The Popularisation of Geek Culture, and the Marginalisation of Otaku Culture

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This paper will use the timely release of the new Transformers film this year – a US production of a Japanese concept – to discuss the state of audiences and consumers of popular culture within Japan as opposed to the West, and thus, attempt to rationalise the difference in the way subcultures are filtering – or not, as the case may be – into the mainstream. Through this it will look at the shrinking toy market which is now beginning to shift towards adult collectors, and predict the dangers the signs within a greying society show for the consumption of popular culture in Japan and the Japanese entertainment industry as a whole.

Some interview subjects requested anonymity.

Introduction: From Geeks and Otaku to Joe Bloggs

The space-age culture raised on fiction such as 2001: A Space Odyssey and Star Wars, and factual history such as the Space Race, came to maturity in the 1980s, and during that time Japan used a cheap method of rendering visuals to transport viewers to far-off galaxies and worlds: animation. With this technology, and the eventual availability of VCRs in households (and thus OVAs¹), there were no boundaries for the imaginations of the fantasy creators. Their visualisations were restricted by only one thing: the imagination of the general public.

The relatively low-cost production of an average anime feature means that there is no need to cater for a wide audience and so a work can be a success within a small subculture circle. Japan has throughout the years proved an ability to cater for niche markets in a way that cannot be easily seen in the West. For example, this cannot be said for the average Hollywood movie. The budget for ticket-sale-driven summer blockbusters is expanding all the time and this is because the technology is developing now to finally realise the imagined fantasies of the 60s, 70s
and 80s in a realistic fashion (these recent years have seen multi-million dollar retellings of classic “geek material” such as X-Men, Spider-Man, The Fantastic Four, and now, Transformers). However, from a business point of view, there must equally be a wide audience for such a work or else such a large budget would generate huge losses for the production companies.

So is it possible to create a work of hard-core science-fiction which would be best suited to geek circles, and market it so that not only the core fandom are pleased, but also so that it attracts the attention of the average movie-goer? Looking at examples of commercial and critical successes such as the original Star Wars, Blade Runner, and even The Fifth Element and such, the answer is, seemingly, yes. At least from a Western point of view. At the same time, many blockbusters like Michael Bay’s Armageddon have used plot devices (romantic sub-plots), popular stars and clichés in addiction to the main attraction of state-of-the-art effects to draw more people (mainly women) towards the work, instead of only attracting people interested in special effects, which would undoubtedly result in a major loss.

In the case of Japan, the situation seems slightly different. Taking as an example explosion-fetishist Michael Bay’s newest work, the overwhelmingly-hyped (in the West, that is – largely ignored by the media in Japan, more on which later) Transformers movie – the newest incarnation of the Transformers licence co-owned by Hasbro and (recently-merged) Takara-Tomy, American and Japanese toy manufacturers respectively – I will try and rationalise the differences between movie-going audiences in the West and in Japan, and through this, analyze what can be said about Japanese society’s attitudes towards media such as film and drama.

I will also attempt to point out the trends currently taking place within the subculture audiences within Japan.

Toy Story: Creative licenses and Japanese toy exports, US-style

First of all, let us examine the history of the franchise in question, bearing in mind throughout the context of the period in both regions: in this case, we begin in 1984, very shortly after toy-maker Mattel and animation production house Filmation’s He-Man and the Masters of the Universe had broken through and delivered the West’s first “half-hour commercial”, that is to
say, it was a licensed production planned for the sole purpose of selling toys. The toys were a big hit despite being simple, stock body figures with limited articulation which mostly only varied in colour, head mold and accessories to distinguish one character from another. *He-man* the show itself was also a hit with children in the Americas and Europe, though there seems to have been no entry into the Japanese market. One explanation for this is the content of Japanese children’s programming, in particular within the medium of animation, at around this time. The creators of such shows, mostly the animated TV science-fiction-oriented series, were of the generation inspired through growing up with fiction such as *Godzilla* (1954), *Tetsujin 28* (1963), and *Ultraman* (1966), but also reality in terms of world-leading technology and machines, such as the bullet train unveiled in 1964, the Honda Formula 1 race car in 1964 and the Osaka Expo in 1970. These young, hopeful “Otaku” creators were, as Michikazu Maeda, owner of the Hero Gangu Kenkyuusho in Osaka (more on this later), puts it, “only interested in challenging and pleasing themselves by realising their creations. As kids watching these shows, we didn’t understand, say, the whole terrorist angle in *Dougram: Fang of the Sun*. We watched it for the cool robots.”

While there were obviously similarities with *He-man* in terms of market forces having objectives to sell toys to kids, this was not the only aim which drove the creators. It was this spirit which kept out such vacuous commercialism-based works of the West from Japan. In the following couple of years, Hasbro employees doing research and PR work at the Tokyo Toy Show were impressed by Takara’s range of transforming toys, including the self-explanatory “Car-Robots”, part of their robot toyline “Diaclone”, and “Micro-Change”, part of their “Microman” line, which featured life-sized objects such as guns, watches, cameras and cassette decks, which could be transformed into robots. The complexity in design and engineering was very high compared to anything America had seen until then, and the executives thought long and hard about how to market this abroad.

However, if we look at the situation from the Japanese point of view, the Diaclone line and Microchange line were hardly runaway successes. Rather, the toy market in Japan was very competitive with no shortage of high-quality toy manufacturers such as Popy, Takatoku and Bandai. At around this time, transformable toys from robot and machine-oriented TV shows were plentiful and big hit shows like *Yamato* and *Gundam*, though they were from the 1970s, were still casting large shadows over current trends because of their fans not outgrowing the works due both to the popularity of sequels and also the complexity and maturity of the shows themselves. Shows
like *He-Man* were but trends when viewed in this light. In 1982-84, robot animation shows *Super Dimension Fortress Macross* and *Super Dimension Century Orguss* pushed their main licencee toymaker Takatoku into bankruptcy despite (but in part, due to) the extremely high quality of the toys. Therefore, there was already a heavily established “robot culture” in the Japanese popular mainstream represented by Gundam and its derivatives, and Takara’s Diaclone output was not viewed as anything particularly special, mostly because there was no real media to support the sales, unlike Gundam, which was primarily a TV show.

So when the Hasbro executives signed a contract with Takara to bring the Diaclone and Micro-Change robots to the West, a lot changed for both companies: first, Hasbro established a story, characters and setting for these robots which would be realised within a wide variety of media including comics, children’s books, a TV series, and eventually an animated theatrical release. Add to this the plethora of fast-food chain tie-up promotions, goods such as pencil cases, rucksacks, clothing and bedsheets and such, and suddenly children could not avoid the charm of the “robots in disguise”, as the catchphrase went. The toy robots from Japan had been given a new breath of life, literally re-packaged and re-branded American-style. With the robots being “characterised” and newly affiliated into “good” and “evil”, they were sold throughout the world as “The Transformers: More than meets the eye!” to great success. Amazingly for the time, the line was re-introduced into Japan, this time with the new packaging and character bios as part of the package, and to coincide, the TV series was also dubbed and broadcast on Japanese television. Its success in Japan hereafter may be attributed to the connection with the TV show, and although the series ended its Western run in 1987, Japan went ahead and produced many more animated shows based on the Transformers at the rate of one a year until the 1990s. In spite of this, the animated movie (released in 1986 in America and featuring an all-star voice cast including Leonard Nimoy, Judd Nelson and Orson Welles in his final film role) was not released in Japan, in spite of its meticulously detailed visuals provided by many Japanese and Korean studios including Toei Doga. The staff also included many talented individuals including Nelson Shin and Peter Chung.
The state of the animated movie industry in the West and Japan, circa 1986

This is where the first major divergence in the development of the franchise within the two regions (and subsequently, in the tendencies of the mainstream of both societies) can be seen. For Western audiences, in spite of the shock which the theatrical release of Ivan Reitman's animated *Heavy Metal: The Movie* (which featured sex scenes, profanities and hardcore violence) had incurred a few years earlier, in 1986 the idea that an animated film could have science-fiction elements, strong language and violent scenes was still very hard to grasp for the average audience raised on Hannah-Barbera and Disney. Although the violence in question was towards robots and not humans, the fact remains that watching the characters children had by this point grown to love after seeing them on television for two years suddenly die horrific deaths onscreen was shocking to both adults and children alike. However, in spite of the film's misunderstood themes being the cause of it not having great success at the box office, it nevertheless set the tone for broader horizons as far as fantasy on film was concerned. Twenty years later, the movie has been re-released many times on DVD and remains a cult classic for its free-spirited, counter-culture style of representation: as opposed to Disney-style round and cute imagery, the 1986 *Transformers* movie introduces a distinctly angular, futuristic and mechanical feel. Instead of the usual musical style of animated characters breaking into song in the average American cartoon, the film has a pounding stadium rock soundtrack provided by quintessentially 1980s hair metal bands, which enhance the intensity of the high-octane action scenes. Finally, the cliched moralistic approach to good and evil is still there, albeit in a “young apprentice must prove himself in the absence of the dead master” mode, heavily borrowed from *Star Wars*, which in turn took it from the Japanese *jidaigeki* (samurai period drama) traditions.

One reason for its absence in Japanese cinemas could be that, as mentioned earlier within the context of toys, the Japanese works were far more mature in content and already had a rich history and success that it would not have done so well. According to an online Japanese movie database\(^4\), there were already 21 Japanese animated movies in the cinema that year, including *Laputa*, *Megazone 23 Part II* and *Urusei Yatsura 4*. The 1980s was the time that otaku culture had finally grown to adulthood and the Transformers movie perhaps fell short of those standards, particularly when the barriers it seemed to be breaking in the West had been broken long before
in Japan during the 1960s with manga, and 1970s with animation. These barriers would seem to re-build themselves later, unfortunately.

The Information Age and the “Nostalgia Factor”

Though obviously no longer in great popularity, the “Transformers” brand name remained in the public consciousness during the 1990s, as the children who had experienced the boom first-hand grew up, and due in no small part to the internet at the end of the 1990s, a 1980s retro boom which has seen its peak in the last couple of years began to take shape. With information on past comic book and TV episode plots and with the possibility of “buying back a piece of one’s childhood” through the advent of eBay, interest in the brand soon resurfaced. At this point it was recognised that there were many fans across the globe who were not necessarily hardcore fans (“geeks”), but having being raised in such a rich new media environment such as the 80s with cult classics such as Robocop and The Terminator, and going on to see their sequels raise the stakes with their higher quality special effects, it was clear that a new way of viewing movies had been established. “Geeks” were no longer a niche. The “nostalgia factor” captured all those who were children during the 70s and 80s and allowed them an insight into the world of the geek: and thus opened the realm up to the mainstream. It was around this point that talks first began concerning the possibilities of a live-action Transformers movie.

At first, there were no studios interested in the idea, however hard producers Lorenzo DiBonaventura and Don Murphy tried to pitch it. Gradually we saw the evolution (appropriately) of the X-Men in a mature and believable live-action format, courtesy of Bryan Singer’s no-nonsense vision. What Singer did, and did successfully, was focus on the characters and their conflicts (the reason why the comic book is still a success 40 years on today) and combine that with a familiar setting, a society not too distanced from ours, adding realism in a way that all fiction should do instead of being a mindless showcase for CGI. Similarly, the new 2001 incarnation of the classic tale of troubled teenager Peter Parker, Spider-Man, directed by Sam Raimi, contained relatively few action scenes and kept the spotlight on the relationships between the protagonists (and antagonists).

In this way, it was seen to be possible to market the Transformers franchise using mainly
the mainstream's knowledge: the power of the household name. But in Japan's case, there appears to be a lack of (mass) communication concerning this. Let us attempt to see what kind of presence the franchise holds within the Japanese mainstream.

Gauging trends: *Transformers* in the Japanese consciousness

Using the Google Trends tools to investigate the online search volume for “Transformers” brought up many interesting results. Firstly, it should be noted that this method paints an overall picture of search trends and does not provide actual figures; thus, it is best used as a tool for comparison between different search criteria.

![Figure 1: Global search volume and news reference volume comparing keywords “Transformers”, and “Spiderman”.](Google Trends)

Entering the word “Transformers” gives an overall view of how this search criterion has risen and peaked in usage on around the summer of 2007. Of course, it is precisely at around this time that the film was released in cinemas, so this is no surprise. The main peak also is highlighted for its coincidence with The Columbian’s news story that “Transformers Nabs $24.7M at Box Office”. Several smaller peaks also relate to other news articles.

Next, the search volume for “トランスフォーマー”, that is, the katakana rendition of “Transformers”, gives a similar representation of the previous criterion.

However, the results become more interesting when taking a look at the comparisons with
other search criteria. One idea which came to mind was to find how search trends for “Spider-Man” (N.B. I used the search term “spiderman” as that is most frequently used for quick searches by users, instead of the more correct hyphenated spelling) and “Transformers” relate to one another within the region of Japan, compared to the rest of the world. It was surprising to find that the comparison between the two brands was extremely similar. However, Google Trends thankfully also provides news reference volume which puts things into a new perspective: the news items for “Spiderman” were minimal on the global scale while “Transformers” seemed to gain a lot of publicity. On the other hand, applying the same method to the Japanese model results in a totally different representation: it seems that the Japanese media (at least, the online news services) gave plenty of attention to Spider-Man, but the graph did not register a single record of Transformers-related news articles at all. To explain the significance of this, I added one further search criterion to compare these findings against: that of SMAP, the Japanese male idol entertainment unit whose five members are seldom absent from a Japanese TV screen, be they in the form of TV drama actors, singers, or simply guests on variety shows. The significance of comparing “SMAP” search volume and news reference volume is that the unquestionable mainstream appeal does not necessarily correlate to net search statistics.

![Graph](image)

Figure 2: Search volume and news reference volume comparison for “トランスフォーマー”, “スパイダーマン” and “SMAP” within the region of Japan. (Google Trends)

Figure 2 shows that although searches and news references for “SMAP” were both constantly numerous, “Spiderman” searches at their peaks often outnumbered them. Yet “spiderman” news references were particularly low. Still, a peak in the news reference volume can be seen for the period around spring 2007. This of course is due to the press activity surrounding the May 1
release of the “Spider-Man 3” movie in Japanese cinemas: the earliest general release date in the world for the film, even earlier than the May 4th US opening date, and this is reflected in the search volume. This may point to a reaction to the publicity. However, it does not necessarily follow that high search activity is the result of high publicity. The search volume shows similar peaks in mid- and again in late 2004, obviously because of the Japanese release of the second Spider-Man film and its subsequent DVD release, yet interestingly, the Japanese news reference volume for “Spider-Man” shows little to no activity during the early part of 2004. I would expect another peak to appear in the forthcoming months as of the time of this writing, since November 2007 has been announced as the DVD release in Japan of the third movie. Some fluctuations are already beginning to be seen.

Thus what we witness with Transformers at present might be a concentration of people who want more information and are looking for it online simply because there seems to be so little information in the mainstream media and news. Not to mention the fact that Transformers also is a range of items and products which vastly outnumber that of Spider-Man. A search for Transformers could relate not only to the movie, but also to any one of dozens of transforming toy robots released in conjunction with the film.

Many things can be said about this method of studying trends, and thus looking at gaps and niches; mainly that it is far from definitive in gauging popularity or interest in a product, be it a major or minor item. Perhaps some people do not use Google as much as Yahoo, or other search engines. In any case, the results for news reference volume on the other hand quite clearly show the appeal of the mainstream media on average. SMAP and its members are known throughout Japan and they are rarely outside the celebrity news headlines. Juxtaposing the situation regarding the virtually non-existent news coverage for Transformers within Japan against the news saturation of SMAP and the Spider-man films as they are released at the cinema, one can see that Transformers is very much a minor, mostly unrecognized brand within Japan. However, what these surprisingly high search statistics show is Transformers as a brand with a very loyal hardcore fan-base. Despite getting next to no news coverage, the search statistics spike is steep and high, following the same pattern as the overseas model.

Whatever the reason, there is an extremely large group of people, otaku or otherwise, inter-
ested in the *Transformers* movie which is just not reflected in the mass media. Though they cannot be *seen*, they are there. However, it is precisely because they cannot be seen that their influence on audience trends is minimal. As of this writing it remains to be seen how integral their role will be in terms of ticket sales within Japan, but without some intense advertising, the mainstream will not respond too aggressively, thus sales may lag behind expectations from the studio.

The ever-changing realm of Fandom: fans within the mainstream; general public within the fandom

The city with the greatest volume of Google searches for the term within Japan is Osaka. It may or may not be a coincidence that Nipponbashi in Osaka is also the home of “Hero Gangu Kenkyusho”, a relatively large toy and hobby store specializing mainly in *Transformers*, as well as other figures and memorabilia from brands and series of the 1970s and 80s such as *Saint Seiya, Dragonball, Mad Max, Armored Trooper Votoms* and the like.

Michikazu Maeda began running the store in 2000, and back then it was a small, one-floor shop on a narrow street with show cases and shelves of items tightly stacked leaving little room for customers to move around. Since then, it has moved to a much bigger three-storey location on the main road with the third floor used as office space, while the first and second floors are the shop floors. The first floor deals with new items of relatively mainstream appeal: ever-popular *Dragonball* and *Saint Seiya* products can be found here, as well as *Masked Rider* and *Soul of Chogokin* (a series of robot toys from different shows aimed specifically at adult collectors which mix modern-day engineering with the nostalgia-induced die-cast feel of 1970s and 80s Japanese toys – “Chogokin” – to recreate a particularly popular robot or character such as *Tetsujin 28* or *Mazinger Z*).

The second floor of the shop deals mainly with collector-oriented items which little of the general public would have interest in nor realize the value of. It is mostly *Transformers* merchandise, a lot of which is made up of rare, second-hand and limited-edition exclusive figures, but also includes lunchboxes, radios and other Transformer-licensed paraphernalia produced during the 80s. Other items besides include second-hand toys from various famous shows and toy-lines of
Maeda says that recently, more and more members of the general public – not necessarily hardcore fans – have been coming in and making purchases in his shop. This is due in large part to the interest generated by the new live-action adaptation of the Transformers, which more than makes up for the conspicuous silence from the movie’s official PR camp in Japan.

Within the store, aside from movie-related toys, of course, flyers, discount coupons for film tickets and other such things are given away, and also, aside from posters on the walls, there is constantly a large screen showing interviews with director Michael Bay and executive producer Steven Spielberg, as well as behind-the-scenes footage, all with Japanese subtitles. Lastly, the members of staff all wear uniforms with Transformer logos and emblems emblazoned on them. While this may appear to be the ultimate in specialist retailing for hardcore fandom, this serves a purpose in getting the attention of the average consumer. Though rare in Japan, similar promotional measures are taken in large toystores abroad, as could be seen in the displays at branches of Woolworths and Toys “R” Us stores around the UK during summer 2007. Giant hype-generating advertising campaigns for the Transformers toyline and paraphernalia dwarfed the customers at these retail outlets. Maeda’s store, in moving away from the modest location in the backstreets to the main road almost embodies the shift from subculture to mainstream.

He also adds another key point: that the number of female customers has been steadily rising. This is important because in terms of movie audiences, obviously attracting female customers is of utmost importance. Maeda says that recently, apart from the usual female otaku which patron the shops around the Nipponbashi area, there are also average girls who enter the shop simply curious about otaku culture. Others are interested in “cute” monsters which are featured at the store, such as “Imagine”, a monster from a recent Masked Rider series, and Disney’s “Stitch” character.

This change in Nipponbashi’s shoppers underlies bigger changes in the area all round.

EM is a major executive at an infrastructure board of executives for the Nipponbashi area of Osaka. The area can be compared to the Akihabara district of Tokyo in terms of being a center for
otaku – specifically animation and comic book fans, toy and model kit hobbyists, computer and gadget enthusiasts, and more recently, consumers of pornographic videos. In over 15 years of working there, the most change he has seen in the main street has been in the decrease of home appliance stores, since the arrival of the large electrical appliance stores such as Yodobashi Camera seven to eight years ago. Meanwhile, in the backstreets, smaller shops dealing with doujinshi (fan comics) and other such subculture items began to be seen, and eventually these began to spread over to the main street, until it eventually developed into what is now known as “Ota-road”, a stretch of stores appealing primarily to the interests of otaku. And the Hero Gangu Kenkyuusho store even has regional television commercials, although they do not run during children’s programming – they run late at night. This indicates, once again, a distinct trend towards marketing towards older collectors, in particular the key phrase uttered during the advertisements themselves: “Nostalgic toys!”

Yet in as recently as these past few months, there has been a trend arising: customers other than otaku are beginning to patron overall otaku-oriented shops, not just Maeda’s store. EM corroborates Maeda’s observations that Nipponbashi’s shoppers have expanded from men in the late 20s – early 40s age group to children and young women. This is a sign that the nostalgia factor is working in another, rather different way: the children of the late Showa period are, as adults, trying to introduce and bequeath their cultural heirlooms to the new generation. EM also ensures that the general public is aware of the interesting and fun attractions Nipponbashi has to offer, even organizing festivals and parades which run along the stretch of the main road.

However, while Maeda has also seen his patrons expanding into other demographics, he laments the overall shift in interests for children today: they just do not play with toys anymore. “This new generation”, he says, “just has not grown up playing with toys. It’s mostly trading cards and video games now. When they become adults, and if and when the nostalgia sets in, they will not reminisce about toys”. The male otaku who hold nostalgia as a key factor in their hobbies, although they are trying – and to an extent appear to be succeeding — to spread their interests to the mainstream, are in fact in danger of extinction. This is leaving a question mark over whether or not Japan’s mainstream as a whole will embrace otaku culture in the way that the West has, and pave the way for new audiences to enjoy genres in media such as film and animation which they had previously thought of as merely the dominion of geeks. EM himself is of the personal
opinion that it is questionable if “otaku culture” can be labelled a “culture”, when Nipponbashi has turned it into a business. When you make money off nostalgia, is it culture?

Japan’s mainstream distancing from the *Transformers* movie casts further doubt over the glimmer of hope seen in the spreading demographics of Nipponbashi customers. Yet, the core otaku fandom itself does not seem too worried – rather, they seem to prefer being in their own realm, with little connection to the mass. Asked why a *Gundam* re-telling in live-action with real actors portraying the now-legendary characters, one animation fan who frequents Nipponbashi stores (in particular the backstreet ones), K, said it ought never happen, “because the public [implying the otaku fandom] now has this image of say, Amuro [lead protagonist in the original 1978 show]. They would never accept any other image, so any actor playing Amuro would look ‘wrong’”. It sounds like the typical argument often seen in movie fan discussions, on- or off-line, that is, the role of nostalgia within “remakes”. He seems to be saying that the Japanese movie industry would not be able to make such a film because the key demographic of non-otaku young men and women would not go to see it as long as the “Gundam” label is on it, while the hardcore fans would detest it for its inevitable lack of accuracy to the source material. When Hollywood producers DiBonaventura and Murphy decided to re-make *Transformers* in a live-action format, they quite correctly predicted there would be an enormous amount of backlash concerning changes within the mythology of the story and the looks of the characters. Perhaps they were even overwhelmed at the sheer ferocity of the criticisms. But, in the tradition of Bryan Singer as discussed above, such changes were viewed as necessary by Hollywood in order to make the film profitable, i.e. to make it appeal to a wide range of demographics: men, women, children and adults of all ages. A few disgruntled fans are a small price to pay when reaping rewards from the mainstream. In comparison, the strength of the otaku within Japan and its refusal to integrate even partially into the mainstream appears as mighty as the mainstream’s insistence to keep it at bay.

This writer was in London during the release of the *Transformers* movie in the UK, and looking around at the audience on the opening night on July 27th, one saw boys, girls, young men, young women, fathers and mothers. Personally, I went with my mother and uncle (both in their forties), my grandmother (in her seventies) and my seven-year-old brother, all of which were aware that Transformers was a 1980s franchise (It should be noted also that my brother, though
he was not around during the original 1980s boom, is as big a Transformer fan as any during that time). Attending a showing in Japan the following month, in comparison, I noticed there were mostly older men in their 30s and 40s, and a few young couples. Some of the couples remained in their seats even after the movie ended as the men tried to explain to the women what they had just seen. The universality of the themes in the film (identical in both releases), effective on the Western audience and yet by no means complex like human dramas, seemed lost on the Japanese audience.

With that in mind, the danger is this: in the West, new audiences are emerging for works of science-fiction and effect-extravaganza: these are firstly being introduced through the power of nostalgia, to draw in old fans and introduce a new interpretation of successful formulae to new viewers. These new viewers then begin to accept such works and thus mainstream success is possible, paving the way for other, new works of fantasy acceptable to the masses yet not necessarily based on any past work. However, Japan’s situation remains unchanged: the period of the 1970s to the end of the 1980s highlighted an impressive creative force within fiction, yet this has not developed in the way that it has within the West, despite the comparative maturity within the actual works at the time (Votoms and such). It is this unfortunate stubbornness on the part of both the fans and the mainstream within Japan that prevents the gap between them from narrowing.

Take the example of Robotech. Broadcast in the West in 1985, Robotech was one of many shows re-branded and re-edited from their original Japanese incarnations (in this case a splicing of three originally unrelated series) to cohere with American broadcasting standards, but although much was cut and toned down from the originals, the American edition remained revolutionary insofar as the overall maturity and realism of the show remained intact. In spite of such unprecedented content for TV animation at the time, it was treated as not much more than the average children’s cartoon. As Carl Gustav Horn describes, “Robotech was written for a teen audience, but its major marketing was towards children, and in most American cities it literally aired at preschool hours.” (Horn et al, 1999: 31) What if that marketing shifted to a wider target? We may soon find out.

Hollywood actor and producer Tobey Maguire has recently been reported as proposing a
Robotech live-action Hollywood film, in the wake of Transformers’ massive earnings. Though there was talk of a Macross (one of the three Japanese shows edited together to form Robotech) live-action film in development back in 1996 involving Southern California-based Galaxy Films and series creator Shoji Kawamori, the project was shelved long ago. All signs are pointing to the fact that either Japanese creators need to put themselves on the map before their aging audience dries up, or audiences need to open up within Japan, so as to allow an entertainment industry willing to take risks.

Figure 4 shows a simplified “society” comprised of a mainstream culture with several surrounding subcultures. Within this Japanese model, there are subcultures which permeate the mainstream and thus raise awareness and knowledge concerning, for example, media such as films or TV shows. Based on this general public awareness, film-makers and such creators can gauge acceptance levels from the audience they target. A Robotech movie in the West would take advantage of the West’s model of subcultures blended into the mainstream (i.e. usage of fans of the original source material mixed with average movie-goers, including – but, importantly, not limited to – members of the mainstream public who enjoyed the new Transformers film) while Japan’s rather conspicuous lack of this blend would imply that a Japan-produced Macross movie, for example, would on the other hand, cater to lesser subcultures, more removed from the mainstream.
This is not to say that extreme commercial enterprises such as was seen in the re-packaging and re-marketing of the *Transformers* by Hasbro is necessary for mainstream success, certainly not in this age of information, but the Japanese entertainment industry ought to consider expansion, since the children of the 1970s and 80s are rapidly aging, and it remains to be seen whether or not their children will carry on tradition, or lose the old creative flame forever.

**Conclusion**

For all intents and purposes, there is no reason why the Japanese cannot make a successful universally-appealing science-fiction film like *Transformers* since there is the existence of a key generation, raised on a diet of thought-provoking fantasy drama since childhood. That these themes apparently need to be diluted, translated and updated by the West in order to succeed universally is something the Japanese entertainment industry ought to regard a missed opportunity, if not a source of shame, even. Children raised in Japan during the late Showa era should have been – and had all the indications of being – the harbingers of a revolution in mainstream drama, but the 1990s and adulthood did not bring about such results; rather, the situation developed into creative stagnation and cyclical cliché proliferation. The Japanese situation today sees sequels and remakes from 1980s TV animation franchises aimed neither at the masses nor at the children of the original work’s target age group, but at the niche markets of the core *otaku* (those who grew up with the originals): *Pailsen Files* (a forthcoming sequel to *Armored Trooper Votoms*), *The Wings of Rean* (a recent *Aura Battler Dunbine* sequel) et cetera. Yet when we look at American works like in the case of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, the recent remake of the early 1990s cartoon was obviously made to cater for the same age group of children as the original, except using updated animation techniques. The same goes for the new *Transformers* cartoons on TV today: *Armada, Energon* and *Cybertron*. Specifically *otaku*-targeted animation is virtually non-existent in the West, save for translations of Japanese shows. The question remains: how much longer can the Japanese niche markets continue to exist in this way?

A modern version of the process of re-packaging which the *Transformers* underwent during the 1980s is apparent in the way the Japanese *Pocket Monsters* franchise was handled during the late 1990s. Gail Tilden, the project coordinator for *Pokemon* at Nintendo of America, Ltd. is quoted in 2000 as saying, “To the best of our abilities, we have tried to prevent kids from feeling that
these are characters coming from Japan. This is on account of localization. The reason is not because we want to hide the fact that *Pokemon* is made in Japan, but because we want to promote the impression that Pokemon are global characters.” (Allison 2006: 234) Thus, it is again America which is seen as the “globalizer” of franchises, uniquely able to interpret works to reach further and wider than their original intended audience. Ten years have passed since the *Pokemon* boom exploded in Japan, and the series is still going strong, although its popularity has understandably recessed. So can we expect a big-budget *Pokemon* movie aimed at average movie-goers twenty years from now, capitalizing on the nostalgia factor of today’s children with extra attributes adding to realism for the rest of the average movie-goers? Only in America.

**Bibliography**


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**Endnotes**

1 Original Video Animation. This was a new medium, designed to bring about high-quality animation (as opposed to the somewhat rushed visuals of many TV series due to budget restraints and scheduling) one could watch at home. Due to the high price home video commanded at that time, OVAs also presented ways of releasing “sequels”, additional chapters to successful TV shows and even just re-edited summaries of entire 20-odd episode series, instead of having an entire run of episodes available for sale. OVAs were not limited to TV restrictions on themes or levels of sex and violence, opening the floodgates for many niche subgenres. It thus also paved the way for animated pornography, developing the otaku sphere of influence. That, however, is the subject for another paper.
**Dougram: Fang of the Sun:** a gritty, hard-boiled Sunrise-produced Japanese animation series from 1982 which is an important work in the development of the “Real Robot” genre, later perfected by the following year’s *Armored Trooper Votoms*. “Real Robots” are defined as different to the “Super Robots”, who had their heyday during the 1970s, in that, most simply put, they are used as artillery, vehicles, weapons and such hardware within the show, instead of being iconic and having an intrinsic heroic image, like, for example, *Mazinger Z*. This then expands on the “reality” of the show (in effect creating a more character-driven story) thus the term “Real robot”.

The Diaclone line actually did have a “story” per se, written as part of the package of the toy, but not in any other medium.


Here too, a “Super” versus “Real” analogy can be used. Singer’s version of the *X-Men* had the mutants stripped of their original multi-coloured skin-tight outfits portrayed in the comic books and instead opted for leather – something the purist fandom frowned at upon first revelation. This was obviously done, however, precisely to prevent distacing the content of the film from the mass audience. As if to add insult to the injury of the hardcore fandom, or perhaps as an apologetic excuse, a character in the film, when asked about the costumes, actually utters the sarcastic line “What would you prefer – yellow spandex?”

Spider-Man’s director, Sam Raimi, is something of an anarchist himself, having made a name for himself with the “*Evil Dead*” series of movies. His unique style brought a fresh new approach to horror films. Since he is at the center of yet another subculture genre, the leverage fans of his works have also helped to contribute to the publicity, and of course eventual financial success of the film.

A *Gundam* live-action feature – entitled *G-Saviour* – was actually produced by an American studio and released in Japan on home video, licensed by copyright owners Sunrise. The cast was American and the dialogue was all in English. Is the deliberate omission of the word “Gundam” in the title an attempt to widen the target audience, as described above? Despite its efforts, the film was ultimately a flop.

This is especially so since works based on originally-Japanese material seem to be the forthcoming trend in cinema, with *Transformers* being but the tip of the iceberg: James Cameron has reportedly been working on pre-production for *Battle Angel Alita* (an adaptation of manga *Gunnm*) for years; and Hollywood blockbuster versions of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, *Voltron* (adaptation of the American edition of *Golion* broadcast in the 80s), *Dragonball*, *Metal Gear Solid* (believed to be especially suited to live-action, since the original video game it is based on plays like a Hollywood film anyway, plus the inclusion as supervisor of the game’s creator, Hideo Kojima, underlies the intention of artistic integrity), and *Robotech* (another adaptation of Japanese animation re-scripted and re-edited for American syndication...
during 1985, this time a mélange of *Super Dimension Fortress Macross*, *Super Dimension Cavalry Southern Cross* and *Genesis Climber Mospeada*) are all currently in development. It would seem, then, a matter of urgency for the original Japanese creators that they be recognized, properly credited and have their works appreciated.