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# “Anime Journalism” — Past and present

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## **Introduction**

This paper intends to investigate the evolution of the role of “journalism” within the framework of the Japanese animation industry. In doing so, it is hoped that one can appreciate the shifting of the status quo within the industry and its relationship with the outside society — thus giving us a new perspective from which to fill in several points yet needed to plot the history of Japanese animation and its relevance within society.

Today, the role of “journalism”, that is to say, reporting on the latest developments in the fields of Japanese animation is still done through the traditional print media outlets, namely magazines such as *Newtype*, *Animedia* and *Animage*.

To very simply set up a base for the analysis to follow, it should be pointed out at this stage that these three flagship magazines belong to large corporate publishers, namely Kadokawa Shoten, Gakken Publishing and Tokuma Shoten, respectively. Every month, these magazines bring young readers the latest news, interviews and “scoops” from the world of animation. The way this works is due to the PR departments of animation production companies having close relations with these publishers, thus negotiating the precise timing for the release of certain information pertaining to up-and-coming works and episodes of current shows.

But in recent years there has been a stark contrast visible when compared to the previous decades in terms of the nature of these relationships.

## **The 1970s and the birth of the “Anime magazine”:**

It can be (and often is) argued that the very first anime magazine from conception was “Animage”, which began publication in July 1978. It is telling that the first issue featured *Space Cruiser Yamato* on the cover — the reason being that this was the show which launched the first “anime boom” in Japan, and thus was the very impetus for the opening of the floodgates to an entire genre of such magazines which began to appear in a very short space of time.

As Fred Patten very concisely, yet in rather great detail, described, the remainder of the main fleet of anime magazines, Animec, My Anime, The Anime and Animedia, followed soon after<sup>1</sup>.

It should be noted that prior to this, another magazine was already in circulation, known as “Gekkan Out”, which would be known as a proper anime magazine later. At first, “Out” was more of a general science-fiction fandom magazine, with its readership consisting of fans of subcultures such as *tokusatsu* and Hollywood B-movies, as well as other themes such as the occult. “Out” first showed signs of its interest in the animation medium as early as its second issue, when it featured a full sixty-page special feature on — again — *Space Cruiser Yamato*. The feature was put together mostly by a group of amateurs: among them, the now-prolific anime critic Ryusuke Hikawa.

The pieces leading to this event were coming together in the year before, with avant-garde subculture art magazine “Fantoche” featuring its own reports on animation works, and an offshoot publication of “Manga Shonen” (which, while being a vehicle for serialized manga stories, also had regular articles on currently airing TV anime), entitled “TV anime no sekai” (“The world of TV anime”). Fantoche featured Starsha from *Yamato* on its cover in issue 2 in April 1976, while “TV anime no sekai” — one of the very first “mooks”, that is, mixture of book and magazine, as it was essentially a special feature which would normally run in the pages of a serial magazine but had been released as its own independent volume — has a breakdown of the prominent shows

of the time, with, again, *Yamato* being headlined.

The Out special feature could, then, be known as the first real mature, critical evaluation of a specific anime work in the world of professional serialized publications. In many ways, it can be considered an evolution of the established fan published materials that had been carried out independently until that point — not least in the sense that the very writers and editors of the piece were already staffing their own fanzines themselves and thus represented the very core of the fandom, in essence establishing their authority officially for the first time, and for the nation to see. Because of this, it is an extremely important event in the history of what I shall call “anime journalism” and its development and evolution throughout the subsequent decades.

Taking a look at the feature in question, one can see that after a brief set of two-colour glossy page sections, one showcasing a collection of merchandise from *Yamato* and another pictorially chronicling the stages of the production process itself from the planning, through scripting, to cel and background painting to photography and such, the stock paper article begins proper with a rather personal introduction from the writer.

The writer describes the following feature as an effort to try to dispel the concept of “modern” anime as being too confusing for the more mature generation, those who grew up not with anime but with “terebi manga”, as it was known in the days of *Tetsujin 28-gou*, *Tetsuwan Atomu* and *8-Man*, and were accustomed to self-contained episodic storytelling for children. Immediately, reading this in 2012, one can feel a division in audiences — *Yamato* was a break with the hitherto children-oriented hero stories of the time, and could reinvigorate the imagination of the children of the 1960s who had already grown out of animation as immature entertainment by the late 1970s. The article therefore was declaring the necessity for an outlet for discourse on the themes this work brought up.

## The 1980s and the emergence of fans as creators, editors

As we have seen, Hikawa and others like him started off in fan circles chronicling and cataloguing every minute detail of production, which gradually got the attention of editors and producers so that information became shared amongst all parties almost equally, and a community spirit was born. For the ever-growing fans of animation, directly visiting the production houses increasingly seemed like a common route towards entering this community, and often the studios would welcome fans to look around freely.

During this time, “anime journalism”, or, the practice of reporting new developments in the industry and analyzing and critiquing anime works and trends, was a large role that these magazines played, and understandably some more academically than others.

Here are some of the more exemplary features in the pages of such magazines, to paint an overall image of what “anime journalism” entailed during the early 1980s.

- Animec Vol. 20: What is SF anime?<sup>2</sup>
- Animec Vol. 31: a feature written exclusively by readers of the magazine: Interview with Ishiguro and Machizaki conducted by young fans of the show, who were readers of the magazine.<sup>3</sup>
- Animec, October 1984: “What is an animation production studio?”— A 21-page feature, complete with staff interviews, reporting on the various working environments and characteristics of the different animation studios.<sup>4</sup>
- “Animation within Critical Analysis of Visual Media” — a ten-page feature which ran in Animec on the topic of what position animation should hold within the discourse of visual critique.<sup>5</sup>
- Animage, April 1982: The great *Future War 198X* controversy — this article is a look at the inner turmoil within the animation industry brought about by the production of the Japanese animated movie *Future War 198X*, which simulates an all-out global

conflict using nuclear weapons. The story is gritty and realistic, as is the visual style, from the battles themselves, down to the depiction of the war strategists meeting and discussing tactics as well as the lifelike character designs. While this movie was in production, certain groups called for its cancellation and most of the staff members boycotted its production, meaning that it had to be moved elsewhere. The article depicts varying opinions on the movie, whether it glorifies war or not, whether it is something that is suitable for children to watch and other such controversies.<sup>6</sup> The film received a VHS release but it has never been available on any digital format.

Such features continued well into the 1980s, but around the midpoint of the decade, a certain decline began to be sensed. The period of 1985–86 saw a turning point of sorts for the industry as a whole, where a culmination of certain factors finally caught up with it. Hikawa points out several things that took place at around this time<sup>7</sup>:

Firstly, Yoshiyuki Tomino, director of the highly-influential *Gundam*, had been directing one entire series every year up until *Gundam*, but was convinced to return by the studio, Sunrise, to do a sequel, which turned out to be *Z Gundam*. It is significant because the realistic, gritty storytelling trend of the late 1970s and early 1980s ended at around this point, with subsequent robot shows being more fantasy and hero-oriented (such as *Machine Robo*), and *Z Gundam* could be considered the end point of that line of evolution.

This period in time also saw the boom in Japan-Western co-productions — something which was rarely picked up on in the magazines, since it was outside of the interests of their main target audience. However the existence of an influx of overseas capital for shows which would only run abroad meant that the studios and their staff moved onto those projects and a staff desertion of sorts occurred within the domestic-oriented productions. The next evolution in anime after *Macross* simply did not happen — at least not on television.

There was a notable rise in the number of televised anime series

based on Shonen Sunday and Shonen Jump properties. These are works with established fan bases and enormously widespread readership: the issue here was that in terms of magazine coverage, rival publishing firms essentially had to increasingly feature their competitors' product in order to properly report news on shows currently on the air.

The potential for mature animation for (young) adults, featuring content not suitable for children, arrived in the form of the straight-to-video animated works, or OVAs (Original Animation Video). In 1985, *Megazone 23*, a feature-length OVA produced by many of the staff of *Macross*, sold phenomenally well, establishing this avenue as a viable replacement for the stagnation of the TV anime market.

One other factor was the release of the Nintendo Family Computer (the "Famicom") and its explosive popularity. The avenues of entertainment were increasing, and were not just limited to TV anime.

Unfortunately, due to all of these factors above, many anime magazines simply folded during this period, including *Animec*, *The Anime* and *My Anime*, with *Out* disappearing, then returning, then fading out once more.

Thus we can pinpoint 1985-86 as the major milestone after which circumstances change dramatically for the animation industry and inevitably, for the publishing industry with which it had established a symbiotic relationship.

## **OVAs and the production committees**

With the arrival of the OVA, came the establishment of the "production committee" system of funding animation works. That is, shows to be broadcasted on TV would usually deal with an advertising agency which would bring together a television station and a sponsor to cover the expenses for production and airing. For the most part, the sponsors were originally confectionery companies such as Meiji (*Tetsuwan Atom*) Glico (*Tetsujin 28-gou*), and Calpis (*Alps no Shoujo Heidi*) — items that children could buy with their own pocket money. Often the candy would include a set of stickers or maybe a badge or small toy of

the character in the show. There was a shift from sweets to toys as robot shows became more popular with boys, and the Chogokin line of figures was born, thanks to *Mazinger Z* and its derivatives, as well as magical items such as compact mirrors and wands, the likes of which appear in girl-oriented shows such as *Himitsu no Akko-chan*. Merchandising was thus central to the success of the show, since it was the main source of revenue.

As the viewership outgrew the target age for these toys in the early to mid-1980s, and the focus for hardcore fandom shifted to video as a viable medium, the production committee system was implemented, which did away with over-reliance on merchandising at the risk of story.<sup>8</sup> Even if the shows got into production and were not cancelled, it was clear that many of the conditions governing the content were stipulated by the sponsors. These toy companies had enormous influence on the story and elements of the shows, down to what colour the robots should be.

The creators were thus presented with an opportunity to expand into previously deemed no-go areas with the OVA and the production committee system, where a collection of companies gather together, such as a publisher, a merchandise manufacturer and such, and “chip in” an investment that will go toward the funds to produce a product — the animated work itself — which should provide returns for all.

Soon OVA-oriented magazines began to hit the shelves. *Anime V* and *Globian* were two such examples.

The short-lived anime magazine *Globian* was published by Hiro Media, one of the many startup video companies which commissioned OVAs for animation fans in the mid-to-late 1980s (and also one of the many which met their end during the crash of the early 1990s). Their multiple-page spread on *California Crisis* (which also adorned the cover) in *Globian* was not surprising, but some of the other features in its pages certainly were.

*Globian* regularly carried articles about the consumption patterns of Japanese animation in foreign regions, as the publication was mostly active in 1986 — the year, according to *Royal Space Force: Wings of*



*Honneamise* (1987) director, Hiroyuki Yamaga, that the United States was forming its own fan culture<sup>9</sup>, which in turn, led to companies coming on board and looking into Japanese animation for investment potential — this meant that they conveyed to the reader a real-time experience of how the situation was unfolding in terms of licensing procedures and distribution. As well as this, the magazine also covered information, albeit briefly, on how the fandom was currently exploding overseas, with conventions and fanzines being showcased. For the most part, these articles were written by Fred Patten, and translated into Japanese for the magazine.

Additionally, and somewhat bizarrely, the magazine also carried a multitude of other articles on futuristic vehicle design, horror B-movies on video, and life abroad — with one particular striking article on the social stigma surrounding contraceptive usage in the United States compared to Sweden<sup>10</sup>, and another on Lafcadio Hearn<sup>11</sup>. Of course, it is baffling how this may have anything whatsoever to do with animation products, but it shows that the editing staff believed that consumers of OVAs would have an interest in these topics — ones that would have no place in the pages of the other, more mainstream and younger-targeted TV anime-oriented magazines such as *Animedia*. It is also indicative of a culture of people who are still very much connected with their readership — a ten-page feature entitled “Animation Making” appeared in the November 1986 issue which gathered a wide array of professionals: creators such as Go Nagai and Mamoru Oshii, as well as writers and producers sharing their views in serialized columns about various departments and new movements within the animation industry<sup>12</sup>.

*Anime V* was more focused on colour spreads highlighting the exciting, upcoming new videos of each month, without much analysis, and its black and white pages were mostly reserved for hardware troubleshooting and how to obtain the optimal viewing experience. With a variety of formats to choose from, be it Beta, VHS, Laserdisc or even VHD, and an even wider array of decks to play the discs and cassettes on, the magazine devoted a large amount of space guiding the beginners in choosing the best system for them, and for the hardcore fanatics,

how to enhance their own set-up. These sections were illustrated with comical drawings as well as photographs. However, now that the factors were set in place for the role of the anime magazine as an incentive for the readers to invest into anime as a product, rather than being a spin-off from television broadcasts, it was the beginning of the end for anime magazines.

### **The shift in role for anime magazines**

For a brief period in time, then, a subculture of young persons with similar interests but different professions collaborated to — perhaps unintentionally — establish and put in motion the pillars of the publishing arm of the animation industry which would become so vital for its promotional purposes in later years. They found themselves forming personal rapports with the creators, who were increasingly being made up of fans themselves, leading to some candid writing for a while.

These young persons were always at the forefront of technology and the developing human resources which utilized said technology — for instance, the young animators had no qualms against implementing new techniques which would create industry-wide revolutionary waves and cause an even bigger eruption in the fandom. Individuals such as Ichiro Itano, whose air-battle choreography featuring spaceships and fighter jets in *Gundam*, *Ideon* and *Macross* kept fans stuck to their screens, were praised as new leaders in the industry, relaying the baton to a new generation of animators. However, shortly after the success of *Macross* and its big-screen adaptation, *Ai Oboeteimasuka*, a movie produced almost exclusively by this new generation with the average main staff member’s age in the early twenties, a change began to come about.

“Break Time” was a magazine which would give insights into the inside workings of the animation studios, and act as more of an educational resource for anime fans looking to find their way into the industry. Figure 1, a page from the self-described “industry magazine” Break Time, published in 1984, shows a photograph of a young visitor to an animation studio with a semi-comical speech bubble reading “ano...



**Figure 1** Page 17 of *Break Time*, No. 2, winter 1984. The text on the left reads: “Now, the path to the anime industry. Anime industry career information.”

sumimasen” (“excuse me, may I come in?”). This is the first page of a large feature on employment opportunities within the animation industry, and the photograph illustrates a very common trend of the time.

This all paints a view of the animation industry as a growing entity constantly seeking expansion, with potential talent lying in the user base. Fans of the previous works would learn of the behind-the-scenes situations in the pages of the magazines and then visit the studios, where they would hone their skills with the masters, through which they would be the ones to bring about the evolved, next generation of master works.

During this time period of the late 70s to early 80s, the magazine staff, writers and editors alike were made up of fans of the works, much like their readership. Likewise, the anime producers were also increasingly fans of animation, and the three groups had a genuine

camaraderie.

## “Anime Journalism” today

Break Time magazine, of course, no longer exists. These days, more complete and heavily-researched industry magazines exist for potential future creators which are thick and glossy and recommend the proper steps to reach the top including enrollment in the now widely-varied creative academies.

Some of the fans-turned-professionals in the industry are noticing this shift and look back on the ways of decades past somewhat melancholically. In volume 13 of *Newtype Ace*, published in September 2012, *Macross* creators Haruhiko Mikimoto and Shoji Kawamori discuss their youthful days going into Studio Nue, a science-fiction art and design agency and eventually being employed by the company during their university years.

The interviewer for this piece, Souichi Tsuji, a longtime writer of the same generation now working for Kadokawa, laments that this freedom to enter studios and interact with creators is no longer the case: his phrasing of the production houses being more “open” compared to now can be interpreted as there being a barrier currently between the fans (users) and the producers (creators). Kawamori, in turn, rather than pointing the finger at the division between those previously stated groups of people, with the flow of information being restricted between them, blames a lack of eagerness in the younger generation, to which Mikimoto retorts that though it may seem that way, a prime factor for that phenomenon may be the recent proliferation of the *senmon-gakkou* training schools that anyone wanting to participate in the industry would apply to and enter prior to ever visiting a studio uninvited, as they themselves once did due to the lack of any such institutions. In that sense, Mikimoto believes that people are “smart” now.<sup>19</sup>

This does, however, again highlight a gap between the professionals and the aspiring amateurs.

The rift between the production staff, the magazine editors and the

readership/viewership gradually came about during the 1990s. Freelance writer Keisuke Hirota recalls that his earliest pieces on *Gundam* during the late 1990s were all commissioned by Bandai Visual, the holder of the distribution rights for the work. Compared to the time of *Animec*, *Out*, and such magazines, these were the days when Bandai's own *B-Club* and *Newtype* were taking over with their glossy, officially-commissioned approach, functioning as promotional material for the animation works. This approach then essentially forbade the types of critique which had been the norm previously, such as the January 1983 issue of *The Anime*, which had a large feature on Studio Nue, its history, its members and its most famous works and illustrations. These days the production committees would rigorously check the text and visual content of the pages and have final say over what goes in and what stays out — even if it was something necessary to describe a particular transition or trend. For example, this particular issue of *Out* features various photographs of characters owned by different companies, the sole link being that Nue worked on all of them. Hirota believes that these would not appear together in a modern magazine feature, because some companies would mandate that their character should not share page space with another company's product. Specific instances have had his own manuscripts returned with many sections blanked out, and instructions to not mention certain things — most often not derogatory or in other ways detrimental to the success of the animation product. Citing real-world influences for particular animation characters and situations are generally frowned upon, as are connections to other works — even in the case where a work is a direct sequel or derivative of another. Reasons for omissions may vary, but in general the production committee would insist that its members be serviced, and it stands to reason that the more members in the committee, the more clashes that ensue.

As a result, “anime journalism”, or what can be inferred to as such, is today generally limited in its scope as doing not much more than promote a certain product — in most cases an upcoming/currently airing TV series — and “report” on its developing status through insider

information gained from staff interviews and the like. In fact, rather than any form of investigative journalism or critique, the publisher and the PR department of the production’s copyright holder negotiate the content of the article.

Hirota does however attempt to incorporate real critique and insights in his work within the *shuukanshi* weekly magazines, the current affairs publications mostly covering the latest political scandals but also popular for their photo spreads of bikini-clad women and smaller cult articles, such as the occult, conspiracies, military hardware fanaticism and subculture, within which anime fits in comfortably.

One such feature he planned and wrote was a four-page special on the future technologies imagined within the fantasy worlds of animation and how they compare with the development of science in our actual reality. He goes into detail describing the development of Honda’s bipedal robot Asimo in 1996, the HAL powered suit by Tsukuba University’s Yoshiyuki Sankai and his company, Cyberdyne, also in 1996, Richard Branson and Virgin Galactic’s 2011 ongoing space tourism endeavour and many more such innovations, and plotting them against the virtual timelines in animated fiction such as the mechanized police robots of 1998 in *Patlabor* (produced in 1988, thus set ten years in the future at the time of release), 2039’s computer-generated idol singer Sharon Apple from *Macross Plus*, and the Gamilan Empire’s attack on Earth in 2192 (*Yamato*).

As one can see, the potential for incorporating anime and themes within anime into other contexts and formulating new theories using anime concepts is rich and mostly untapped — provided one has adequate knowledge of the workings of the world. This is a result of the distancing of the anime journalism machine from society and its refinement of its own insular system, and as we have seen, the entire phenomenon is lamented by even the individuals in the creative positions producing the works themselves.

## Conclusion

New members of the workforce in the animation industry are coming in from the background of formal training, with little prior experience of a real studio. Similarly, the newer recruits in the writing staff of anime magazines are employed and trained to write what the production committees dictate, rather than critique and analyze.

Only a handful of professional writers remain who can skillfully bring knowledge to the table: those like Ryusuke Hikawa, Keisuke Hirota and Ryouta Fujitsu. Even the numbers of freelance writers have fallen significantly during the last decade — Hirota describes numerous factors for this: namely tardiness with deadlines, poor work ethic and lack of any special knowledge. Hikawa and his group brought something new to the table with their 1977 Yamato special in *Out*, thanks to the knowledge they had gathered through their own efforts. There appears to be a distinct lack of this sort of knowledge in younger generations — something which they themselves seek to rectify.

Hikawa and Fujitsu are currently involved in more educational work such as public lecturing: Hikawa has a course on critique and its place within the anime world, which runs at Ikebukuro Community College. Meanwhile, Fujitsu regularly conducts a series of study groups — again, open to the public — analyzing the various trends in anime of the last few decades as well as others taking one seminal work per session and breaking it down into components to deconstruct it critically.

It is hoped that they can cultivate a new workforce which will bring about a revolution in the way information about animation works past and present flows smoothly and can spread across the public consciousness, breaking free from its current, insular state.

## Notes

- 1 Patten, Fred 2004: *Watching Anime, Reading Manga: 25 Years of Essays and Reviews*, Stone Bridge Press.

- 2 Animec Vol. 20, 1981, October.
- 3 Animec Vol. 31, 1983, August, 26-31. These pages feature interviews with the *Macross* production staff such as Noboru Ishiguro, Kenichi Matsuzaki and Shoji Kawamori conducted and written by the readers of the magazine.
- 4 Animec 1984, October, 27-47.
- 5 Animec 1985, May, 71-82.
- 6 Animage 1982, April, 123-125.
- 7 Personal interview conducted on September 11, 2012.
- 8 Here I refer to the numerous works of animation which had been cancelled due to a lack of support from the sponsors after merchandise did not meet projected sales. While the viewership was not bad, robot shows *Gundam* and *Layzner* were both axed before their stories were properly concluded. Incidentally, Animec showed a staunch support for both *Gundam* and *Layzner*, offering many exclusive interviews with the staff and providing discussions and analyses over many issues. Thematically, these shows have been lauded by critics since.
- 9 アクロス編集室 Across Hensyuushitsu 1995: *世界商品の作り方 The Making of World Products*, Parco Ltd., 80.
- 10 *Globian*, 1986, August, Hiro Media, 84-85.
- 11 Ibid, 82-83.
- 12 *Globian*, 1986, November, Hiro Media, 22-31.
- 13 Tsuji, Souichi 2012: *Macross 30th Anniversary Project Discussion: Shoji Kawamori and Haruhiko Mikimoto*, Gekkan Newtype Ace, Vol. 13: 389.

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