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## ANIME PLEASURES AS A PLAYGROUND OF SEXUALITY, POWER, AND RESISTANCE

### **Abstract**

This paper argues that the pleasure of viewing anime (Japanese animation) enables anime otaku's playful practices and engenders an imperceptible politics in viewers' own favor. First, by examining two anime works, *Fooly Cooly* (2003) and *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (1999-2001), I argue that anime images embody the pleasure of evasion and the pleasure of transgression as a form of resistance to the regulatory power and the normative sexuality. Deliberately deploying (1) void signifiers, (2) bodily senses, (3) liminal conditions, and (4) taboos and prohibitive themes, both anime works provide a temporal revelation of social orders and body disciplines for viewers. Further, these evasive and transgressive pleasures empower anime otaku (commonly referring to obsessive fans among English speakers) to go beyond image consumption, actively and constantly changing, manipulating, and subverting anime images in their practices, such as creating amateur manga, peer-to-peer networks and websites, and anime cosplay (costume-role-play). Anime otaku's pleasurable practices demonstrate de-assurance of their supposed identity and engender an imperceptible but playful politics that strays from social structures in which they reside.

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This paper argues that the pleasure of viewing anime enables anime otaku's playful practices and engenders an imperceptible politics in viewers' own favor. First, I briefly review theories of pleasure and concentrate on Foucault's (1990a) *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* that connects pleasure to power and sexuality. Second, by examining two anime works, *Fooly Cooly* (2003) and *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (1999-2001), I argue that anime images embody the pleasure of evasion and the pleasure of transgression as a form of resistance to the regulatory power and the normative sexuality. Deliberately deploying (1) void signifiers, (2) bodily senses, (3) liminal conditions, and (4) taboos and prohibitive themes, both anime works provide a temporal revelation of social orders and body disciplines for viewers. Further, these evasive and transgressive pleasures empower anime otaku to go beyond image consumption, actively and constantly changing, manipulating, and subverting anime images in their practices, such as creating amateur manga, peer-to-peer networks and websites, and participating anime convention and cosplay (costume-role-play). Anime otaku's pleasurable practices demonstrate de-assurance of their supposed identity and engender an imperceptible but playful politics that strays from social structures in which they reside. To that end, this paper suggests that anime pleasures offer a chance to develop not an escape from ideological constructions, but new ways of creative production and of resistance to the regulatory power in the practitioners' own favor.

### **Pleasure, Power, and Sexuality**

#### What is Pleasure?

*The psychoanalytic pleasure.* For Freud (1914, 2003), the pursuit of pleasure is what motivates the subject. Freud argues that human civilization is built upon two

fundamental principles: *the reality principle* and *the pleasure principle*. The pleasure principle depends upon a series of feelings through which the subject follows the instincts of sexuality and aggression to pursue whatever feels good (Kazlev, 2004). The reality principle deals with human basic needs that reply on social and economic facts, such as looking for food, clothing, and shelters. The reality principle obtains its social and economical stability through laws, regulations, norms, and prohibitions. However, to maintain the social and economical stability sometimes the subject has to counter his or her pursuit of pleasurable experiences. According to Freud, the subject thus subordinates the pleasure principle to the reality principle and turns his or her energy to produce something socially and economically useful. He argues that the subordination of pleasurable experiences is a process of repression that results in human civilization (Felluga, 2002).

*Pleasure and jouissance*. Lacan (1966, 2002) reworks Freud's concepts, using the term "jouissance" to refer to a transcendence of "the pleasure principle." Jouissance is a French word that may be translated literally as "pleasure" or "enjoyment." It connotes the enjoyment of the surplus value of property and rights. In psychoanalytic and feminist discourses, this word is particularly used to refer to sensuous and sexual gratification (such as orgasm) as a temporary fulfillment that can be used and enjoyed, but cannot be exchanged by individuals (Wolfreys, 2004). In other words, jouissance is linked to the enjoyment of certain kinds of surplus values, whereas these values are inexchangeable.

While Freudian pleasure depends on the subordination of laws, regulations, norms, and prohibitions, Lacanian jouissance always comes from the transgression of them. According to Dylan Evans (1996),

The pleasure principle functions as a limit of enjoyment; it is a law which commands the subject to “enjoy as little as possible.” At the same time, the subject constantly attempts to transgress the prohibitions imposed on his enjoyment, to go *beyond the pleasure principle*. However, the result of transgressing...is...pain... The very prohibition creates the desire to transgress it, and jouissance is therefore fundamentally transgressive. (emphasis in the original p. 91-92)

Roland Barthes (1975) also distinguishes pleasure and jouissance between the texts that reenact cultural codes and the texts that disruptively transgress limits.<sup>1</sup> Whereas the former meet the reader’s expectations thus validating the status quo for the subject, the later de-stabilizes the reader’s expectations through a breakdown of the reading subject and the culture in which he or she resides. For Barthes, pleasure involves the recognition, confirmation, and negotiation of the social order and the subject, while jouissance is an enjoyment of evasion through which the subject escapes from the social and self controls. Therefore, pleasurable texts reaffirm their meaning but texts with jouissance are an escape from *meaning*, which is always socially constructed and reconstructs social orders for the reading subjects (Fiske, 1989).

*Aesthetic pleasure.* In art theory, aesthetic pleasure is characterized as a unique state of pleasurable experiences through works of art. It is suggested that aesthetic pleasure involves a disinterested and distanced state of mind. According to Steven Connor (1992), “For aesthetic pleasure to be valuable... it must be disinterested, and consequently, universal pleasure; this is to say pleasure without individual profit,

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<sup>1</sup> French *plaisir* and *jouissance* are translated to “pleasure” and “bliss” in the English version of Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text*.

advantage, or gratification” (p. 203). In order to be in a disinterested state, these kinds of pleasurable experiences cannot be grounded in the subject’s personal desire, needs, or susceptibilities (Levinson, 1996). Contrary to the psychoanalytic pleasure, aesthetic pleasure resides in an art object or a communal experience, and it should not subordinate to the real world status (social and economic facts) of these objects or experiences. Although individuals cannot experience each other’s pleasure from a psychoanalytic view, it is argued that aesthetic pleasure always seeks for acquisition of knowledge that connects to particular objects. Therefore, unlike the psychoanalytic pleasure that is individual, personal, and incommunicable, aesthetic pleasure ought to be communal and constantly looking for a universal ground.

#### Pleasure and Power

In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, Foucault (1990a) investigates the relationship between pleasure and power through the discourse of sexuality. For Foucault, pleasure at least resides in two contradictory forms of power: one comes of actions and practices that exercise power, especially the power that attends to surveillance; another comes of actions and practices that escape from that power. He describes,

The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting. ... These attractions, these evasions, these circular incitements have traced around

bodies and sexes, not boundaries not to be crossed, but *perpetual spirals of power and pleasure* (emphasis in the original, p. 45).

The first kind of pleasure that exerts power over others or/and over oneself may be demonstrated through Feminist critiques of Hollywood classical cinema. For example, Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1979, 1999) decodes the patriarchal desire behind Hollywood cinema through a psychoanalytic approach. She argues that Hollywood classical cinema effectively constructs a male voyeuristic position that enjoys watching fetishized female bodies. Although Mulvey situates her argument in psychoanalysis through which *desire* becomes a key to initiate pleasure of images, the same instance can be examined through a Foucauldian lens that centers on *pleasure and power*. The example in her argument, Hollywood classical cinema, engenders the (visual) pleasure that comes of exercising a patriarchal power over the object "women" by means of cinematic codes. This kind of pleasure to which Mulvey refers comes from operating power over the subordinated, just as the male voyeuristic gaze on female bodies in Hollywood cinema.

Further, for the same instance, pleasure not only exists in these practices that exercise power over others, it also resides in those practices exercising the patriarchal power over oneself (the female self). Females may enjoy being looked at; thus she may be obsessed in objectifying herself—wearing high heels, putting efforts on her body shape—to obtain the pleasure of being looked by disciplining herself and subordinating herself to the patriarchal power.

Contrary to the previous kind of pleasure relating itself to power, the second, according to Foucault, comes of evading from or opposing that power. It is this kind of

pleasure that attracts and is attracted by power. I suggest the first kind of pleasure as *the pleasure for power*, and the second as *the pleasure for resistance*. However, this categorization cannot be taken as a simplified relationship between pleasure and power, and pleasures cannot be reduced into two exclusive forms. Foucault's power and resistance do not present a binary or an all-encompassing opposition between the ruler and the ruled as Marxists suggest. Power is not something that certain institutions or agencies can hold on, acquire, or share. Power only appears when it is exercised. Power is from below, from a matrix of relations, and thus "where there is power, there is resistance" (p. 95). Foucault (1990a) argues that the resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Power depends on "a multiplicity of points of resistance" (p. 95). Resistance, for Foucault, is always a plurality.

Each form of resistance has its own specificity, but I am interested in the form of resistance appearing in pleasurable experiences and practices. This paper treats pleasure as an effective starting point to analyze the visual and the accompanied activities. Pleasure has a spiral relationship with power; it is a byproduct of power and a practice of power simultaneously. If we articulate the pleasure of viewing, we may be able to understand power relations in contemporary visual culture more adequately. In addition, taking pleasure as the center point has an advantage: it will never have an exhausted point because the pleasurable experiences can never be fully defined and articulated. Not only does pleasure multiply, distort, and overflow the meanings, definitions, values, and classifications, but also everyone has a potential to invent his or her own pleasure. Pleasure is always creative and productive, though it may not be critical. It has no means

to an end and it may de-stabilize the regulatory power and the normalized discourses through practices.

### Pleasure and Sexuality

Treating sexuality is a discursive formation in power relations, Foucault and feminist theorists who utilize his work take pleasure as a rallying point for the counterattack against the normalized sexuality. At the end of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1990a) claims that “ the rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures” (p. 157). Foucault raises three important points that are worth discussing further: (1) the deployment of sexuality, (2) the regime of sex-desire, and (3) the counterattack through bodies and pleasures.

*The deployment of sexuality.* For Foucault, because modern society demands healthy and productive workers, the discourse on sexuality was developed in order to discipline, shape, and regulate bodies to be productive and healthy. He argues that sexuality has been deployed as a truth claim that saturates the heterosexual norms through which the productivity of bodies is ensured for the subjects. Foucault claims,

Between each of us and our sex, the West has placed a never-ending demand for truth: it is up to us to extract the truth of sex, since this truth is beyond its grasp; it is up to sex to tell us our truth, since sex is what holds it in darkness. (Foucault, 1990a, p. 77)

Sexuality becomes a truth for us, and we as “the sexed subjects” can only find who we are through our sex. Issues of our identity and subjectivity become undetachable from sexuality. The deployment of sexuality structures the grand binary system of the



normal/pervert, male/female, adult/children, and heterosexual/homosexual to discipline and regulate bodies.

*The regime of sex-desire.* Psychoanalysis proposes that human desire is driven by the inherent “lack” of human psyche, and human thoughts and activities regarding sex are structured by that desire. It may be argued that, to find the truth of oneself, one must investigate his or her very desire driven by this lack. Hence, desire has a psychological depth; desire can be latent or manifest, apparent or hidden; desire can be repressed or sublimated. Desire expresses what one really wants, who he or she really is, and one’s true subjectivity (Davidson, 2001).

On the contrary, Foucault argues that liberating desire cannot free us from the deployment of sexuality. The normative sexuality, within the articulation of psychoanalysis, insists that sexual difference functions Oedipally to induce the lack and desire in relation to a sexually different other (Butler, 1999). Desire comes from the projection of an ideal other onto a different sex, and thus the concept of “sex-desire” presupposes sexual difference through which a subject’s desire follows the lack inherently in his or her sex, biologically and culturally. Following Foucault, Ladelle McWhortor (1999) argues that the history of sexuality is a history of the elaboration of “desire” as a central concept and as the basis of human identities and cultures. She says,

The history of sexuality is a history of the elaboration of desire as a concept and as the basis of human identities and culture. If we make desire central to our analyses, critiques, and political activities regarding sexual networks of power, we run the risk of simply reproducing the structures and values that hurts us and of missing opportunities to create new possibilities for ourselves. (p. 176)

For Foucault and McWhorter, desire may not be the cause of sexuality, but a byproduct of the deployment of sexuality. Because the notion of desire persists in heterosexual norms, efforts on liberating it only reinforce the deployment of sexuality. Investigating desire may simply reproduce and reinforce the same structure of the normative sexuality. Therefore, Foucault suggests a shift of attention from desire to pleasure, for which he considers as a “virgin territory” that has not been touched by normalized discourses.

*The counterattack through bodies and pleasures.* Foucault refutes the psychoanalytic synthesis that “desire” structured by the lack drives human sexuality. Instead, Foucault proposes that pleasure as a discursive and intensified surface operation unfolds social constraints and the regulatory power of human sexuality. He claims,

I advance this term [pleasure] because it appears to me to escape those medical and naturalistic connotations that this notion of desire bears within itself... Desire is not an event, but a permanence of the subject, on which all this psychologico-medical armature is grafted. The term “pleasure,” on the other hand, is free of use, almost devoid of meaning. There is no “pathology” of pleasure, no “abnormal” pleasure. It is an event “outside the subject,” or at the limit of the subject, in that something which is neither of the body nor of the soul, which is neither inside nor outside, in short, a notion not assigned and not assignable. (Cited from Davidson, 2001)

McWhorter (1999) also argues that because “normalizing discourses have not colonized pleasure as they have colonized desire, pleasure may constitute a counterattack against the normalized power that constitutes sexual norms (p. 184). For them, pleasure is exhausted by its surface—bodies. Pleasure can be intensified and increased; its qualities

can be modified, but it does not directly imply a causal relationship between the subject's sex and his or her psyche.

Judith Butler (1999) interprets Foucault, asserting that pleasure signals a moment to free ourselves from our time, as a tactical reversal to counter the grids of power that deploys sexuality.<sup>2</sup> Pleasure can induce the subject to experience a temporality outside of the constructions, providing a possible path to the dissolution of the subject. During a pleasurable experience, the body of the subject may be momentarily released from its social definition and control, as an expression almost devoid of meaning, and thus this experience may transcend the limits of meaning. Foucault is more interested in pleasure that transgresses the limits into something unanticipated or even unintelligible. His account of pleasure as a temporal experience contains a potential to resist the regulatory power and offers possibilities to evade meaning and to transgress what has been normalized in discourses and constructed for bodies. More specifically, opposite to the psychoanalytic regime that confines the subjects through the linkage between sex and desire, Foucault asserts that human beings can invent pleasure(s) that free them from the regulatory power and the normative sexuality.

### **The Pleasure of Viewing Anime**

I suggest that the pleasure of viewing might serve as a critical starting point for art educators to approach visual culture. Unlike those abstract terms of ideology, desire, or fantasy that always look for something beyond the visual, pleasure only exists in practices and activities—in viewing, reading, writing, or artmaking (of course it also

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<sup>2</sup> Butler (1999) questions Foucault's natural position on "bodies and pleasures" in her *Revisiting Bodies and Pleasures*. She argues that although Foucault refutes the synthesis of "sex-desire," the very idea of "sex-desire" in fact must be presupposed in order for bodies and pleasures to become a tactical reversal under the name of sexuality in its regulatory sense.

exists in eating, drinking, and having sex). My analysis of the pleasure of viewing anime does not aim to unveil something “deep” within images, but to understand the effects and functions of pleasures that accompany practices. I propose that the pleasure of viewing anime is threefold. First, like aesthetic pleasure, the pleasure of viewing anime must have a common ground—anime works. It is also to say that the pleasure of viewing anime is both individual and communal. Second, anime works often present various themes related to sexuality (Chen, 2002; Craig, 2000; Drazen, 2003; Lamarre, 2006; Ruh, 2006). Thus it may be argued that anime pleasures often deal with the deployment of sexuality. Third, anime pleasures are often situated in the pleasure for resistance, through which viewers might experience a temporal freedom. Anime often includes elements of resistance because anime culture is always a youth and subculture that has its respects to the mainstream (Brehm, 2002; Lamarre, 2004). On the basis of these three propositions, I focus on *the pleasure of evasion* and *the pleasure of transgression* to discuss how sexuality is played and enjoyed (instead of being constructed and normalized) through anime *FLCL* and *Revolutionary Girl Utena*.

#### The Pleasure of Evasion in *FLCL*

*The pleasure of evasion* signals a moment through which the subjects might experience a sense of being “out of control.” John Fiske (1989) argues,

Anything out of control is always a threat, and always calls up moral, legal, and aesthetic powers to discipline it. The signs of the subordinate out of control terrify the force of order, ...they demonstrate how escaping social control, even momentarily, produce a sense of freedom (p. 69).

The pleasure of evasion is a temporal escape of social orders and is often expressed in excessive, irresponsible, and illogical behaviors. However, it calls for a sense of freedom and extends possibilities that are not confined within everyday life. In the following, I argue that *FLCL* provides possibilities of temporal escapes for its viewers by centering on the meaningless play of signifiers and on the overwhelming senses of bodies.

*The meaningless play of signifiers.* The title, *FLCL* (pronounced as “furi kuri” or “fooly cooly”), purposefully refers to a void meaning through which viewers cannot associate it to anything. Like the title, signifiers in *FLCL* are not intended to signify anything in particular; rather, they are often displaced in context to condemn the process of meaning making. Nevertheless, the meaningless play empowers its viewers to momentarily evade from *the* meaning structured by social orders in which the viewers reside.

The story of *FLCL* begins as the following: An ordinary boy, Naota, lived in an ordinary town, and his life wasn't really exciting until all of a sudden some extraordinary things started to happen. The ordinary town where the protagonists lived seems to be ordinary yet viewers immediately see a giant iron located in the town, with steam and smoke exposed occasionally (see figure 1). No explanation or reference of this giant iron was made throughout the series. When a giant iron is purposefully set to be *ordinary* and *normal* as a city hall in a town scenario, the logic of social orders has been displaced by illogic imagery and narrative. Thus *FLCL* brings viewers into a realm where the ordinary/extraordinary, logical/illogical, and normal/insane cannot be distinguished.

The random storyline continues. A mysterious girl Haruko appeared on her Vespa and smashed this ordinary boy over his head with a bass guitar, causing a large horn

grown on his forehead. Thereafter, robotic beings and some miscellaneous phallic-shaped items emerged from his forehead. The insane, or the illogical events, persisted to happen to this ordinary boy. The robotic being with a television face coming out from his head later became a housemaid in his family. His brother's girl friend Mamimi, who found consolation in an actively affectionate relationship with Naota while the brother was away in the United States, (mis)recognized this robot as God (see figure 2). She also called it "Canti," after a character in a video game she constantly played. The mysterious events never seemed to have an impact on the inhabitants, and they were not intended to develop later plots. They were what they were as daily lives that did not need explanations. In *FLCL*, the only logic is the consistency of the illogical, and the illogical is normal. As Naota remarked frequently in the series, "Everything is normal. Nothing is happening" (Imaishi, 2003).

Signifiers in *FLCL* are void because they are displaced—they are taken out from their contexts or normal scenarios, or they are muddled up in order to empty out common senses within them. A giant iron located in an ordinary town is a displacement of an ordinary object. A housemaid robot with a TV head, wings, and a halo (which is indeed an antenna) is a random play of signifiers. Because signifiers in *FLCL* are dissolved, viewers are freed from their regulatory meanings. The meaningless play of signifiers open possibilities to be out-of-control, inducing viewers' pleasure that evades from social orders and norms.

*The overwhelming senses of bodies.* The pleasure of evasion not only comes from a breakdown of the signifying chain and an escape of regulatory meanings, but also has an emphasis on the overwhelming senses of bodies. First, the loud rock n' roll music and

the fast pace of image montage enliven viewers and excite their visual and aural senses in *FLCL*. The director Kayzuya notes that *FLCL* is an “imagination being made physical and tangible, just as it is for me when take whatever is in my head and draw it” (cited from Ruh, 2006, p. 141). Throughout the series, music plays a significant role to initiate viewing pleasure. The energetic rock soundtracks get louder and pick up speed during the action scenes, and images, texts, and dialogues flash too fast for anyone to catch them up. The emphasis on bodily senses makes linear interpretations impossible; it disrupts the process of meaning making that has an emphasis on human psyche and cognition. As a result, the overwhelmingly bodily senses might enable viewers to be freed from a linear process of meaning making.

Second, with the enhancement of aural and visual senses, *FLCL* boosts viewer’s pleasure by concentrating on *bodies*. Fiske (1989) argues that pleasure is concerned with bodies, not the bodies of individuals, but with the *body discipline*—“the materiality of life that underlies and precedes individuality, spirituality, ideology, and society” (p. 83). *FLCL* uses many close-ups to detail bodies and to knead bodies like dough, breaking them to be an angle, a volume, or a curve. This pleasure of looking at bodies in *FLCL* might be taken as scopophilia—a pleasure of which human beings take others as objects on the basis of their sexual desire. No doubt viewers can sense the total control of a voyeuristic position through a great amount of low-angle shots and many close-ups of female body parts. Many camera shots of female characters, such as Mamimi and Haruko, are often taken from low angles, showing their extremely short skirts and the underneath. When two pervert police officers tried to gaze Haruko’s crotch, both her body and the officers’ gaze were clearly illustrated. However, Haruko had a full

awareness of their gaze, and she was in control while being looked at (she controlled what to show and how to show her body). In this particular instance, viewers may not experience a sense of objectifying Haruko's body; rather, they experience the juxtaposition between the pleasures of looking and being-looked-at—the voyeuristic pleasure and the powerful position that initiate this pleasure. Being-looked-at is no longer situated in a vulnerable state. While viewers are able to gaze Haruko from low-angle camera shots through which her body indulges viewers' pleasure, she is always looking back viewers from a higher position. Therefore, the pleasure of viewing *FLCL* is not simply a scopophilia structured by the inherent lack based on sexual desire. Rather, it is a pleasure that temporally engenders viewers to escape from the “body discipline.”

Third, because anime characters are not real human, but an *idea* of human beings, they are not confined by the body disciplines that materially precede social orders. Characters in *FLCL* can have robots and objects such as guitars physically growing from their bodies. Thus anime permits a greater freedom for viewers who experience outside of disciplinary bodies momentarily, rather than being an avenue of the passive control by desire.

To sum, the pleasure of evasion comes from the temporarily out-of-control which is demonstrated through the meaningless play of signifiers and the overwhelming senses of bodies. This temporal escape of social order calls a sense of freedom that is often expressed in excessive, irresponsible, and illogical behaviors, but it also extends possibilities that are not confined within viewers' everyday life.





Figure 1. A Scenario of *FLCL*  
The giant iron is located in an ordinary town.



Figure 2. The robotic God in *FLCL*.



Figure 3. The powerful position of Haruko.

### The Pleasure of Transgression in *Revolutionary Girl Utena*

Transgression is an action that demands *limits* for its very existence. Foucault (1998) argues that transgression not only presupposes limits, but also constitutes them in overcoming them and monetarily opens them up to the limitless. Hence, transgression might be argued to be threefold: (1) It presupposes and reaffirms its limits. (2) It does not present a victory over limits, but opens up possibilities of contestation, testing the boundaries of limits. (3) Limits and transgression reply on each other. Transgression reveals limits as a flashlight in the darkness; both of them are visible only at the moment when transgression crosses limits.

Like many other anime, *Revolutionary Girl Utena* consists of three forms— a manga, a television series of 38 episodes, and a film, known in English as *Adolescence of Utena* (Kunihiko, 2001). An opening script leads *Revolutionary Girl Utena* in every TV episode:

*Narrator: Once upon a time....*

*...There was a princess grieving over the death of her mother and father. Before this princess appeared a prince traveling upon a white horse. His appearance gallant, and his smile gentle, the prince enveloped the princess in the scent of roses and wiped away her tears.*

*Prince: Little one bearing up alone under grief, please lose not thy strength and nobility when thou grows.*

*Prince: As a token of this day, please retain this.*

*Utena: Pray, shall we meet once more?*

*Prince: This ring should guide thee to me.*

*Narrator: But because of the strength of her admiration for the prince, the princess made up her mind to become a prince herself!*

*(Pause)*

*Narrator: But was such a good idea?*(Web resource, Sato, 2003).

A gentle prince traveling with a rose ring, a female protagonist's journey to look for her prince, and a dreamy and pink-colored visual style, all of these elements code this anime to be a fairy-tale romance that gratefully and implicitly tell girls how to live her life happily. However, *Revolutionary Girl Utena* deliberately structures these elements as limits for viewers to transgress them with pleasure. This anime first reassures what constitutes an ideal life for girls in fairytales, and thus it initiates visual pleasure by transgressing this ideal, bursting a flame lightening what limits girls in and through fairy-tale romances.

*The limits for girls in fairytale animations.* What have been constructed as limits for girls in and through fairytale animations? It is fair to say that Disney has represented, reproduced, and reinforced an ideal girlhood for female youths through its animated images since its first animated feature *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). Typically, an evil witch persecuted a beautiful princess, and the prince fought with the witch for saving the beauty. Through this typical storyline, Disney divides women into two contradictory roles: the beautiful princess and the evil witch, such as Snow-White and the evil queen, Cinderella and her foster mother and sisters, and Sleeping Beauty and the evil fairy, etc. The princess, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, or Snow-White, pretty and young, has very limited mobility. She learns that in order to be happy she must be loved; to be loved she must wait for love's coming. In most cases, she does nothing but waits;

she has no qualities asked other than her beauty. On the contrary, the evil witch, who often has an elder face and furious expression, uses magic or super power to transfer herself in order to obtain her will against the princess. She is certainly independent (presented by the absence of her friends, family, and spouse), vibrant (sometimes presented by her hysteric expression), and powerful (she defeats against the prince). She is active to pursue what she wants although they are often the same with what the princess has and wants: beauty, youth, and happiness.

Due to the growing female self-consciousness and feminist movements, female characters are gradually changing since the late 80s. *Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Mulan* (1998) are two significant animations of heroines' adventures. In *Little Mermaid*, the female protagonist Aria had more active personality and motivation to pursue her love: she saved the prince and looked after him. She had stronger personality than the former female characters in Disney animation. However, her emotion and action were affected by her love for the prince and, hence, reacting against her father. Her happiness derived from being able to be with her lover rather than her own achievements. In *Mulan*, the female protagonist Mulan actually accomplished a victory for her country and saved the emperor. However, although Mulan was more successful than her prince, Disney assumes that viewers would happily opt for fulfilling of her marriage rather than awarding Mulan a medal or a position. While the two works affirm the female protagonists' autonomous selves through their adventures, the protagonists are still restrained in the notion of "being-for-others." Identically, the fathers played a critical role in indicating heroines' journeys, and their actions, adventures, and decisions were for the purpose of being

loved. The process of looking for the female autonomous selves is built upon and limited by the notions of a binary system of gender and heterosexual relationships.

*A temporal revelation of limits.* *Revolutionary Girl Utena* targets young female viewers, and the pleasure of transgression is intensified particularly when viewers are more familiar with and confined by the limits—the binary gender system and heterosexual relationships. The female protagonist Utena was guided by her rose ring to the Ohtori Academy (as it was leaded in the opening script), which was supposed to be an elite private school in Japan but had a bizarre European feature that was full of roses and rococo architecture (see figure 3). In this academy, Utena found a mysterious castle hanging upside down in the sky, a mysterious girl Anthy Himemiya who embodied the most disturbing characteristics of feminine passivity, a group of students in the student council who continued dueling with each others in order to win Anthy as a “bride,” and, finally, Anthy’s brother, Akio, the president of this academy who seemed to control all the mysteries and might be the prince for whom Utena was searching.

The Ohtori Academy is a perfect setting for the transgressive pleasure. This academy is in an extremely confined condition, a “baroque apocalypse,” where adolescent emotions, identities, and interpersonal relationships are at their most problematic (Napier, 2005, p. 172). Napier (2005) refers this kind of setting to a *liminal world*, arguing it occurs in “a place that is not a place and a time that is not a time, and hosts the emergence of a society’s deepest value” (p. 171). This liminal world does not represent certain places (high schools in Japan) at a certain period of time (contemporary Japan), but a temporal revelation of the limits where some strongest social values are deeply rooted.

Instead of being another Cinderella-styled story, in which the princess would pine for the return of her prince, Utena wanted to be a prince because of her admiration to the prince's nobility and bravery. When Utena found that Anthy was suffering from others, she immediately decided to become a prince in order to save Anthy. The word *become* is critical in this case. Utena *is* not a prince but who *becomes* a prince (though the series also implies that she can never be one). Commonly, a prince takes the action to save the suffered and to pursue he wants in fairytales. Utena, the prince-to-be, needs Anthy's existence and her suffering so that she can save her as a prince. Contrary to Utena's active persona, Anthy was disturbingly passive—she served the one who won the dual as a master; she cooked, cleaned, and ministered to his or her needs; and she appeared to have no willpower of her own. Utena was able to *become* a prince because Anthy as the other completes Utena. The actions and fights that Utena took did not save Anthy but positioned Anthy as the other to complete Utena as a prince. If one interprets Utena's journey and her will to become a prince as a process of identification, this anime series indeed presents a failure of this process. Along with the progressively complicated storyline, Utena's naïve, hypocritical, and selfish mind of being Anthy's prince is clearly presented. In Utena's last dual with Akio, Anthy's brother and the "real" prince, Utena declared, "I'll be the one to free Himemiya (Anthy) from you." Just upon the moment when Utena was almost winning the dual, Anthy betrayed her, stabbing her in the back. At the end, it seemed that everything went back to normal for everyone at the Ohtori Academy, except that Utena disappeared from the academy, which almost left viewers an ending in a sense of nothingness.

The failure of Utena's being-a-prince suggests a paradigmatic shift from questioning issues of female subjects and desire to investigating practices and pleasures. Elizabeth Grosz (2005) declaims that this is a theoretical choice. A theory of the subject that focuses on affirming identity through relations of identification and recognition with other subjects could be subscribed to interpret this anime. Alternatively, Grosz suggests subscribing a theory of "the impersonal," in which agencies and subjects are detached from non-human forces in and around us, and pleasure is one of the components that has the potential to mobilize, rather than recognize, the subjects (p. 189). Grosz criticizes that feminist studies may give issues of identity and subjectivity too much attention than they deserve. Her critique will be discussed in the next section.

The pleasure of *Revolutionary Girl Utena* does not come from a political claim that helps its young female viewers to recognize their identity, but from a potential that reveals social constructions and allows viewers to transgress the regulatory power temporally during the viewing process. First, by using a female protagonist as a prince, *Revolutionary Girl Utena* breaks the linear chain of the "prince-princess" vis-à-vis the "self-other" that takes a binary system of gender and sexuality for granted. *Revolutionary Girl Utena* deliberately sets up three limited identities based on fairytales—the princess, prince, and evil witch. Along with the storyline, viewers are exposed to a progressive uncertainty in terms of the protagonists' identities—Utena had a strong will to be a prince but this will was depicted to be naïve and selfish; Anthy had mysterious power while being extremely passive and submissive; and the "real" prince, who should be (and was) full of bravery and nobility, had a romantic relationship with Utena and an incestuous relationship with his sister Anthy simultaneously. Not only are the protagonists full of

internal conflicts and identity issues, but also their interpersonal relationships cannot be subscribed to the process of self-identification through others. Unlike many fairy-tale animations, in which the other must exist in order to sustain the self, this anime portrays ambivalent boundaries, even no boundaries, between the “self” and “others.”

Second, the theme of “becoming a prince” in *Revolutionary Girl Utena* does not present a happily reversed process of female identity formation. It is far more ambiguous regarding issues of female identity and subjectivity. The word “become” implies uncertainty, changing, and a moment that entails a virtuality of future and redirects the past. “Becoming someone” enacts a splitting self; it is a multiplication or proliferation of identification that puts the very idea of “I” into question. Because *Revolutionary Girl Utena* enables viewers to split the “I,” the pleasure comes from fragmentation and dissimulation of the subjects. Viewers can no longer settle a single subject position, but only involve a temporal mobility that allows them shift their subject positions among protagonists with pleasures.

*A transgressive pleasure of sexuality.* *Revolutionary Girl Utena* has a sweet and sugary visual style while it in many instances presents inappropriate, obscene, and sometimes extremely disturbing contents of sexuality. It includes cases of incest, rape, promiscuity, and homosexuality, for many which are considered as taboos (especially when “animation” and “fairytale” are terms under the Disney hegemony). Visually, *Revolutionary Girl Utena* avoids explicit nudity and violent images, but gives viewers a purified version of these taboos and prohibitive themes. These matters are presented through sugary and flowery yet disturbing metaphors and symbols. For instance, an important visual motif, an elevator, was used as a state of transition and transformation



before the protagonists' dueling. The design was a long-extending pillar with a cage-styled platform (see figure 4 and 5). This fragile, unstable, and dangerous elevator as a visual metaphor was also used while protagonists having psychological conflicts or having confessions (see also figure 6). In many scenes, flowers were arranged in a puzzling array, and mysterious shadow characters suddenly showed and practiced plots without a linear connection of the story (see figure 7 and 8).

It is inevitably misleading if we attempt to examine these images under the framework of "representation." Representation positions a *real* before itself and thus becomes a reproduction and consolidation of that real (Butler, 1990/2000). On the contrary to the fixed relationship between visual representation and the real, *Revolutionary Girl Utena* strategically acts out of a fluid relationships between images and meaning, which are able to give transgressive pleasure.

Conceptually, transgression of taboos is not simply to violate the Law. According to Foucault (1998), "Transgression forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance, to find itself in what it excludes (perhaps...to recognized itself for the first time), to experience its positive truth in its downward fall" (p. 73). *Revolutionary Girl Utena* is perhaps the most popular anime of a lesbian theme, but this theme does not reflect upon a homosexual identity for the protagonists. Whereas Utena and Anthy's relationship is clearly depicted to be homoerotic encounters, this anime portrays their encounters on the basis of their very desire toward the prince. Utena kept her obsession to Akio, kissing and having sex with him. A sexual undertone between Anthy and Akio had continuously illustrated throughout the series. *Revolutionary Girl Utena* simultaneously invokes and disavows the pre-existing notions of lesbianism and the same-sex desire.

There is no predictable sexual relationships and gender. By setting protagonists in an extreme liminal world, it shows a temporal contestation between the limits and the exclusion.

Further, although incestuous elements are never literally applicable in this anime, they are indirectly associated through visual metaphors and symbols. The incestuous relationships were not only implied in the encounters between Anthy and Akio, but also among other protagonists—a twin brother and sister in the student council who had obsession on each other, and a male protagonist who fell in love with Utena and had the childhood trauma due to his stepfather. For Lévi-Strauss and structuralists, the incest taboo becomes a way in which sexual positions are occupied, and masculine and feminine are differentiated. This taboo secures heterosexual family structure and kinships (Butler, 1990/2000). While the regulatory discourse of sexuality institute the viewing individual and embody him or her as a coherent and singular subject within the social norms, he or she would be freed from the norms through the viewing practices—even though it is momentary. By transgressing various taboos and prohibitions of sexuality, *Revolutionary Girl Utena* offers a pleasure toward the unpredictable through which a potential is granted to erase categories of sexuality, even as it invests in these very categories.



Figure 4: A Rococo-styled campus in *Revolutionary Girl Utena*

©1997 Be-Papas/Chiho  
Saito/Shogakukan/Shokaku/TV Tokyo  
Image courtesy Central Park Media

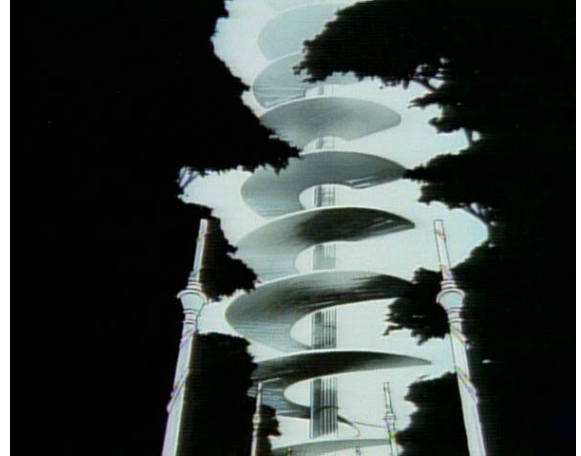


Figure 5: The elevator and stairs extend toward the castle in the sky in *Revolutionary Girl Utena*

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Saito/Shogakukan/Shokaku/TV Tokyo  
Image courtesy Central Park Media

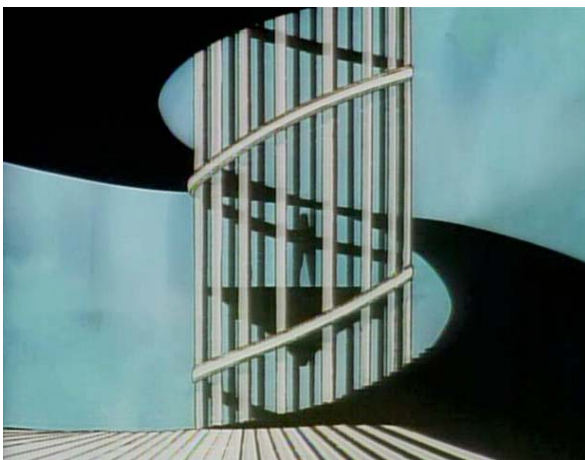


Figure 6: A front view of the elevator in *Revolutionary Girl Utena*

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Image courtesy Central Park Media



Figure 7: A top view of the elevator in *Revolutionary Girl Utena*

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Image courtesy Central Park Media

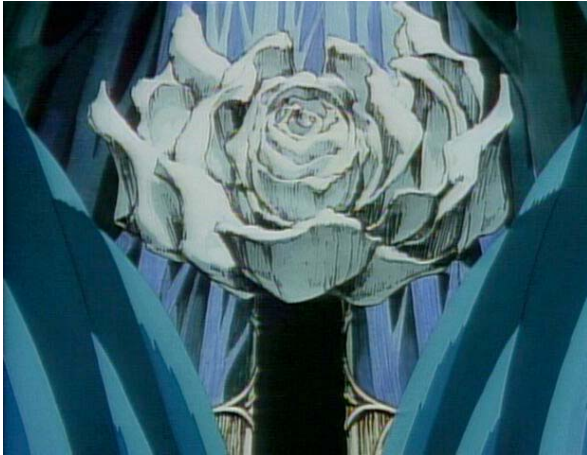


Figure 8: Visual Metaphor and symbols

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Image courtesy Central Park Media

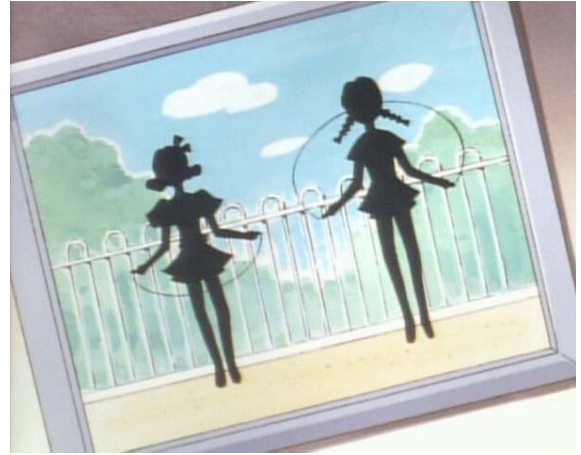


Figure 9: Visual Metaphor and symbols

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Saito/Shogakukan/Shokaku/TV Tokyo  
Image courtesy Central Park Media



Figure 10: Utena and Anthy in the TV series

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Image courtesy Central Park Media



Figure 11: Utena and Anthy in the film  
*Adolescence of Utena*

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Saito/Shogakukan/Shokaku/TV Tokyo  
©1999-2000 Shojo Kakumei UTENA Seisaku  
Iinkai  
Image courtesy Central Park Media

## Examining Anime Otaku's Productive Pleasure

The term “otaku” literally means a polite way saying “you” or “your house,” and is partly characterized by the subjects’ creative endeavors around the artifacts that they love. In the 80s and 90s, otaku had very negative representation in Japan’s society: obsessed fans, technological fetishists, avid collectors, antisocial outcast, and even borderline psychopaths (Eng, 2002). In 1989, Tsutomu Miyazaki, a 26 year old, kidnapped, molested, and murdered four little girls. When the police arrested him, they found a huge collection of various anime and manga. The Japanese general public immediately associated him as an anime otaku. For a long time, this term described a marginalized group that had been stereotyped as antisocial.<sup>3</sup> Recently, this term is revisited due to anime’s significant influence in global society. For instance, Toshio Okada, a founder of Gainax studio who is affectionately known as the “Otaking” (King of otaku), lectured the otaku culture at Japan’s most prestigious university, Tokyo University. He attributes otaku to a pioneering role in global information society, as a new type of experts who focus on information accuracy through a collaborative process (Azuma, 2005; Eng, 2002; Lamarre, 2004). In 2001, William Gibson (2001), a remarkable author of the cyberpunk genre in science fiction, proclaims that otaku is “the passionate obsessive” and “the information age’s embodiment of the connoisseur,” who is more concerned with the accumulation of data than of objects (para. 17). Contrary to the former negative representation of an isolated geek group, Lawrence Eng (2002) redefines otaku as “reluctant insiders” who have their particular ethic to appropriate technologies, to acquire information accuracy, and to engage in hyper-sociality on the

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<sup>3</sup> American anime fans believed they are more socialized and had long debates on whether “otaku” was an appropriate term to describe anime fans in the United States. See Eng’s discussion on American representations of otaku culture.

basis of their passion on anime. While examining the pleasurable activities and practices by anime otaku, this study argues that defining or identifying a particular group by their interests in anime objects is problematic and misleading. Anime otaku indulge in looking for anime *information* more than anime *objects*, and information is inherently rhizomatic. Instead of being formulated as a group by similar interests or politics, anime otaku are empowered by pleasures which indeed de-assure subjects' supposed identity as a playful politics without coherency.

### Anime Otaku's Pleasurable Practices

*Pleasure is an accompaniment to practices.* In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2*, Foucault (1990b) argues that ancient Greek used pleasures as part of the attempt to take care of oneself through careful managements of sexual practices. For Foucault, pleasure is an accompaniment to practices, as *askèsis*—“an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought” (p. 15). He suggests that when one encounters pleasure, the experience might enable she or he to further reflect, experiment, and reformulate the self through practices. Individuals experience various pleasures in different activities, but the pleasures that they experience are so close to these activities as they are indistinguishable. Jeremy Crampton (2003) argues that pleasure is linked to practices more than desire, and through pleasure we might find an more effective way to understand actions and practices. He says, “The reason for this is that whereas desires are at some remove from activities by both time and nature, pleasures are close to the activities. They don't need to reach out for something they don't have” (p. 182). Unlike the abstract descriptions of “desire,” which can never be fulfilled due to the inherent lack of the subject, pleasure is always accompanied by actions and practices. In Foucault's view, pleasure is opposed to

desire, as surface to depth, as bodies to subjects, and as activities of thought to thoughts of being.

*Otaku is a doer, not a mere consumer.* Eng (2002) describes that otaku are heavy and specialized consumers of specific media products—“people who do not shop on impulse, but inhabited the opposite extreme of the spectrum, obsessive and completely self-conscious in their consumption” (p. 3). However, beyond the consumption, anime otaku actively and constantly change, manipulate, and subvert anime works in their practices. Their practices include amateur anime and manga that imitate or adapt styles of their favor anime, an extension of visual signifiers to their bodies, known as anime cosplay (costume-role-play),<sup>4</sup> peer-to-peer networks and websites, and some of their practices even become an voucher of the contemporary art world, such as Takashi Murakami’s work. Otaku do not passively consume anime works; they *act out* their pleasure of viewing anime through practices.

Buckingham and Sefton-Green (2004) use one of the most popular anime, *Pokémon*, as an example, challenging that scholarly textual analyses on anime say very little about how anime images are designed to be *used*. They argue that images of *Pokémon* were designed to generate activities and social interaction, rather than being “consumed” in a passive sense. Anime is clearly not just a “text” in academic terminology or a set of objects that can be isolated for critical analyses. Images of anime do not provide simple meaning and one-way functionality for viewers; rather, they *require* actions on the part of viewers. Anime is the materialization of pleasure that enables otaku to actively and constantly *indulge* in acquiring new information of anime

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<sup>4</sup> “Cosplay” is a contraction of the English words “costume” and “play,” referring to one of the otaku phenomena that centers on dressing as characters from anime or manga.

products, imitating and subverting anime signifiers, and interacting with other participants in order to exchange *knowledge* about anime. Anime otaku's practices are not the process of becoming a recognized authority—the knower; it is a pleasurable process of becoming a thinker through practices, which means that the subject must continually challenge his or her knowing by doing.

### Anime Otaku's De-assurance of Identity

*De-assuring identity through pleasure.* Foucault advocates to break up the equation of the forms of pleasure one enjoys and one's supposed identity (Rabinow, 1997). For Foucault, pleasure plays a fluid role in power relations—it is capable to be bound to regulatory discourses while it is also capable to lead the subjects to the unpredictable. Investigating pleasure may shift our focus from *discovering* one's identity and subject position to working on practices in ones' favor. Grosz (2005) criticizes feminist studies focusing on identity issues as “a useful fiction” to imagine that we as subjects are masters or agents in discourses and/or power relations (p. 193). She argues, however,

... it [focusing on identity issues] is misleading, for it makes the struggle about *us*, about our identity and individualities rather than about the world; it directs us to questions about being rather than doing; it gives identity and subjectivity a centrality and agency that they may not deserve...(p. 194, emphasis in the original).

For Foucault and Grosz, identities are accomplishments or effects of discourses and/or power relations (Grosz uses “inhuman forces”) that constitute us as subjects. Although subjects function as a foundation of thoughts, actions, and changes, they are generally the



result of enculturation processes. Focusing identity issues may drive us overly concerned with individual differences and particular subjectivities. It may also result in *re-assurance* of the subjects' struggles in power relations. On the contrary, because pleasure is fluid among discourses and between power and resistance, it may unleash subjects from the struggles of affirming the self recognition (Grosz, 2005). Pleasure enables subjects to de-assure their identities, leading them to unexpected and surprising encounters.

*Being otaku is about pleasure, not about identity.* Otaku is a postmodern invasion of the former idea about "fandom" and "subculture." Subculture, as Dick Hebdige's (1979) study of British punk, was a form of resistance to cultural hegemony, persisting on a unique style as an identity against the ruling ideology. Recent media studies tend to view anime fandom as a subculture, which is about making a personal identity (Kelly, 2004; Kinsella, 1998). Whereas such studies pay attention to the emphasis on how visual representation influences the subjects' identity formation, they overlook the power of anime pleasures that indeed enable otaku to evade from their everyday selves and to invent their favor practices.

Anime otaku's practices demonstrate a schizophrenic quality of postmodern subjects. For instance, unlike the punk youth using their body as a political claim of their uniqueness, otaku cosplay makes their body into pure signifiers of playfulness, refuting a unified identity. They experiment various dressing styles, transgressing gender codes, and mimicing multiple personalities. An otaku accumulates information, narratives, and visual signifiers from the anime medium, later producing her or his personal narratives and signs. Instead of being attached to a single work, series, or genre, she or he consistently looks for variation within the anime medium, shifting her or his position

without any claim to originality and individual uniqueness. Being otaku is about enjoying the fragmentary, random, and disjunctive play of signifiers, through which the pleasure of evasion voids disciplines and meaning applied on the bodies, and the pleasure of transgression de-assures one's supposed identity.

### Anime Otaku's Playful Politics

*A politics of imperceptibility.* Pleasure is not necessarily tied directly to a larger political framework or systems of justification, but might be a “politics of imperceptibility” (Grosz, 2005, p. 194). Pleasure can be seen as the struggle of *imperceptible* power through which a subject is enabled to *invent* something entirely different from the everyday life. As Grosz (2005) asserts,

Engaging in whatever sexual and other pleasures one chooses may produce political effects, but it is not primarily the political that is at stake in this relation. It is instead a relation of production or assemblage, which may have political effects at particular moments, but is primarily productive or creative rather than critical. (p. 194)

Although this politics of the imperceptibility may not have a coherent and critical goal or agenda (thus it may not be very sufficient to achieve a goal-oriented politics), it benefits us for its open-ended practices. These open-ended practices are usually playful, active, creative, and without boundaries between the oppressed and the oppressing. McWhorter (1999) suggests that pleasure enables creative opposition and active resistance. Pleasure requires the viewing subject's active engagement of images to produce pleasure. Taking pleasure instead of desire as a central issue shifts the focal point from viewer's passive acceptance of images to the creative function of viewing practices. Producing pleasure

requires the subject's "will"—energy and self-esteem. It empowers the subjects to produce meaning of and for the self, and it may eventually result in politically active resistance of the regulatory power and normative discourses.

*The otaku playful politics.* The contemporary Japanese artist Takashi Murakami claims, "Otaku are an underground, but they are not opposed to the system" (p. 20). Azuma (2005) argues that otaku have no narratives, objectives, no themes, and no political implications, but this lack of political meaning *has* political meaning. Eng (2002) asserts that otaku is a significant alternative to other forms of resistance engaged by reluctant insiders of information. "This resistance is less outwardly political and rebellious to the system. Otaku do not rely on authorized sources of product information and distribution, but have established their own networks of information and trade" (p. 20). Larmarre (2004) also points out the "odd" relationship between otaku and authorized sources. He describes,

Oddly, otaku activities seem both to expedite and to slow corporate-controlled movement of anime around the world. They provide the (dimensionless) point where global markets coalesce and disperse, where they accelerate, gaining or losing speed. Otaku movement comes before official networks, yet the official networks do not subsume it. Even if the official networks leave otaku activities behind them, otaku activities persist in their own particular ways. The relation between otaku movement and corporate markets is not one of mutual reciprocity. While the two seem always to occur in conjunction, the one does not simply reflect the other (p. 152).

First, Otaku's practices break up the conventional mode of production, consumption, and distribution. In Japan, anime otaku produce their "fan art" and later became "the official"—anime producers. One of the remarkable examples is Toshio Okada and the Gainax studio he founded. In other countries, such as Taiwan and the United States, anime otaku share anime works (unofficially and in many instances illegally) in their own translations with others online before the official versions distributed. Interestingly, the official—Japanese anime producers and distributors—usually does not treat otaku's imitations of anime images or personal distributions as a violation of the law. On the contrary, the official takes otaku's practices as a lead, as a significant indicator of a successful work.

Second, otaku resistance functions as a cynical carnival without resorting to outright social critique. In Murakami's *Superflat* exhibition (1998-2001), strong social and political themes are noticeably absent, but there are hints of tongue-in-cheek subversion, appropriation, and parody. Whereas Murakami claims that *Superflat* portrays the otaku's repression on in Japan's society, the atmosphere was light hearted and fun, with no scathing portrayals of oppressors or sympathetic appeals from the victimized (Eng, 2002). Otaku practices may originate in the regulatory power structure. However, they betray and stray from that structure, producing a playful politics in their own favor.

### **Summery**

The primary purpose of this paper is not to justify anime pleasure, but to show how anime and its pleasure are able to excite, simulate, enliven, and empower viewers to continue their pleasurable practices. Many studies focus on pleasure of viewing as if it is a surface through which we can understand human psyche and how identities are formed.

On the contrary, this paper argues that pleasure is an accompaniment to other activities, as an external form of the “will to power” (Grosz, 2005). This paper concentrates on the anime pleasures that are situated in the form of resistance, as an evasion of the regulatory power and a transgression of the normative sexuality. Further, this paper examines de-assurance of identity and the playful politics in anime otaku’s pleasurable practices.

Art educators’ attention to representation of images in relation to the subjects’ desire and identity may simply reduce analyses to be a byproduct of political effects, drawing the shortcomings of the visual that has moral, ideological, and aesthetic emphases. This line of analyses directs us to a *discovery* of anime images, through which we risk running our efforts on merely the effects of images. Alternatively, this paper subscribes pleasure as a starting point to *invent* the new, the unthought, and the stray from the regulatory power through anime images.

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