

Moe to Memes, Otaku to Autists

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The term 'moe' is one of the most important keywords in Japanese pop culture. The development of moe seems very much memetic to me: later artists copied earlier artists and added their own improvements. I also think that an understanding of moe is useful for understanding the history of Internet memes in the West. This is because anime culture was influential on Western meme culture, and moe is influential in anime culture. In the East, the connection between moe and meme has remained close and immediate for decades; in the West, only indirect.

Moe is a slippery word to translate or define. It means a specific kind of affectionate obsession, and has vaguely sexual connotations. It is predominantly targeted as a feeling towards an anime heroine with attractive characteristics. Cute and sexually attractive characters most commonly elicit the moe response, and the stereotypical big-eyed, kawaii anime girl is the result of the industry's scramble to produce more and more moe characters. Over time, the moe-inducing style became settled as a genre. The genre has become the one of the defining characteristics of Japanese pop culture because the culture is founded on the otaku industry and its massive economic influence. Moe is often seen as a symbol of the consumerist corruption of the medium, and many artists and fans have voiced concern at the way moe crowds out other genres of anime and manga with more literary value.

Moe is all about filling particular niches, because the depth of obsession often correlates with specificity. Moe is a broader concept than sexual fetishes, but the cultural pattern which results from it is very similar to fetish communities, and there is a big overlap. The closest analogue to “moe” in English might be when someone types “HNNNNNNG” after seeing something cute or a cool object that they really want, like a special edition merchandise. Of course, people also say “HNNNNNNG” when they see something sexually exciting. But moe has not caught on in the West so much, and this is primarily because animation and comics are less popular in the West. The reason moe itself is unpopular even within the Western animation and comics industry might be because Western media is a lot more explicit in its use of sex. Moe is a particular mixture of cuteness and sexuality which accentuates both. Too much sex means there is not enough room for cute, and thus not enough room for moe. Disney has recently been increasing the cuteness factor in its female characters, and moving closer to moe. Part of the increase in the otaku following for Disney in the East can be attributed to this trend.

The history of moe is most commonly traced back to the 70's, when Urusei Yatora (1978 - 1987) ran on Weekly Shonen Sunday from 1978 to 1987. Urusei Yatsura is most commonly cited as the beginning of the contemporary moe genre. For perspective, Osamu Tezuka ran his Astro Boy manga from 1952 to 1968. The roots of moe should rightfully be traced back to Tezuka's female characters which stood out beyond generic love interests for the hero. For instance, his Princess Knight(1953 - 1956) is a full-fledged shoujo adventure fantasy about a princess who pretends to be a prince and goes on political adventures to save her kingdom. Sailor Moon (1991 - 1997) is one well-known descendant. The big-eyed, exaggerated style in moe anime also owes its popularity to Tezuka; Tezuka himself credits Disney for inspiration in this aesthetic choice. Yet contemporary manga artists who strive to make anime into more than mere entertainment often cite Tezuka as a role model. A post-war Japanese consciousness about the status of women and children in a destroyed nation strongly influenced Tezuka's writing, and the strong attachment readers felt to his characters was partly the result of how he argued for the humanity of female characters: a hitherto unpopular choice. The contemporary anime industry failed to inherit the spirit behind his style in equal measure as the style itself, and the trend is exaggerated in online subcultures.

The archetypal online community is specialised in its collective interests, hostile to outsiders, particular about its tastes and difficult for normies to get into. Knowledge and skill, especially when useful for creating relevant content for the community, is highly valued; “otaku” is the Japanese equivalent of the “autist”. These knowledge hungry subculturalists hate having to share the same space as normies, and

often simply create their own to post in peace without being bothered by people less obsessive than they are. Such communities gave rise to many highly influential Internet forums. The most important case is undoubtedly the imageboard Futaba Channel, an otaku-heavy, isolationist community. Its image-focused thread system attracted foreign users who would have had difficulty with the other, Japanese text-focused platforms. Its success led to spinoff imageboards in other languages, namely 4chan (English), Krautchan (German) and Dvach (Russian).

With the large and growing popularity of anime in the West, a lot more of the associated meme culture is also being imported across the cultural border. Not only are there obvious examples like images that previously only circulated around Eastern Internet communities, Western users have been picking up quintessentially otaku techniques and aesthetic trends. A terrific example of this is the Ideal GF meme, which utilises a memetic technique called ‘moefication’, the artistic reinterpretation of non-moe things as moe. This notion of moefication itself is a meme, sometimes referred to as ‘moe beam’ which turns anything it touches into a moe version of itself. Interestingly enough, it’s also been translated into an English meme as ‘Japanizing Beam’, a template about turning ordinary characters and objects into moe characters. Only the pornographic subgenre of moefication, called ‘Rule 34’, is even comparably popular in the West. The use of Japanese phrases as a meme (e.g. “omae wa mou shindeiru”) is another key signal of the spread of Eastern memes into the West.

I think that the collapse of the cultural border between the East and the West is a good sign. Both cultures are treasure troves of new content and memetic technologies to each other, and the combination of the two is sure to open a new stage in meme history for everyone. I’ve barely touched upon the topic and have a lot more to say but I have to go to the gym now. I’ll write the second part another day.

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