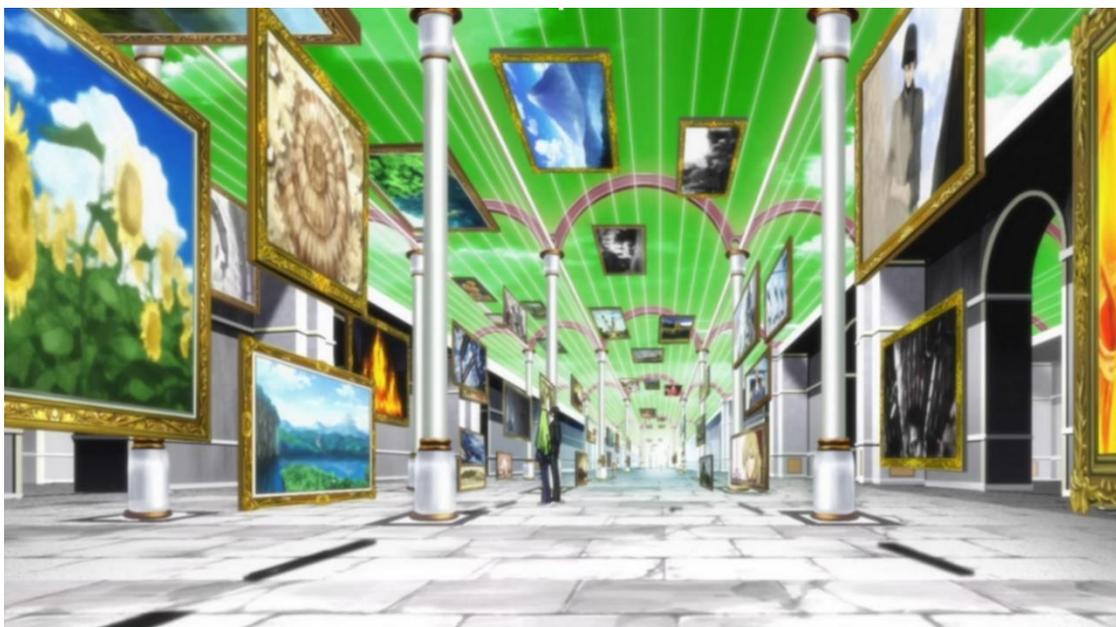


Figure 5.7: Big-screen ecologies of power in *Code Geass* (Taniguchi 2006-2008).

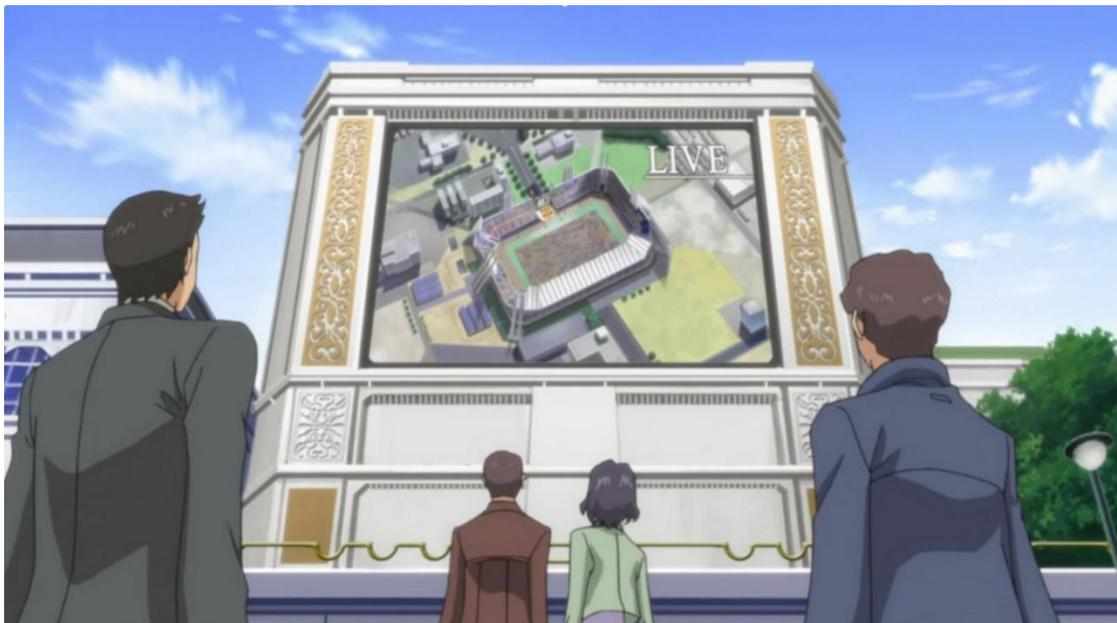


Figure 5.8: *Mecha* pilot as keyboard warrior in *Code Geass* (Taniguchi 2006-2008).



Figure 5.9: The Geass power working in *Code Geass* (Taniguchi 2006-2008).

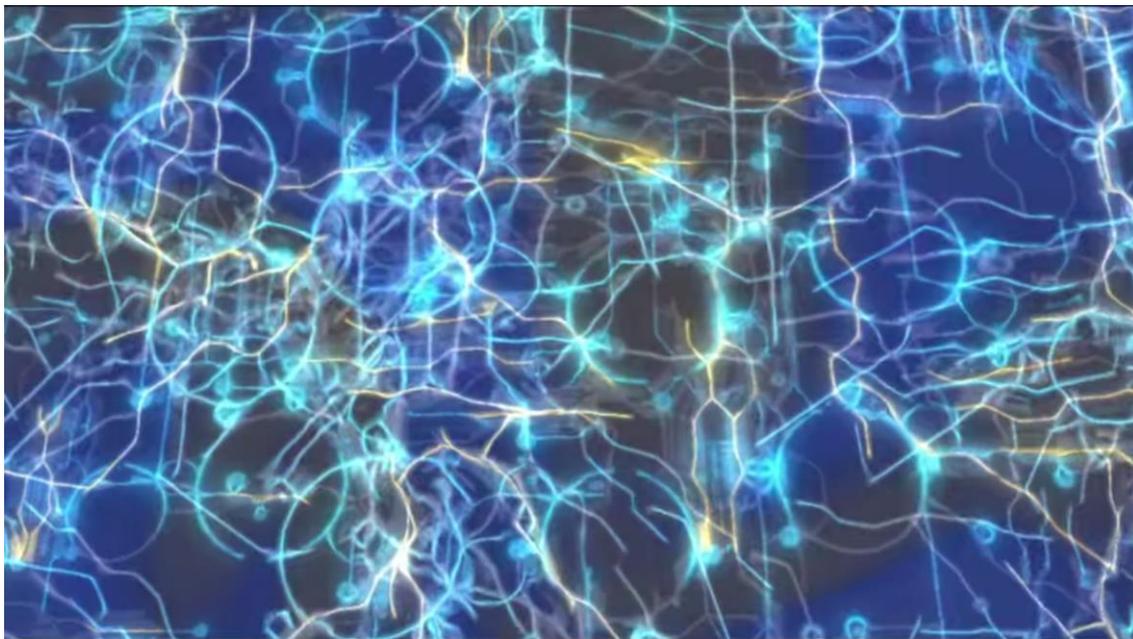


Figure 5.10: A new geopolitical realignment in *Code Geass* (Taniguchi 2006-2008).

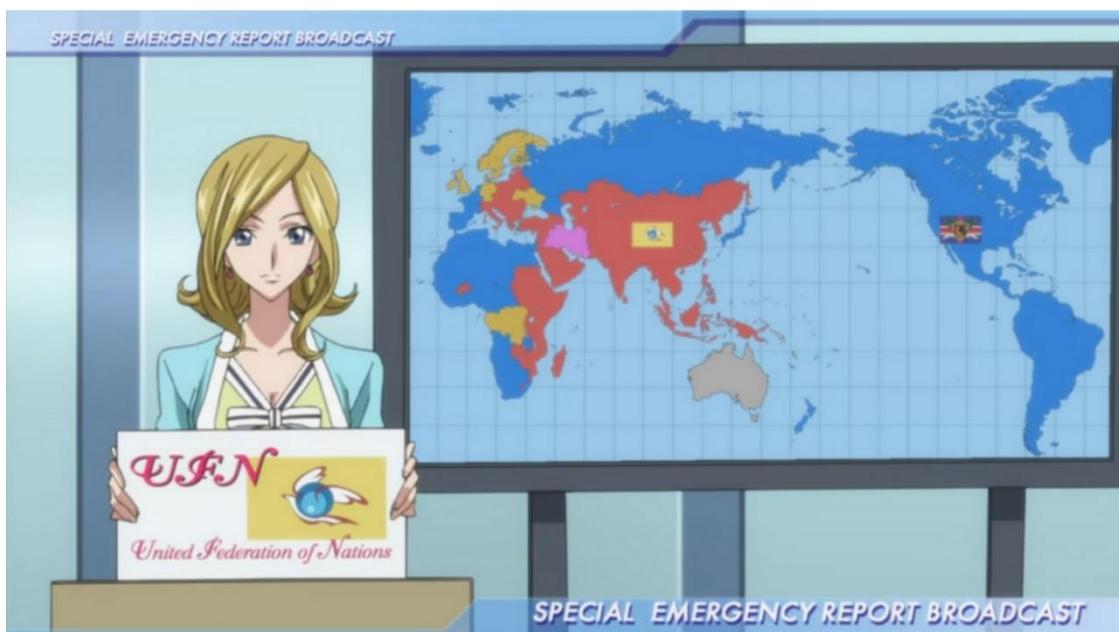


Figure 5.11: “Japan” imagined as one million Zeros in *Code Geass* (Taniguchi 2006-2008).



Figure 5.12: The multinational Black Knights in *Code Geass* (Taniguchi 2006-2008).



Figure 5.13: The signaletic urban space in *Penguindrum* (Ikuhara 2011).



Figure 5.14: Empowering penetration in *Penguindrum* (Ikuhara 2011).

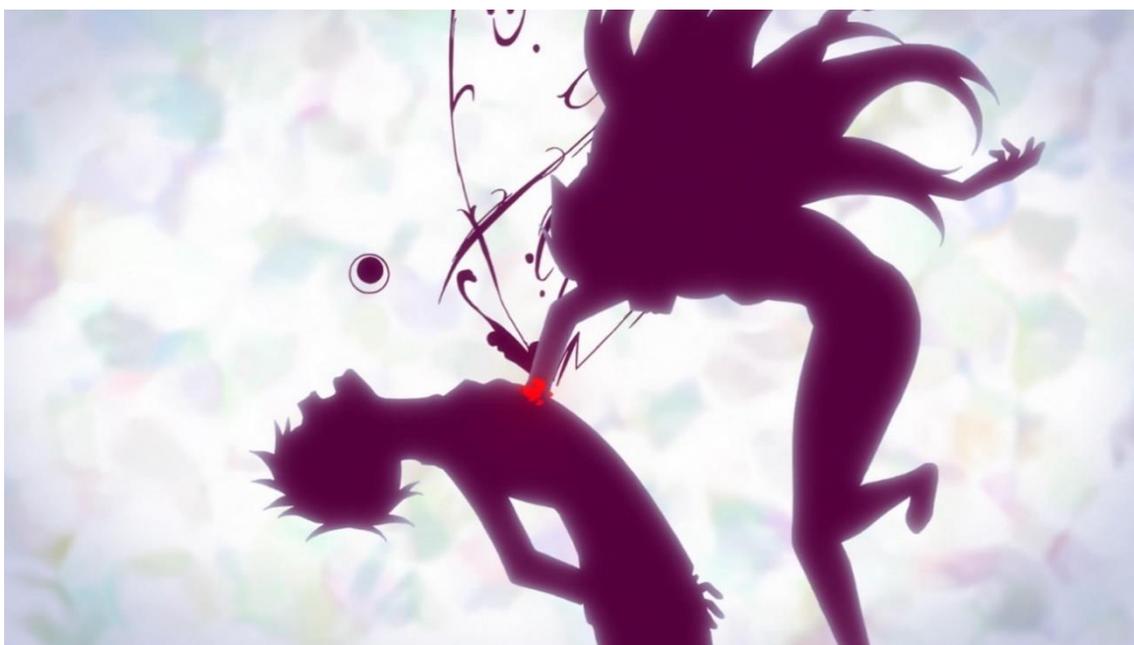


Figure 6.1: The anime *Strike Witches*, with designs by Shimada Fumikane (Takamura 2000).



Figure 6.2: The *Kankore* home screen, with the carrier Akagi (C2 Kikan 2013-present).



Figure 6.5: The climatic vision of historical identity in *The Eternal Zero* (Yamazaki 2013).



Figure 6.6: Tanks dissolved into the environment in *Garupan* (Mizushima 2012).



Figure 6.7: The imaginative ecology of *MC Axis* (Ikaros 2007: Vol. 4, 34-35).



Figure 6.8: Inter-nationalist encounters in *Hetalia: Axis Powers* (Shirohata 2009).



Figure 6.11: *Garupan* art on the English Reddit site
(<https://www.reddit.com/r/GIRLSundPANZER/>).

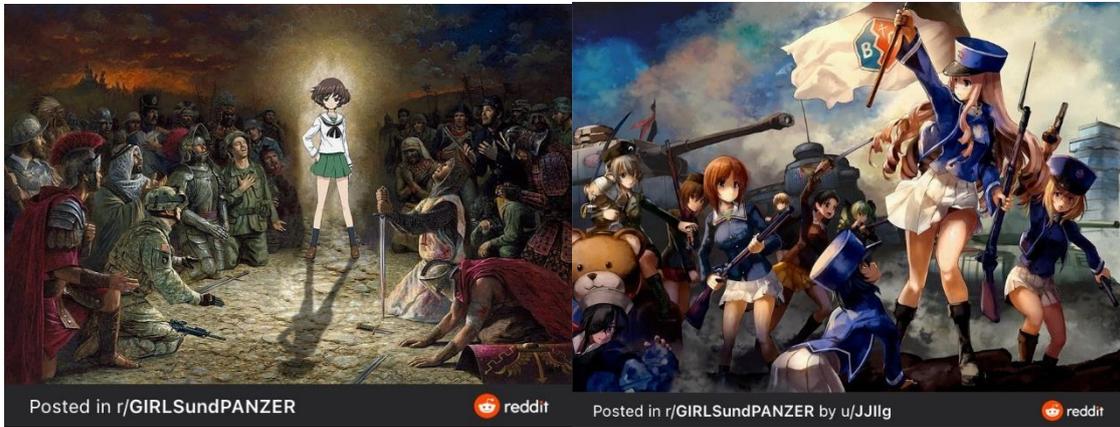


Figure 6.12: Virtual World Heritage site tourism in *Sound of the Sky* (Kanbe 2010).



Figure 6.13: War machine as digested past in *Sound of the Sky* (Kanbe 2010).



Figure 6.14: Andersonian spaces and times in *Violet Evergarden* (Ishidate 2018).



Figure 6.15: Violet as national medium and subject in *Violet Evergarden* (Ishidate 2018).



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