

Urban Imagery and Care for Survival in Japanese Animation

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Abstract: Since the 1980s, several narrative cartoons that use cities as a major narrative background has appeared in Japan. These cartoons illustrate the changes in social life and psychological state brought about by rapid industrialization and urbanization, as well as the conflicts between people, people and society, and people and nature. This type of animation presents various urban problems and expresses the mental dilemmas of urban people and the culture of Japanese urban life. *Castle in the Sky*, *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, *Spirited Away*, *Summer of the Kappa*, *Letter to Momoko*, and *The Garden of Words* are typical representatives of Japanese “urban animation.” These cartoons will be analyzed in this article starting from the interrelationship and coexistence between people, people and society, and people and nature, and the urban images and urban problems presented by Japanese animations will be interpreted.

Keywords: Japanese animation; Urban imagery; Care for survival; Materialism; Individualism

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1. Introduction

After World War II, Japan underwent rapid urbanization and modernization. This means that modern natural science ethics will replace Japan’s nearly two hundred years of Confucian ethics-centered tradition, and natural science knowledge will become the new standard for all value judgments instead of ethics-centered values. American comparative modernization scholar E. Black believes that “modernization is a process of both creation and destruction”^[1], which is demonstrated by Japan’s modernization transformation. Through modernization, Japan becomes anti-traditional and anti-Confucian ethics, trying to use scientific methods and rationality to establish a “scientific outlook on life.” This modernization process of replacing old culture with new culture has brought about the ruins of the Japanese national spirit and the alienation of concepts and consciousness. As Japan enters the era of modernization, secularism, materialism, and individualism have dominated. Its society has become full of vitality, the economy has experienced rapid growth, and personal wealth has also increased significantly. However, their people are not becoming happier, interpersonal relationships have become estranged, and society’s order has deteriorated. Therefore, the alienation of concepts and consciousness, the tense relationships between people, people and society, and people and nature are

reflected in Japanese animation.

2. Materialism and survival anxiety

Modernization's admiration of natural science will inevitably lead to the collapse of religious belief. A world without God is composed purely of material things, and people are materialized into purely physical existences, which leads to the emergence of "materialism." In this way, the entire purpose of human existence is to increase physical happiness and reduce physical pain, and material interests become the highest value pursuit. "Profit" has become the main force that controls people's actions, and people have become "rational economic humans." All close relationships between people become interest-based., this kind of "materialism" is especially prevalent, especially in cities with rapid economic development, which not only triggers various social conflicts and leads to social disorder but also restricts the survival and development of human beings. From the 1950s to the 1970s, Japan accelerated urbanization and vigorously developed its heavy and chemical industries to catch up with the economic development level of Europe and the United States. This reckless pursuit of material interests has led to major environmental pollution and seriously threatened national survival. This incident left a psychological shadow in the hearts of Japanese people that can never be erased – a kind of fear and anxiety about the state of existence. Japanese animation keenly captures the anxiety of Japanese people in a modern living environment where materialism breeds.

In the animation *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, to expand the city and build a better life, human beings rely on technology to do whatever they want, treating nature as a storage yard for the raw materials needed for human life and production, resulting in severe pollution of the urban environment and the creation of the forest of Sea of Decay. However, instead of reflecting on their own mistakes and establishing a correct relationship between humans and nature, they choose to blame nature and start a war against nature in the name of saving the world. This leads to the further deterioration of the relationship between humans and nature until it threatens humanity's survival. The human beings in the film are representatives of extreme materialism. They blindly pursue profits and material enjoyment without considering the rational development of natural resources and protecting the ecological environment. Therefore, when environmental pollution occurs, they panic and cover up their inner anxiety and desire for survival through war and killing each other.

The animation *Summer of the Kappa* implies the contradiction of "antagonism between man and nature" at the beginning of the film. The father of the little kappa, Gu, would be killed by humans with materialistic values when he tried to protect his natural home. Gu then brings this contradiction to the modern city of Tokyo 100 years later. Although the city has undergone tremendous changes, it is still full of dangers because of the presence of humans. Modern humans have not become kind with the advancement of science and technology. Instead, technology has become a powerful weapon for them to harm nature. With the power of technology, they trample on nature and bring aggression into the natural and ecological fields, causing the kappa to become extinct. The most frightening thing is that materialistic values have completely swallowed them up, and they have lost their human consciousness. They blindly pursue "profit" and fulfill their mission in modern society. They are ignorant of the harm their actions will bring to the natural environment, and they never bother about the consequences of their actions on human survival. In fact, when little kappa tries suicide by jumping off a tall tower to protest the "atrocities" of humans, they do not show any remorse. Instead, they watch him with a nonchalant expression. The film reflects the truest mental state of urban people under the background of today's alienated civilization - numbness and confusion, which is thought-provoking.

In addition, the animation *Castle in the Sky* also reflects human beings' thinking on survival issues. In the film, Dola behaves materialistically and does whatever it takes to obtain the "flying stone" that symbolizes

advanced technology. When the City in the Sky, which symbolizes advanced technological civilization, is controlled by an evil party, to avoid the harm caused by the power of science and technology to the human race and provide humans with a good living environment, she puts aside her material interests and returns to the team of justice. She fights against the hostile forces, even at the expense of destroying the City in the Sky. Dola's fight for justice is a reflection and decision from the perspective of "human survival." When human survival becomes a problem, material interests become illusory and meaningless. Through the changes in the behavior of Dola, the film clearly conveys the thoughts and concerns of human beings about the living environment.

3. Individualism and the jungle state of man

After the Meiji Restoration in Japan, the self-governance structure of the feudal community centered on the samurai class gradually collapsed. People lost their common spiritual connection and lived in small nuclear families that were completely connected by the simplest blood relationship, becoming an atomic existence. This led to the birth of "individualism." When modern cities were formed, individualism became more intense, and "big city humans" appeared. This type of person focuses solely on themselves and their desires and ignores the reaction or well-being of others. They regard the outside world as the "environment" for survival, and others are merely objects. They regard others as enemy or prey ^[2]. In other words, urbanites have become people in the "jungle state" envisioned by scientist Thomas Hobbes. They often "separate themselves from their peers, alienate themselves from family and friends, so that after they have constructed their small circle, they no longer care about the society around them" ^[3]. This becomes an illustration of social relations and people's mental state in big cities. Japan is an advanced country, where individualism and jungle-like people prevail throughout. Therefore, the mental states of urban people, such as alienation, indifference, and loneliness, have become the issues captured in Japanese animation.

For example, *Spirited Away* alludes to the mental state of modern urbanites by describing the mental state of the character, a "faceless man," who is not good at communicating and is lonely. The faceless man in the film has no face of his own. He is always dressed in black and stands alone in a dark corner. He wants to integrate into the human world but is not able to talk to other people. He can only use money to attract people to get close to him, but the closeness that money brings can never fill the loneliness in his heart. What he wants is exactly what money cannot buy. This kind of emotional torture of not getting what he wants makes him even more violent and unpredictable, and he becomes an alien in the city. The faceless man in the film is similar to modern urban people in many ways. They seem alienated from the world but long to love and be loved. Being lost in the "jungle" for a long time, isolation and loneliness have caused them to lose the ability to communicate with others, and they cannot find the correct way to love.

People in the "jungle state" only focus on their inner desires and will and do not care about the intentions and reactions of others. Thus, the portrayal of the self-interested radio reporter is depicted in *Summer of the Kappa*. To take a picture of the little kappa, Gu, the radio reporter in the film forces open the backpack containing Gu and takes a frontal photo of Gu with his camera, despite his objections. His selfishness brought him work results and recognition from his leaders, but it negatively impacted Gu. The radio presenter's actions illustrate the behavior of caring for one's own interests even to the extent of hurting others. This is a typical mental state of a "jungle state" person.

Letter to Momoko describes the busyness of Momoko's parents and the neglect of her emotional needs in the urban living atmosphere, as well as her indifference and unwillingness to give back to her parents. Distorted emotions and various social realities of alienated family relationships are reflected in this film. *The Garden of Words* also describes the indifference and loneliness of urban people and the hard-won love in the "jungle state."

In short, in the context of social concepts and consciousness alienation, the “jungle state” has always been the main theme of Japanese animation. This has also formed a common impression that Japanese animation is good at presenting urban problems and mental dilemmas.

4. Conclusion

Urbanization comes with modernization. Japan’s urbanization is faster than other countries, which means that Japan has completed its modernization transformation in a relatively short period. On one hand, this rapid transformation has brought advanced and scientific values and rich material enjoyment to urban people. On the other hand, religion and theocracy have begun to lose their binding force, and society has become secular. Material abundance has led to excessive material pursuits. The loss of divine power allowed urbanites to remove all shackles and transform into individualistic people. The advocacy of modern values such as materialism and individualism causes the estrangement of the relationships between people, people and society, and people and nature.

Many animations in Japan illustrate the lifestyle, psychological characteristics, and spiritual dilemmas of urban people in a specific urban context and depict the contradictory relationships between people, people and society, and people and nature under the background of urbanization. This type of animation provides a new perspective for observing Japanese urbanization and Japanese society and a new way to interpret Japanese urban cultural life patterns, citizen mentality and spiritual characteristics, and urban problems.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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