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Yoko Ono

## Nostalgia and Futurism in Contemporary Japanese Sci-Fi Animation



*Voices of a Distant Star*, Makoto Shinkai, 2002

Science Fiction (Sci-Fi) is one of the most dominant genres in Japanese popular visual media, namely manga and anime. Although Sci-Fi generally deals with events that take place in the future, Japanese anime/manga abounds with nostalgic images that coexist in these futuristic settings. In this paper, I would like to examine how nostalgic references are used in Japanese Sci-Fi animation, and then revisit the concept of 'future' in Sci-Fi, hoping to cast another light on how visions of the future are portrayed in Japanese popular visual media.

First let us confirm the definition of nostalgia. For its everyday sense we might consult the OED, which defines it as: 'acute longing for familiar surroundings, esp. regarded as a medical condition; homesickness. Also in extended use a) sentimental longing for or regretful memory of a period of the past, esp. one in an individual's own lifetime; (also) sentimental imagining or evocation of a period of the past, and b) something which causes nostalgia for the past; freq. as a collective term for things which evoke a former (remembered) era (cf. *memorabilia*)'. Pam Cook argues in her *Screening the Past* that authenticity of representation of the past in films, or the distinction between

history, memory and nostalgia, has become vague because the latter two are associated with fantasy. They are recollections of one's experience 'reconstructed for the purpose of current agendas', or in other words, 'something idealised (...) that can be never retrieved in actuality and can only be accessed through images' (Cook, 2005). Yet Cook questions, however, traditional notions of history and representation by saying that 'nostalgia cannot be regarded as simple device for idealising and de-historicising the past', as the nostalgic memory films 'encourage reflection in audience' (Cook, 2005).

Now, a nostalgic attitude of looking back on the past does not seem to complement Sci-Fi which is usually placed in a futuristic setting. Interestingly enough, however, Japanese Sci-Fi animations and manga that have a dystopian vision of the future tend to look at the past nostalgically. For instance, Hayao Miyazaki's early work such as *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986), which I will come back to later, share a mixture of fear of the dystopian future and a nostalgic depiction of community life.

Why fear for the future? Japanese visions of a dystopian future are undeniably rooted in the traumatic experience of the atomic bomb attacks, but also derive fundamentally from frequent and continuous threats of natural disaster such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. These tormenting memories have formed a paranoid vision in the mass imagination that things that are out of people's control could come and destroy the world, and this dystopian vision of the future has been repeatedly depicted in various popular media. Why then, mix it with nostalgia in Sci-Fi?

To examine the questionable combination of the two in this paper, I would like to focus on the *sekai-kei* genre, in particular, of Japanese Sci-Fi. It is said that this new genre had developed since the mid-1990s in Japanese popular media, including animation, manga and the 'light novel' or novels targeted at young audiences, and was given this name in early 2000s. The best examples are *Voices of a Distant Star* (Makoto Shinkai, 2002), *She, the Ultimate Weapon* (Shin Takahashi, manga 2000-01, TV animation series 2002) and *Iriya no Sora, UFO no Natsu* (*Iriya's sky and the summer of UFO*) (a novel by Mizuhito Akiyama, 2001-03, OVA 2005) (Azuma, 2007). This

new term of *sekai-kei*, or the genre pre-occupied with 'self-absorbed visions of the world' posits that the private love relationship of the main character and the heroine ('you and me' exclusively) is directly connected to the vague yet ontological issue of 'the end of the world' without depicting the outside/external world, or in other words, the society or nation to which these characters belong (Azuma, 2007).

Although I said earlier that *sekai-kei* developed since the mid-1990s, some argue that its core elements can be found already in as early as the 1980s in the works by a Sci-Fi novelist and originator of the 'light novel', Motoko Arai (Azuma, 2007). So it is possible to consider that the quintessence of *sekai-kei* has existed from the early stages of Japanese Sci-Fi, particularly in the ones for juvenile audiences, and it comes to the fore after the phenomenal success of the *Evangelion* series (Hideaki Anno, 1995-96), which certainly contains *sekai-kei* elements.

Now, I would first like to examine one *sekai-kei* animation mentioned above, namely *Voices of a Distant Star*, by applying contemporary Japanese cultural theorist Hiroki Azuma's postmodern 'otaku' discourse from *The Animalising Postmodern* (2001) and the succeeding studies in *The Birth of Gamic Realism* (2007) that has been received as 'neo-new' criticism in Japan, and then analyse the use of nostalgia in these *sekai-kei* Sci-fi animations.

To begin with, I would like to summarise Azuma's discourse. According to his analysis, *otaku* (geek) culture is grounded in a postmodern Japanese society. By referring to Jean-François Lyotard's famous definition of the postmodern as 'incredulity toward grand narratives' in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), Azuma points out that the belief in fictional worlds, one of the significant aspects of *otaku* culture, makes interesting parallels with the attitude that Japanese society as a whole adhered to after grand narratives of progress and prosperity have been lost. Particularly in 1970s when the oil shocks and the incidents of *Rengo sekigun* (the United Red Army of Japan) gave a negative impact on Japanese society, however, the tide turned and incredulity towards grand narratives grew stronger. The post-war baby boomers who had been brought up with faith in grand narratives could not ac-

cept the world as it was, and in disillusionment tried to live on as if grand narratives still existed and functioned. This coincided with the emergence of *otaku*.



[www.hirokiazuma.com](http://www.hirokiazuma.com)

Azuma observes that *otaku* depended on the fabrication of sub-culture instead of grand narratives, and he suggests that the 'copy culture' of *otaku* resembles the 'precession of simulacra' or hyperreality proposed by Jean Baudrillard's economics-based theory expounded in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976) and *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). It is well known that *otaku* make parodies of their favourite manga or anime, and sell them at Comic Market conventions (Kinsella, 1998). However, it has become difficult to distinguish the original from the copy because the boundaries between them have nowadays become blurred. The parodies made by *otaku* have gained such popularity in their community that some *otaku* would become professionals and produce their original work in the public media, and the original writers/artists produce parodies of their own work to attract an *otaku* audience. *Otaku* consumption culture clearly demonstrates that simulacra have overtaken the original. *Otaku* culture thus reflects postmodern Japan well, Azuma argues.

Azuma then develops his argument by proposing a 'database' model to capture the postmodern world. Azuma states that the postmodern world lost fundamen-

tal 'grand narratives', but the 'grand narratives' have been replaced by a 'database' and the little narratives by simulacra. Azuma designates these 'databases' as 'grand non-narratives' in contemporary Japan.

Let me elucidate this further by mentioning his other point that there is a generation gap in the present *otaku* community. *Otaku* of the 1970s and 1980s, born in the time when 'grand narratives' were still believed, could not rid themselves of the old conceptual framework. They needed 'grand narratives' in their sub-cultural products, because otherwise they could not regard the world depicted in *manga/anime* as realistic. In other words, *otaku* in the 1970s and 1980s enjoyed *manga* and *anime* that had a clear definition of the virtual world with its own historical and social settings and messages, and the creators were required to produce contents with fictional 'grand narratives' such as the *Mobile Suit Gundam* series by Yoshiyuki Tomino (the first series appeared as a TV series in 1979-80) that is claimed to have changed the concept of giant robot animation, which had been regarded as purely children's entertainment, into a 'Real Robot sub-genre' (Simmons, 2002). On the other hand, the younger generation of *otaku* from the 1990s and 2000s, born long after the period of incredulity of 'grand narratives' had passed, are ready to accept the world without 'grand narratives', therefore their sub-cultural products do not require 'grand narratives' anymore, and they just look for signs from the database. In other words, the younger generation only cares for characters, without paying much attention to the stories or the world around or behind them (Ito, 2005). So, what these young *otaku* are enthusiastically doing is just collecting figure dolls of their favourite characters. Azuma then argues that the younger generation of *otaku* perceive the world or reality as if playing video-games.

Azuma coined this attitude 'gamic realism' and insists that to understand this new variety of 'realism', analysis of the surrounding media environment is essential. He continues that while traditional media deliver contents (in other words, one-way communication), gamic realism looks for interactive communication media (for instance, an internet community such as Bulletin Board System), as young *otaku* feel that they are con-

nected to products, to others or to reality in this mode of interactivity.

By applying Azuma's theory, regardless of whether the attitudes of contemporary *otaku* are socio-logically dysfunctional or not, I would now like to analyse nostalgia in *Voices of a Distant Star*. This 25-minute full digital animation was produced by an amateur individual called Makoto Shinkai (who served as its director, script writer, editor and art designer) and won many animation and media awards in Japan for its high visual quality, and gained cult popularity. The story is relatively simple: it takes place in 2046, when the science and technology of mankind has developed dramatically after the discovery of the remains of another civilization on Mars in 2039. In order to investigate this civilization (named Tarsian), which had moved to another planet, they formed the United Nations Space Army.



*Voices of a Distant Star*, Makoto Shinkai, 2002

The protagonists, Mikako and Noboru, are close classmates at junior high school. The heroine has been selected as one of the pilots to serve in the army and joins the UN space fleet. The male protagonist Noboru is thus left behind and remains on earth, going on to high school. The two never express their feelings to each other before Mikako's departure, despite the fact that they have strong affection for each other. The main story is about their communication and the difficulty of communication, which is a key issue of self-identification for young *otaku*. As their long distance 'relationship' begins, they try to communicate by text messages via mobile phone. However, the further Mikako travels from earth's

solar system, the longer it takes to send and receive messages. Eventually, the time it takes for a message to arrive takes a few months, a year, a few years, and so on. Because of the faster than light technology that moves the UN fleet through space, Mikako and Noboru remain the same age as each other despite the increasingly vast distances that separate them. Their messages, however, must travel at slower or normal (ie. technologically permissible) speeds.

Eventually, Mikako sends a despondent message, saying that 'I am still 15 years old, but by the time you receive this message, you will be 24 years old!' She fears that Noboru will forget about her. She compares their relationship to Romeo and Juliet, separated by time and space. Meanwhile, Noboru fears that he cannot grow up if he merely waits for Mikako's text messages, and he tries to move forward in his new life without Mikako.

It is useful to examine the *sekai-kei* genre here. The plots of the two other *sekai-kei* works I mentioned earlier are quite similar to this: the male protagonist and heroine are secondary school students and are in romantic relationships; the story is often narrated from the male protagonist's point of view; their everyday life is depicted as if it were today's high school life even though the story takes place in the future; despite its emphasis on technological advancement, particularly in terms of weapons and armaments, the characters' everyday life hardly seems to show any futuristic change; one day, they are involved in a war that may cause the end of the world; this triggers the couple to pay desperate attention to each other; the most interesting feature of this crisis is that it is the heroine who goes to the war front to fight to protect the male protagonist and indeed the world, and she gets wounded both physically and mentally, whereas the male protagonist observes the situation powerlessly.

Why is there such subversion of gender stereotypes in these narratives?

One could argue that it is because these *sekai-kei* animations are targeted at young *otaku*, particularly male, so it was produced as an animated version of a *bishōjo* game or romance simulation game. Azuma's term, 'gamic realism', can explain this aptly. The male protagonist is indeed a game player. The audience gets a better

sense of reality if it is presented like a simulation game, as Azuma argues. That also explains why the story is told from the male protagonist's point of view. The male protagonists are not sure of their feelings at the beginning of the story, but their affection grows as the story develops.

In romance simulation games, there are several genres, one of which is called a 'tear-jerker' game, often with a heroine suffering from terminal illness or with problems that are out of her control. The more sentimental the setting is, the more attached the game player becomes to the heroine. The dystopian setting of *sekai-kei* (at the end of the world) fits well in this genre of game, which is why there is no need to describe the 'grand narratives' of their world. The nation, war and society are a mere setting for turning the player's enthusiasm towards romance with the heroine. The reason why the heroine has to go through physical (as well as psychological) anguish can be explained in the same way. Heroines are chosen by the nation to become fighters for a great cause against their will. However, no matter how much the game player adores the heroine, being a game player, he is powerless and there is nothing he can do to save her apart from reading the text that tells of her pains. In most cases, the heroine dies or disappears at the end (it is called 'bad-end' among *otaku* game players, as opposed to 'happy-end').

I hope to have explained clearly enough that *sekai-kei* constructs its world as if it is a simulation game. However, I seem to have lingered too long on Makoto Shinkai and the *sekai-kei* genre. Now let's come back to *Voices of a Distant Star* and nostalgia.

As I mentioned earlier, the protagonists' everyday lives appear very familiar to ours, despite its futuristic backdrop. In fact, apart from the stunning depiction of space robots, there is nothing to indicate a futuristic setting. The fact they exchange text messages on very basic mobile phones seems odd in this setting. On the contrary, the audience senses nostalgia in the details of their everyday lives. But why and how do these images elicit the audience's nostalgia?

The trick can be found in the introductory sequence of the film. It is Mikako's nostalgia for the home life she shared with Noboru, if not homesickness. She is away from her home and beloved. The audience is

drawn into the world of *Voices of a Distant Star* to sympathise with Mikako's situation from the beginning. Indeed, it is not difficult for the audience to simulate Mikako's nostalgia, as Shinkai's naturalistically depicted landscape is so familiar with what the audience has experienced in their adolescence and easily stimulates their nostalgia. By applying Azuma's theory, one can say that these images are simulacra of nostalgia.

However, I must remind you here that even though the audience sympathises with Mikako, they are still watching the story from the male protagonist's viewpoint; in other words, a game player's view. The text message communication displayed in the story is actually a one-way communication from the heroine, and although the audience can hear the inner voice of the male protagonist, the audience never sees him sending messages to the heroine. This underlines the resemblance to simulation games; a character can express her message, but the player can merely read the text, and cannot interact with the character.



*Voices of a Distant Star*, Makoto Shinkai, 2002

If *Voices of a Distant Star* duplicates a simulation game, there is an additional issue to be considered. Left on the earth, Noboru decides to be strong and grow up alone. Whereas Mikako, when she encounters her alter ego (which is actually a Tarsian transformed into her own form<sup>1</sup> who invites her (and mankind) to follow the Tarsians further so that they can offer mankind more knowledge and technology), refuses to embrace this new, distant life by saying that she would just like to return home to Noboru. This makes a very interesting

contrast between the two characters' choices for life. One (who is situated in a recognisable present) tries to face reality and grow up, while the other (situated in an unrecognisable present that is also a distant future) prefers to remain in a nostalgic world, which is not reality.

Here again, I would like to apply Azuma's discourse: in the gamic reality, those who are familiar with meta-narratives of a virtual world are aware that they cannot stay there forever. A player struggles to make a choice whether to continue enjoying meta-narratives (in the case of romance simulation games, by simulating love affairs with several heroines), or to give up and come back to real life.

Mikako's and Noboru's choices represent, respectively, one who wants to remain in a non-real world (in her case, the nostalgic world) and one who tries to grow up in reality. Their choices are emphasised by their age as, while Noboru grows up physically (since his time in the anime is measured by the increasingly delayed reception of messages from Mikako), Mikako remains 15 (since her time is connected to sending the messages and not to their delayed reception), staying in her reminiscent world.

One may ask the question of how Mikako can be synchronised with the audience as she is merely a character in the game, and not a player. She is undeniably a character rather than a player in terms of a simulation game, but at the same time, she represents a player who plays a shooting game. She fights against Tarsians as in a shooting game. In that sense, both protagonists represent game players, though in different types of games. The story ends with a text that states: '*koko ni iru yo*' (I am here) with a voice-over of both protagonists, as if responding to Mikako's question 'where am I?' at the opening sequence. The text is written on a neutral, plain white background to allow the audience to read this out of the context of each character's life. It does not matter which choice one makes, because they are both allowed to exist (albeit in different relations to each other's time and space).

Now let's focus on nostalgia. As I mentioned earlier, the nostalgic landscape in *Voices of a Distant Star* are simulacra. It means that these images are not rooted in 'grand narratives'. They are a collection of signs that

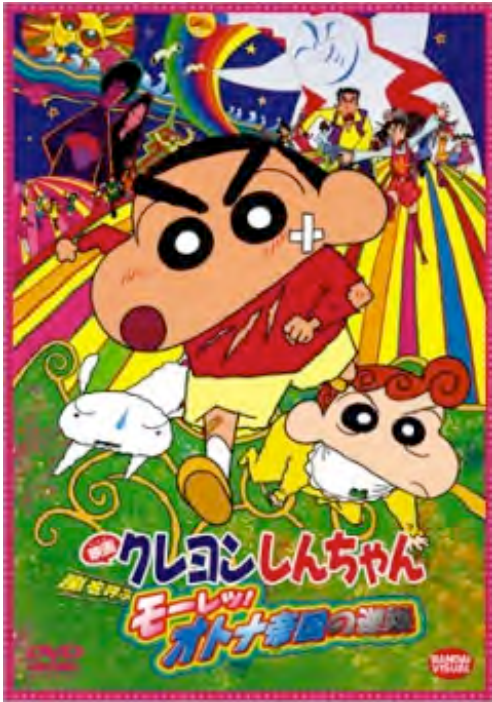
brings sentimental imaginings of the past to the audience's mind, but it does not necessarily belong to one particular time, community or person. It can rather be said that these signs are fragmented reflections of the collective imagining, or a fabrication of what Japanese regard as the 'nostalgic past'.

In order to elucidate this point, I would like to refer to another animated feature, *Crayon Shin-chan: The Adult Empire Strikes Back!* (Keiichi Hara 2001). It is the ninth spin-off, feature-length animation of a widely popular *manga* and TV series. *Crayon Shin-chan* is a comedy aimed at children with a naughty kindergarten boy as a central character, and certainly has much less *otaku* appeal than *sekai-kei*. This film, however, is more Sci-Fi than an everyday life comedy in its own right.

In *Crayon Shin-chan*, a new theme park called 20<sup>th</sup> century EXPO opens in various parts of Japan, including in the town where Shin-chan lives, and adult residents including Shin-chan's parents are enthusiastic about the attractions representing 20<sup>th</sup> century popular culture, feeling like children again. Retro products (like monochrome televisions and vinyl records) come back onto the market due to popular demand. One day the adult residents disappear from town, and Shin-chan and his friends discover a conspiracy carried out by a secret society called 'Yesterday once more' to build a new Adult Empire by recreating the 'good old' Showa period. Adults have been brainwashed by toxic gas which contains the 'nostalgic air of Showa period,' which was being diffused into the air of the 20<sup>th</sup> century EXPOs. The Showa period was symbolised here by Tokyo Tower and imagery from EXPO 70, which was held in Osaka.

This film hit the screen in 2001, at the very beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and Ken, one of the core members of the secret society, says that there is no 'future' in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and that is why he would like to bring people back to the time when community functioned properly. In a sequence in which Ken takes the protagonists to his recreated 'Showa community town,' where he currently lives with others who agree with his vision, it is not difficult to see the exemplification of 'Showa nostalgia'. The film displays that nostalgia as merely signs (of memorabilia) that can be retrieved from a 'database', and reproduced as if a film set. Indeed, the

more recent hit film *ALWAYS: 3chome no yuhi* (*Always: Sunset on 3rd Street*) (Takashi Yamazaki, 2005), based on Ryohei Saigan's long-running *manga* of the same title that first appeared in 1974, reincarnates this nostalgic landscape in a live-action film by employing Special Effects. There is a remarkable resemblance in the depictions of Showa downtown landscapes in the two films.



*Crayon Shin-chan: The Adult Empire Strikes Back!*  
Keiichi Hara, 2001

The most interesting point here lies in what Ken says; he does not want to face the dark side of the future and prefers to return to the past. Japanese nostalgia for the Showa period, particularly around the 1950s (Showa 30s), has been widely criticised in the postwar period because it tends to neglect the negative side of that period. Ken, for instance, fabricated a downtown of the Showa 30s like a film studio set, and tried to remain there. The little, childish hero, Shin-chan, stands against Ken by saying he would like to grow up. Targeting mainly children, this film's message is straightforward and clear.

Thus, nostalgia in contemporary Sci-Fi animation is synonymous with the refusal to grow up into the future. Nostalgic landscapes are signs of the comfortable homely surroundings that no longer exist, and the narrative in *Crayon Shin-chan* presents a pair of contrasting characters; one protagonist accepts the harsh reality and

tries to grow up, while the other tries to remain in the fabricated comfort of the past. This is related to *Distant Star* in complicated ways.

It is useful also to examine how 'future' is presented in these films, and to discover without difficulty that 'future' is also characterised by signs retrieved from a database, in the same way as 'nostalgia'. 'Future', likewise, is represented by highly advanced technology, super robots in particular, and space travel and/or war. It is interesting to see that the superficial images of the future in *sekai-kei* do not differ much from the ones in the *manga/anime* of the 1970s. There is a significant difference, however, in the perception of the future between them. In the 1970s, when 'grand narratives' were still believed in, it was also believed that the 'future' was a time and place of hope for mankind, where science and technology would advance and people's lives would be more civilised, more prosperous and more convenient. The 'future' promised the ultimate comfort of life and was something to which to look forward.

Today, people are disappointed to learn that scientific and technological advancement does not necessarily fulfill one's life. On the contrary, it can rather alienate and disconnect individuals; unhappy and distraught people are desperate to find a comfortable place in society, looking back at the past where once there was a community to which they felt they belonged. The Showa period is depicted positively in the films I mentioned above, because people could believe that there was a 'future' at that time. The catch copy from the trailers of *ALWAYS: 3chome no yuhi*, confirms this: 'Although we were poor, we could dream of the future' (*yutakadewa nakatta keredo, ashita eno yumega atta*).

I hope to have demonstrated enough to reach the conclusion now. I have to mention, however, that not all Sci-Fi animations use nostalgic views of the past in such a way. For instance, Miyazaki's early works like *Nausicaä* and *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* depicted community life positively yet in a nostalgic manner. Miyazaki, who values positive aspects of history (or 'grand narratives'), believes that human beings should learn from the past to build a better future. When Miyazaki depicts community life and technology nostalgically, he convinces the audience (and probably himself too) to re-evaluate what we had in the

past.<sup>2</sup> As Helen McCarthy suggests, Miyazaki is against blind faith in technology and recapturing the old world, and his true message is 'to help the children (...) learn what makes them feel good and what will make a better world' and 'to deal with the future through' his work (McCarthy, 2002).

Mamoru Oshii, the director of *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), on the other hand, consistently questions history and employs a nostalgic landscape for a dramatic denial of a present that has abandoned faith in the future. In a sequence in *Patlabor: the Movie* (1989), Detective Matsui walks around Tokyo looking for signs of a terrorist in hiding, Dr. Hoba. Detective Matsui observes that many traditional old houses have been abandoned, and realises the antipathy of Hoba, a genius engineer, towards the massive destruction of his hometown Tokyo in the name of 'urban development'. He then discovers Hoba's intention to contrast the symbolic 'Tower of Babel' with the ruins of old downtown Tokyo.<sup>3</sup> The film was released during the 'bubble economy' and was actually a timely criticism against Japan/Tokyo of the late 1980s. Oshii's attitude towards the past is opposite to Miyazaki's, but both of them are looking at the past to shape the future. The young *otaku's* nostalgia, on the other hand, represented by *Voices of a Distant Star*, is merely simulacra of comfort that is not related to history in terms of 'grand narratives'. In this way, *otaku* nostalgia in Sci-Fi animation demands our further consideration.

## Filmography

### Feature anime:

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Miyazaki, Hayao. *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986)

Miyazaki, Hayao. *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Winds* (1984)

Miyazaki, Hayao. *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988)

Oshii, Mamoru. *Patlabor: the Movie* (1989)

Oshii, Mamoru. *Patlabor 2 the Movie* (1993)

Shinkai, Makoto. *Voices of a Distant Star* (2002)

Yamazaki, Takashi. *ALWAYS: Sunset on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street* (2005)

### OVA or TV animation series:

*She, the Ultimate Weapon* (TV series dir. by Atsuko Kase, 2002)

*Neon Genesis Evangelion* (TV series dir. by Hideaki Anno, 1995-96)

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<sup>1</sup> This film bears many resemblances to precedents in super robot animations; *Evangelion* in particular. This sequence reminds us of the sequence where Rei Ayanami encounters her alter-ego (their enemy 'Angel' transformed into her shape) who questions her true desire.

<sup>2</sup> However, in *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988)—probably the most loved of Miyazaki's work among Japanese audiences—it seems that Miyazaki embraces community life in a rural village in the early Showa period without significant forethought.

<sup>3</sup> Oshii also employed a snowy landscape that refers to the February 26<sup>th</sup> incident of the military coup d'état (1936) (Yomota, 1999) to highlight the sequence of the brief encounter between the heroine Shinobu and the terrorist Tsuge who was her lover in the past in *Patlabor 2: the Movie* (1993).



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