The study of contemporary Japanese SFTV is a lot like the classic science-fiction story wherein intrepid scientists discover space aliens have landed on Earth. The trouble is that no one believes them. Why? The proof aliens are here is precisely the fact that everything is so terrifyingly normal. Similarly, many of the core elements of Japanese SFTV – thermonuclear lizards, giant robots, and cartoon mascots – were once viewed as either outrageous oddities, or exclusively Japanese obsessions. Yet nowadays Godzilla, Evangelions, and Pokemon have become almost as iconic and ubiquitous as Mickey Mouse and the NBA. The more popular the exotic world of Japanese SFTV has become, the less world audiences think of it as exotic or alien.

The paradox deepens when we consider just how drastically that world audience has changed since the end of the Cold War. Today our planet has 2 billion cell-phones, 500 million computers, and a truly multinational consumer culture. No single nation-state dominates the mass media, the world economy, or global geopolitics anymore. Put another way, the enormous impact of Japanese SFTV on our media-savvy and multinational 21st century cannot be explained by reference to Japan’s specific national identity or culture. In fact, some the most interesting works of Japanese SFTV are shockingly un-Japanese, in terms of aesthetic style as well as narrative content.
One of the main reasons for this is the unique historical context of Japanese SFTV. Whereas American SFTV draws much of its content from the plentiful archives of US-based pulp fiction, comic books, television and science fiction cinema, Japanese SFTV is similarly dependent on multinational media. The latter’s two most significant influences are the anime (televised animation) culture and the 3D videogame culture. While the earliest forms of anime and videogames emerged in Japan and the US during the 1960s, they quickly escaped their national spawning-grounds. Today, South Korea, North Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, France, and the US are all significant producers of anime, while India, China, Russia, and many of the countries of the European Union have become powerhouse 3D videogame producers.¹

Both anime and videogames have rich histories of multimedia innovation and cross-cultural borrowing. Anime artists such as Akira Toriyama and Hayao Miyazaki drew inspiration from classic Disney films such as *Fantasia* (1940), as well as live-action works such as Jan Svankmajer’s *Alice* (1988), a mordant retelling of the *Alice in Wonderland* narrative in a Czech turn. At the same time, videogame franchises ranging from Square Enix’s legendary *Final Fantasy* series to Hideo Kojima’s magnificent *Metal Gear Solid* routinely cite sources as diverse as Western European auteur cinema and the Hong Kong action blockbuster.

The upshot is that Japanese SFTV, videogames, and anime reciprocally influence each other in powerful and productive ways. The anime culture played a particularly important role in diffusing the innovations of the Hong Kong action films within Japanese SFTV, ranging from the balletic editing sequences of the *wuxia* (Chinese martial arts) films to John Woo’s slow-motion or “bullet-time” camera techniques. The anime culture also developed a varied vocabulary of stylized effects, capable of generating rich characterization and emotional complexity out of simple visual materials. The exaggerated eyes of anime characters have become standard in
world animation, while the stylized confrontations and complex geopolitical themes of anime series such as Akira Toriyama’s *Dragonball Z* forever raised the bar for future action franchises.

The videogame culture played an equally important role in revolutionizing the elements of music, sound-editing and voice-acting. Contemporary videogame culture is dominated by franchises and organized in terms of episodic content. The typical game requires ten to twenty hours of play-through time, an investment of time comparable to watching a TV series. Kojima’s *Metal Gear Solid 3*, for example, features elaborate cut-scenes, complex characters, a gripping musical score, and the superb voice-acting of David Hayter and other talented actors.

Anime and videogames also provided a venue for sophisticated meditations on identity-politics and post-Cold War geopolitics. Rumiko Takahashi’s anime series *Ranma ½* (1988-1992) delivered a rip-roaring satire of the foibles of Japanese gender roles, identity-politics, and consumerism during the height of the Japanese Bubble Economy, while Square Enix’s *Final Fantasy 12* (2006) is a fusion of mythological fantasy, role-playing gaming, post-Iraq War geopolitics, and science fiction.

This extraordinarily rich narrative ecology had two significant effects on Japanese SFTV. First, it gave the latter a vast archive of characters, storylines, editing styles and visual innovations to draw upon. Second, it made it impossible for Japanese SFTV to follow in the footsteps of American SFTV.

Historically, American SFTV has been profoundly influenced by the political imaginary of the US empire. It could not be otherwise, given the overwhelming preponderance of the US economy over its Cold War competitors. In 1945, the US generated half the industrial output of the planet, bankrolled the recovery of Japan and Western Europe, and fielded the richest and most technologically advanced consumer culture in the world for the next four decades.
Yet there is nothing in the annals of Japanese SFTV comparable to the opening of the classic *Adventures of Superman* (1952-1958) series, where the Man of Steel stands on Planet Earth as if it were the front lawn of America, Inc. Nor is there anything like the benevolent neocolonialism of the *Star Trek* franchise, with its wide-eyed NASA idealism backed by murderous Pentagon firepower. This is not to argue that Japanese SFTV is free of the toxic racism, sexism, militarism, and xenophobia which afflict all media cultures, only to underline the fact that at some point in the 1970s, Japanese SFTV broke from the US imperial script and never looked back.

In retrospect, two key geopolitical events conspired to make this break-out possible. The first was Japan’s post-WW II demilitarization. Japan’s postwar boom was founded on civilian industries epitomized by Toyota engineering, Sony style, and Canon creativity. In contrast, the high-technology sector of the US was the recipient of vast subsidies from the Pentagon. Silicon Valley was largely financed by defense contracts, while aerospace giant Boeing is one of the largest military contractors in the world. It should not surprise us that American SFTV gravitates towards the US military-industrial complex, precisely where Japanese SFTV gravitates towards consumer electronics.

The second event is Japan’s relationship to its East Asian neighbors, or more precisely, Japan’s role in jump-starting the economic boom of the East Asian region. Beginning in the mid-1980s, formerly autarkic economies like China and Vietnam, colonial antagonists like South Korea and Japan, and Cold War enemies like Taiwan and China shelved their real and imaginary grievances in order to invest in – and trade with – each other. After much trial and error, these countries and regions adopted variations of Japan’s highly successful developmental state to accelerate their own economic growth.
The result has been one of the most impressive economic expansions in world history. Today, East Asia is linked by dense networks of capital flows, commodity exchanges, and media broadcasts. Total trade between China and Japan is now larger than total trade between Japan and the US, while the countries of East Asia have accumulated well over $2 trillion in currency reserves.5

This economic boom has been paced by equally impressive flows of people, ranging from mass tourism to internal and external labor migration. In 2005, the World Tourism Organization estimated 31 million Chinese, 16.5 million Japanese, 10 million South Koreans, and 2.7 million Thais traveled as outbound tourists, visiting mostly other Asian destinations.6 Tens of millions of Chinese citizens are moving from China’s countryside to its cities each year in search of a better life. Millions of Filipinos and Indonesians work in Malaysia and Singapore, and a million Koreans live and work in Japan.

Over time, the vast East Asian market exerted an increasingly powerful effect on Japan’s media culture. In the 1960s, painful memories of Japanese imperialism in WW II meant that Japanese media artists could not follow in the footsteps of American SFTV and depict a benevolent Japanese colonialism. In the 1970s, this anti-imperial sentiment was solidified by the object lesson of the US neocolonial war in Vietnam. To be sure, Hollywood and American consumer culture remained enormously popular in Japan. By the 1980s, however, Japanese media artists began to find they had more in common with the Hong Kong films and China’s Fifth Generation directors than with Hollywood.

At some point in the early 1990s, the bullet train of East Asian community left the station. It has been gathering speed ever since. The sheer scale and scope of regional integration did much more than just foreclose any recrudescence of Japanese imperialism, in the same way that
Germany’s integration into the European Union consigned German expansionism to the history-books. It also made new types of multinational cultural exchange possible, or what might be termed a cultural logic of “Asianization.”

The concept of Asianization is meant to complement Koichi Iwabuchi’s useful notion of the “popular Asianism” of the Japanese mass media. Iwabuchi is highlighting specifically binational forms of cultural exchange between Japan and its East Asian neighbors. By contrast, Asianization refers to the sum total of the multinational media flows throughout the entire East Asian region – the simultaneous exchange of music, film, television and game narratives across multiple national borders.

The rapid proliferation of broadband Internet and media-capable cellphones throughout East Asia has kicked Asianism and Asianization into high gear. Today, Japan imports Korean TV serials such as Winter Sonata and Jewel in the Palace, as well as films and Cantopop musics from Hong Kong. Korean online videogames and Japanese anime are hugely popular in China, while Japanese anime series and films are a hit throughout East Asia and, indeed, the world.

Japanese SFTV has acknowledged this process of Asianization in two ways. First, it has critiqued the pervasive techno-Orientalism of mainstream US and European mass media, as well as its indigenous Japanese counterpart. Second, it has begun to consider the utopian possibilities of a larger East Asian community of nations, based on multilateral diplomacy, equal exchange, and mutual respect. It did this by critiquing East Asia’s own homegrown traditions of xenophobia, colonialism and militarism, including those elements within its own cultural history.

Hideaki Anno’s anime series, Neon Genesis Evangelion (1995), is one of the first great examples of this new cultural logic. The initial episode of the series seemed to be a straightforward giant robot or “mecha” cartoon, in which giant robots piloted by teenagers have

*Evangelion* would turn the theme of the alien invasion on its head. Its twenty-five episodes enthralled audiences with a mixture of pulse-pounding action and thoughtful and unexpected meditations on natural history, social responsibility, and adulthood. As the series progressed, Anno repudiated the latent militarism, sexism, and xenophobia of the mecha, by accessing an extraordinary array of Japanese, American, and European media forms. Most of all, the series broke new ground by showcasing powerful, complex female characters, unlike anything in the annals of anime. In fact, one of these characters, Asuka Langley, a young girl of half-German, half-Japanese descent, is the first credible multinational character in the history of Japanese SFTV.

The result was a double-barreled critique of Japan’s indigenous identity-politics of gender, race, and sexuality, as well as the rapacious economic agenda of its keiretsu business elites. There is a similar double-edged critique at work in the literal Japanese title of the series, *Shin Seiki Evangelion*, or literally “Gospel of the New Century.” The creators of the series apparently wished to simultaneously evoke and subvert the theological implications this title would have in English-speaking countries. As a result, they crafted a translation that points away from a potentially fundamentalist theology, and towards the electronic biology, as it were, of consumer capitalism. More specifically, Evangelion critiques the production and reproduction of bodies in late capitalism by showing that the giant robots are not simply ciphers of Japanese electronic engineering. Nor are they symbols of a militarized, colonialist masculinity. They are full-fledged subjects, embodiments of a progressive or East Asian collective consciousness.
A few years later, the TV series *Cowboy Bebop* (1998), created by Hajime Yatate and directed by Shinichiro Watanabe, would push Evangelion’s achievement still further. The main characters are four cash-strapped, space-traveling bounty hunters, in flight from a ruined Earth. Spike is a laconic martial arts expert with a shady past, Ed is a quirky female computer hacker, Faye is an independent-minded pilot, while middle-aged Jet is a tough-minded mercenary with a philosophical streak (videogame fans will note Jet’s resemblance to the incidental characters of Reddas in *Final Fantasy 12* [2005]).

None of these characters follows his or her respective mass-cultural conventions, nor is any one tied to a definable national identity in the way Anno’s characters are. The only obvious geographic reference in the series is to Faye’s hometown, which resembles contemporary Singapore, that is to say, a multinational entrepot city. Watanabe skillfully balanced the underlying anomie of the plot with moments of slapstick hilarity, and film noir visuals with martial arts mayhem. The quick-witted scripts and ironic endings gently tweak many of the more egregious conventions of Japanese SFTV, such as out-of-control robots, mad scientists, corrupt police forces, and renegade yakuza or Japanese mobsters.

Watanabe would later translate this sensibility to another key series, *Quack Experimental Anime Excel Saga* (1999), a wild and woolly satire of every Japanese and American SFTV cliché ever made, plus a few which haven’t been invented yet. The series is loosely based on Koushi Rikudo’s manga (the generic Japanese term for comic book), which was once considered impossible to translate into television, due both to its scandalous content as well as the sheer density of its inside jokes about Japanese manga and anime culture. Wisely, Watanabe avoided a literal transcription of the manga. Instead, he allowed the science-fiction narratives and visuals to carry the story.
The delirious pacing, over-the-top sight gags, and deft scriptwriting are complemented by satires of Japanese, US, and European animation traditions. For example, Excel, the main character, parodies the Evangelion character Asuka Langley, underlining the degree to which Anno’s series has become embedded in the landscape of contemporary Japanese SFTV. There is also Pedro, a Brazilian-Japanese character who is played mostly for laughs, but whose very presence points to the fast-growing immigrant communities of contemporary Japan (significantly, at the end of the series Pedro’s family moves to Japan).

The most significant recent work of Japanese SFTV is Satoshi Kon’s Paranoia Agent (2004). This series represents a change of pace for Kon, who is best known as the director of visually stunning, thought-provoking anime feature films such as Millenium Actress (2001) and Tokyo Godfathers (2003). Fortunately, Kon did not compromise the quality of his work in transitioning to the small screen. Paranoia Agent is a fusion of a variety of media genres – the crime thriller, the film noir mystery, the role-playing videogame, the giant robot adventure, the horror movie, Nintendo’s Paper Mario videogames – along with a myriad of Japanese SFTV motifs too numerous to count into a parable of the arrival of multinational media politics in East Asia. Where Evangelion created a hyperspace junction from Japanese SFTV to the multinational SFTV of the future, Paranoia Agent travels through that junction.

The two main characters of the story are two police officers, the hard-bitten Keiichi Ikari and his younger, less conventional partner, Mitsuhiro Manwa, who are investigating a series of criminal assaults. Citizens are being struck down by an unknown teenager on roller blades, armed with a golden bat. The media quickly dubs the attacker “shonen batsu,” or literally “Bat Boy” (the English translation is “Li’l Slugger”). At first, the attacks are non-fatal and even a bit comic, but they quickly escalate into savage beatings, gruesome mass murders, and finally a full-
The names of the police officers are not accidental. “Ikari” hints at the father and son Ikaris who star in Anno’s *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, while “manwa” suggests “manwha,” the term for Korea’s thriving cartoon and animation culture. This twin reference to Japanese anime and its Korean analogue not only brackets two of East Asia’s most prominent animation cultures, but also broadly nods in the direction of the “Hallyu” or Korean wave, i.e. the imported Korean television melodramas that have become a huge hit in contemporary Japan.

The search for Li’l Slugger quickly turns into an allegorical tour of the toxic, dehumanizing effects of multinational consumerism, ranging from schoolyard bullying to endemic sexual violence, and from repressive identity-politics to the collective madness of xenophobia and war. Eventually, Ikari and Manwa resign from the police force, choosing to unravel the mystery of L’il Slugger on their own as private detectives. This shift not only abolishes the coordinates of national space latent in the crime thriller; it also points to the arrival of explicitly multinational aesthetic forms. During one episode, the characters literally have to battle their way through a 3D console videogame, replete with slapstick boss battles and less than helpful non-player characters. During a later episode, Ikari has to crash through a simulacrum of a cartoon world, rather like Nintendo’s *Paper Mario* (2001) videogame. Other episodes show Manwa searching through the shortwave radio spectrum in order to track Li’il Slugger’s movements and battle against the constantly-mutating monster.

As it turns out, Li’l Slugger’s reign of terror has been triggered by an innocent-looking cartoon mascot called Mellow Maromi, a stylized pink dog which is also the linchpin, within the narrative world, for a best-selling television and toy franchise. Maromi’s creator is a young woman named Tsukiko Sagi, a highly successful anime artist, and her company has put her under
a crushing deadline pressure to create a commercial sequel to Maromi. When she begins to fall apart under the stress, Maromi begins to take on a deadly life all its own.

This clever rewriting of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1827) for the multinational era concludes with a plot twist worthy of the finale of *Evangelion*. In Anno’s series, the audience discovers that the alien invaders were merely ciphers of humanity’s neocolonial and economic violence upon itself. Paranoia Agent goes still further, by naming the central agent of that violence. This agent mutates constantly, it is not limited to any particular national space, and it inhabits all cultural spaces, simultaneously. This monster can be nothing less than multinational capitalism itself, a system that, the series suggests, if left to its own devices, will destroy individual subjects as ruthlessly as it is wrecking the planetary ecology.

Yet Kon does not counsel despair in the face of the overwhelming might of this system. Instead, he points to new forms of collective resistance. The model for this response is the final alliance between Sagi, Manwa, and Ikari to bring the multinational monster under control. Sagi’s artistic creativity, Manwa’s tracking skills, and Ikari’s force of will turn into symbols of multinational aesthetics, multinational theory, and multinational social movements, respectively. Their alliance represents the prototype of a new kind of East Asian solidarity, capable of resisting the worst impulses of keiretsu capitalism and Wall Street neoliberalism on their own multinational terrain.

The need for such a solidarity is not simply a rhetorical ploy. Economic interdependence has brought undreamt-of prosperity to East Asia, but it has also made cross-cultural dialogue and multicultural understanding an urgent necessity for the region’s citizens and communities. Environmental protection and consumer safety require cross-border regulations, while Singapore and Malaysia have become as dependent on mass labor migration as Switzerland and France.
There is a striking confirmation of Satoshi Kon’s vision in the field of Korean science fiction. One of the first Korean animated series to be exported abroad, _BASTof Syndrome_ (2001), adopted many of the conventions of the mecha and Japanese SFTV, including teenagers piloting giant robots, adolescent growing-pains, and videogames which are realer than reality itself. Five years later, Korean science fiction had matured enough to create its first multinational masterpiece. Joon-ho Bong’s film _The Host_ (2006) cleverly rewrote the Godzilla narrative in an East Asian turn, showing how a ravenous monster is spawned by a combination of US Cold War intervention and neoliberal hubris.

What ultimately defeats the monster is not a national scientist or Pentagon super-weapon. Rather, it is a combination of an Olympic-level archery competition, the pro-democracy media mobilization, Korean cellphone acumen, and a creatively reconfigured traffic pole. These are multinational media and industrial infrastructures, which anticipate some form of East Asian cultural and political community.

We do not yet know what political forms this community will take. Perhaps regional organizations such as ASEAN will continue to deepen their scale and scope. Alternately, entirely new forms of multinational democracy may emerge, on the model of the European Union. Be that as it may, one of the most significant long-term effects of Japanese SFTV is its enormous influence on East Asia’s booming videogame culture. Japanese publisher Enterbrain estimates that game software sales in 2006 reached $815 million in China and $2.24 billion in Korea.¹¹

These totals compare favorably Japan’s game market ($4.42 billion), and if current growth rates hold, China and Korea will soon rival the other two major game markets in the world, Europe ($7.43 billion) and the US ($7.83 billion). More remarkable still, total videogame sales throughout East Asia are now larger than sum total of cinema box office receipts, DVD
sales, and DVD rentals in the region. Animation, anime and Japanese SFTV are leading the way in a seismic shift in media production and consumption throughout East Asia, and indeed the world.
Notes

1. While the exact numbers are difficult to come by, most analysts estimate total sales of the world animation industry (defined as the sum of media broadcasts, films, DVD sales, toys and merchandising) at $40 billion in 2005. Japan probably makes up about a fifth of this total. World videogame revenues amounted to $36 billion in 2006, according to analyst firm NPD. Olivia Chung reports that the animation market in China in 2006 may have already reached $2.5 billion: http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China_Business/IE15Cb03.html


3. Military spending comprised 10.2% of the US economy in the 1950s, 8.5% in the 1960s, 5.8% in the 1970s, and 6.0% in the 1980s. See Robert M. Coen and Bert G. Hickman, “Chapter 3: Macroeconomic Impacts of Disarmament and the Peace Dividend in the US Economy,” in Nils P. Gleditch, editor. The Peace Dividend. New York: Elsevier, 1996 (55-56). After shrinking during the 1990s, US military spending exploded after 2001, and was on track to reach $657 billion in 2006. This is about 5% of US GDP. In 2006, the US accounted for 47% of all military spending on the planet. The countries of the European Union spent $190 billion on the military, and all the other stable democracies in the world spent $248 billion on defense. Together, the democracies of the world comprise 80% of world military spending. The only non-democratic country with a large military is China, with an annual budget of $122 billion. However, China’s population is also 4.5 times larger than that of the US. Annual US military expenditures are $2,147 per US citizen, while the comparable Chinese figure is $90 per Chinese citizen. Finally, note that Iran’s entire military budget in 2006 was $6.6 billion, while North Korea’s is estimated at $2.3 billion. All data courtesy the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation: http://www.armscontrolcenter.org/archives/022279.php


5. See economist Brad Setser’s survey of world currency reserve growth in East Asia and elsewhere in the world-system, published on the Roubini Global Economics Monitor: http://www.rgemonitor.com/blog/setser/186728/

6. As late as 2001, Chinese mainlanders could visit only 18 other countries and regions. Today they can visit 132 countries and regions. According to data from Zhang Guangrui, director of the Tourism Research Center at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 4.5 million Chinese traveled abroad in 1995 and spent $3.7 billion during their trips. In 2005, the number increased to 31 million and total spending skyrocketed to $21.8 billion. World Tourism Organization (http://www.world-tourism.org). Zhang Guangrui. “China’s Outbound Tourism: An Overview.”

8. All too many Western accounts of the East Asian mass media are informed by technologized versions of Orientalism, a.k.a. the rewriting of the colonialist fictions of the noble savage, the barbaric tribal horde, and the benevolent settler-colonist in a consumerist turn. As late as the mid-1980s, mainstream US journalism alternately applauded or condemned the Japanese as rigidly collectivistic or irrationally individualistic, mystically Eastern or robotically Western, wildly oversexed or icily frigid. In short, the Japanese were stereotyped as Japan’s high-tech export goods, as opposed to their actual human identities.

9. The keiretsu are gigantic corporate networks that produce about one third of the entire output of the Japanese economy. These are not centralized monopolies, but rather diffuse, overlapping networks of ownership and control. Unlike the US, where individuals still own all the stock of publicly-traded companies, stock ownership in Japan is overwhelmingly concentrated in the hands of banks and corporations. Typically, a keiretsu bank and each of its affiliated companies will own a small stake (usually less than 5%) of the stock of other affiliates. Each stake is small, but adds up to effective group control of the firm. Interestingly, there are roughly analogous modes of corporate governance in Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea. The keiretsu model is also spreading rapidly in China and Vietnam. See: http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/keiretsu.html

10. For a more complete analysis of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, which deserves wider recognition as one of the transcendental works of art of the 20th century, see Chapters 6 and 7 in my own publication *The World is Watching* (2003).


Works Cited


*Fantasia.* Multiple directors. Walt Disney Pictures, 1940.


