

## **Animating Reality**

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### The Simulacra and Database in American Animation Consumption

Japanese anime fans provide a new model of media consumption that may be spreading to American viewers through a recent surge of legal, free anime delivery that features programs targeting the most avid fan, the otaku. With the creation of Toonami in the late 1990s, a block of programs structured around Japanese animation series, The Cartoon Network introduced the general U.S. population to anime as an alternative animation format, creating a market for the programming and educating American viewers to different styles of animation suitable for broader audiences than traditional afternoon animated programming. The streaming site Crunchyroll pioneered one of the current methods of anime delivery through its formalized space for viewing animation where an international audience not only watches anime but discusses and critiques it. As a sponsor-supported site, Crunchyroll attempts to merge the act of consumption with consumer produced community discourse. Because much of the animation produced in Japan targets otaku, collectors and producers of media and merchandise, the discussions allow a discourse to develop among new fans who create their own aesthetic and critical judgments as they become fluent in the elements comprising otaku texts.

As technology shaped the thought processes and communication of preliterate, literate, and mediated cultures, computers and the internet have shaped the thought process and understanding of those who grew up using the technology. Building on Hiroki Azuma's simulacrum/database model of the otaku, this technology aware consumer breaks down the elements of an anime (such as hair color and style, representation of expression, and texture), catalogs these elements in memory, and forms connections between previously viewed shows while watching a new one for the first time. The new American, and to varying degrees international, anime viewer has the ability to consume a product in an artificial construct similar to Japan's otaku community. Specifically, they produce successful series through the community discourse, and in the process, they establish their own database of anime elements through the internet viewing experience.

New viewers of anime targeted for otaku may criticize the characters and stories for being generic types without developed characterization, but for an otaku, the layers that produce a positive viewing experience are developed through exposure to previous anime and rests on the balance produced by the elements in the new anime. In a well balanced anime, the empty characters become dynamic combinations resonating because they draw from and add to a database acquired through extensive viewing. The simulacrum level remains of generic characters engaged in a archetypal story, but the viewer engages the work in a manner similar to aesthetic appreciation, removing from the characters any realism.

The simulacrum level often portrays female characters as sexual fantasies of male characters, the composition of the character exaggerating body types and parts, exploiting fetishistic uniforms, and exhibiting sexually suggestive behavior. Symbols of hetero female sexuality fully compose the character often on a nonhuman foundation ranging from demons, to supernatural animals, to reanimated corpses. The citationality of elements that mark gender in the human have been stripped from the body and are presented as charged signs that fit within

the database and within the simulacrum of the viewed program. A schoolgirl uniform or straining cleavage may evoke emotions instead of a sexual response. The performance and performativity of gender breaks down as the citational elements become entrenched in the model of the simulacrum/database consumer.

Current American programming offers much of the same self-reflexive coded content as otaku anime, but with other cultural attributes. *Scooby Doo! Mystery Incorporated* (2010) richly and self-consciously relies on the audience having seen earlier *Scooby Doo* series beginning with the 1969 original as well as other Hanna-Barbera shows to get a full impact. Contemporary characters have more assertive sexual roles, demonstrating the production for an audience beyond the limited demographic. With prime time adult animation series like *Family Guy* and *The Simpsons* offering much of the same self-reflexive and pop culture references, a new class of viewer exists who understands the characters not as caricatures of people but as personifications of ideas and symbols dependent on a database/ simulacra experience to fully enjoy.

The new consumer of animation has learned to understand the world in a manner consistent with computer and internet technology. Using the internet as a streaming medium for anime, an international audience watches the coded programming created for the otaku demographic, and they engage in communal discourse that establishes the basis of aesthetic understanding and constructing a database of elements to enrich further animation viewing. By employing the database/simulacrum viewing of animation, an audience becomes aware of the citational elements of gender and allows the citationality of the symbols to operate without a physical body. A new generation of viewers exists who understand the simulacra heart to shows like *Scooby Doo! Mystery Incorporated*, and these viewers also engage with characters not as people but as citational forces of symbols.