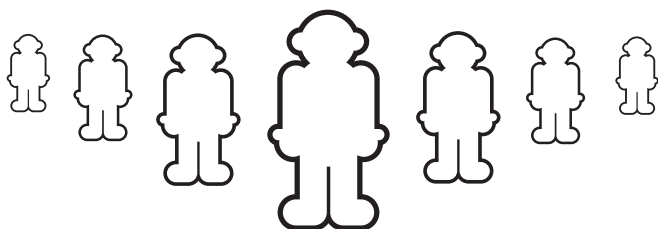# OTAKU

JAPAN'S DATABASE ANIMALS

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OTAKU

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2. Database Animals

Otaku and Postmodernity

The Propagation of Simulacra

My claim that there is a deep relationship between the essence of otaku culture and postmodern social structure is not particularly new. The following two points have already been identified as postmodern characteristics of otaku culture.

One is the existence of *derivative works*. Here I use the phrase "derivative works" as a general term for the largely eroticized rereading and reproduction of original manga, anime, and games sold in the form of fanzines, fan games, fan figures, and the like. They are vigorously bought and sold mainly in the Comic Market (which meets twice a year in Tokyo), but also through countless small-scale exhibits held on the national level, and over the Internet. Founded by a base of amateurs, the market, where numerous copies circulate and a great number of professional authors get their start, formed the nucleus of otaku culture both quantitatively and qualitatively over the past twenty years. If we fail to consider the derivative works of amateurs in favor of only the commercially manufactured projects and products, we will be unable to grasp the trends of otaku culture.

This prominence of derivative works is considered a postmodern characteristic because the high value otaku place on such products is extremely close to the future of the culture industry as envisioned by French sociologist Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard predicts that in postmodern society the distinction between original products and commodities

and their copies weakens, while an interim form called the *simulacrum,* which is neither original nor copy, becomes dominant.[1] The discernment of value by otaku, who consume the original and the parody with equal vigor, certainly seems to move at the level of simulacra where there are no originals and no copies.

Furthermore, that transformation does not end with consumers. There have been many cases recently of best-selling authors who themselves produce and sell fanzines derivative of their own commercial products. For instance, it is well known that the original creator of *Sailor Moon* released products in the Comic Market. And, though they are not strictly derivative works, the company that produces *Evangelion* itself sells much software[2] that parodies the source. Here the distinctions between original and copy have already vanished even for the producer. Moreover, from the beginning the sense of realism in otaku genres has been weak; in many cases, even original works create worlds through citation and imitation of previous works. Without reference to the real world, the original is produced as a simulacrum of preceding works from the start, and in turn the simulacrum of that simulacrum is propagated by fan activities and consumed voraciously. In other words, irrespective of their having been created by an author (in the modern sense), the products of otaku culture are born into a chain of infinite imitations and piracy.

The Decline of the Grand Narrative

The second postmodern characteristic of otaku culture is the *importance placed on fiction* as a mode of action for the otaku. This attitude determines not only their hobby but also how they relate to people. In many cases, the human relations of the otaku, detached from the relations of workplace and family in the so-called social reality, are determined by an alternate principle for which fictional anime and games form the seed. The generation older than the otaku see this behavior only as retrograde, immature acts of the *moratoriamu*[3] period; this is the source of much friction.

The term "otaku" was born in the period from the 1970s to the 1980s when the otaku would refer to each other as "*otaku.*"[4] Critic

Nakajima Azusa in his *Communication Deficiency Syndrome* argues that the essence of otaku is expressed in this alias. She notes: "What the word 'otaku' (meaning 'your home' or 'your family') points to is the assertion that one is identified, not by personal relations but by a relationship to the home unit and one's own territory." This kind of territory is necessary, according to Nakajima, because even after the paternal or national authority has been toppled, otaku must search for a group to which they should belong. The reason the otaku, "no matter where they go, cart around tons of books, magazines, fanzines, and scraps stuffed into huge paper bags like hermit crabs" is that, if they do not ferry around "the shell of their selves"—namely their fantasies of group affiliation—they cannot be mentally stable.[5] The personal pronoun *otaku* fulfills the function of mutually endorsing the fantasy of group affiliation. Nakajima's point is highly significant. For the otaku, certainly the fictional is taken far more seriously than social reality. And the media often conclude from this kind of observation that the otaku cannot distinguish between reality and games.

However, such a conclusion is imprudent. Since not all otaku are mental patients, it follows that they generally possess the ability to distinguish between fiction and reality. Their preference for fiction, as Nakajima explains, is related to their identity. The otaku choose fiction over social reality not because they cannot distinguish between them but rather as a result of having considered which is the more effective for their human relations, the value standards of social reality or those of fiction. For example, they choose fiction because it is more effective for smoothing out the process of communication between friends, reading the *Asahi Newspaper* and then going to vote, or lining up with anime magazines in hand for an exhibition. And, to that extent, it is they who may be said to be socially engaged and realistic in Japan today, by virtue of not choosing the "social reality." Otaku shut themselves into the hobby community not because they deny sociality but rather because, as social values and standards are already dysfunctional, they feel a pressing need to construct alternative values and standards.

This is a postmodern characteristic because the process by which the coexistence of countless smaller standards replace the loss of the singular and vast social standard corresponds precisely to the "decline

of the grand narrative"[6] first identified by the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. From the end of eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century in modern countries, various systems were consolidated for the purpose of organizing members of society into a unified whole; this movement was a precondition for the management of society. These systems became expressed, for instance, intellectually as the ideas of humanity and reason, politically as the nation-state and revolutionary ideologies, and economically as the primacy of production. *Grand narrative* is a general term for these systems.

Modernity was ruled by the grand narrative. In contrast, in postmodernity the grand narratives break down and the cohesion of the social entirety rapidly weakens. In Japan that weakening was accelerated in the 1970s, when both high-speed economic growth and "the season of politics" ended and when Japan experienced the Oil Shocks and the United Red Army Incident.[7] From this vantage point, we can view the otaku's neurotic construction of "shells of themselves" out of materials from junk subcultures as a behavior pattern that arose to fill the void from the loss of grand narrative.

On this point, sociologist Ōsawa Masachi's theory of otaku might be useful. In his 1995 article "On Otaku" ("Otaku ron"), he claims that, for the otaku, there is a "discord" in distinguishing between the intrinsic other and the transcendental other; and for this reason otaku are strongly attracted to the occult and mysticism.[8] This "distinction between the intrinsic other and the transcendental other," put plainly, means the distinction between the world of the other that surrounds one's own self (the experiential world) and the godly world that transcends it (the transcendental world). The otaku cannot distinguish between these two, with the result that they are easily hooked on pseudoreligions that draw on themes popular in various subcultures.[9] In a modern society, such disorder would have been dismissed as personal immaturity, but in postmodern society it is not so simple, because the very society in which we live is something now characterized by the "disorder" of the grand narrative. The behavioral pattern of the otaku precisely reflects this characteristic of postmodernity. After having failed to grasp the significance of a "god" or "society" supported by tradition, otaku try to fill the void with the subculture at their disposal.

In this way, otaku culture beautifully reflects the social structure of postmodernity on two points—the omnipresence of simulacra and the dysfunctionality of grand narrative. Studies on these two points are accumulating everywhere, so there is no need for me to add to them here. Consequently, here in chapter 2, I will pose two questions based on these two premises, which act as threads guiding otaku culture. In turn, these questions will help us to develop our consideration of the characteristics of postmodern society wherein they are intensified.

The two questions are:

1. In postmodernity, as the distinction between an original and a copy are extinguished, simulacra increase. If this is valid, then how do they increase? In modernity, the cause for the birth of an original was the concept of "the author." In postmodernity, what is the reason for the birth of the simulacra?

2. In postmodernity grand narratives are dysfunctional; "god" and "society," too, must be fabricated from junk subculture. If this is correct, how will human beings live in the world? In modernity, god and society secured humanity; the realization of this was borne by religious and educational institutions, but after the loss of the dominance of these institutions, what becomes of the humanity of human beings?

Narrative Consumption

Theory of Narrative Consumption

Let's begin with the first question. I would like first to draw attention to the previously mentioned *Theory of Narrative Consumption* by Ōtsuka Eiji. More than presuming the omnipresence of simulacra, Ōtsuka goes further in his analysis to consider the kind of logic under which simulacra are produced and consumed. Since I will draw heavily on Ōtsuka, I will cite him at length:

> Comics or toys are not consumed in and of themselves; rather, by virtue of the existence of an order behind these products or of a "grand narrative" of which they comprise a portion, each begins to take on value and to be consumed. So it becomes possible to sell countless

similar products (like the 772 different Bikkuriman stickers[10]), because consumers are led to believe that they themselves approach the overall picture of the "grand narrative." For example, the creators of lines of character "products" such as "Mobile Suit Gundam," "Saint Seiya," "Sylvanian Family," and "Onyanko Club" had prepared a "grand narrative" or an underlying order ahead of time, and this selling of concrete "goods" was directly tied to the consumers' knowledge of it.[11] . . .

Interest in the program itself had been limited to a small group of enthusiasts, but in reality this has clearly become a shared feeling among consumers in certain areas, such as anime, comic, and toys. At this point we can see a new situation confronting today's consumer society. What is being consumed is not the individual "drama" or "goods" but rather the system hidden behind them. However, the system (or the grand narrative) itself cannot be sold, so, in appearance, installments of serialized dramas and "goods" get consumed as single fragments that are cross sections of the system. I want to label this kind of situation "narrative consumption" *(monogatari shōhi)*. . . .

However, products that presuppose this kind of "narrative consumption" have an extremely dangerous side. That is to say, if consumers through their cumulative consumption of "small narratives" get their hands on the entirety of the program that is a "grand narrative," they will freely manufacture "small narratives" with their own hands. For instance, let's consider the following case. Without the permission of the makers who hold the copyright, if someone exactly duplicates one of the Bikkuriman stickers of the 772 beginning with "Super Zeus," it is a crime. A sticker made in this way is a "knockoff." And to date there have been numerous incidents of this sort. On the other hand, what happens when the same person manufactures a 773rd character that is not drawn in the set of 772 stickers and, yet, is consistent with them and in accordance with the "worldview" of Bikkuriman? This is not a copy of any of the 772 originals. And therefore it is not a "knockoff" in that sense. Moreover, because it is consistent with the 772, the 773rd sticker has equal value to the original 772. At this phase of "narrative consumption" cases arise in which there is no distinction between the "real" (genuine, *honmono*) and the "fake" (knockoffs, *nisemono*) in these kinds of individual goods.[12]

From the Tree-model World to the Database-model World

Here Ōtsuka uses the phrase "small narrative" to mean a particular narrative within a particular work. By contrast, the "grand narrative"

supports that kind of small narrative, but the phrase also refers to the "worldview" or "settings," which cannot be expressed by the surface of a narrative.[13]

So according to Ōtsuka, each work in otaku culture merely functions as an entrance to this grand narrative. What consumers truly value and buy are the settings and the worldview. Yet in reality, it is difficult to sell settings and worldviews themselves as works. Therefore, a dual strategy is effected: although the actual commodities are grand narratives, it happens to be small narratives, which are fragments of grand narratives, that are sold as surrogate products. Ōtsuka labels this situation *narrative consumption.* This is the natural consequence of the inundation of simulacra known as derivative works.

More than an analysis of a subculture, this point is also suggestive of a fundamental theory of postmodernity. To put it simply here, before the arrival of the postmodern, in the era of modernity—when the grand narrative was still functioning—the world could be grasped, roughly, through a kind of *tree model* (or projection model) like the one given in Figure 3a. On the one hand, there is the surface outer layer of the world that is reflected in our consciousness. On the other hand, there is the deep inner layer, which is equal to the grand narrative that regulates the surface outer layer. In modernity it came to be thought that the purpose of scholarship was to clarify the structure of the hidden layer.

However, with the arrival of postmodernity, that tree-model world image collapsed completely. So what kind of structure accrues to the postmodern world? One candidate for explaining the Japan of the 1980s that often seemed borne out in reality was the "rhizome" model, in which signs are linked in diverse patterns over the outer layer alone (the deep inner layer having been extinguished).[14] However, in my mind, it is easier to comprehend the postmodern world through a *database model* (or a reading-up[15] model) such as the one in Figure 3b.

An easily understandable example of this is the Internet. The Net has no center. That is to say, no hidden grand narrative regulates all Web pages. However, it is not a world established through the combination of outer signs alone, as in the case of the rhizome model. On the Internet, rather, there is distinct *double-layer structure,* wherein, on the one hand, there is an accumulation of encoded information, and,
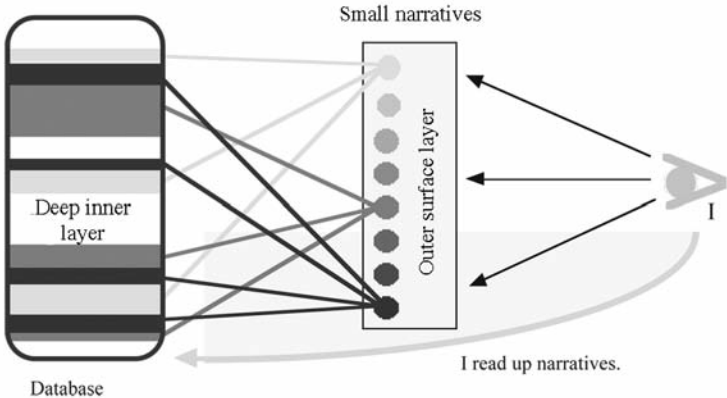
Figure 3a. The modern world image (the "tree" model).

on the other hand, there are individual Web pages made in accordance with the users "reading them up." The major difference between this double-layer structure and the modern tree model is that, with the double-layer structure, the agency that determines the appearance that emerges on the surface outer layer resides on the surface itself rather than in the deep inner layer; i.e., it belongs on the side of the user who is doing the "reading up," rather than with the hidden information itself. In the world of the modern tree model, the surface outer layer is determined by the deep inner layer, but in the world of the postmodern database model, the surface outer layer is not determined by the deep inner layer; the surface reveals different expressions at those numerous moments of "reading up."

For me, the shift in models is not simply a social shift, such as with the emergence of the Internet, but also was clearly demonstrated in the scholarly world by the ideas of complex systems theory, such as the self-organization of molecules, artificial life, or neural nets, that became widely known in the 1990s. However, I need not go into the details of postmodern theory here. For the purpose of following the argument, it is enough to say that the tree-model world image that is characteristic of modernity stands in opposition to the database model of the postmodern world image; in the deep inner layer of the former there is a grand narrative, but in the deep inner layer of the latter there is not.

Figure 3b. The postmodern world image (the "database" model).

Rereading the aforementioned Ōtsuka chapter with the above premise in mind, we can see that the structure of the database model clearly reflects Ōtsuka's structure of narrative consumption. The dual structure of settings and small narratives represents the double-layer structure of information and appearance. In otaku culture ruled by narrative consumption, products have no independent value; they are judged by the quality of the database in the background. So, as these databases display various expressions depending on the differing modes of "reading up" by users, consumers, once they are able to possess the settings, can produce any number of derivative works that differ from the originals. If we think of this situation as occurring only in the surface outer layer, the original product or work can seem swallowed by the chaos of a sea of simulacra. However, in reality, it is better to assume the prior existence of a database (i.e., settings) that enables both an original and the works derived from it, depending on how one "reads up" the database.

That is to say, the otaku consumers, who are extremely sensitive to the double-layer structure of postmodernity, clearly distinguish between *the surface outer layer within which dwell simulacra,* i.e., the works, and *the deep inner layer within which dwells the database,* i.e., settings. Since this double-layer structure will appear many times in what follows, I want to emphasize the point here.

The Grand Nonnarrative

The Decline of the Grand Narrative and Fiction as Supplement

Even now, Ōtsuka's point has not fundamentally lost its validity. However, here I would like to add one amendment. Ōtsuka calls the settings or worldview a "grand narrative." The reason he uses this word, besides the influence of postmodernism that was then in vogue, is that it was common to discover a worldview or a historical view in the otaku products of the late 1980s. Take *Gundam,* for example: since its first television series was broadcast in 1979, works that continued the series, such as *Mobile Suit Z(eta) Gundam, Char's Counterattack,* and *Mobile Suit Double Z Gundam,* were conceived of as belonging to the same fictitious history. Accordingly, the desires of *Gundam* fans necessarily and faithfully embarked on a close examination of this fanciful history; in reality *Gundam*-related books were already shrouded in timelines and mechanical data. Certainly, as Nakajima Azusa has pointed out, at this point a narrative other than reality (i.e., fiction) is constructed.

And the fictional narrative occasionally fulfills the grand role of substituting for the real grand narrative (namely, political ideology). One of the most spectacular examples of this is Aum Shinrikyō, which equipped its doctrines with a subculture imagination and turned ultimately to terrorism.[16] As Ōsawa Masachi explicated in his *The End of the Fictional Age,*[17] the United Red Army of the 1970s and the Aum Shinrikyō of the 1990s differ only in that the former believed in communism, a widely recognized narrative, while the latter believed in a narrative that was still having difficulty winning broad recognition.

In the narrative consumption of the 1980s, too, social circumstances appeared in the background. As a reason for the rise of narrative consumption, Ōtsuka himself points to the extinguishing of "death" or the "mystical underworld" in modern society—that is to say, he points to the extinguishing of the transcendental.[18] Consequently, it is entirely appropriate for him to label the aggregate of worldview and settings supporting a subculture as a "grand narrative," because, in the situation of the 1980s, it must have seemed that the worldview

and settings were constructed in order to compensate for the loss of grand narrative.

From Ideology to Fiction

The mechanism that compensates for the decline of grand narrative can be placed in a slightly broader framework. The latter half of the twentieth century (not just in Japan, but globally) was a time of grand change caught between two periods. The world until the 1950s was under the sway of the modern cultural logic, which could be grasped in the form of the tree model. Accordingly, grand narratives were constantly produced, indoctrinated, and desired. An example of this would be the students' immersion into leftist politics.

However, things began greatly to change in the 1960s; from the 1970s, the cultural logic of postmodernism strengthened rapidly. Consequently, grand narratives were already neither produced nor desired. Nevertheless, this kind of change placed a huge burden on the people who came to maturity at this moment. In spite of the global move toward a database model, they were planted with the old tree model (the desire for a grand narrative) in educational institutions and through written works. As a result of this paradox, this particular generation was driven to forge the grand narrative that had been lost. And though I will not elaborate further here, the interest in occult thought and New Age science that grew in America during the 1970s and the global radicalization of the student movements can be seen as results of this drive. The rise of otaku culture in Japan, too, of course shares the same social background. For the first-generation otaku who appeared at that time, knowledge of comics and anime or fan activities played a role extremely similar to the role played by the leftist thought and activism for the All-Campus Joint Struggle generation.[19]

The Appearance of a Generation Disinterested in Grand Narratives

Whether that kind of complex psychology regulates otaku culture even now is a different problem. I think, conversely, that with the evolution from the modern to the postmodern, the necessity for this kind of

forgery had to fade. The younger generations that grew up within the postmodern world image imagine the world as a database from the beginning, since they do not need a perspective on the entire world that surveys all—that is to say, *they have no need for forgeries, even as a subculture.* And if this is the case, in the shift from the generation that needed fiction as a substitute for lost grand narratives to the generation that consumes fictions without such a need—even though they are two parts of the same otaku culture—then a grand transformation is realized in their forms of expression and consumption.

This new tendency became apparent in the 1990s, after the release of Ōtsuka's critique. Compared with the 1980s otaku, those of the 1990s generally adhered to the data and facts of the fictional worlds and were altogether unconcerned with a meaning and message that might have been communicated. Independently and without relation to an original narrative, consumers in the 1990s consumed only such fragmentary illustrations or settings; and this different type of consumption appeared when the individual consumer empathy toward these fragments strengthened. The otaku themselves called this new consumer behavior "*chara-moe*"—the feeling of *moe* toward characters and their alluring characteristics. As previously mentioned, here the otaku coolly consumed only the information that was behind the works without relation to the narrative or message of those works. Consequently, any scheme for analyzing this consumer behavior that proposes that these fragmentary works had already compensated for "the loss of grand narrative" is not really appropriate.

What the *Evangelion* Fans Wanted

Let's consider this through some concrete examples. I've already touched on *Mobile Suit Gundam.* In the 1990s, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* was frequently compared to *Gundam.* Both are science fiction anime with similar protagonists: young boys caught up in battles in the near future. These works were also widely supported by a generation close to that of the respective protagonist, even becoming a topic of conversation for the entire society. However, in reality, both *Neon Genesis Evange-*

lion and *Gundam* can be thought of as works that were consumed and supported by fans with entirely different attitudes about narratives.[20]

As described above, numerous fans of *Gundam* desired the completion and close examination of a singular *Gundam* world. That is to say, in their case they preserved the current passion for a fictitious grand narrative. However, even during the peak of the craze, the fans of *Evangelion* who appeared in the mid-1990s—especially those of the younger generation (the third generation of otaku)—did not really have a concern for the entire world of *Evangelion.* Instead they focused exclusively on the settings and character designs as objects for excessive interpretation or "reading up" (exemplified in derivative works), and for *chara-moe.*

For them, a grand narrative or fiction with a *Gundam*-style world was no longer desirable, even as a fantasy. *Gundam* fans' extraordinary adherence to the consistency of the timeline of the "space century" or to mechanical reality is well known. By contrast, many *Evangelion* fans required settings to empathize with the story's protagonist, to draw erotic illustrations of the heroine, and to build enormous robot figures, and showed obsessive interest in data to that extent, but beyond that they seldom immersed themselves into the world of the works.

This shift clearly appears again not only on the side of the consumers or the creators of derivative works but also from the point of view of the original creators. The first television broadcast of *Gundam* in 1979 was followed by several well-known sequels. Most of those were developed along the lines of a single fictitious history under the supervision of the general director, Tomino Yoshiyuki. In the case of *Evangelion,* however, there were no sequels and no plans to make sequels.[21] Instead, the original creator's production company, Gainax, developed the derivative works sold in the Comic Market and at the same time created plans for related concepts; for instance, there are mahjong games, erotic telephone card designs using the *Evangelion* characters, and even simulation games in which players nurture the heroine Ayanami Rei. These are all far removed from the originals.

The important point here is that this change exercised a strong influence on the structure of the original itself, as well as on the recycling

of the originals and the related projects. In contrast to the *Gundam* director Tomino, Anno Hideaki (the director of *Evangelion*) antici- pated the appearance of derivative works in the Comic Market from the beginning, setting up various gimmicks within the originals to promote those products. For instance, a scene from a parallel *Evange- lion* world is inserted in the final episode of the television series. In that parallel world with a completely different history, an Ayanami Rei dwells with a completely different personality. But in fact the scene depicted there was already a parody of an image that had been widely circulated as a derivative work at the time of the original broadcast. That is to say, an extremely warped relationship is inter- woven into this work, where the original simulates in advance the simulacra.

Although two versions of this work were released for the cinema, both were framed as more than direct continuations of the television series, reworking the story with different versions of that fictional world. This characteristic is apparent in the 1997 *Evangelion Death,* which was made as an omnibus edition. This omnibus edition trans- forms video images from the TV series into the raw materials for remixing, presenting them as fragments without a unified narrative.

All of these characteristics indicate that, from the outset, the anime *Evangelion* was launched not as a privileged original but as a simulacrum at the same level as derivative works. In other words, this thing that Gainax was offering was certainly more than a single grand narrative, with the TV series as an entrance. Rather, it was an aggre- gate of information without a narrative, into which all viewers could empathize of their own accord and each could read up convenient narratives.

I call this realm that exists behind small narratives but lacks any form of narrativity *a grand nonnarrative,* in contrast to Ōtsuka's "grand narrative." Many consumers of *Evangelion* neither appreciate a com- plete anime as a work (in the traditional mode of consumption) nor consume a worldview in the background as in *Gundam* (in narrative consumption): from the beginning they need only nonnarratives or information.

Moe-elements

Narratives and Coffee Mugs as the Same Class of Merchandise

One might argue that the original TV series of *Evangelion* continued to function as *an entry into the database,* if not into a grand narrative. However, otaku culture of the few years since *Evangelion* is rapidly abandoning the need for even this kind of an entry point. The rise of multimedia plays an important role here. In today's market for otaku culture, the previously accepted order is no longer dominant; no more do original comics versions debut, followed by anime releases, and finally the related products and fanzines. For example, a proposal for an anime series may make its way into a PC game, and even before the anime production is complete it garners fan support through radio dramatizations and fan events, and even spawns related products that hit the market. Or, conversely, the commercial success of a PC game or trading cards could lead to the publication of fan anthologies (a collection of derivative works made with the permission of the original author) or novelizations, with the anime and comic versions only following later. There are multiple layers of these kinds of intricate circuits. In such a situation, it is quite ambiguous what the original is or who the original author is, and the consumers rarely become aware of the author or the original. For them, the distinction between the original and the spin-off products (as copies) does not exist; the only valid distinction for them is between the settings created anonymously (a database at a deep inner layer) and the individual works that each artist has concretized from the information (a simulacrum on the surface outer layer). Here, even the idea that the original functions as an entry point into the settings or the worldview is becoming inappropriate.

The most important example in understanding this trend is the character called Di Gi Charat or Digiko, created in 1998 (Figure 4). This character was originally created as a mascot for a dealer of anime- and gaming-related products. Therefore, no narratives existed behind it. However, the character gradually gained popularity in the latter half of 1998, broke out as a TV commercial in 1999, followed by anime and novels in 2000, and has established a solid world of its own.

Figure 4. *Di Gi Charat.*

What is noteworthy in this process is that the stories and settings that form its world were created collectively and anonymously as a response to the market, after the character design of Digiko alone gained support. For example, Usada Hikaru (or Rabi~en~Rose) and Petit Charat are characters associated with Digiko, but they were released only in 1999, and even the name of the former was decided by a fan poll (Figure 5). Furthermore, although Digiko is now known to be "cocky and carefree," these settings did not exist from the start but were added in the anime version as a sort of self-parody.

Moreover, unlike *Evangelion,* this development was not managed by a particular author or production company, because it was just part

Figure 5. Usada Hikaru (Rabi~en~Rose) and Petit Charat. *Di Gi Charat.* Produced by Broccoli.

of a corporate ad campaign. In such a situation, it does not make sense to ask what the original of Di Gi Charat is, who the author is, or what kind of message is implied. The entire project was driven by the power of fragments; projects such as the anime or the novel, formerly discussed independently as a "work," are merely related products, just like character mugs and loose-leaf binders. The narrative is only a surplus item, added to the settings and illustrations (the nonnarrative).

Combinations of *Moe*-elements

Another interesting point is that Di Gi Charat uses excessively advanced skill to trigger *chara-moe,* as if to compensate for the absence of story and message. I wrote earlier that the design of Digiko alone found support at first. However, one cannot quite say that the design was particularly original or attractive. In fact, the design of Digiko is a result of sampling and combining popular elements from recent otaku culture, as if to downplay the authorship of the designer. I have identified some of the major elements in Figure 6.

I will not describe the characteristics of each element here, but note that each element, with its own origins and background, constitutes a category that has been developed in order to stimulate the interest of the consumers. It is not a simple fetish object, but a sign that emerged through market principles. For example, it is well known that the "maid costume" originated in the X-rated anime series *Cream Lemon: Black Cat Mansion* in the 1980s and gained popularity in the "visual novels" of the 1990s.[22] Also, in my observation "hair springing up like an antennae" was popularized in the visual novel *The Scar (Kizuato)* (Figure 7), and it has become a standard element seen in anime and games. From this point on, let us call these elements, developed to effectively stimulate the *moe* of the consumers, "*moe*-elements" *(moe yōso).* Most of the *moe*-elements are visual, but there are other kinds of *moe*-elements, such as a particular way of speaking, settings, stereotypical narrative development, and the specific curves of a figurine.

As one can immediately see in specialty stores in the Akihabara or Shinjuku parts of Tokyo, the *moe*-elements are proliferating within otaku culture. The "characters" circulating in these stores are not unique designs created by the individual talent of the author but an output generated from preregistered elements and combined according to the marketing program of each work.

The otaku themselves are aware of this situation. The otaku search engine "TINAMI" launched in 1996 signifies this awareness with an actual device (Figure 8).[23] To enable the user to find illustrations from

Figure 6. *Moe*-elements that constitute Di Gi Charat.

tens of thousands of registered sites, this searchable database classifies and quantifies various characteristics of otaku illustrations in detail. The site is equipped with selectable parameters so that the user can search for *moe*-elements. That is to say, the user can search for the desired characteristics of things like "cat ears" and "maid costumes," or can set "the percentage of characters appearing" at more than 75 percent, "the age of character" at between 10 and 15, and "the degree of déformé" at 5 in order to find desired characters categorized in the database. Figure 9 shows the actual search window of "TINAMI."

Figure 7. An "antenna hair" as a *moe*-element seen in *The Scar (Kizuato).*
Produced by Leaf.

Some of the "categories" lined up at the bottom half of the figure are *moe*-elements, such as "cat ears," "animal," "angels," "maid costumes," and "glasses."

As the Internet spread and the site of otaku activities moved to the Web during the late 1990s, search engines such as "TINAMI" began to play a prominent role. In such an environment, the producers, like it or not, must have been conscious of their position relative to the

Figure 8. TINAMI homepage.

Figure 9. TINAMI search screen.

whole of otaku culture. As soon as the characters are created, they are broken up into elements, categorized, and registered to a database. If there is no appropriate classification, a new element or category simply will be added. In this sense, the originality of an "original" character can only exist as a simulacrum.

There used to be a narrative behind a work. But as the importance of narrative has declined, the characters have become more important in otaku culture. Subsequently, a database for *moe*-elements that generates the characters has been established. Otaku culture of the 1990s has followed this general trend, but *Di Gi Charat,* which emerged at the end of the 1990s, marks the terminal point of this trend.

In fact, the characters in this work were created with intentionally excessive *moe*-elements. The novelization describes Digiko as having "the maid costume with lots of frills, a cap with white cat ears, cat gloves, cat boots, and a cat tail. Perfect and fully equipped with double-*moe*-options," while Puchiko is described as wearing "a tiger-striped hat with cat ears, a girls' school uniform ('sailor suits') and bloomers, a tiger cat tail. A double-*moe* costume, quite evil and foul for fans."[24] These self-parodying descriptions clearly indicate the fragile position of this work. Digiko has cat ears and speaks with "-*nyo*" (the Japanese sound for "meow") at the end of her sentences.[25] This is not because cat ears or the "-*nyo*" endings are exactly attractive themselves, but because both cat ears and peculiar sentence endings are *moe*-elements and, to be exact, because the otaku of the 1990s accepted them as *moe*-elements as they became aware of the whole structure of this process. In this sense, *Di Gi Charat* is not so much a project that naively relies on the desire of *chara-moe* but a complex project that, by pushing that desire to the limit, has become a satire for the present market dominated by *moe*-related designs.

Database Consumption

Attractive Characters, Rather Than Quality of Individual Works

The organization of the *moe*-elements has rapidly advanced in the 1990s. The term *moe* is said to have emerged in the late 1980s, originally referring to the fictional desire for characters of comics, anime, and

games or for pop idols. Since those who feel *moe* toward a particular character tend to buy its related goods excessively, the success of a project for the producers of such goods is directly determined not by the quality of the work itself but by its ability to evoke the *moe* desire through character design and illustrations. This tendency goes back to the 1970s, but its significance decisively increased in the context of the 1990s multimedia trend.

With the new multimedia, various kinds of projects can progress simultaneously while leaving the status of the original quite ambiguous. Therefore, the common ground for all of these projects is neither the authorship of the original creator nor a message but a common world of the work and characters, or, in extreme cases, characters alone. For example, the only reason (other than copyright) for categorizing the TV and film series *Evangelion,* directed by Anno Hideaki, with the "nurturing"[26] simulation game *Ayanami Nurturing Project* as "*Evangelion*-connected" works, or categorizing novel games such as *Droplet* ("*Shizuku*") and *The Scar* ("*Kizuato*") created by Leaf and its parodied trading card game *Leaf Fight* as "Leaf-connected" works is that they feature the same characters. Since the continuity in terms of content between these works is extremely weak, the fans of *Evangelion* and *Droplet* could very well have shown little interest in *Ayanami Nurturing Project* or *Leaf Fight.* Such consumer behavior could have been dominant; it even would have been easier to understand outside of the otaku market.

But the otaku market of the 1990s systematically raised consumers who accepted both versions within a single spectrum and, in fact, the market expanded its size on the basis of the inundation of such "related goods." As a result, instead of narratives creating characters, it has become a general strategy to create character settings first, followed by works and projects, *including the stories.* Given this situation, the attractiveness of characters is more important than the degree of perfection of individual works, and the know-how for enhancing the attractiveness (through the art of the *moe*-element) has rapidly accumulated. Under such circumstances, the development of *moe*-element databases has become a necessity.

Connections between Characters across Individual Works

As a result, many of the otaku characters created in recent years are connected to many characters across individual works, rather than emerging from a single author or a work. For example, Figure 10 lists four characters: Hoshino Ruri from *Martian Successor Nadesico,* Ayanami Rei from *Evangelion,* Tsukishima Ruriko from *Droplet,* and Ōtorii Tsubame from *Cyber Team in Akihabara (Akihabara Dennōgumi)*. These characters have many things in common in terms of settings and designs.

Such connections, frequently seen in otaku works, have been called "quotations," "influences," and "parodies." However, notions such as "quotations" and "influences" unconsciously presuppose a unit such as an author or a work. For example, there is a notion that an author is influenced by another author's work, and he or she quotes it or sometimes parodies it. Even now we can say that the activities of otaku works lie within such a model. For example, it is not incorrect to trace the genealogy of our four characters as follows: Ruriko was created

Figure 10a. Hoshino Ruri. Designed by Gotō Keiji. *Martian Successor Nadesico.* Produced by XEBEC.

Figure 10b. Ayanami Rei. Designed by Sadamoto Yoshiyuki. *Neon Genesis Evangelion.* Produced by Gainax.

under the influence of Rei, and Ruri was created as quotations from both, and Tsubame is a parody of Ruri.

However, the validity of this model is limited. Let us say that Ruri is a quotation of Rei or Ruriko. But who did the quoting? In comparison with *Evangelion,* where the roles of Anno as a director and Sadamoto Yoshiyuki[27] as a character designer were relatively clear, it is difficult to determine the involvement of Sato Tatsuo and Mamiya Kia in the complex production process of *Nadesico.*[28] Moreover, the example in Figure 10 is just a tip of the iceberg.

Figure 10c. Tsukishima Ruriko. Designed by Minazuki Tōru. *Droplet.* Produced by Leaf.

In fact, in the late 1990s, characters bearing a close resemblance to Ayanami Rei have been produced and consumed on a massive scale—in comics, anime, and novelizations, both in the commercial market and the fanzine market. It does not seem wise to attribute this expanse to the "influence" of *Evangelion.*

I believe that it is more appropriate to use the image of the database to grasp this current situation. The emergence of Ayanami Rei did not influence many authors so much as change the rules of the *moe*-elements sustaining otaku culture. As a result, even those authors who were not deliberately thinking of *Evangelion* unconsciously began

Figure 10d. Ōtorii Tsubame. Designed by Kotobuki Tsukasa. *Cyber Team in Akihabara.* Produced by Ashi Production.

to produce characters closely resembling Rei, using newly registered *moe*-elements (quiet personality, blue hair, white skin, mysterious power). Such a model is close to the reality of the late 1990s. Beyond Rei, characters emerging in otaku works were not unique to individual works but were immediately broken into *moe*-elements and recorded by consumers, and then the elements reemerged later as material for creating new characters. Therefore, each time a popular character appeared, the *moe*-element database changed accordingly, and as a result, in the next season there were heated battles among the new generation of characters featuring new *moe*-elements.

The Double-layer Structure of Consumption as Seen in *Chara-moe*

As these observations make clear, the *chara-moe,* which represents otaku culture of the 1990s, is not the simple act of empathy (as the otaku themselves wish to believe). It is a quite postmodern consumer behavior, sustained by the movements back and forth between the characters (the simulacra) and the *moe*-elements (the database). Within the consumer behavior of feeling *moe* for a specific character, along with the blind obsession, there is hidden a peculiarly cool, detached dimension—one that takes apart the object into *moe*-elements and objectifies them within a database. I will discuss this double-layer structure in detail below, with visual novels as an example, but suffice it to say that *chara-moe* cannot be explained away merely as a fanatical consumer behavior.

The otaku's *moe* sensibility is doubled between the level of individual characters and the level of *moe*-elements, and that is exactly why the otaku are able to swap the objects of the *moe* so quickly. If the otaku were selecting the characters simply according to their own tastes without the level of *moe*-elements, then the fans of each character would be unrelated to those of another character. If this had been the case, then the "character business" that bloomed in the 1990s would not have been possible.

From "Narrative Consumption" to "Database Consumption"

To summarize the discussion up to this point, there is no longer a narrative in the deep inner layer, beneath the works and products such as comics, anime, games, novels, illustrations, trading cards, figurines, and so on. In the multimedia environment of the 1990s, it is only characters that unite various works and products. The consumer, knowing this, moves easily back and forth between projects with a narrative (comics, anime, novels) and projects without one (illustrations and figurines). Here, the individual projects are the simulacra and behind them is the database of characters and settings.

At yet another level, however, each character is merely a simulacrum, derived from the database of *moe*-elements. In other words, the double-layer structure of the simulacra and the database is again

doubled, forming a complex system. The otaku first consume individual works, and sometimes are moved by them. But they are also aware that, in fact, the works are merely simulacra, consisting only of the characters. Then they consume characters, and sometimes feel *moe* in them. But they are also aware that, in fact, the characters are just simulacra, consisting only of combinations of *moe*-elements. In my observation, *Di Gi Charat* is a project created with a high degree of self-awareness of the doubled (and perhaps even tripled) consciousness of the otaku.

Therefore, to consume *Di Gi Charat* is not simply to consume a work (a small narrative) or a worldview behind it (a grand narrative), nor to consume characters and settings (a grand nonnarrative). Rather, it is linked to consuming the database of otaku culture as a whole. I call this consumer behavior *database consumption,* in contrast with Ōtsuka's "narrative consumption."

In the shift from modernity to postmodernity, our world image is experiencing a sea change, from one sustained by a narrative-like, cinematic perspective on the entire world to one read-up by search engines, characterized by databases and interfaces. Amid this change, the Japanese otaku lost the grand narrative in the 1970s, learned to fabricate the lost grand narrative in the 1980s (narrative consumption), and in the 1990s, abandoned the necessity for even such fabrication and learned simply to desire the database (database consumption). Roughly speaking, such a trend may be surmised from Ōtsuka's critical essay and my own observation. Figure 11 shows the difference between narrative consumption and database consumption. Figures 11a and 11b correspond to the aforementioned Figures 3a and 3b, respectively.

The Novels of "Anime/Manga-like Realism"

It is unavoidable that many examples of otaku culture are visually oriented, but let me cite a different example of how the rise of the *chara-moe* and database consumption is beginning to exert tremendous influence on print culture. In the mass media, the "novel" is still categorized as either "literature" or "entertainment." In reality, however, for ten years the otaku market has been producing and consuming numerous novels
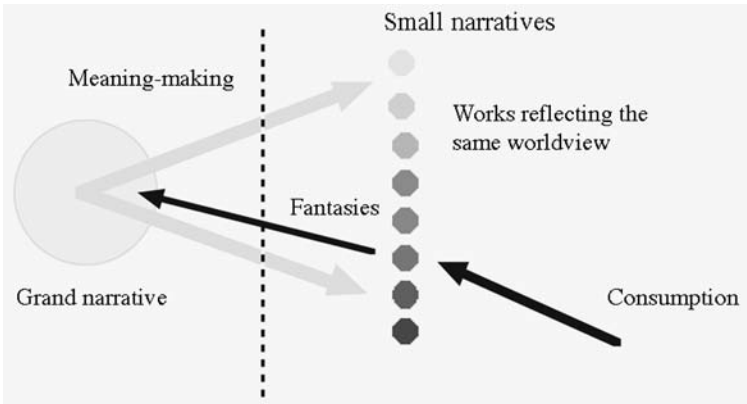
Figure 11a. The structure of narrative consumption.
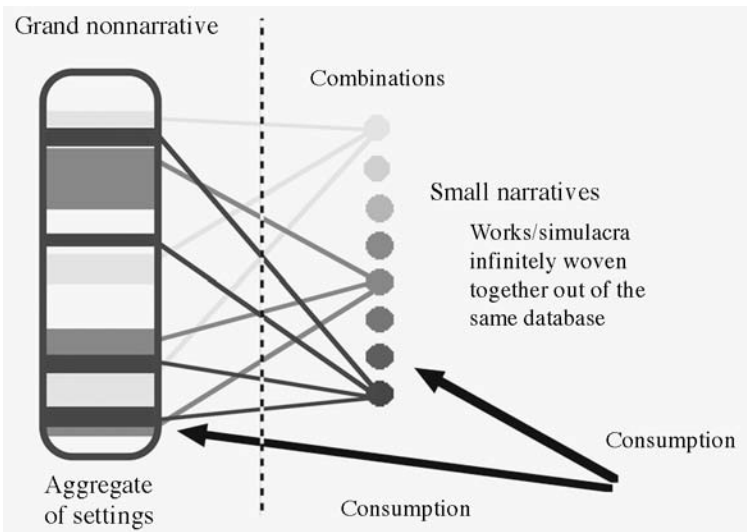
Figure 11b. The structure of database consumption.

that cannot be classified as either. Sometimes labeled with existing categories such as "mystery," "science fiction," and "fantasy" and sometimes labeled in with reference to their readership or producers such was "junior novels," "game novels," and "young adult (juvenile)," these works have a fictional world with a unique logic that differs from the traditional classification as either literary or entertaining. For this

reason, their general reputation is poor. But their logic can be naturally understood in the context of otaku culture, as discussed above.

Perhaps the most appropriate example of this new and different breed of novels may be found in the works of Seiryōin Ryūsui.[29] Seiryōin was born in 1974, falling between the second and third generations of otaku. His debut novel, *Cosmic* (1996), is a mystery novel in which a dozen or so detectives try to solve several dozen locked-room murder cases. That setting is already original, but in addition each detective is given an impressive name and characteristics: Yaiba Somahito ("The Blade Wizard"), who reasons with a dialectic method called "Jin-suiri" ("Syn-llogism"); Tsukumo Jūku ("Ninety-nine Nineteen"), who uses intuition called "Jintsū Riki" ("Divine wisdom and cosmology"); and Amagiri Fuyuka ("Rain-mist Winter-aroma"), who speculates in her sleep, a talent referred to as "Gori Muchū" (Enlightenment and reason in the dream). The resolutions of the mysteries are also extremely absurd. In addition, these superhuman characters appear in a subsequent series of novels, including *Joker, Jukebox,* and *Carnival.*[30] Since his debut, Seiryōin has been declaring that these novels together form a "Great Story of the Water Stream" ("*Ryūsui Taisetsu*").[31] In short, his novels may not emphasize the quality of an individual work, but they contribute to the attractiveness of individual characters and consequently the quality of "the Seiryōin world" that they constitute as a series. This author consistently has garnered strong support among teenagers, but some veteran mystery writers have reacted negatively.

Referring to Ōtsuka again, he points out that, behind the rise of this sort of novel, realism itself has begun to transform itself.[32] The modern Japanese novel is said to reflect reality vividly *(shasei);* the otaku novel reflects fiction vividly.[33] The characters and stories that Seiryōin depict are never realistic, but they are possible in the world of comics and anime already published, and therefore the reader accepts them as real. Ōtsuka called such an attitude "anime/manga-like Realism" and identified its origin in the science fiction writer Arai Motoko's statement at the end of the 1970s that she "wanted to write the print version of the comics *Lupin the Third.*" Ōtsuka argues that, although the naturalistic realism (of the modern Japanese novel) and

the "anime/manga-like Realism" give very different impressions on surface, the progression from the former to the latter was a matter of necessity, because in Japan the former was fictional to begin with.

Elements of Mystery Fiction as *Moe*-elements

Once again, I agree with Ōtsuka's observation in general, but I must emphasize that the very fiction supposed to be "reflected vividly" has already been broken up into individual elements and collected in the database. It is well known that Seiryōin's novels are influenced by Kurumada Masami's popular manga *Saint Seiya.* At the same time, Seiryōin constructs his world by extracting and freely combining various elements from the all of the numerous neo-orthodox mystery novels of the mid-1980s to mid-1990s. Here, the reader shares the same database. That the author can quickly write dozens of discernibly different locked-room murder mysteries with a dozen or so different detectives—and that the readers accept it as a matter of course—is only possible because images of detectives, tricks, and ways of solving mysteries have already become *moe*-elements.

Such self-referential awareness of the conditions of the genre is probably inherited from the writers of a previous generation, such as Ayatsuji Yukito and Norizuki Rintarō.[34] But one great distinction is that, where the previous generation directed their consciousness to the rules (codes) of mystery,[35] Seiryōin's consciousness is directed toward the database of *moe*-elements. It is commonly accepted that the market for mystery greatly expanded in the 1990s, but as far as the young readership is concerned, such growth was sustained by readers differing from the "orthodox" fans who enjoyed clever tricks; the new readers felt *moe* toward characters created by Kyōgoku Natsuhiko and Mori Hiroshi,[36] drew illustrations of them, and embarked on derivative works from them.

This situation spreads beyond the mystery genre. Otaku print culture as a whole is beginning to obey a different kind of logic, one oriented toward characters rather than individual works. Seiryōin's novels, in fact, not only presuppose this as a condition but even satirize it. For example, in Japan Detective Club, 350 detectives are "divided into

Groups 1 through 7" and "during the Group Switch every two months the overachievers of a lower group are promoted while the underachievers of a higher group are demoted without mercy."[37] This setting of the Japan Detective Club can be read as a parody of the whole situation, if one keeps in mind the character-oriented state of the market.

Neither literature nor entertainment, the otaku novels are already being sold and consumed according to a logic similar to that of video games and illustrations. Commercially speaking, the change from naturalist realism to "anime/manga-like realism" is sustained by this change in the market. As far as I know, Seiryōin is the author who reacted to this change most responsively and changed how he writes novels most fundamentally. Here, it is neither reality (naturalism) or an earlier fiction (narrative consumption) but the database of *moe*-elements that is felt as most real.

The Simulacra and the Database

Drawbacks of the Simulacra Theory

In the above discussion, otaku culture gives us an answer to the first of the two questions I asked at the beginning of this chapter: in postmodernity, how do simulacra increase? The surface outer layer of otaku culture is covered with simulacra, or derivative works. But in the deep inner layer lies the database of settings and characters, and further down, the database of *moe*-elements. The consumer behavior of the otaku, which might seem like a chaotic inundation of simulacra, becomes more ordered and understandable once we turn our eyes to the level of the database.

These observations, beyond an analysis of subculture, provide insights that would change the existing notion of the simulacra. In earlier theories on postmodernity, the increase in simulacra has been considered a chaotic phenomenon emerging after the demise of the distinction between the original and the copy. Such an argument cites, first and foremost, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," a short essay written by Walter Benjamin more than sixty years ago. In it Benjamin famously argues that the sense of originality (called "aura") residing within a particular work of art is based

upon the "singularity" of the "ritual" that gave birth to the work, but that the technology of mechanical reproduction voids such a sense.[38] This argument later became a core of simulacra theory.

Benjamin's grasp of "aura" here clearly reflects the aforementioned tree model. In front of an original, the viewer feels a connection with the "ritual" beyond the work at hand. There is no such connection with a copy. In other words, an original and a copy are distinguished by the presence of the connection with the ritual (i.e., the presence of the aura). This aesthetic indeed reflects a modern worldview. Figure 12 indicates this idea, based on Figure 3a. The omnipresence of simulacra represents a situation in which, having lost the very criteria for this connection, an original and a copy have come to have the same value and all signs have begun to float without their foundation.

Therefore, in the context of the earlier theories of postmodernity, the two phenomena I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter— "the omnipresence of simulacra" and "the decline of the grand narrative"—can in fact be grasped as two aspects of a single change: the collapse of the tree model. Of course, there is a fundamental difference between these two phenomena, in that the former is a change caused mainly by technological advances while the latter is a social, ideological change. Still, there is undeniably a common change in the worldview underlying these two phenomena. In fact, Benjamin's essay discusses the age of mechanical reproduction and the decline of ideologies as related phenomena, and Baudrillard grasps these two trends in relation to each other, arguing, "no more ideology, only simulacra."[39]

However, previous theories on postmodernity failed to understand that the tree model did not simply collapse but *was replaced by* the database model. Of course, some discussions have suggested such a point. For example, Baudrillard argues that, in contemporary society, permeated by marketing and semiotic consumption, "we live less as users than as readers and selectors, reading cells."[40] His argument that differentiated goods and signs are stocked and circulated in quantity (the totality of which Baudrillard calls "hyperreality") and that consumers can express their personality or originality only as a combination of them grasps a reality that very closely resembles what I have been calling the database model.
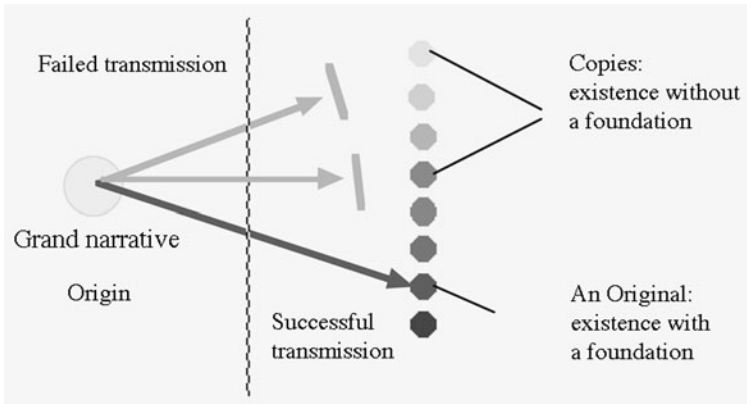
Figure 12. The original and the copy.

However, even in this discussion, the level of the simulacra and the level of the database have never been clearly distinguished, nor has the whole been grasped as a double-layer structure. Baudrillardian "hyperreality" covers both the world of the simulacra and the world of the database. In the example of otaku culture, the inundation of derivative works, narrative consumption, *chara-moe,* and even the so-called deformed designs such as Di Gi Charat would all be explained by the concept of "hyperreality."

From "Original versus Copy" to "Database versus Simulacra"

In contrast, in the present study I wish to show that the simulacra that are filling up this society have never propagated in a chaotic fashion but that their effective functioning is warranted first and foremost by the level of the database.

Otaku culture is filled with derivative works; originals and derivative works are produced and consumed as if they were of "equal value." However, not all of such derivative works actually have the same value; otherwise the market would not grow. In fact, underneath the simulacra exists a database, a device that sorts good simulacra from bad ones regulating the flow of derivative works. The 773rd Bikkuriman sticker must adequately share a common database with the previous

772 stickers, or it would not be regarded as a derivative work to begin with. *Ayanami Nurturing Project* must adequately share a worldview with *Evangelion,* and the design of Di Gi Charat must adequately sample *moe*-elements from the late 1990s. Simulacra created without recognition of these processes will be weeded out by the market and disappear.

In other words, in postmodernity, a new opposition is emerging between the simulacra and the database, in place of the previous opposition between the original and the copy. In the past, the original work was "an original" and the derivative work "a copy." Only herein exists the criterion for judging the quality of a work. For example, in the case of *Evangelion,* the TV series created by Anno Hideaki is a "work" connected with the authorship and his original message, while derivative works by amateurs and related commercial projects are mere copies. People are supposed to strictly distinguish between these two in consuming them.

However, in reality, over the past twenty years a consumer behavior that does not discriminate between these two categories has been gaining more and more power. Instead, as I mentioned above, the database of characters, settings, and *moe*-elements is on the rise and with it a different variety of standards applied to the database. On the rise instead are the database of character settings and *moe*-elements, as I have argued above, and emerging with it is a different kind of criteria based on one's relation to this database. A copy is judged not by its distance from an original but by its distance from the database. Figure 13 indicates this new relationship.

In contemporary thought, the magical attraction of the original as an original is sometimes called "the myth of authorship." As we survey the history of otaku culture from the 1980s to the 1990s to the 2000s, we find that even this myth has been rapidly declining. Most readers and experts in the field would agree that it is easy to name authors of major comics and anime that represent the 1980s, but it is more difficult to do the same for the 1990s. This observation might be seen as a symptom of the genre's decline, but in actuality, the very fact that it is difficult to name an author points to the essence of otaku culture in the 1990s. Now the author is no longer a god and therefore
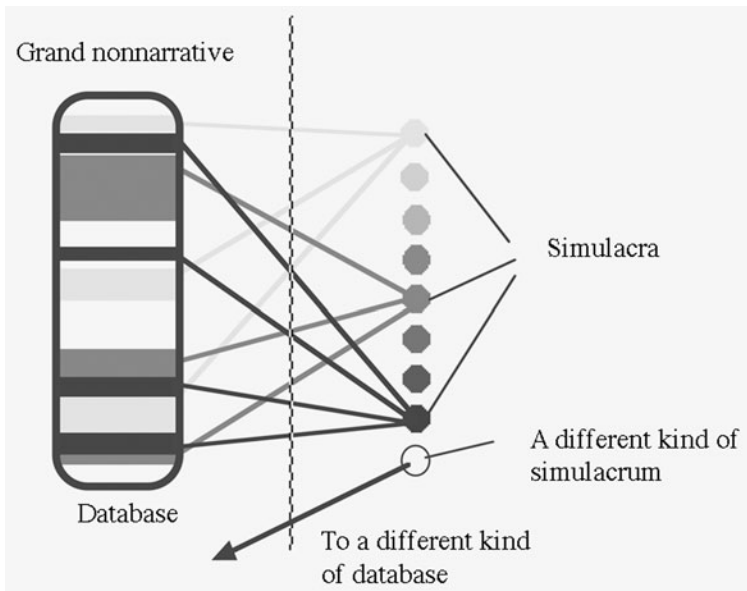
Figure 13. The database and the simulacra.

cannot be named. Instead, *moe*-elements have become gods. A moderately knowledgeable consumer should be able to name several major *moe*-elements representing the 1990s.

The Psychology of Derivative Works

The market for otaku culture consists of the double-layer structure of the simulacra and the database. Understanding this simple fact is important so as not to misunderstand the intentions of the otaku. For example, the inundation of simulacra, which is the reality of otaku culture, may seem radical and anarchistic from a certain viewpoint. But in fact the authors of derivative works do not exhibit such an aggressive intent. On the one hand they mercilessly parody, cut up, and remix the originals, but on the other hand they do not consider their actions to be a violation of the original works, and they stop their creative processes as soon as the original author asks them to do so. In this sense, they are rather conservative.

This duality may be incomprehensible at first, but it is easily understood through the aforementioned double-layer structure. As I have discussed repeatedly, the originals and the derivative works are both simulacra, and there is no fundamental difference between them.

Instead, the core of a work lies in the database of settings. Therefore, in the mind of the otaku, even if derivative works violate original works (at the level of the simulacra), the originality of the original works as information (at the level of the database) is protected and respected. Rather it is thought that, from the standpoint of authors of the derivative works, the increase of simulacra should raise the value of the originals. Of course, in reality the existence of the copyright should preclude such sensibility. However, more than a quarter century after the birth of the Comic Market, it is important to know the background of such psychology.

Discord between Murakami Takashi and the Otaku

Such a basic understanding would also be necessary when the fruits of otaku culture are brought beyond its bounds. The contemporary artist Murakami Takashi, whom I have mentioned several times, has endeavored most energetically to connect otaku culture to the outside world.

Born in 1962, Murakami would belong to the first generation of otaku and has even released many works influenced by anime and figurines, calling himself "an otaku who could not truly become one." His works, as seen in the DOB sequence (Figure 14) and the Second Mission Project Ko[2] sequence (Figure 15), are created both by focusing on the character designs that have been uniquely developed in otaku culture and by emphasizing, dissolving, and deforming their characteristics. I believe it is a great attempt to sublimate the oddities of the otaku simulacra into works of art,[41] but the otaku do not speak highly of them. On the contrary, Murakami's ventures have been criticized even by the otaku who have collaborated in his works.

One can name several reasons for this discord between Murakami and otaku, but among them are the structural characteristics of otaku culture as discussed above. Asano Masahiko, a creator of figurine molds

Figure 14. Takashi Murakami, *AND THEN Rainbow,* 2006. Acrylic on canvas mounted on board. 1000 x 1000 x 50 mm. Courtesy Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris and Miami. Copyright 2006 Murakami Takashi/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All rights reserved.

and one of the key figures in his role as editor for the production of Second Mission Project Ko^2, has said at an event that Murakami does not have "the otaku gene."[42] I think what he wanted to say is that Murakami lacks the ability to intuitively grasp various characteristics that make otaku works "otaku-like," i.e., the ability to grasp *moe*-elements.

In the world of contemporary art criticism, the production of simulacra is positioned as "a weapon that constitutes a new avant-garde."[43] And probably Murakami, too, was initially attracted to the surface layer of otaku culture as "avant-garde." Understood in this context, the DOB and the Second Mission Project Ko^2 are indeed works created by extracting and purifying the most radical and groundless parts

Figure 15. Takashi Murakami, *Second Mission Project Ko²* (ga-walk type), 1999. Oil paint, acrylic, synthetic resins, fiberglass, and iron. 2244 x 1769 x 1315 mm. Courtesy Blum & Poe. Copyright 1999 Murakami Takashi/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All rights reserved.

of the otaku designs, and in this sense they should be highly praised. For the otaku, however, this experiment by Murakami is nothing more than an incomplete attempt, extracting and imitating only the simulacra as designs (literally on the surface level) without understanding the database of *moe*-elements. Such a conceptual difference regarding the simulacra results in the different evaluation of Murakami's ventures by the contemporary art world and the otaku world.

Murakami's experiments, no matter how much they borrow the otaku designs, cannot be otaku-like in essence, insofar as they lack the level of the database. It is unclear how this affects the evaluation of Murakami as an artist, but it is useful to be cognizant of the difference between borrowing otaku designs and understanding the cultural structure behind such designs. However, in my opinion, Murakami's venture has been able to scrape out an aspect of otaku culture sharply *precisely because* he does not understand its structure, and that it is not a mere borrowing in this sense. Otaku designs at times have reached an extremely radical point, as the example of Di Gi Charat attests, but the authors themselves are often unaware of the designs' radicality because they are merely combinations of *moe*-elements for the authors. Murakami's works might be able to change this lack of awareness.

Snobbery and the Fictional Age

The Hegelian "End of History"

Let us proceed to the other question raised at the beginning of this book: If, in postmodernity, the notion of transcendence is in decline, what becomes of the humanity of human beings? To answer this question, first it is necessary to locate the meaning of the rise of the database consumption and the double-layer structure of postmodernity (discussed above) within a broad world historical view, one removed from discussion of a Japanese state of affairs.

In the first chapter I mentioned the philosopher Alexandre Kojève. Kojève was the Russian-born French philosopher who was famous for his unique 1930s lectures on Hegelian philosophy, which were published as *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*.[44] In Hegelian philosophy, which was first developed in the early nineteenth century, the "Human" is defined as an existence with a self-consciousness, who, through a struggle with the "Other" (also endowed with self-consciousness), will move toward absolute knowledge, freedom, and civil society. Hegel called this process of struggle "History."

So Hegel claimed that history in this sense ended for Europe in the beginning of the nineteenth century. This claim may have seemed strange at first glance, but it is still very persuasive. This is because he

declared that, when the modern society was about to be born, this very birth was "the end of history." There is a famous story that Hegel finished the manuscript of his magnum opus, *The Phenomenology of Spirit,* in Jena one day before Napoleon's invasion of the city. Of course, the mode of thought that sees the arrival of Western-style modern society as the conclusion of history has since been thoroughly criticized as being ethnocentric. However, looking at it another way, given that two centuries after Hegel was writing, modern values have covered the entire globe, this historical perspective is very difficult to refute.

The American "Return to Animality" and Japanese Snobbery

Regardless, what is important here is not Hegel's own thinking but the interpretation Kojève added to Hegel's philosophy of history. Specifically, it is a footnote added in the second edition of his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel,* twenty years after the initial lectures, which became famous, at least in Japan. In the first chapter, in order to open simply, Kojève emphasizes that after the end of Hegelian history only two modes of existence remained for human beings. One was the pursuit of the American way of life, or what he called the "return to animality,"[45] and the other was Japanese snobbery.

Kojève called the form of consumer that arose in postwar America *animal.* His reason for using such a strong expression is related to the provisions for *humans* peculiar to Hegelian philosophy. According to Hegel (or more properly according to Kojève's interpretation of Hegel), Homo sapiens are not in and of themselves human. In order for human beings to be human, they must behave in a way that *negates* their own environment. To put it another way, they must struggle against nature.

Animals, in contrast, usually live in harmony with nature. Accordingly, postwar American consumer society—surrounded by products satisfying consumer "needs" alone and whose fashion changes accordion to the media's demands alone—is not, in his terminology, humanistic but, rather, "animalistic." Just as there is neither hunger nor strife, there is no philosophy: "After the end of History, men would construct their edifices and works of art as birds build their nests and spiders spin their webs, would perform musical concerts after the fashion of frogs

and cicadas, would play like young animals, and would indulge in love like adult beasts," wrote Kojève with some frustration.[46]

On the other hand, *snobbery,* instead of having any essential reason for denying the given environment, is a behavioral pattern that denies being "based on formalized values." Snobs are not in harmony with their environment. Even if there is no chance whatsoever for denial, snobs presume to deny, to manufacture formal opposition, and to love the thrill of opposing nature. The example Kojève gives is ritual suicide *(seppuku).* In ritual suicide, in spite of having no reason to die, suicide is committed in essence because of the formal values of honor and order. This is the ultimate snobbery. This way of life is certainly not "animalistic" in that there are moments of negation. However, this also differs from the human way of life in the "historical" age. For the nature of snobs and their oppositional stance (for instance, the opposition to instinct at the time of ritual suicide) would no longer move history in any sense. No matter how many sacrificial corpses are piled up, ritual suicide, which is purely and courteously executed, certainly would not be a motivating force of revolution.

Japanese Snobbery Cultivated by Otaku Culture

Based only on a hunch and a short stay in Japan, the argument in Kojève's footnote consists largely of fantasies. However, when we look back at it, we can say that his prescient belief that the core of Japanese society is characterized by a mentality of snobbery, and that it will govern the cultural world, is frighteningly appropriate today.

To be sure, precisely after his pointing this out, otaku culture appeared in Japan and, proclaiming itself heir to Edo culture, cultivated a new snobbery. According to Okada Toshio's *Introduction to Otaku Studies,* to which we have already referred several times, otaku harbor a sense of distance best expressed in the following quip: "as they know they are being tricked, they can be truly emotionally moved." This has become a pillar of otaku sensibility. The otaku know that "it is quite meaningless to dare to watch 'childish' programs after becoming adults."[47] For example, the robot anime and squadron special effects dramas[48] that have deep-seated popularity with otaku expand on the

same kinds of narratives in the same kinds of settings, and to that extent an individual work can be said to have absolutely no meaning. However, the otaku sensibility, according to Okada, consists in distinguishing values in form, "idea"[49] from this substantive meaninglessness. This kind of detachment is precisely the characteristic of snobbery described by Kojève.

For example, Kojève writes, "post-historical Man must continue to *detach* 'form' from 'content,' doing so no longer in order to actively transform the latter, but so that he may *oppose* himself as a pure 'form' to himself and to others taken as a 'content' of any sort."[50] This kind of description is extremely difficult to comprehend, but when we compare it with the consumer behavior of the otaku pictured in *Introduction to Otaku Studies,* we can understand it in a very concrete way.

Posthistorical man, namely the otaku, is fully conversant with the values and patterns of otaku works; he can consciously detach the "idea" from them—which is to say, "to continue to *detach* 'form' from 'content.'" However, this detaching is no longer for the purpose of finding meaning in various works or engaging in social activities but rather is in order to confirm the self as a pure idle spectator (which is "the self as pure form"). In this way, the otaku personify in some sense the way of life in "posthistory" predicted fifty years ago by Kojève. This means Okada's and Murakami's claims to see the future of the world in otaku also contain a certain kind of truth.

The Twentieth Century Ruled by Cynicism

The attitude toward the world that Kojève called snobbery was further theorized in detail and called *cynicism* by the Slovenian-born scholar of psychoanalysis Slavoj Žižek. As an example of cynicism, he repeatedly cited Cold War Stalinism. In his *Sublime Object of Ideology,* published in 1989, he wrote:

> To exemplify this connection (the relationship between Hegelian philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis) let us refer to Stalinism—more specifically, to its obsessive insistence that whatever the cost we must *maintain the appearance:* we all know that behind the scenes there are wild factional struggles going on; nevertheless we must keep at any

price the appearance of Party unity; nobody really believes in the rul-
ing ideology, every individual preserves a cynical distance from it and
everybody knows that nobody believes in it; but still, the appearance is
to be maintained at any price that people are enthusiastically building
socialism, supporting the party, and so on. . . . We could thus say that
Stalinism has a value as the ontological proof of the existence of the
big Other.[51]

Supporters of Stalinism actually know that it is a lie. However, *pre-
cisely because of* this, they cannot stop appearing to believe in it. This
twisted relationship between form and substance is identical to the
attitude called "snobbery" by Kojève. Snobbish, cynical subjects do
not believe in the material value of the world. However, it is exactly
because of this that they cannot stop appearing to believe in the for-
mal value of the world; so they do not mind sacrificing substance for
appearance or form. Kojève grasped this "precisely because of" as an
activity of the subject. But Žižek argues that this reversal is a compul-
sory mechanism that the subject can do nothing about. Even knowing
it to be a lie, people believe in Stalinism; even knowing it is meaning-
less, people commit seppuku. Even though it is disagreeable, it cannot
be stopped.

According to Žižek's theory, this paradox is related to the principles
of human psychology. Consequently, when we read his work, it is as if
the reversal found in his words "precisely because of" is confirmed
from Greek philosophy through Hitchcock to Coca-Cola in every
time and place.

However, I think this kind of universality is a bit doubtful. There
is not space here to write in detail the reasons for this, so I want to
give attention to only one: the fact that the theory of cynicism in *The
Sublime Object of Ideology* was built on the *Critique of Cynical Reason*
by German critic Peter Sloterdijk, originally published in 1983. The
cynicism Sloterdijk examines is entirely a phenomenon of the twenti-
eth century. He writes the following:

The First World War signals the turning point in modern cynicism.
With it the up-tempo phase of the decomposition of old naïvetés be-
gins—such as those about the nature of war, the nature of social order,

of progress, of bourgeois values, indeed of bourgeois civilization itself. Since this war, the diffuse schizoid climate around the major European powers has not become any less intense. . . . Everything positive will be from then on an "In-spite-of," laced with latent desperation.[52]

The experience of World War I and the subsequent ruination of Europe thoroughly devastated the nineteenth-century trust in enlightenment and reason. My idea is that Žižek's theory of cynicism, contrary to what he himself asserts, is not a universal principle of humanity; rather, it is subtly set up as an analysis of a "twentieth-century mentality" that was born in the outcome of this war. This is naturally true, in a sense, because the theories of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, to which Žižek frequently refers, were themselves derived from the same experience of the Great War. For instance, Lacan paid close attention to the work of Freud's later years (such as those pieces dealing with the death wish and the repetition compulsion), but that work was indeed written from the middle of World War I through the postwar years. Furthermore, in addition to Freudian theory, the philosophy of Heidegger and the surrealist movement, both of which influenced Lacan, were born in the same period. Accordingly, the previously mentioned analysis by Žižek can be seen as an attempt to explain the realities (that is, the ideology of the Cold War) and theories (Lacan) that were both hatched out of World War I. I am sorry I cannot go into this in a more concrete way here, but Žižek's various cultural and social critiques are extremely sophisticated, if we gain a certain distance from them. In his work, most phenomena are explained through a reverse cynicism, but actually that is the reflection of our society, which truly has been ruled by cynicism during the past century.

As I explained in the beginning of this chapter, postmodernity refers to the conditions of the cultural world since the 1970s. However, taking a broader perspective, we can go back as far as the 1920s and 1930s to find the budding of postmodernity in the appearance of new technologies of reproduction, the origins of information theory, and even changing views of human beings. The aforementioned Benjamin essay was written in 1936, and it was World War I more than anything else that first began the decline of "grand narratives" such as
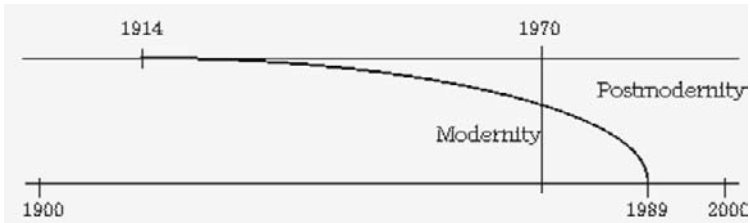
Figure 16. The transition from modernity to postmodernity.

"reason" and "enlightenment." And, conversely, it was only in 1989 that this decline was finally brought to the surface, when, with the end of the Cold War, the ghost of the last grand narrative, called "communism," finally disappeared. Consequently, the shift from modernity to postmodernity can be thought of as something gradually occurring over the seventy-five years between 1914 and 1989, with a single focus in the 1970s (see Figure 16).

I think Žižek is the thinker who theorized that structure in the most easily understandable way and who most beautifully reflected the spirit of the transitional period. To sum up the twentieth century, we might say it was characterized already by the loss of a transcendental grand narrative, as is well known—but one had to believe in the semblance of a grand narrative, and furthermore, *the semblance that life is meaningful.* To put it another way, the twentieth century was partially postmodern. Today the paradox that "life has no meaning; but because life has no meaning, we live" has lost its importance. But this way of thinking must have held extreme urgency during the Cold War period.

Cynicism Found in Otaku Snobbery

From this point of view, otaku snobbery appears to be a manifestation of the worldwide trend toward cynicism, as well as an extension of the formalism of Edo culture. Since the political stresses and social conditions of Japanese otaku certainly differed from those of Soviet citizens under Stalinism, comparing them may seem like a joke. But they do have in common the mental process that, after relativizing the

value of everything, brazenly finds meaning in the meaningless and then at some point finds that "brazenness" itself inescapable. This is precisely how Kojève, without really knowing much about Japan, could foresee the rise of an otaku sensibility.

Among the past theories on otaku, Ōsawa Masachi himself has mentioned this point. As I have described, he sought a characteristic of otaku in the substitution of subculture for the fallen grand narrative (the agency of the transcendent other). It is at this point that he refers to Žižek and develops a theory of otaku that completely corresponds with the above theory of cynicism. Ōsawa notes that there is "the secondary projection of the agency of the third party, under the assumption of the primary collapse of the agency of the third party"; at that point he emphasizes that these projections are "desperate measures" for the otaku to live in today's society.[53] Although Ōsawa's terminology is unique, if we put his expressions into the terminology of this book the "agency of the third party" is the transcendental other, or the grand narrative; and the "secondary projection" is a fabrication by subculture. After the collapse of the authentic and primary grand narrative, the otaku built a fake grand narrative (a secondary projection) under this assumption. They cannot relinquish that fake.

The Idealistic Age and the Fictional Age

Beyond this assumption, Ōsawa makes even deeper critical observations in works such as *The End of the Fictional Age* and *Postwar Intellectual Space*.[54] According to Ōsawa, the ideological circumstances of postwar Japan can be divided into two periods—*the idealistic age* from 1945 to 1970 and *the fictional age* from 1970 to 1995. To render it in my own terms, the "idealistic age" is the period when grand narrative functioned alone while the "fictional age" is the period when grand narrative functioned only as a fake. In this framework, otaku narrative consumption—emphasizing fiction—can be grasped as "a thorough form of a consumer society's cynicism" in the context of a consistent trend from the end of the war through the 1980s. So the Aum Shinrikyō incident of 1995 is truly positioned as the end of that trend. "If

the Red Army and the people who sensed themselves to be of that same period represent the demise (or limits) of the idealistic age, Aum Shinrikyō represents the demise (or limits) of the fictional age."[55]

The seventy-five years from 1914 to 1989 was a long transitional period from the modernity of the nineteenth century to the post-modernity of the twenty-first century. The mindset of the transitional age was characterized by cynicism or snobbery that peaked in the Cold War era. However, in Japan, this process was severed at once by the defeat of 1945. Conversely, from postwar reconstruction to the period of high growth, Japan surmounted danger by restoring grand narratives (i.e., national goals/interests) and by strengthening the so-cial ideological apparatuses such as educational facilities and social organizations.[56] In reality, the efficient economic growth of this pe-riod was supported largely by the administrative and legal systems left behind by the structures of total war set up during World War II. This synthesis was once again relaxed in the 1970s. The result for Japan was that the transition to postmodernity began in earnest in the 1970s, but at a much quicker pace. The reason the opposition between Ōsawa's "idealistic age" and "fictional age" is clear is probably because it is based on a situation peculiar to the history of Japan.

The Dissociated Human

Rising Desire for a Well-constructed Narrative

As Ōsawa emphasizes, we no longer live in the "fictional age." The spirit of cynicism/snobbery has lost its validity both globally and in Japan, and a new model for subject formation is emerging. Within this larger perspective, the transition from narrative consumption to database consumption is not simply a shift within the subculture but reflects a much larger movement. What kind of model can be glimpsed behind database consumption?

What is noteworthy in this regard is that, within otaku culture, there is an increasing interest in the drama within a work, coinciding with the decline of the grand narrative. So far I have argued that no grand narrative is needed in otaku culture. But in fact, as we can see

in the novelization boom and the revived interest in narratives within comics since *Evangelion,* there seems to be a rising desire for a well-constructed narrative that holds readers' (or viewers') attention for a while, emotionally moves them a little, and makes them think a little. In my opinion, this contradiction most clearly reveals the nature of subjectivity as an agent of database consumption.

The "Games for Reading" at the Center of Otaku Culture

Let us consider specific examples. In otaku culture of the 1990s, PC games called "girl games" or "beautiful girls games" play a significant role. This game genre was first created in 1982, proliferated in the early 1990s, and reached its peak in the late 1990s.[57] "Girl games" are basically adult-only games, played not on consumer game consoles (such as NES/"FamiCom" or Sony PlayStation) but mainly on Windows machines. Their basic format is quite simple: the player tries to "win over" female characters of their choice through various game systems, and, if successful, they can view pornographic illustrations as a reward. This very simplicity, however, has generated several intriguing experiments.

Among such forays, I wish to focus here on "novel games," a subgenre of girl games that, at the center of otaku culture since *Evangelion,* has sustained the prosperity of the girl games in the late 1990s and generated numerous derivative works and related goods.

In general, novel games are multistory, multiending novels (which in the past were rendered as "gamebooks") that can be "read" on the computer screen with images and sounds. The basic interface is easily understood if you can imagine a picture scroll or a *kamishibai,* picture-story show. This game system was first established in *Hypericum (Otogirisō)* on Super Nintendo but was introduced to the world of girl games in 1996 with *Droplet. Droplet* was produced by Leaf, a production company run by second-generation otaku, and with its sequels *The Scar* and *To Heart (Tō Hāto)* the game still boasts cult-like popularity.

Basically, all that the player of a novel game does is to read the texts and choose from the given options. The degree of freedom is

much lower than that of action games and role-playing games, and there is little room for taking advantage of animation and real-time 3-D graphics. For this reason, the technological advancement of consumer game consoles had a negative effect on the novel games, but in the low-budget adult PC game industry, this paucity of features worked in its favor. From this point on, "novel games" refers to those in the latter group, i.e., the novel games as girl games, unless otherwise noted. In any case, in recent years many of the novel games released for consumer game consoles were rereleases of the PC girl games.

The player of novel games, unlike players of other kinds of games, is overwhelmingly passive. For most of the playing time, the player simply reads texts and views illustrations. It is true that, in recent years, many games use animations and rich background music as well as feature well-known voice actors and actresses, and there are some quite intriguing experiments among them. Still, texts and illustrations continue to constitute the main features of novel games. Until only a few years ago, it was difficult for personal computers to process voices and animation because they are data-intensive, so the novel games could not use them even if their creators had wanted to. Due to this restriction, the development of novel games almost necessarily concentrated on the pursuit of texts that could effectively trigger emotion (ones over which one can cry) and illustrations for which one can feel a strong empathy (or feel *moe*). The multistory, multiending structure pushed this tendency further. The multiple stories and multiple endings (i.e., multiple women to "win over") required combining as many stories and as many characters as possible through efficient combination of the necessary modules.

Developed with a low budget and for rudimentary hardware, novel games were adult-only games stripped of unnecessary literary or artistic flair. For the reasons mentioned above, they have developed into a unique genre that most efficiently reflects the otaku's passion toward *moe*-elements. Therefore, the role that the novel games have played in otaku culture in the past several years is enormous. For example, after *Evangelion* the most influential character among the male otaku is not a character in anime or comics but probably "Multi" in *To Heart* (Figure 17).

Figure 17. "Multi HMX-12." In *To Heart Visual Fan Book* (Tokyo: Digital Works, 1999), 125.

What It Means "To Be Able to Cry" over Novel Games

In this way, the novel-games genre reveals especially strongly the characteristics of database consumption, even within contemporary otaku culture largely dominated by this database consumption. As a result, some of these games have even lost original characteristics of girl games and instead create a unique world with more emphasis on the combination of *moe*-elements rather than pornographic elements. Typical examples of this are *Kanon* (1999) and *Air* (2000), both produced by Key (Figure 18).

Although both of these works are categorized for adult-only sales, they now contain hardly any pornographic illustrations. Games produced by Key are designed not to give erotic satisfaction to consumers but to provide an ideal vehicle for otaku to efficiently cry and feel *moe,* by a thorough combination of the *moe*-elements popular among otaku. For example, in *Air,* pornographic illustrations of all sorts are concentrated in the first half, as if to reject the premise that the goal of girl games is erotic satisfaction. The latter half of the ten-plus hours of playing time does not even contain substantial choices; the player only follows the texts as a melodrama unfolds about a heroine. Even this melodrama is rather typical and abstract, created out of a combination of *moe*-elements such as "incurable disease," "fate from previous lives," and "a lonely girl without a friend." The story of *Air* moves on as a barebones structure of combined settings, while leaving important questions unanswered, such as where the story takes place, what the heroine's illness is, or in what age "the past lives" were.

Nevertheless, this kind of game is a great commercial success— selling more than one hundred thousand copies despite its high price— because, like the successful strategy of *Di Gi Charat,* it masterfully grasps all of the fundamentals of *moe,* from the types of narrative to the details of design. As I mentioned with regard to novels by Seiryōin Ryūsui, the *moe*-elements extracted from the subculture database seem far more real than the imitation of the real world for the emergent group of consumers in the 1990s.

Therefore, in most cases when they say "it's deep" or they "can cry," the otaku are merely making a judgment on the excellence in the

Figure 18. The startup screen for *Air*. Produced by Key.

combination of *moe*-elements. In this sense, the rising interest in drama that occurred in the 1990s is not essentially different from the rising interest in cat ears and maid costumes. What is sought here is not the narrative dynamism of old, but a formula, without a worldview or a message, that effectively manipulates emotion.

Toward the Possibility of Producing a More Thorough Simulacrum

There is yet another aspect to the consumption of novel games. Unlike novels and comics, the substance of computer games is sought not in the drama that the player sees on the screen (a small narrative) but in the system that generates such a drama. Whether in action games or role-playing games, the images on the screen or the narrative development are but one possible version generated according to the player's keystrokes. If the player plays differently, the same game can display a different set of screens or narrative development. And the consumer of the games as a matter of course receives not only the single story at hand but also the sum of different versions of *possible stories*. Therefore,

an analysis of novel games must pay attention to this double-layer structure in order to avoid the mistake of employing a framework from literary or film criticism.

Clearly, this structure reflects the postmodern world image (the database model) that we have analyzed thus far. Therefore, there is a deep relationship between the development of computer games and the development of postmodernity; this relationship is obvious just from the temporal coincidence, but I will discuss this point on another occasion. Here it suffices to say that for the novel game, as a kind of computer game, the user's attitude toward it is double-layered as well. As mentioned above, the consumption of novel games at the outer surface layer satisfies with combinations of *moe*-elements, and the otaku fully enjoy the indulgence of crying and *moe*. This is definitely true, but when we look more closely, another kind of desire can be discerned.

More concretely, there is a desire to invade the system of a novel game itself and to extract the raw information *before* it is constituted on a playing screenshot, and to reconstitute an entirely different work with the material. Many screenshots of novel games are constructed from a combination of multiple data. The three images on the right of Figure 19 are screenshots from *The Scar,* but they can all be resolved into various electronic files, as indicated on the left of the figure. For example, the screenshot on the top right was created by overlaying the image of the character (in the system designated by the file name "C31.LFG") on the background image of a Japanese-style room ("S10.LFG") and laying the texts of the scenario (part of the file designated as "016.SCN") over them. In addition, as indicated in the figure, the same texts and images can generate various screenshots depending on combinations. The recycling of files is desirable by necessity, not only because of the streamlining of the production process but also because of hardware conditions (limits on the capacity of recording media).

Such recycling of images is by no means uncommon and is often seen in comics and anime. In anime in particular, most screens consist of multiple overlapping cells, and the idea is not that different with the novel games. One crucial difference between novel games and

Figure 19. Double-layered structure of novel games.

anime, however, is that in novel games fragments of the screen are not only used by producers but can also be easily analyzed and made into a database by consumers. The text and image files as indicated in the figure are often unreadable at the time of purchase, because they are actually compressed and encrypted. However, many consumers of girl games are computer users who have abundant technical knowledge and have the hacker's mentality. As a result, on the Internet there is freeware that analyzes the data and "extracts" scenarios, images, and sounds from the data of such major games as *The Scar.* I used one such freeware application in order to create the figure here.[58]

Such an environment pushes the derivative works in novel games a step further than before. As I explain above, derivative works are works presented as simulacra, which are created as a combination of arbitrarily chosen fragments in the database extracted from the settings of the original. However, in the derivative works of the past, the database utilized is an abstract one, reconstructed independently by the consumers, and this leaves room for the originality of the author. For example, the authors of the fanzines of *Evangelion* dissolved the original into fragments and reassembled them, but they had to draw the actual pages of the fanzines by themselves; some kind of authorship resides there. There were some attempts to create derivative works by sampling the TV series (those were called "mad video"), but in part due to the technological limitations of the time, it did not become a major movement.

But in the latter half of the 1990s, the rise of the novel games, the popularization of analysis described above, and the enrichment of multimedia environment to reconstitute the data enabled the production of more thorough simulacra that are qualitatively different from those derivative works. One example of this is a type of video work called a "mad movie." This is a short video clip created by capturing the screens of anime and games and manipulating and editing them to some music, and is mainly circulated over the Internet. One difference from the what used to be called the "mad video" in the 1980s is that the entire editing process has been digitized, and as a result the intentions and the motives of the producers become quite different.

In particular, the works created as derivative works of novel games have made quite unique developments.

For example, among the mad movies of *Air* are works created by using the images extracted from *Air* almost untouched, edited with the music extracted from the game. Here, unlike the derivative works in fanzines, a new type of derivative work is emerging that uses the exact same data as the original but is created by changing the combinations and modes of expression. Recently, there have been many interesting examples along these lines, such as an attempt to create a completely different game using the same character images and voice data, or an attempt to independently transplant a Windows version of a novel game to another operating system.

These new types of derivative works are much more likely to cause copyright issues than the previous types such as fanzines, because they use the original data as is. Creators seem to be aware of this problem, and some of these attempts are exchanged over the Internet for only a limited time. I am not in the position to comment on the present state of creating derivative works out of the actual data taken from the original, but I wish to draw the reader's attention to the fact that such a desire to create derivative works in this way is not an individual aberration but a desire necessarily born out of the essence of the novel games (and, ultimately, the essence of postmodernity).

As I said earlier, a scene in a novel game, even in the original, is created by combining multiple data. A screen and a plot, which seem unitary on the surface outer layer, are just an aggregate of meaningless fragments in the deep inner layer. There, the same texts and images are given several different roles, according to the operation of the player. If so, it is a natural development to think that, in reverse, one might create a *different version* (but as valuable as the original) of the novel game by combining these fragments differently. Creators of mad movies are enthusiastically analyzing the system and recombining the data in order to realize again the same emotional experience that they experienced with the original, but in a different combination. At least in their minds, this activity is led by a consciousness fundamentally different from plagiarism, parodying, and sampling.

The Disparate Coexistence of Small Narratives and Grand Nonnarrative

In this way, the consumers of novel games can be characterized as having two completely different inclinations toward the surface outer layer (the drama) and toward the deep inner layer (the system) of a work. In the former they look for an effective emotional satisfaction through combinations of *moe*-elements. In contrast, in the latter they want to dissolve the very unit of the work that gives them such satisfaction, reduce it to a database, and create new simulacra. In other words, in otaku the desire for small narratives and the desire for database coexist separately from each other.

In my opinion, this indicates, through the structure of cultural consumption, a mode of subjectivity in an age when snobbery and fiction have come to an end and the database model has become dominant. Modern individuals traced a path back from small narratives to a grand narrative; individuals at the transition from modernity to postmodernity needed snobbism in order to bridge the gap between them. However, postmodern individuals let the two levels, small narratives and a grand nonnarrative, coexist separately without necessarily connecting them. To put it more clearly, they learn the technique of living without connecting the deeply emotional experience of a work (a small narrative) to a worldview (a grand narrative). Borrowing from psychoanalysis, I call this schism *dissociative.*

Interestingly, many novel games tend to reinforce this sense of dissociation intentionally at the level of the content. As mentioned above, novel games presuppose multiple stories and endings. Therefore, the player cannot pursue a relationship with only one woman. The very structure of novel games essentially requires the player to wander from relationship to relationship. Nevertheless, in a scenario for a novel game, the protagonist (the object of the player's identification) is rarely defined as a debaucher, switching from one girlfriend to another. Instead, "destiny" and "pure love" with the heroine are emphasized. Therefore such a game embraces a clear contradiction: although the protagonist is depicted as someone who experiences pure love at

each juncture and encounters his "woman of destiny," actually each of the different encounters that results from the player's choices is called "destiny." Here, there is a vast discrepancy between the drama required by the characteristics of the system and the drama prepared in each scene.

However, at the current phase of database consumption, this contradiction is not felt as a contradiction. At the level of the deep inner layer of the work (i.e., the database), there exist several different destinies (junctures) for the protagonist. However, at the surface outer layer of the work, i.e., at the level of the drama, there is only one destiny for the protagonist, and the player identifies with, feels empathy for, and is sometimes emotionally moved by it. The players of novel games do not feel this as a contradiction. While they realize that there are several different destinies within the work, they emotionally relate to the world of the work as if the randomly selected choice before them at a given moment is the only destiny.

The reader might perhaps find it difficult to understand a dissociated mental process such as this. In the modern novel, behind the protagonist's small narrative was always a grand narrative that gave it meaning. Therefore, there was only one ending to the novel and that ending could never be changed.

In the postmodern novel games, by contrast, the protagonist's small narrative will never be given meaning by a grand narrative. Each narrative is nothing more than a simulacrum constituted by a combination of randomly chosen finite elements extracted from the database. They can be reproduced again and again at will, and yet from a different point of view the narratives are a "destiny" that cannot be reproduced in the sense that a cast of a die is random and preordained at the same time. Whether you think that the meaning given by a grand narrative is destiny or you think it is the scarcity of the combinations selected from the bundle of finite possibilities that is destiny, I doubt that the importance of this stops with the differences between novels and novel games but rather symbolically reveals the differences between modern and postmodern life skills. Although I can only analyze otaku culture in this book, I think that more broadly this dissociative coexis-

tence of *the desire for a small narrative* at the level of simulacra and *the desire for a grand nonnarrative* at the level of database is a structure that generally characterizes subjectivity in postmodern society.

The Animal Age

A Society Sufficient without the Other

According to Kojève, after the loss of the grand narrative only two choices remain—animality and snobbery. Thus far, this book has argued that the role of snobbery as a zeitgeist ended in 1989 for the world (and for Japan in 1995) and that now a different zeitgeist is evolving, moving toward database consumption. Based on Kojève's rhetoric, I think it fitting to place the name *animalization* on that transition.

What is animalization? Kojève's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* has a unique definition of the difference between the human and the animal. Key to this definition is the difference between desire and need.[59] According to Kojève, humans have desire, as opposed to animals, which have only needs. The word *need* indicates a simple craving or thirst that is satisfied through its relationship with a specific object. For example, animals sensing hunger will be completely satisfied by eating food. This circuit between lack and satisfaction is the defining characteristic of need. Even human life is strongly driven by such needs.

However, humans have a distinct species of craving—*desire.* Different from need, desire does not disappear when the object of desire is obtained and the lack is satisfied. For Kojève and French thinkers influenced by him, a favorite example of this variety of craving is the male's sexual desire for the female. The male desire for the female does not end even when the male obtains a partner's body, but rather swells more and more (according to Kojève and others). This is because sexual desire is not a simple thing satisfied with a sense of physiological climax; rather it has a complex structure, wherein *the desire of the other is itself desired.* Simply put, even after a man gets a woman, in reality he wants that fact to be desired by (excite the jealousy of) the other. Or, at the same time, he thinks he wants to get that which the other desires (is jealous of), so that desire is never exhausted. Humans differ from animals in their self-consciousness; the reason they can

build social relations is because they have intersubjective desire. Animal needs can be satisfied without the other, but for human desires the other is essentially necessary; and here I will not go into detail, but this distinction is an extremely grand premise that is the basis for modern philosophy and thought from Hegel to Lacan. And Kojève, too, maintains this.

Consequently, "becoming animal" means the erasure of this kind of intersubjective structure and the arrival of a situation in which each person closes various lack–satisfaction circuits. What Kojève labeled "animalistic" was the postwar, American-style consumer society. But, based on this context, we can still find in that word a sharp insight that is more than a simple impression.

The logic of American-style consumer society has grown steadily since the 1950s and has now spread throughout the world. Today's consumer society has been standardized, media-ized, and it has developed a meticulously well-kept distribution management system. In it, improvements accumulate day after day so that consumer needs are satisfied immediately and mechanically, without the intervention of the other. The objects of desire that previously could not be had without social communication, such as everyday meals and sexual partners, can now be obtained very easily, without all that troublesome communication, through fast food or the sex industry. So it can be said that in this way our society has truly been stepping down the path of animalization for several decades. As previously mentioned, Kojève predicted that in this society the world would become a place where people "would perform musical concerts after the fashion of frogs and cicadas, would play like young animals, and would indulge in love like adult beasts."[60] If we look at today's mature, computerized consumer society, we can see that Kojève's prediction has been nearly realized.

The "Animalistic" Consuming Behavior of the Otaku

In this perspective, the adjective "animalistic" is indeed appropriate for the otaku consuming behavior, positing *moe* for *Di Gi Charat,* reading Seiryōin Ryūsui's *Cosmic,* and crying over the girl game *Air.* As we see again and again, snobbery is no longer necessary for the

otaku of today. The desire for a grand narrative that gave birth to snobbery is itself now weakening. Instead, demanding the right formula of *moe*-elements that more effectively realizes emotional satisfaction, they consume and cull new works one after another.

Accordingly, if otaku discover some new element, most characters and narratives are immediately transformed, and from the assembled and negotiated permutations of multiple elements many analogous works are born. Within the collective and anonymous works in aggregate, traditional authorship plays an extremely small role. The intensity of the works does not come from the message or narrative embedded there by the author but is decided according to the compatible preferences of consumers and the *moe*-elements dispersed in the works.

So if we were to stretch our chain of association, this sort of otaku behavioral principle can be thought of as differing from that of intellectual aficionados (conscious people), whose interest is based in cool judgment, and from that of fetishistically indulgent sexual subjects (unconscious people). But rather, more simply and directly, the otaku behavioral principle can be seen as close to the behavioral principle of drug addicts. Not a few otaku tell a heartfelt story that, having once encountered some character designs or the voices of some voice actors, that picture or voice circulates through that otaku's head as if the neural wiring had completely changed. This resembles a drug dependency rather than a hobby.

The Conservative Sexuality of the Otaku

Actually, there are some cases that can be better explained by taking this kind of confession of personal experience at face value. Psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki raises the following question in several occasions: Why are there very few actual perverts amongst otaku, even though the icons of otaku culture are filled with all sorts of sexual perversions?[61] Since the 1980s, much has been made about male otaku possessing pictures of Lolitas and female otaku enjoying the "yaoi" genre featuring male homosexuals;[62] on the other hand, everyone knows that among the otaku there are not so many real pedophiles or homosexuals. Accordingly, Saitō's raising of this question should be of profound interest.

Unfortunately, Saitō's answer is too complex. According to his explanation, the otaku have lost a grand narrative (in Saitō's terms they've "failed in their symbolic castration"), and in order to fill the loss they need to sever real sexuality from imaginary sexuality and supplement the loss of the former with the latter. As a result, their creations are filled with excessively sexual images. This analysis probably highlights a certain aspect of otaku psychology, but, as far as explaining the phenomena concerned, Saitō's logic is unnecessarily circumlocutory.

With the continuing trend toward animalization in mind, there is a much more simple explanation of the same reality. Just as animal needs and human desires differ, so do genital needs and subjective "sexuality" differ. Many of the otaku today who consume adult comics and "girl games" probably separate these two; and their genitals simply and animalistically grew accustomed to being stimulated by perverted images. Since they were teenagers, they had been exposed to innumerable otaku sexual expressions: at some point, they were trained to be sexually stimulated by looking at illustrations of girls, cat ears, and maid outfits. However, anyone can grasp that kind of stimulation if they are similarly trained, since it is essentially a matter of nerves. In contrast, it takes an entirely different motive and opportunity to undertake pedophilia, homosexuality, or a fetish for particular attire as one's own sexuality. In most cases, the sexual awareness of the otaku does not reach that level in any way.[63] Precisely because of this, otaku have a strange Janus-faced quality (just as in the previously mentioned case of their attitude toward derivative works): on the one hand, they consume numerous perverse images, while on the other hand, they are surprisingly conservative toward actual perversion.

From the Fictional Age to the Animal Age

The massive trend from the fabrication of grand narratives to their simple disposal, from *Gundam* to *Di Gi Charat,* from narrative consumption to database consumption, that is to say *from the partial postmodern to the total postmodern* means the animalization of people living in the animal age. Consequently, here I build on and continue the discussion of Ōsawa Masachi, which considers 1945 to 1970 as the

idealistic age and 1970 to 1995 as the fictional age, by calling the period from 1995 *the animal age.* As I've said repeatedly, this transformation, or the animalization of consumers, was born out of global postmodernization and was by no means a solely domestic phenomenon. Moreover, just as the opposition between the idealistic age and the fictional age is acute, it is clear that the movement from the fictional age to the animal age, too, was particularly fast in Japan.

Here it is instructive to look at the behavioral pattern of the so-called *kogal*[64]—the street girls on whom 1990s journalism foraged as much as it did on otaku, though in different ways. As I don't know much about this tendency, my consideration will have to rely on general mass media coverage, and I can only give some rough impressions. However, within those bounds, the *kogal* behavioral pattern, though it possesses many traits that appear on the surface to be the polar opposite of the otaku, of course can still be thought of as "animalistic." The girls hardly resisted selling their own sexual bodies, an act which they separate from their consciously chosen modes of sexuality; engaging in essentially isolated communication despite having many acquaintances, they choose to lead a lifestyle extremely sensitive to the satisfaction of their needs.

Similarities between the *Kogal* and the Otaku

The emergence of the *kogal* is not at all unrelated to the changes in otaku culture. In the late 1990s, the sociologist Miyadai Shinji became famous as an expert in the culture of the street girls, and the trajectory of his problematic was quite close to that of Ōtsuka Eiji and Ōsawa Masachi, and all three belong to the same generation. By tracing his writings, it becomes quite clear that the two subcultures, i.e., the otaku and the *kogal,* emerged as a reflection of the same social transformation.

For example, *The Choice of the School Uniform Girls,* the book in which Miyadai took up the *kogal* (then known as "the blue sailor suit girls") as the main theme for the first time, is also noteworthy for its excellent discussion on the otaku in its latter half.[65] According to Miyadai, since 1973 the sense of community within a generation has been lost in Japanese society, and youth groups became "island uni-

verses." In the 1980s, the people known as "new Homo sapiens"[66] and "the otaku" were the first groups to adjust to this change. Miyadai characterizes the principles of action for the "new Homo sapiens" and the otaku as "depthless communication based on the symbolic exchanges and a self-image that is barely maintained within the limited information space"; they emphasize fictional, symbolic exchanges "in order to artificially make up for the presuppositions of communication that have become weaker than before."[67] Clearly, this analysis points to the same psychological process that Ōtsuka called "narrative consumption" and Ōsawa called "the secondary projection of the agency of the third party." This desire to fabricate a replacement for the lost grand narrative out of subculture is what Miyadai calls "a global meaning-giving strategy."

However, as *The Choice of the School Uniform Girls* emphasizes, in the 1990s this very strategy had become saturated, making it difficult to maintain even "the limited information space." In our terminology, it is the age in which even narrative consumption has become difficult. Based on this understanding, in 1995 Miyadai greatly appreciated practical action principles among the street girls and began journalistic activities with the slogans such as "Taking-it-easy *[mattari]* Revolution" and "From Meaning to Intensity." It is difficult to provide specific quotes of Miyadai from this period, as he failed to give a sustained argument; but his basic attitude is quite obvious from these slogans and various essays he wrote. There are curious coincidences between this and the questions of database consumption discussed thus far.

For example, in *Live the Endless Everyday,* which is a collection of Miyadai's essays published immediately following the Aum Shinrikyō sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995, he persistently discusses the contrast between "those who cannot adjust to the endless everyday" and "those who can adjust to it." Members of the Aum Shinrikyō cult represent the former, while the "blue sailor suit girls" fall into the latter. Given this contrast, Miyadai writes that it is probably possible to resolve the insularity of the former intellectually, but "such an approach is so mesmerizingly circuitous that one must wonder if it could ever be an effective strategy." Miyadai goes on to say:

"but I believe that there is another, completely different path: it is to abandon a total, comprehensive demand. It is a decisive path that we have already begun to take."[68] In a highly encoded and anonymous city culture, the "blue sailor suit girls" of the 1990s adopted a take-it-easy attitude "without telling Yumi from Yuka"; for them, there is neither the will to capture the entire world in their perspectives ("a total, comprehensive answer") nor the excessive self-consciousness caused by abandoning such will. They do not have a "meaning-giving strategy" nor do they need narrative consumption.

This is the very "path" that I have been discussing as "database consumption." Just as the snobbish otaku and the "new Homo sapiens" were two sides of the same coin in the 1980s, so were, probably, the animalized otaku and these girls in the 1990s.

The Sociality of the Otaku

In the postmodern age, people become animalized. As a matter of fact, in the past ten years the otaku have undergone rapid animalization. One reason for this is that their cultural consumption revolves not around the giving of meaning by a grand narrative but around the combination of elements extracted from the database. They no longer bother themselves with the troublesome relationship wherein "the desire of the other is itself desired"; they simply demand works in which their favorite *moe*-elements are presented in their favorite narratives.

There may be objections to such a statement, however. True, the otaku's attitude toward a work may be animalized, i.e., governed by a simple logic of lack and satisfaction. At the same time otaku are also known to be quite sociable. Far from avoiding contact with others, don't the otaku engage in diverse modes of communication, such as online chats and bulletin boards as well as conventions and "off-line meetings" in real life? And aren't there complex relationships at work, such as desiring the desire of the other? Even today, the otaku, regardless of their generation, compete with each other in collections, envy each other, boast, form cliques, and slander each other. This behavior is quite "human." Would it not be too one-sided to argue that the otaku are animalizing and that they are beginning to lose the level of desire?

But that is not the case. Indeed, the postmodern otaku are human beings equipped with desire and sociality. However, their desire and sociality are quite distant from those of the modern human beings.

As I have argued repeatedly, the otaku feel stronger "reality" in fiction than in reality, and their communication consists in large part of exchanges of information. In other words, their sociality is sustained not by actual necessity, as are kinship and local community, but by interest in particular kinds of information. Therefore, while they are quite capable of exercising their sociality as long as they can gain useful information for themselves, they always reserve the freedom to depart from the communication. Whether it is a conversation on a cell phone, an Internet chat, or instances of students or young adults not going to school or staying in their rooms,[69] such freedom "to drop out" has characterized 1990s society in general, not just in otaku culture.

In our era, most physiological needs can be satisfied immediately in an animalistic manner. Regardless of whether this contributes to our individual sense of prosperity, there is no question that in this regard contemporary Japanese society is overwhelmingly more convenient than in the past. And otaku sociality, as Miyadai has pointed out, is produced in accordance with such a society. Since sociality with the other is no longer necessary, this new sociality has no foundation in reality and is based solely on individual volition. Therefore, no matter how much otaku engage in human communication such as competition, envy, and slander, these are essentially mimicry, and it is always possible to "drop out" of them. Kojève might have explained this situation by claiming that the otaku have abandoned the substance of sociality but still maintain its form. Again, in the 1990s, this tendency was not limited to the otaku.

The Society without Grand Empathy

Indeed, the interest in small narratives, which I discussed in the previous section, has risen as if to supplement this hollowing out of sociality. In postmodernity (i.e., the animal age), the world may be understood in terms of the double-layer structure of small narratives and a grand nonnarrative, i.e., of simulacra and the database. Since there is no grand

narrative in the deep inner layer, it is the small narratives in the surface outer layer that can give "meanings" for living. The database does not give us meaning. Therefore, the otaku of the 1990s are simply moved by the drama in the outer surface layer of the work, despite their desire to dissemble, analyze, and reassemble works, or *precisely because of this desire.*

The consumption of novel games is divided into double layers: the desire for the system at the level of database, and the need for drama at the level of simulacra. The former requires sociality of the otaku. They chat actively, exchange information in "off-line meetings," buy and sell derivative works, and discuss their impressions of new works. In contrast, for the latter no sociality whatsoever is required. Their needs for narratives are satisfied individually, in solitude and in absence of the other. A novel game can never be a multiplayer game. And their interest in "crying" and "*moe,*" which has quickly risen in the 1990s, clearly indicates that they are *not* expecting an emotionally moving experience or emotional identification through virtual socializing mediated by the database. In a sense, this is the commonly mentioned psychology of the otaku—the otaku, unable to be moved in reality, demand to be moved by fiction. However, there is a reason I cited concepts such as "postmodernity" and "database" in my discussion here. This change involves not only a simple shift in the locations of emotion but also a qualitative transformation.

It is unnecessary to cite Rousseau to point out that empathy was once considered a basic element of society. In a modern, tree-model society, the circuit tracing small narratives (small empathy) back to a grand narrative (a grand empathy) was still maintained. Today, emotional activities are being "processed" nonsocially, in solitude, and in an animalistic fashion. For in the postmodern, database-model society, there cannot be such a thing as a grand empathy. Today, many otaku works are clearly consumed as tools for such animalistic "processing." To this extent, the functions of *moe*-elements in otaku culture are not so different from those of Prozac or psychotropic drugs. I believe the same observation can be made of some trends in the entertainment industry, such as Hollywood films and techno music.

To conclude, corresponding to the double-layer structure of the database world, the postmodern subjectivity is also divided into double layers. This subjectivity is motivated by "the need for small narratives" at the level of simulacra and "the desire for a grand nonnarrative" at the level of database; while it is animalized in the former, it maintains a virtual, emptied-out humanity in the latter. This, in a nutshell, is the image of humanity emerging from the above observations; I call this new view of humanity *a database animal*.

The modern human was a narrative animal. People were able to satisfy their thirst for "the meaning of life" peculiar to humanity through a likewise peculiarly human means: sociality. In other words, they were able to connect small narratives with a grand narrative analogically.

However, the postmodern human cannot satisfy a thirst for "meaning" through sociality, but rather satisfies it in solitude by reducing it to animalistic needs. There is no longer any connection between small narratives and grand nonnarrative; the world drifts about materially, without giving meaning to lives. The reduction of meaning to animality, the meaninglessness of humanity, and the dissociated coexistence of the animality at the level of simulacra and the humanity at the level of database—in the language of contemporary criticism, these are my current answers to the second question of this book: After the forfeiture of the competition of transcendence in postmodernity, what will become of the humanity of human beings?