The Problem of Existence in Japanese Animation[1]

SUSAN J. NAPIER
Mitsubishi Professor of Japanese Studies
University of Texas at Austin

MY TALK today is on "The Problem of Existence in Japanese Animation," a title that sounds rather ambitious. Frankly, when I was asked to speak at the American Philosophical Society I was tempted to do something less far reaching—perhaps just a quick capsule history of Japanese animation. After all, my mother was an admirer of William James, a philosopher known for his belief in pragmatism, and I myself grew up in the house that William and Henry James built for their mother in Cambridge, Massachusetts. However, it's not often that I have the chance to speak before such a diverse and erudite group, so I decided to throw pragmatism to the winds and instead explore some questions that have become increasingly intriguing to me as I have continued my research in animation. In that regard, a more accurate, if more unwieldy, title for this talk might be "How the Animated Medium Problematizes Existence or, at the Very Least, Adds a Layer of Complexity to How We See Ourselves."

I would like to think first of all about the medium of animation itself and our response to it. Paul Wells has said that "[a]nimation is arguably the most important creative form of the 21st century. . . . it is the omnipresent pictorial form of the modern era"(1). Wells's assertion may appear surprising to many of us in America. Unlike in Japan, where animated film is appreciated across the generations, as exemplified by the recent award-winning film *Spirited Away* (Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi), which was the highest grossing film (including live action and foreign films) in Japanese history, animation is still regarded largely as a children's medium in America. Indeed, many older Americans (including my friends and colleagues!) seem uncomfortable with the notion of taking animation seriously as an art form.

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Why is this? Part of the reason may be that, compared with Japan, the West in general has not, until recently at least, been a particularly pictocentric culture. The Japanese, on the other hand, have long possessed a pictorial narrative tradition. This began at least as early as the tenth-century satirical picture scrolls (*emaki mono*) that depicted members of the aristocracy as frolicking beasts, and continued into the eleventh and twelfth centuries with scrolls that included both text and illustration for the classic romance *The Tale of Genji*. By the eighteenth century, the development of woodblock printing techniques created a thriving illustrated book (*kibyoshi*) culture, in which tales of adventure, romance, and the supernatural would be printed with texts topped by illustrations that would often include dialogue by the various characters. These *kibyoshi* are considered by many Japanese scholars to be the ancestors of the ubiquitous Japanese manga. Manga are often described as comic books, but they are quite different from what Americans would think of as comic books. More like graphic novels, they are thick (sometimes telephone-book-sized) volumes, which depict anything and everything—from mystery stories to etiquette lessons—and are read by almost all the Japanese population from childhood through at least middle age. In many cases manga are the direct sources for Japanese animation (anime) and many of the most popular anime narratives also exist in parallel manga form.

In the West, the story is a different one. Narratives that put an equal emphasis on print and illustration have usually been confined to children's books, apart from the occasional exception of someone like William Blake and his ethereally illustrated poetry. Print culture was considered serious and adult, even while mass production made comics and cartoons easily available. Certainly by the twentieth century, comic strip art and the related medium of animation were largely seen as something for children, for hobbyists, or for light comic relief.

But there may be other reasons as well for Westerners' lack of ease with animation. A psychologist friend of mine has suggested that we are psychologically less "defended" when we watch animation. In other words, when we watch a live action film, we have certain expectations that actions will progress in a "normal" format. For example, if I throw a ball, I expect it to follow a reasonable trajectory, say, from one end of the room to another, and then to bounce back. In animation, however, we might throw a ball and anything could happen. The ball might triple in size, turn from blue to red, or burst into a bouquet of flowers. Animation challenges our expectations of what is "normal" or "real," bringing up material that may seem more appropriately housed in dreams or the unconscious, and this can be a deeply disconcerting process.

In Japan, and perhaps East Asia in general, such discomfort may not be as strong. In my previous research on the fantastic, I found that Japanese fantasy literature had a surprising number of examples in which a protagonist was comfortable existing in a world in which reality and fantasy blended together, rather than having to decide between the two of them. This approach may go back as far as early Daoism, as in the story of the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tze, who dreamed he was a butterfly but woke to wonder if, instead, he were a butterfly dreaming he was a man. While Westerners might want to make a clear distinction between boundaries of reality and dream, the East Asian tradition allows for more fluid boundaries.

Among young Americans, however, this attitude may be changing. I find that my students who, after all, have been raised on computers and animated video games, sometimes enjoy animation more than live action film and, in general, seem very comfortable with concepts such as virtual reality. Their comfort level with the non-representational stands in marked contrast with that of many of my over-forty colleagues and friends, leading me to believe that we may be encountering a genuine paradigm shift between the generations. At the risk of sounding grandiose, I would like to suggest that, especially among younger people, the last decades have brought a new way of conceptualizing reality, based on the notion that our environment is in a constant state of mutability and flux, and that the division between the world of mutability, dreams, and the unconscious, and the hard-and-fast "real" is an increasingly ambiguous one. Or, as Victoria Nelson asserts in *The Secret Life of Puppets*, the materialist ethos is increasingly challenged by a popular culture linked with new types of technology that "gives us as rationalists permission to journey to the transcendental otherworld as a fantasy experience without having to acknowledge a direct contradiction to our worldview" (21).

This is not a strictly new concept. As Gilbert Rose wrote more than twenty years ago in *The Power of Form*, "modern conceptual models [assign importance] to shifting boundaries rather than stable structures [and] reality is no longer seen as a steady backdrop but is, instead, viewed as a dynamic oscillation between figure and ground" (112). This latter notion of "dynamic oscillation" seems particularly to link with animation, a medium that is based on the principles of movement, metamorphosis, and constantly shifting boundaries.

But the question of how "reality" is constituted is one that occupied Japanese art long before animation, specifically in the realm of the *bunraku* or puppet theater that flourished in Japan in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Unlike Western puppet theater, where the manipulators are unseen, *bunraku* emphasizes the dynamic between

puppet master and puppet, and thus between the real and the unreal, by having the manipulators of the puppets appear on stage swathed entirely in black and working with the puppets (who are about a third life-size and very realistically created) in full view of the audience. Although, at first, the viewer may have some difficulty concentrating on the puppets, in a surprisingly short time one finds oneself ignoring the men in black and finding in the puppets an uncanny mixture of real and unreal that, as Roland Barthes explains in his essay on *bunraku* in *Empire of Signs*, jeopardizes the "basic antinomy" between animate and inanimate (58). Indeed, the puppets' ability to cross the boundaries of real and unreal was recognized by the greatest of all writers for the puppet theater, the playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon, who stated apropos of his own work that "art is something that lies in the slender margin between the real and the unreal"(quoted in Bolton, 745).

To better understand the uncanny dynamic between animate and inanimate, we might look at Masahiro Shinoda's extraordinary live action film *Double Suicide*, a 1969 work based on Chikamatsu's *Love Suicide at Amijima* (Shinju ten no Amijima). This work uses live actors interspersed with their puppet counterparts to offer a fatalistic view of love and hope in which human beings are as much puppets as are the artificial dolls who double them. But perhaps an even greater achievement in the film is the way that it presents a seamless intermingling of the artificial and the human, leaving the viewer questioning what really makes him or her differ from the puppet.

Of course *Double Suicide* is not an animated film, but its highlighting of boundary crossing is one that is explicit or implicit in much of the Japanese animation that appeared in the 1980s and 1990s, when anime began to become an important force artistically (it had already long been important commercially) in the Japanese entertainment industry. What Paul Wells says of animation in general is particularly applicable to the best of Japanese animation: "Many animations have the tone, style, and surreal persuasiveness of the dream or nightmare, and the imagery of recollection, recognition and half-recall" (71). Indeed, it should be emphasized that, while much of anime is shallow commercial fare—as is the case with popular culture in general—at its best, the medium produces work that is far more ambitious and exciting than American animation.

I would like to conclude with three examples from recent Japanese animation that problematize reality, each in very distinctive ways. The first is the aforementioned blockbuster hit *Spirited Away*, by Japan's most famous animation director, Hayao Miyazaki. The reasons behind the success of this film are generally easy to understand. It is in certain

ways a quest/coming of age story about a young girl lost in a fantasy world who must rescue her parents, who have been turned into pigs after an orgy of consumption at a mysterious restaurant. The film contains echoes of *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz*, but it is more disturbing than *Wizard* and ultimately more conventional than *Alice*, since it allows for a traditional happy ending. Before that ending, however, we see a variety of boundaries being crossed: Chihiro, the young heroine, and her family get lost on a short cut to their new home and end up walking through a tunnel-like structure that opens into an abandoned theme park (in itself a simulacrum of the "real"), which in turn opens up to a bizarre fantasy realm dominated by a magnificent old-fashioned bathhouse whose customers are gods or spirits.

The first boundary crossing is of course the family's progress through the tunnel, an action that can be seen as a voyage into the unconscious or else a regression into infancy, since symbols of orality and anality abound in the film. The next boundary, the abandoned theme park, is an even more intriguing image, since the father explicitly describes it as a remnant of the economic bubble that Japan went through in the 1980s. The theme park suggests the artificiality and ephemerality of the bubble and, perhaps, the inevitability of its bursting. In contrast, the final boundary crossing, Chihiro's entrance into the genuinely fantastic bathhouse of the gods, can be interpreted as a rediscovery of the vanishing culture of old Japan, a culture that is constantly in danger of being soiled by both outside influences and internal corruption. It is significant that this culture is seen in ghostly and occasionally demonic terms—evoking the fact that much of "Old Japan" has faded into myth and folklore and can no longer be approached in reality. Furthermore, both the gorgeous fantasy imagery of the bathhouse and the demonic nature of some of its residents underscore the role of the bathhouse as a site of the supernatural, resistant to the scientific materialism of Western modernity.

The disturbing and even threatening aspects of *Spirited Away* are contained by the movie's happy ending, in which Chihiro does indeed rescue her parents and they return unscathed to the real world (although the film includes a slightly supernatural tweak at the end, when the family leaves the tunnel to find their shiny Audi covered with dust and leaves, implying a disconnect between real-world time and the time in the bathhouse). In terms of its narrative, *Spirited Away* could potentially work as a live action film but, as Wells maintains of animated fairy tales, "the more surreal narrative dynamics and thematic complexities of many fairy tales require the more open vocabulary of animation to accommodate them." The "open vocabulary" of *Spirited Away* brilliantly evokes what Wells calls the "ethereal illusiveness" (71)

of dreams that stay with us for a long time after waking. Or, as Joe Morgenstern, in his *Wall Street Journal* review of *Spirited Away,* puts it, "There's an afterglow of profound pleasure but also a sense of loss."

While *Spirited Away* falls largely on the "dream" side of the animation continuum, my next example, Mamoru Oshii's film *Ghost in the Shell* contains elements of both dream and nightmare. Created by a director clearly familiar with both Christian and Platonic concepts (in fact Oshii considered attending seminary at one point), the film is definitely not for children. Much more intellectually challenging than most American science fiction films, *Ghost in the Shell* tells the story of a female cyborg, Motoko Kusanagi, a government agent who, when not tracking down cybervillains, spends her time ruminating about whether she has a "ghost" (essentially a soul or mind). In the course of her work she encounters a sentient computer program known as the Puppet Master, which she is supposed to capture and destroy. At the film's denouement, however, the Puppet Master convinces her to fuse with it/him to create a new form of electronic offspring that will be "born in the Net," at the same time as it possesses a material existence.

Ghost in the Shell takes on many traditional science fiction tropes (Arthur Clarke's 1953 novel *Childhood's End* also deals with the creation of a kind of Overmind), but the film's extraordinary visuals, combined with the complex three-dimensional character of Motoko, allow for a fresh treatment of a complex subject. In perhaps the film's most memorable scene, Motoko, most of her torso blown away by a deadly government assault, lies on the floor of a deserted glass building preparing to receive the Puppet Master. The "camera" shifts to her point of view as she gazes up at the building's glass dome and sees for an infinitesimal moment what appears to be a winged creature floating toward her, accompanied by a drifting feather. The implication that this is an angel is obvious but is never explicitly stated, leaving the viewer with the feeling of having been offered a fleeting glimpse into a totally Other world. No doubt live action cinema could achieve something similar to this surreal moment, but I suspect that the materiality of live action limning Motoko's battered torso and the shattered glass of the building would undercut the scene's ethereal beauty.

My last anime example, *Serial Experiments Lain* (the title is in English), also contains numerous evocative moments, but these moments are more likely to evoke nightmares than dreams. Unlike the more approachable (and intensively marketed) *Spirited Away* or the critics' favorite *Ghost in the Shell*, *Lain* was far from being a megahit in Japan, but it has attracted a cult following among viewers (both in Japan and in America) who found its cyberpunk world to be a refreshing

challenge to reality. *Lain* begins with the haunting refrain (sung in English over the credits) "I am falling, I am fading," and, like *Spirited Away*, it follows a young girl (Lain) whose journey into a liminal Other world becomes a drama of self-discovery. In the case of *Lain*, however, this is not a fantasy realm but rather the world of cyberspace, an environment she enters after her father gives her a fancy new computer that becomes her gateway to the world of the Wired. Lain becomes more and more involved in the Wired at the same time as the Wired seems to begin impinging on outward reality. Doubles of Lain appear out of cyberspace to wreak mayhem in the real world, turning her friends against her and involving her in a vast conspiracy. Ultimately, Lain discovers that she herself is actually a piece of software and that, to save the real world, she must retreat into cyberspace and erase any memory of her material world existence. In the series' final scene the viewer finds Lain trapped inside of what seems to be an old-fashioned, static-ridden television set. Her final words are "But you can see me any time."

Unlike Chihiro in *Spirited Away* or even Motoko in *Ghost in the Shell*, Lain crosses a boundary from which she cannot return. But the series also raises the question whether there is anything to which she can or should return. The "real world" of the series, brilliantly animated in a flat, affectless style that suggests its fundamental hollowness, appears equally unappealing. Perhaps, in a world that shifts between an empty "real" and a dark "virtual," being a piece of software is ultimately as satisfying as being human.

We may find such suggestions disquieting or disconcerting, but they can also be stimulating and challenging. In the twenty-first century, an exclusively material existence is no longer something that can be taken for granted. Other worlds such as the past, the supernatural, cyberspace, or spiritual transcendence are penetrating its boundaries. Whether we welcome such fluidity or not, we can at least find in Japanese animation an intriguing opportunity to explore these other territories in ways that are both aesthetically pleasurable and emotionally and intellectually engaging.

Works Consulted

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For those of you interested in seeing any of the works mentioned here, *Spirited Away*, and sometimes *Ghost in the Shell*, are available at your local Blockbuster. *Double Suicide* is available in video form from Sony and should be in any video store with a good foreign film section. *Serial Experiments Lain* is available as a DVD set from Pioneer and at the various anime shops that are springing up around the country.