

Sekai-kei and Genjitsu-touhi: Long Shadow of the Lost Decade

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Abstract: When the reality is undesirable, one dimension to which the public can respond depends on whether the reality can be changed. When such change is possible, one tends to be more active, extroverted, and rebellious. When otherwise, one tends to be more passive, introverted, and fearsome. Countercultures that took form from such reactions to reality would inherit such quality, evident in how queer culture tends to possess the quality of the former. In contrast, the otaku culture has the latter. As a culture of indulgence and fear of reality, a phenomenon of genjitsu-touhi is evident in the works of related industries after this period, which is a vicious cycle involving lucid reflection and blinded indulgence that points toward death. Sekai-kei anime follow the same step as genjitsu-touhi, as they provide an exaggerated and unrealistic commendation of otaku's personal matter by tying it to affect the life and death of the entire world – an externalization of narcissism. Some of these works, however, strive for a therapeutic purpose in addition by demonstrating the change, challenge, and growth of equally defective main characters that were previously used to provide narcissistic indulgence, though the efficacy of such therapy is hard to evaluate.

Keywords: Japan, sekai-kei anime, otaku, Lost Decade, Vocaloid

1. Introduction

American public culture, as I have personally sensed it, tend to dismiss Japanese anime (otaku) culture. “Why are the anime characters childish? Is drawing a mature character that difficult? What’s worse, why sexualize them?” may be the first set of questions that comes to people’s minds, and all deeper and thought-provoking questions on anime in general stem from it (and thus can be addressed from it): “Why is the plot so unrealistic? Why place so much attention on such trivial (and sometimes sexual) matters? Why the two extremes of either very sick and perverse or very virtuous and benevolent on the characters?” This essay indeed has an explanation to it, though I do not consider this to suffice to justify such a depiction.

This study attempts to draw connections between the three proper nouns through the method of deduction, which are sekai-kei, genjitsu-touhi, and the Lost Decade. Despite an ample amount of analysis of works within this era shall be presented, this essay mainly places the focus on the consumers instead of the creators. The section “The Lost Decade, and the Fear of Reality” outlines the struggle of adults in the economic downfall and the powerlessness in changing reality, which derived a fear that propelled them to indulge, instead of confront, inadvertently replenishing the otaku culture on the brink. Otaku culture is thus defined as a culture of fear, introversion, and escapism at its core, unlike queer culture which, despite being a comparable counterculture, tends to be

extroverted, confronting, and rebellious. “Genjitsu-touhi, and the Vicious Cycle” provides insight into the phenomenon of escapism, or genjitsu-touhi, which is a word I use to represent the special case with Japanese people after the 1990s, by analyzing the lyrics of 2 Vocaloid songs, “Rolling Girl” by wowaka and “Strobe Last” by sinnamota. Genjitsu-touhi is defined to be a vicious cycle of four stages – Departure, Failure, Obsession, and Indulgence – featuring a process of destruction that eventually leads to death in conclusion. “Sekai-kei: Genjitsu-touhi?” performs a deduction with three sekai-kei anime works and derives that sekai-kei anime is filled with externalized narcissism, catering toward those who are in the stage of indulgence. Finally, in “Indulgence-Therapy Consumption,” I offered the insight that sekai-kei anime, in addition to providing indulgence, attempts to break away from the vicious cycle by curing and changing the main character within the work, thus offering a method of therapy to the traumatized otaku audience, though the efficacy of such method is prone to be put into question. Lastly, this essay offered some insight into further research in addition to the previous point, namely the therapy method for otaku consumers to be creators themselves through doujin culture, a unique form of creativity that can be deemed inseparable from the surge of anime in the 1990s.

2. The lost decade, and the fear of reality

In the 1990s, Japan experienced a traumatic downfall, which is commonly referred to as the “Lost Decade”. Following the end of the Cold War in 1990s, Japan lost its strategic position in containing communism. Other East Asian countries like China and South Korea began to rise up, offering direct competition with Japan in global trades. The Asset Price Bubble Burst in 1992 drops the thriving Japanese economy and everyone’s faith in water. People were unemployed, forming the so-called fluidization of labor. Major events like the Kobe Earthquake and the Tokyo Subway Attack and minor events like increasingly prevalent juvenile crime, alongside all the macro trends mentioned above, were amplified through the advancement of new media. One should not find it hard to understand why “a universally depressive mood across all society” [1] is present. However, the government instead advocated for self-responsibility (*jiko-sekinin*). Adults, after all, are people who need to face all the turbulence from society, instead of students, who focus mainly on their studies without perceiving the burden from society directly and impactfully. These people are referred to as the “Lost Generation,” who later constituted the majority of “otaku.”

Despite the term “otaku” has long existed before 1990s, those people were in the minority compared to the mass public. In fact, they were heavily resented for not participating in work, and this hate reached to a peak in 1989 when Miyazaki Tsutomu (nicknamed “otaku killer”) molested and murdered 4 girls aged from 4 to 7 [2]. The public heavily criticized such an incident, driving the cause of this murder to pornographic manga and other “otaku” related materials discovered in Miyazaki’s house, raging a wave of manga boycotts as well as rectification of pornography in the industry. People also began to discriminate against those who possessed manga, implying that they were equally disgusting creatures. Thus, this period gained the title of “the darkest moment in anime history” [3] by contemporary otakus, since the action of generalizing a highly rare and perverse case onto the entire population is unjust in their eyes, which I suspect anybody would not agree. Nevertheless, otaku culture soon experienced a major expansion in the 1990s due to the Lost Decade. People suffered uneasiness from society rushed in to this community to join those group of losers and perverts that they once despised. How much have the term “otaku” changed after the bubble burst may not be easy to evaluate here, but one should not fail to notice that economic downfall and the popularity of otaku culture had a direct connection. 1990s, therefore, is a major turning point that redefined the concept of “otaku,” impacted the whole otaku related industry (or GAI), and influenced the contemporary generation profoundly.

Here, allow me to compare contemporary (mainly) East Asian otaku culture with contemporary (again, mainly) North American queer culture. Both are countercultures receiving scrutinization from the mainstream; both somehow suffered unjust public portraits. Despite some arguments may come to exist that these two cultures are slowly merging together as they are overlapping more and more (which I can hardly disagree since as culture became more and more generalized, many aspects should naturally begin to overlap), otaku culture and queer culture are fundamentally different due to their historical root. The former took off as a response to the Lost Decade, while the latter took shape from the response to the mistreatment of sexual minorities in the last century. The reality which the former is experiencing cannot be changed, while the that of the latter can be changed. This deviation caused every difference that we can see. Otakus are introverted while queers are extroverted; otakus are passive while queers are active; otakus center everything at home while queers center everything outside. Placing photos of anime girls at home is definitely the former; raising a pride flag in a parade is definitely the latter. I should point out that this is the most original and the innermost core of both of the cultures; there are, of course, deviations from them that people can name. When the reality cannot be changed, one can only fear or not fear it. Only when the reality is alterable can someone be rebellious toward it. Therefore, I should summarize the two ways which they respond to an unsatisfying reality as fear and revolt. Anime culture is born from fear of reality, and this fear can be summarized by one word: *genjitsu-touhi*.

3. *Genjitsu-touhi*, and the vicious cycle

What is *genjitsu-touhi* anyway? Allow me to explain it with something I am familiar with. *Tangping* (lying flat) and *neijuan* (rolling inward) are internet slangs in Chinese social media. However, due to their high conclusiveness and people's resonance toward it, it becomes a colloquial word used in daily life as well as a term to summarize the social phenomenon. Similarly, *genjitsu-touhi* does not seem to have any equivalence in English language, but due to the lack of familiarity of Japanese in a societal setting, I cannot evaluate the popularity of the word *genjitsu-touhi*. However, like *neijuan* and *tangping*, it is an accurate summarization of a social phenomenon of the mentality of the Lost Generation, and that is why I would like to use the term to refer to this specific fear of reality in what I should call the greater anime industry (GAI). In order to get a deeper and more direct understanding into such mentality, I am going to present two pieces of work within the GAI, thus deducing the essence of *genjitsu-touhi*. They are the lyrics of two Vocaloid songs – Rolling Girl by Wowaka (*genjitsu-touhi* P) and Strobe Last by Siinamota.

Vocaloid is a voice synthesis software. The characteristics of the voicebank make them virtual singers. Later on, all the songs produced with voice synthesizing software were called Vocaloid. Such songs possess unique characteristics to make them into a separate genre. The advancement of software lowers the barrier for someone to make a song from start to finish, and, because of this, these songs are often independently produced which the musician can be the songwriter, the lyricist, the producer, or even the illustrator and the MV editor at the same time, making it bizarrely personal and emotional. The mode of marketing and distribution of such music is also different, as they depend on revolutionary websites like Nico Nico and YouTube (where everyone can post anything and be seen) to reach to the public.

The first song is called “Rolling Girl” (ローリングガール) as one of the most famous song by wowaka (as of August 5, 2024, there are 29 million views on YouTube, 12 million on Nico Nico). The English translation was from Project DIVA [4]. Here, I will directly quote it in length:

“A lonely girl mutters ‘I’m fine’,
have words failed her?
A failure, a failure.
Obsessing over her mistakes

Makes everything spin again!
One more time, one more time
"I'll roll along again today"
The girl said, the girl said
Breathing life into the words!
'How about now?'
'Not yet, we still can't see what's ahead.
Hold your breath, now.'"

Genjitsu-touhi within the song is presented through the action of rolling. As a response to failure, the girl within this song becomes obsessive and took the approach of rolling. People who are rolling (escaping) have little control over their lives at that point. They also are not allowed to see where they are heading (maybe a hole, maybe a pond, maybe off the floor) and how long the rolling would last, simultaneously bear constant and yet uncertain harm to themselves. One should notice that the momentum of the action of rolling makes it less of a subjective choice of indulging. After all, they are lonely. Therefore, no one can help them to stop. After they have fortunately stopped by various factors, they stand up, realizing that even if they are not rolling, the future still cannot be seen. However, people who are standing cannot end their life by just holding their breath. This is the perfect sarcasm of indulging itself: Conscious people who have total control cannot voluntarily die while rolling people who have no control are those who may involuntarily die. No matter what, death is never a personal will. Genjitsu-touhi is simply a little cycle which has a possibility that may lead people to death within a larger cycle of switching between two statuses of rolling and not rolling.

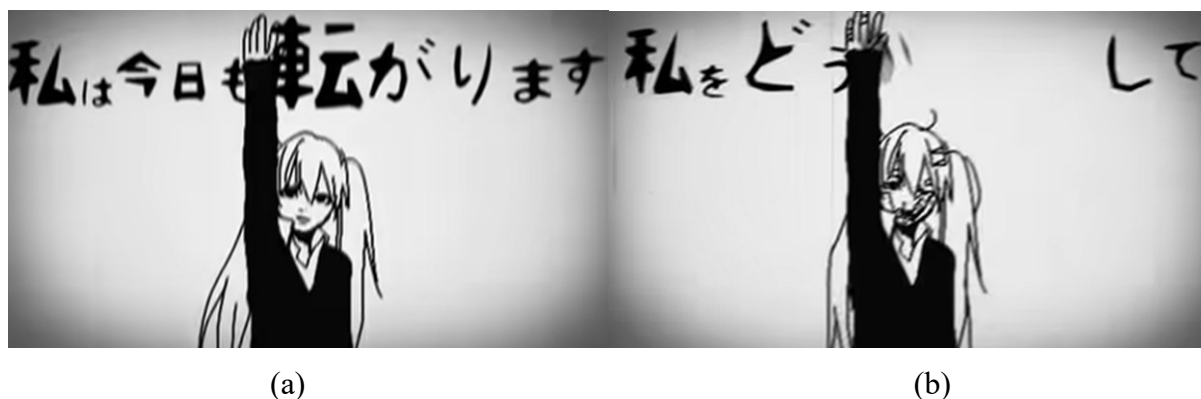


Figure 1: The girl in the first chorus and the second chorus in a fan-made music video of the song Rolling Girl [5]

The next song is Strobe Last (ストロボラスト) by Siinamota [6]. This song is also pretty negative, which I will again quote it below:

“Don't you notice yet?
I'm starting to walk
In ways I believe in.
There you go again.'
Right.
I knew it.
I'm the same as ever.
Maybe I'll try to start walking.
In that distant time
See, what you touched is
Your own mind

Perverted by pain.
There you go again.
Now, I was smiling.
I was breathing
With a foul mind
That's all there is to it.”

This lyric is narrated through first person. Starting to walk may be a new start, an attempt to change something, an attempt to break the cycle or the status quo – they are heading somewhere. However, they would then realize that they did not change. They may do the same thing again in the future, but at least now they will not. Pain changes their mind into a inert state, dispersing foul scent yet lying and breathing shamelessly without doing anything, and that is all there is to it. From this point of view, *genjitsu-touhi* is also a response to failure, a result of perversion by pain. Instead of in a state of “rolling,” a constant state of destruction with eyes muffled – *genjitsu-touhi* is much more similar to lying in bed and suffer the torture for *siinamota*. However, both of these seem to be a response to failure. Both would contemplate for a while (I am fine, but have words failed me? I am the same as ever, but will I do the same thing again?). Both of which talks about destruction – damage caused by rolling and pain that pervert the mind. Both of the author dies afterward – which we can conclude that *genjitsu-touhi* would eventually lead to death – which is an attempt to break the cycle of rolling and standing up (and in *siinamota*’s side, walking and staying the same).

The four stages of *genjitsu-touhi* can be thus summarized as Departure – Failure - Obsession – Indulgence. Beginning with the term “departure” (It is always the same, dreaming dreams that don’t come true), it symbolizes the action within the lyric which involves some action desiring for change. It can be successful, though highly impossible. Somehow, people have ended with dissatisfaction and frustration (a failure, a failure), engaging in some degree of reflection, gradually driving up to obsession (Obsessing over her mistakes...), which ends up in indulgence (...makes everything spin again!)

4. Sekai-kei: *genjitsu-touhi*?

In *sekai-kei* anime, as pointed out by Azuma Hiroki, “small scale relations... directly connected to large-scale drama... without practical intermediary institutions.” [7] Since he did not point out the presence of the world (since *sekai-kei* itself means “world series,” which the world is notated with katakana to indicate its artificiality,) I would rather reshape and condense it into “love, without society, affects the world,” which I expect one to treat these words in their most general sense possible, making it even resonate a backward definition. Any relationship can be treated as “love”; Any macro place involving many people can be treated as a “world”; anything that halted the connection between the two can be treated as “society.” One may treat it as ridiculous, especially when people find the compulsion to demand perfect logic and reason between events presented in the drama that are fully consequential to each other with a clear acknowledgment of the involvement of the society. However, it was perfectly acceptable in, if not the essence of, the *sekai-kei* anime, which I will demonstrate below.

In *Neon Genesis Evangelion* [8] (further referred to as *Evangelion*), for example - the “love” lies between the 14-year-old male protagonist, Ikari Shinji, and his mother, which was projected to other female characters. This love developed from his childhood trauma in which his mother died in an experiment and his father had left him alone. The “world” component was the destruction of humanity. The bypass of society was accomplished by a simple logic of “Only he can save humanity.” He is the only character that can drive the machine EVA-01. If anyone else would try to replace him, the machine itself would refuse them. Furthermore, if there is no EVA-01, the other two machines controlled by Asuka and Rei would not win the fight, and humans would be destroyed. In short, the

life and death of humanity depend on whether Ikari (you), a traumatized child who is still struggling, drives that machine.

In *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* [9] (further referred to as *Madoka Magica*), the “love” lies between the 13-year-old female protagonist Madoka and another girl of the same age called Homura. The concept of the “world” is increasingly general within the work, as it is initially the family and the school, then, the town, the entire Earth, and finally, the entire universe. The absence of society was achieved by presenting an extraterrestrial creature, Kyubey, as the agent of energy, which is expressed through hope, miracles, despair, and causation. It would present the girls with a contract, luring them to become magical girls to fight evil witches with the benefit of accomplishing a miracle in this world that would never happen otherwise. However, magical girls would inevitably fall into despair and degenerate into witches who would harm the world. The ending is that the love between Madoka and Homura changes the law of the universe, in which every witch would be destroyed before they appear. To conclude, the trauma and despair of the characters (you) would lead to the destruction of the universe, while love between characters can change everything.

The last example I want to point out is *No Game No Life: Zero* [10] (further referred to as *NGNL0*). The “love” exists between a human, Riku, and an ex-machina, Schwi. Schwi as a machine girl wants to understand the existence of “heart” in humans. The “world” is the diegetic world which has 16 different races, while the humans are the weakest and the least capable. The absence of “society” was accomplished, again, by making the world apocalyptic such that there is no hindrance in the connection between the main character and the world. It is, in fact, represented pretty artistically by a chess game between Riku and a supernatural being, as shown in Figure 2 (Tet, the God of games). In chess, people lose important pieces, like how Riku lost Schwi in a brutal conflict. He lamented his inability to win, which partially foreshadows the ending. In fact, in the end, he did not win either – it was a draw, but one that has forever changed the world. Again, in conclusion, you and your chess pieces control a game and determine the fate of the world.



Figure 2: Riku just knew that Schwi was dead

If I drive, world lives. Else, world dies; If I become magical girl, the world lives. Else, world dies; If we lose, world dies, Else, world lives. All in all, these anime works take your trauma, your obsession, your love and your sacrifice seriously, acknowledging them by routing them directly to the life and death of the entire world (or even bigger, the entire universe) with a simple Boolean relationship, so that attention from others would be gained. This impractical If/Else statement has an obvious reason, which itself is the purpose here. In reality, such a tyrannical relationship was never achieved; no one has ever deserved such attention from others; even during the Cold War, the button to the destruction of the whole world was not determined by a few unstable and traumatized children. Living in this society of negligence, one would imagine the entire society to be a giant machine with infinite parts, which, even if a few of them are broken and go missing, can be easily replaced. The plurality of people, like the viewer themselves, reminds them of the pointlessness of their suffering

and death – even if they die, people soon replace and forget them. *Sekai-kei* anime, however, has deliberately omitted the presence of that machine, preventing a backlash to the viewers themselves. Then, such anime artificially recognizes themselves individually by presenting an equally defective and marginalized part to change the world. They are expected to insert themselves into that symbolism, as if he really has some power in reality. The meaning of the individual is recognized by an abstract concept, an artificial world that solely depends on it. One would identify such a relationship to be an externalization of narcissism to the extreme. The desire to be recognized and loved by the world, without anyone else's potential of competition.

One should have already recognized that watching anime itself is a form of *genjitsu-touhi*. It's like rolling with eyes muffled; people temporarily forget the reality in which they are situated. When they finish such session, they would again fall into melancholy since the reality is too scary. What we are beginning to see in *sekai-kei* anime, however, is a new form of consumption that involves breaking away from this cycle of *genjitsu-touhi*, a new consumption model based on indulgence and therapy.

5. Indulgence-therapy consumption

Scholars before me have long examined the model of consumption for anime which they identified as a media mix. Li Jinying has summarized two models alongside hers in her 2024 book. “What I want to propose here is a third model of media mix—cybernetic consumption. Instead of the narrative-centered model of “narrative consumption” [by Ostuka] or the character-centered model of database consumption [by Azuma], media mix systems such as Steins; Gate are gearing toward a game-centered model of cybernetic consumption...”[3] Despite the conclusiveness I have received here, what I have noticed is the deliberate obliteration of the subject itself: Otaku. Instead of centering around the media – the product or the form itself that is being consumed, I shall relocate the focus from externality back to internality.

One should notice the imperfection of the main character in *sekai-kei* anime. Ikari Shinji is definitely not a perfect person given his incapability, escapism, numbness, etc. His portrait within the series, as shown in figure 3.a, is generally negative, demonstrating his incompetence and alluding to his internal struggles. In later works like *Madoka* and *NGNL0*, the main characters (Homura and Riku) always fail, although a final quasi-success is achieved. *Sekai-kei* anime seem to be presenting itself as a psychological therapy session for the patient. First of all, *sekai-kei* anime wipes out the image of the society and anything related to reality such that trauma can be avoided. Secondly, *sekai-kei* anime would provide recognition of the importance of the personality, trauma, and relationship of the patient by routing a similarly defected person's such and such to the abstract concept of the life and death of the world. Finally, *sekai-kei* anime develops their character over time as they finally reached an end, where they can somewhat survive in the society.

On the other hand, some anime only provides indulgence, and the characters are instead portrayed in a positive and perfect manner. This includes the *NGNL* anime series and other *nichijou* anime like *Wataoten*. The main character of the latter, Hinata, as shown in figure 3.b, appears in a self-contented and extroverted manner, as if she has already reached to the finale of their development, providing a strong sense of conclusion – although she is seemingly younger than Ikari Shinji. “This is her definitive state, she will not change anymore” is the message she demonstrates within the series. Such depiction, therefore, would only provide indulgence.

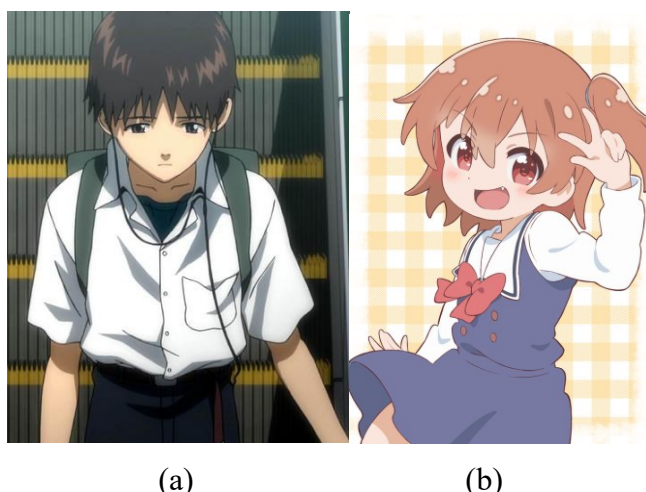


Figure 3: Ikari Shinji from Evangelion and Hoshino Hinata from Wataten

One would question whether that therapeutic purpose is really effective. The question is objectively hard to answer since there is no data collection that can prove the relationship. Some may even point out how the population (and the culture) of otaku only increased over the years. The solution which people can walk out of their distress in facing reality varies. In terms of finding the meaning of existence, anime also offers a way of creativity through doujin culture (a unique mode of creativity that originated in Japan that involves the expression of passion in lieu of the desire to make money). However, whether creating can address one's existential crisis is also hard to measure. As anime culture walks outside of Japan, it is very much generalized to the point that the original core can be neglected. Evangelion also stops to be the most popular anime out there. What I can do here is only to point out that such a phenomenon exists. I would also welcome people after me to continue researching this topic.

6. Conclusion

The fear of reality presented within anime culture originates from the Lost Decade. This fear of reality is in forms of Genjitsu-touhi as a vicious cycle of destruction, which can eventually lead to death. An attempt to prevent such death leads to desire for mild psychological therapy while indulging presented by sekai-kei anime works like Evangelion. Whether these therapy are truly successful can be a very interesting topic for future research.

The most fundamental question of American people's skepticism toward anime, which I have already pointed out in the introduction – “why are the characters childish? Why the school setting is so frequent?” – can be addressed here. The trauma and helplessness that Japanese adults suffered from the society drives them to the relatively utopic and pressure-less school life, which they feel more comfortable to situate in. After all, instead of how most people have imagined, anime is not oriented toward children in the first place (which can make one angrier since those skewed anime works are not prohibited to kids in anyway, casting unpredictable consequences on them.) Those that do orient toward children, ironically, do not show the setting of school life that often (One Piece is on the sea; Naruto is fantasy situated in the past, etc. Both are adventurous; both features significantly more grown-up characters.), probably because school life is not that desirable for children; they find the life of adults – free from restriction and full of adventures, at least ideally – more appealing.

As anime industry has evolved and globalized, things became increasingly nuanced. Creativity exists in doujin and Vocaloid culture may rescue some people out of existential crisis. Anime works may have evolved into tags and symbolism for people to label themselves instead of discovering themselves. Producers may have realized that those works made to adults also begins to capture

teenager audience, thus preventing specific topics from going too deep. Major companies like Bilibili may have been attempting to wipe out the cultural origin of anime for a long time by encouraging cosplaying that seem to be an obvious contradiction to the introversion of otaku culture. However, the value of this study should not be denied. There definitely exists nuanced and complicated connection between various nouns that exist within this industry. In order for a more systematic understanding of the whole realm of the GAI, such study that involves connecting across realms should be encouraged.

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