

Beyond Maids and *Meganekko*

Examining the Moe Phenomenon

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The phenomenon of *moe* is perhaps the most significant and controversial phenomenon in Japanese popular culture to have gained prominence in the last decade. However, despite its increasing pervasiveness within the zeitgeist of the anime fan (*otaku*) community, it is a phenomenon that has been almost entirely ignored by those scholars studying Japanese popular culture. *Moe* (pronounced mo-eh, with two morae), is a rather nebulous concept that at the most basic level can be thought of as an almost fetishized ‘appeal’ of a character (overwhelmingly female) in anime or *manga* (comic books). This emphasis toward ‘appeal’ exploded in prominence after the turn of the new millennium to dominate an ever larger percentage of anime output; in 2003 *moe*-related programming and merchandise accounted for \$810 million in sales in Japan (Hirano 42). However, despite its importance, a more precise definition of *moe* is hard to come by. There has yet to be a truly satisfactory definition developed in any academic source, and even the definitions one finds in common use in the *otaku* community are often vague or contradictory.

The origins of the term *moe* itself are also debated. *Moe* in Japanese literally means “budding,” as a plant, in this context taken to mean perhaps a “budding affection” (Bolton, Csicsery-Rony and Tatsumi 230). The term is also postulated to have come from the verb *moeru*, meaning “to burn,” in this context “to burn with passion” (Dela Pena 9). It has even been suggested that the term originated from the names of early ‘cute’ female anime characters Hotaru Tomoe from *Sailor Moon* (Junichi Sato, 1992-3) and Moe Sagisawa from *Dinosaur Planet* (Masami Furukawa, 1993-4) (Oplinger).

In any case, *moe* has come to be commonly defined in the anime and manga fan communities less by a gen-

eral overarching concept but rather by a set of identifiable character traits. In this particular schema, *moe* can be divided, in the broadest sense, into two categories: one called “narrative *moe*” and another referred to as “non-narrative *moe*.” Narrative *moe* is that which is derived from a character’s actions, personality, or back-story; that is, those things which are only identifiable within the context of the story narrative and therefore cannot easily be reproduced in a single still image. Characters exhibiting such traits would include Mio Akiyama or Yui Hirasawa from the anime series *K-On!* (Naoko Yamada, 2009) whose *moe* appeal is based on personality quirks (in this case Mio’s fearfulness or Yui’s clumsiness and scatterbrained nature). Archetypal personality traits such as *tsundere* (alternatingly hostile and loving) would also fall under this category.

Non-narrative *moe* is that which is created by a set of specific visual characteristics that are not dependent upon a story to be understood and interpreted, and would include such things as physical appearance, clothing and costume as well as ‘fetish objects’ such as glasses (*meganekko*) or cat ears (*nekomimi*). Exemplary of this category are Rei Ayanami from *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Hideaki Anno, 1995-6) seen wrapped in bandages, Sakura Kinomoto from *Card Captor Sakura* (Morio Asaka, 1998-2000) in her elaborate, frilly costume, and Azusa Nakano, again from *K-On!*, wearing the aforesaid *nekomimi*.

Additionally, overarching qualities exist for all types of *moe* that govern those more specific traits outlined in our two categories above. First, the *moe* character, whether expressed narratively or non-narratively, must often exhibit a sense of vulnerability, which induces a feeling of protectiveness towards the character. This vulnerability can be either physical or mental (e.g. a child-like appearance or person-

ality) or situational (e.g. the vulnerability associated with the subservience of a maid, or as a result of uncontrollable circumstances such as a life-threatening illness). Finally, the appeal of a character and one’s attraction to the character must be nonsexual. Famous *mangaka* (comic book author) Ken Akamatsu – who is well accustomed to utilizing *moe* tropes in his own work – has defined *moe* as “being calmed/soothed by watching from afar. It is not an object of sexual action... Looking at a bishoujo [beautiful girl] and thinking ‘I want to do her’ is a normal sexual desire for a man; looking at a *biyoujo* (a girl younger than a *bishoujo*, synonymous with ‘loli’)... and thinking ‘I want to be calmed/soothed’ is

traits that are cataloged and recombined ad infinitum in a succession of derivative simulacra. In this way, Azuma characterizes *moe* as “not a simple fetish object, but a sign that emerged through market principles” (42). To him, the development of *moe* characteristics are intimately linked with the consumer/producer dynamic by which “characters emerging in *otaku* works were... immediately broken into *moe*-elements and recorded by consumers, and then the elements reemerged later as material for creating new characters” (52). Thus, *moe* characteristics themselves remain detached from viewers’ emotional responses and, in a sense, from the artwork itself.

Because of its nebulous nature, some have shoved sexuality into their definition of *moe*, but such definitions miss the point of what *moe* actually is.

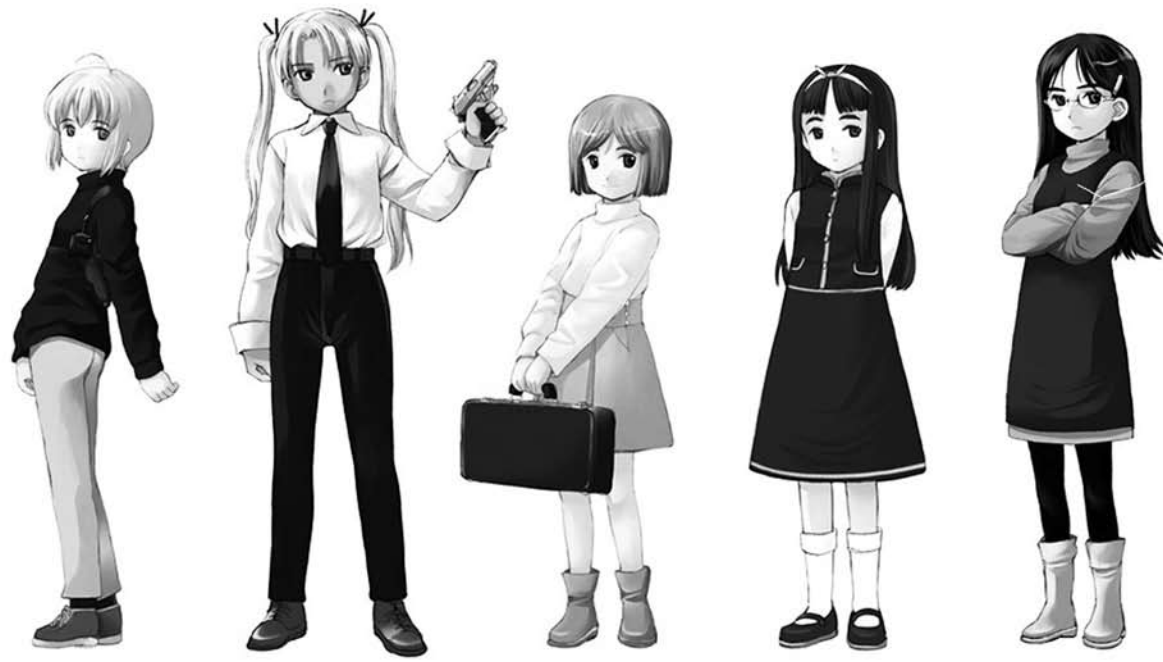
‘*moe*’ (Akamatsu). Now, it has been argued that this perception of *moe* as nonsexual is incorrect, that the erotic and sexual images are in fact very common, and that there exists a significant pedophilic overtone to much of the *moe* output (the so-called ‘Lolita-complex’ or ‘lolicon’), exemplified by such series as *Kodomo no Jikan* (Eiji Suganuma, 2007). *Otaku* scholar Lawrence Eng counters this assertion, claiming that “[the] argument against *moe* on the basis that it is ‘pedophilic’ suffers when one considers that a) not all *moe* characters look like children, b) *moe* characters are not always portrayed in a sexualized manner and c) those who appreciate ‘young’ characters do not necessarily view them in a sexual way” (Eng 2006: *Lainspotting*). However, even Eng cannot completely shake off the idea that at least some *moe* is sexual. Nevertheless, this notion, while certainly a widespread one, is simply a confusion of terms. Because of its nebulous nature, some have shoved sexuality into their definition of *moe*, but such definitions miss the point of what *moe* actually is. Sexual feelings should be seen only as a secondary response that sometimes is coupled with, but is still separate from, the more authentic *moe* response, which shall be examined shortly.

The notion that *moe* is defined and driven by specific character traits has been most extensively expounded by noted Japanese scholar Hiroki Azuma who contends that modern *otaku* consume animation as a “database,” in which the most important element of consumption is not the narrative per se, but rather the various tropes and character

In summary, Azuma claims, “[T]he chara-*moe* [a character’s *moe*], which represents *otaku* culture of the 1990s, is not the simple act of empathy (as the *otaku* themselves wish to believe). It is a quite postmodern consumer behavior, sustained by the movements back and forth between the characters... and the *moe*-elements” (53). This postmodernist bent has been taken up in more recent scholarship on anime by Thomas LaMarre, who again focuses on this forced repetition of character traits as the driving force of *moe*:

In effect, *moe* refers to an affective response to images...*Moe* might be thought of in terms of the excitement you feel for an image, which leads you on to more images. This onward movement might become organized as repetition compulsion, for instance. You may become obsessed with certain details, and repeat them automatically – as, for instance, with the *otaku* tendency to repeat images of women with specific kinds of skirts, breasts, hair, weapons, and so forth. What powers such repetition is an élan for the image that allows attention to, and interest in, new images—that is, *moe* (380)

However, these definitions are unsatisfactory for two primary reasons. First, viewing *moe* only through the lens of its commonly accepted traits and markers is inadequate. Such characteristics should be seen as a necessary, but not suffi-



cient, condition for the explanation of the *moe* phenomenon. Thus, they should not be singularly seen as definitions of *moe*, but rather as merely triggers of the phenomenon (Bolton, Csicsery-Rony and Tatsumi 230). What is properly *moe* is the response these characteristics evoke in the viewer, enhanced by these triggers being concentrated to such an extent within the *moe* image. Therefore, the real focus should not be on superficial external traits, but on the nature of the viewer's specific response. In this regard, Akamatsu has posited that the principal nature of the *moe* feeling is one of a nurturing affection. He claims, "[*m*]oe is a 'maternal affection' which a part of males have been left with that has undergone a change and shown itself and, originally, is an irregular feeling a male should not have; however, it is a pure love which does not include any sexual action and is an exceedingly peaceful desire." While Akamatsu's identification of the psychology of the male viewer may be unsatisfactory, nevertheless his identification of the 'true' nature of *moe* as the response created in the viewer towards the image is valid.

In this same male-focused vein, Scott Von Schilling sees *moe* as a "longing for fatherhood." Certainly, a significant portion of the consumers in the *moe*-targeted market are unmarried males in their 30s. Von Schilling believes that these men are beginning to see a lack of purpose in their lives and the "window of fatherhood slowly closing" and, in response, are creating an emotional state in which the longing for fatherhood becomes all the more pressing and mentally all-consuming. In this state, then, they turn to *moe* products to fill this gap in their emotional being. A perfect example of this 'fatherly nurturing' sentiment explicitly

expressed in anime can be seen in the character of Henrietta from the series *Gunslinger Girl* (Morio Asaka, 2003-4). Henrietta is a young girl who has been turned into a cyborg to act as an assassin for the Italian government. Over the course of the series she develops a strong affection for her handler, who in turn develops strong paternal and protective feelings towards her.

Now, this is not to say that *moe* is necessarily only a phenomenon experienced by males – female parallels can be seen in *yaoi* (homosexual male romance) products targeting women, among others. However, since *moe* products in Japan are overwhelmingly targeting a male audience (intending, therefore, a male response), and since this male-focused manifestation is that to which the *otaku* community is normally referring to when discussing the topic, it will remain our main focus here. Regardless, the *moe* appeal might be conceived of being external to the image itself, or, at the very least, the emotional state of the viewer might be seen as the reason why the quintessentially *moe* characteristics have the concentrated appeal that they do.

Second, Azuma and LaMarre seem to be suggesting that *moe* is essentially a direct product of the *otaku* 'movement' and of the repetition indicative of the 'database' viewing structure of animation and, therefore, is necessarily a new construct inexorably linked with the modern *otaku* subculture. This, however, is simply not true. While the modern *otaku* subculture may have helped to accelerate the proliferation of the phenomenon, *moe* can be seen even in the earliest Japanese animation and comics. If we look for tell-

ing *moe* character traits (again not embodying *moe* itself, but rather only as signifiers for the presence of the *moe* response), we can find them in such early characters as Ayame from Osamu Tezuka's 1948 work *The Lost World*. Ayame is a 'cute' genetically engineered girl who is created in order to be exploited for labor (her subservient position giving her the necessary vulnerability) and who, when molested by another character, is saved by the heroic teenage scientist Kenichi Shikishima. They then live together as brother and

sister in a completely platonic relationship (the Akamatsuan "nurture" here explicitly presented to the viewer) – a truly quintessential *moe* scenario (McCarthy 2009).

Therefore, if the traits that are normally used to describe *moe* are not seen as the fundamental nature of the phenomenon, then they should be seen as representative of a peculiarly Japanese expression of it, one derived from the unique culture and society of Japan. In particular, we might see these stylistic attributes as an outgrowth of the so-called 'cult of *kawaii*' (aka: *kawaisa*) – that is, the seeming obsession of the Japanese people with the 'cute' and child-like. Sharon Kinsella explains that this aesthetic, which "celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced social behavior and physical appearances...saturated the multimedia and consumer goods and services whilst they were expanding rapidly between 1970 and 1990 and reached a peak of saccharine intensity in the early 1980's" (220). Indeed, one need not look very hard at all to see this predisposition to 'the cute' in Japan's culture. Outside of their natural home in video games, comics, and animation, cute *moe* mascot characters are used in all manner of commercial promotions, from food and household items to Microsoft products and even military and political advertisements.

However, while the outward stylistic elements of the Japanese cute aesthetic can clearly be seen in many *moe* characters, the "cult of *kawaii*" is perhaps more important in being symptomatic of a cultural mindset that allowed the expression of Japanese *moe* to develop. Tomoyuki Sugiyama, author of *Cool Japan*, believes

the Japanese fondness for the cute and innocent is rooted in Japan's harmony-loving culture, stating, "[the] Japanese are seeking a spiritual peace and an escape from brutal reality through cute things" (Kageyama 2006: *Washington Post*). In this same vein, Miki Kato claims that *kawaii* and the child-like behavior associated with it are "inherent in the Japanese character" and a consequence of the social and psychological pressures of modern Japanese society. She writes, "[*k*]awaii gives people a way to hang onto child-

hood and thereby postpone the pressures of adulthood" (Avella 214). Additionally, a love of the child-like and innocent could be seen as evidence of the "infantilized" Japanese mindset, which some have claimed developed after World War II (Fujitani, White and Yoneyama 137-8). Prominent Japanese artist Takashi Murakami, founder of the Superflat postmodern art movement, ascribes to this last notion and places the cause of the ascendance of *kawaii* squarely on the mindset created by the forced dependency of Japan on the United States after the war (246).

Indeed, we might view the post-millennial *moe* saturation of anime as a result of social issues, especially regarding male identity, caused by these societal pressures in post-war Japan becoming more forceful and overpowering. Eminent anime scholar Susan Napier has noted how traditional conceptions and expressions of masculinity are being eroded in modern Japan. She writes, "Japanese men today are being forced out of traditional notions of masculine performance and presented with a wide range of possible identities" (121). The turmoil that results from these "disturbances in the social fabric" is further displayed and emphasized in the media, in which "[e]xpressions of male anxiety, anger, loneliness, and depression pervade contemporary Japanese cultural productions" (121). That said, the *moe* phenomenon can then be seen as another aspect of this expression. It is possible that because of the above-mentioned issues and problems that Japanese males are now increasingly looking toward the fantasy world to supplement and correct their perceived inadequacy, using the "cute," as Sugiyama stated above, to "escape" (Kageyama 2006: *Washington Post*). Thus, it is little wonder that the increased proliferation of

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moe has occurred during a time when these issues are reaching a crescendo. In any case, it becomes quite clear that *moe* is very much admixed with the Japanese psyche, character, and modern culture.

If, then, the tropes most commonly associated with *moe* are seen as merely culturally dependent trappings, the general concept of *moe* – as the simple response to the ‘concentrated appeal’ – should alternatively be seen as universally valid. Indeed, this concentration of the appeal is clearly displayed in *all forms* of popular art, not only anime and manga, and not only in Japanese art. For example, a possible comparison might be the ‘appeal’ of such films’ ever-increasing levels of explicit violence and gore in American horror movies, such as the *Saw* franchise (2004–2010), originally created by James Wan and Leigh Whannell. Of course, in this case the nature of the viewer response is to the increasing concentration of this ‘appeal’ and, as such, is very different from the nurturing response engendered by the Japanese expression. It is, nevertheless, a product of the same broad phenomenon found in contemporary popular culture. Indeed, the backlash that developed against the *Saw* franchise and other examples of ‘extreme’ horror cinema might also parallel a growing backlash against the oversaturation of *moe* in the *otaku* market.

However, if we are to talk about *moe* as a response to concentrated appeal in this universal way, it would be best not to refer to these other incarnations as ‘*moe*,’ and instead leave that term to refer specifically to the Japanese manifestation. A more suitable term for this other more general occurrence of the phenomenon in popular art is the “M-phase” (that is, the “*Moe*-phase”). In the end, then, is the true significance of the *moe* phenomenon that has been completely overlooked by anime and manga scholars: *moe* is symptomatic of an occurrence of a much more universal, and possibly necessary, trajectory of popular art, with its Japanese manifestation merely the most obvious form. It is also a trajectory in which a viewer’s response to the *moe* or M-phase image, whatever it is intended to be (whether the ‘nurture’ of Japanese *moe* or the ‘thrill’ of the explicit violence and/or gore in contemporary horror cinema), is maximized by the ‘appeal’ that triggers it becoming increasingly saturated and focused in *moe* products. In this way, *moe* has relevance not only to scholars of modern Japanese culture and art in addition to those *otaku* who consume *moe* images, but also to all who are concerned with modern popular art and who inhabit any region of the world. If *moe* is finally to be understood as a path that all popular art can take, the question really then becomes – what is the next step? Only time will tell.

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Reviewing the ‘Japaneseness’ of Japanese Animation Genre Theory and Fan Spectatorship



Jane Leong

Since the 1990s, anime has been gaining considerable recognition outside of Japan. This popularity has, and continues to be, bolstered by both our current climate of intense globalisation and the dynamic practices of cultural production which anime fans engage in. It is this intersection between globalisation, popular culture and fandom, which makes anime a fascinating subject of cultural analysis.

In particular, anime poses a unique counterpoint to the traditional discourse of globalisation as presented by scholars such as George Ritzer (1993), who had suggested the inception of a homogenised global industry moulded on American popular culture. Such a traditional model has been challenged by the way anime as a non-Western cultural product has been enthusiastically received across the globe, due in a very large part to the dedicated involvement of fans who created more exposure for anime by translating and circulating it to audiences worldwide. Furthermore, this global appeal has been attributed to anime’s hybrid nature, which refers to the mixing of Japanese and non-Japanese elements that at the same time signifies neither one culture nor another.

However, I argue that anime cannot be completely dissociated from the ‘Japaneseness’ which typically frames its creation. The challenge here, of course, is to then ar-

ticulate a discourse of ‘Japaneseness’ for an era of global or transcultural influences and flows. This article suggests that one way to do this is to address Japaneseness as a process of genre formation. More significantly, it emphasises the cultural studies approach to genre, which aims “not to posit the inherent value of value, nor to ascribe positive value to any particular entity ... but rather to vindicate the *activity of evaluation*” (Burgass 347) which underlies the way non-Japanese fans engage with anime.

Hybridity and the *Mukokuseki* Factor

Some scholars have attributed anime’s ability to appeal to so many diverse audiences worldwide to its perceived hybridity, whereby “distinctive Japanese aesthetics and Western cultural forms and values coexist,” and can therefore be “appreciated by Japanese and Western audiences alike” (Bainbridge and Norris 243). While anime undoubtedly draws on Japanese traditions of art, the first Japanese animators in the 1910s were also inspired by early American and European animation (Patten 278). For example, acclaimed Japanese animator Tezuka Osamu, hailed as the pioneer of anime, acknowledged the influence which Western animators like Walt Disney had on his work (Schodt 63). This hybridity is likewise reflected in the story