"Doesn't She Ever Die? - The Punkification of Late Capitalism"

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While manga originated in 19th century Japan and short animated films appeared as early as 1917, modern anime truly begins with two seismic events; the success of the first feature length animated film, Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937, and World War II. Disney profoundly impacted the development of manga and anime. The style and animation process and business practices became models to be emulated. World War II ended the Japanese empire. In its place came a parliamentary style democracy and a highly market driven capitalist economy that grew to be the fourth largest in the world.

The horrific devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki gave way to the world domination of Toyota and Sony. The first modern anime are two propaganda films; the short, *Momotarō no Umiwashi* or *Momotarō's Divine Sea Eagles* in 1943, and its sequel *Momotarō: Umi no Shinpei*, or *Momotarō: Sacred Sailors* in 1945.

The latter is the first feature length anime film. Both were directed by Mitsuyo Seo and their style was directly inspired by Seo's admiration of Disney's *Fantasia* from 1940. Both films feature the Japanese folk character *Momotarō* or "Peach Boy", cute anthropomorphized animal characters with big eyes, and appropriated images of Western pop culture such as Bluto from the Popeye cartoons, who represents the boorish drunken decadence of the West.

Momotarō's Divine Sea Eagles features cute animals preparing to attack Pearl Harbor and *Sacred Sailors* has more cute animals liberating an island from the Dutch East India Company, which they will then colonize themselves. Ironically, Mitsuyo Seo was left wing politically himself and after the war he had trouble getting distribution for an animated film that promoted democracy when Tōhō dropped it for being "too leftist". He left the industry soon after to become a children's book illustrator.

Seo's film style in turn was a formative influence on Osamu Tezuka, the father of Manga, and creator of the popular character Astro Boy, which would go on to become the most popular manga in history and span multiple television series films and video games.

Tezuka was also inspired by Disney, in particular *Bambi*, which he had seen many times as a child, and Hollywood film techniques which he adapted into his own visual storytelling style. Tezuka's influence on the style of manga generally led to widespread adoption of the big eyes which both he and Seo had

appropriated from Disney, as well as Fleischer cartoons and quotations from cinema and pop culture.

Manga and anime increased in popularity as Japan's economy grew more and more consumer driven and aimed at both young and adult audiences. Consumer cultures grew around brands and iconography. In the 1970s, a subculture developed called “kawaii” which emphasized innocent looking, cute, childlike icons and products.

Hello Kitty, first created in 1974, was kawaii's avatar which also encompassed Lolita fashion, toys, and ad designs. Hello Kitty would go on to become a worldwide brand and, beginning in the 1980s and culminating in the first decades of the 21st century, Manga and anime would come to dominate pop culture in the West.

Fans in the United States and Western Europe would even come to appropriate the Japanese term “otaku” to refer to their fandom. These images of consumerism are associated with unaffected childishness, cosplay culture, and a conspicuous display of brand logos and items like figurines, plush dolls, stickers, and so on.

While we often, and rightly, criticize appropriation of imagery, terminology, and culture by mostly Western, mostly white consumers, we just as often forget that consumerist appropriation happens in every direction. Modern manga and anime is selling a Disney-fication of itself back to us.

If any pop culture phenomenon represents the contradictions and tensions inherent to a commodification of the very resistance to commodification, it is punk. Punk rose in the early 1970s as a musical, political, and fashion movement. Bands rejected the corporate sheen of arena rock, championed the working class, and also appropriated iconography from S&M, Glam, and New York art school fashionistas.

It began almost simultaneously in England and East Coast America, and quickly was exported around the world. As Kade Nations of *Sabukaro* notes; “Punk was quickly condemned by traditionalists as profane, only fueling the genre's propensity for individuality and the rejection of societal norms. This was especially true in Japan, a collectivist country where deviancy is heavily frowned upon, particularly at a time in which waves of youth led protests challenged the country's institutional and social conventions.”

“The genre began taking off among Japanese youth in the early 1970s who were influenced globally by successful groups such as the New York Dolls, championing this new contemporary rock sound.”

Tamala 2010: A Punk Cat in Space was released in October 2002, nearly a year after 9/11, as the War on Terror was beginning, just a few months before the U.S. declared war in Iraq. Most internet users still had dial up connections. Google was in its infancy. Social media barely existed.

Yoneyuki Sugita writes, “In its efforts to market 9/11 to the Japanese public, the Japanese mass media waged a prolonged search for the most appropriate framework to capture the disagreements and criticisms that surfaced in Japan in response to U.S. actions in the aftermath of 9/11.”

“The Japanese mass media's linking of the 9/11 attacks with the U.S-Japan alliance constituted a contradictory yet critical comfort zone for the Japanese people as they sought to derive meaning from the 9/11 attacks that were appropriate to their own sense of Japan's place in the world.”

In other words, the media encouraged docile acceptance of the American response to 9/11. The two person collective called T.O.L., or Tree of Life based the character on Hello Kitty and Astro Boy and created the film on 2D and 3D computer animation programs. They worked in a media landscape that conflated democracy with global war, and patriotism with shopping. Moreover, they did so at a time when anime and manga, especially kawaii varieties, had begun to dominate American pop culture. Punk was both a rebellious ethos and a shopping mall uniform.

Karl Marx likened capitalism to a vampire. Both bourgeoisie and capital itself, capitalism leeches the lifeblood of the workers and then feeds them with consumer goods. As David McNally puts it, “People's sense of their very bodies, of their capacities and creative energies, of the interrelation of self and things and of self and others, all of these are utterly transformed by commodification. We are consumed with consuming. Our labor goes to the accumulation of tchotchkes that speak our status.”

Like piercings, buttons, safety pins, and patches announced the punk, the kawaii otaku adorn themselves in merchandise. We might call *Tamala 2010* a prime example of kitsch art about late capitalism, a pastiche of pop cultural and high art references. KFC ads and Diane Arbus, Hello Kitty and Hieronymus Bosch. Colonel Sanders stalks the land, a knife in his head. *Tamala* is constantly sacrificed and reborn at the altar of advertising.

Emily Raine in her essay, *The Sacrificial Economy of Cuteness in Tamala 2010: A Punk Cat in Space*, argues; “There seems a certain fundamental link between cuteness and cruelty, something in cuteness that simultaneously provokes both a doting affection and desire to throttle.” *Tamala: 2010* plays with this tension, articulating animal cuteness within an economy of sacrifice.

Cuteness and sacrifice are drawn together by their mutual assimilation into a smoothly functioning capitalism in the film's disorienting mash of narratives, animation styles, and arcane allusions and allegories. Capitalism is the hinge upon which cuteness, sacrifice, and commerce are articulated together.

The term “late capitalism” was popularized by the Marxist theorist Ernest Mendel, who was actually referring to the economic boom in the period between World War II and the 1970s. This was the period in which multinational corporations, mass communication, and international finance developed into global forces.

Frederic Jameson, in a 1984 essay later expanded into the 1991 book *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, argued globalization and a post industrial economy had led to post modernist culture and art. Everything everywhere all at once became a commodity to be consumed. Distinctions between high and low culture collapsed and art became more self referential and superficial.

Content replaced intent. We no longer watch films, listen to music, read books, or look at art. We consume content. Naturally, the term “late capitalism” has been commodified itself to become a meme on social media, a knowing wink for viral reposting, a marketing slogan to the sarcastically hip.

Even political movements are denuded into slogans and hashtags. “Occupy Wall Street”, “We are the 99%”, “Me Too”, “Black Lives Matter”; all frothing in the never ending scroll.

Frederic Jameson has an oft cited and paraphrased remark; “Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.” We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world.

This is to say, more broadly, that it is easier to imagine the end of history, of the world itself, than an alternative for late capitalism that, like the vampire, transmutes and disguises itself to frustrate attempts at dialectic representation, rather reverting to subversion and containment. Crisis and the threat of

imminent collapse are inherent in capitalism because, as Marx argued, production and consumption are separated.

Capitalism's drive for accumulation and alienation of living labor from use values what products are actually designed to do, in favor of fetishized abstract wealth. The accumulations of materialism leads to the abuse, not just of labor, but of the environment; both now commodified.

Capitalism as a vampire is dead labor's drain on the living and it fetishizes itself so that living labor is in service of commodity of the dead, thus the prolongation of the working day to ensure the production of surplus and to the perpetual crisis for surplus production, in Marx's words, only slightly quenches the vampire thirst for the living blood of labor.

Tamala 2010 renders Marx's vampire metaphor literal. Cat Earth is controlled by Catty & Co. Corporation, which derives its power from a Minerva death cult. Tamala's murder by a dog cop (#ACAB) reveals that she has been the sacrificial heart of Catty & Co.'s advertising engine for nearly 150 years.

What does it add up to be? Anything? This film was to be the first of a trilogy that remains unfinished more than 20 years after its release. Whatever the case, you can collect Tamala figurines and apparel available at your favorite retail site.