

Love is Dead, Long Live the Otaku

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Foreword

Oftentimes, I felt alienated by my peers for being different from them, all the while knowing the path I chose was the reason for this feeling. Sometimes I would feel conflicted that the path I chose seemed self-destructive despite allowing me to live a life I was proud of. It was during this time that I was sorting out my own personal philosophy when I stumbled upon the familiar words from a man who had reached the same conclusions as I had. This is when I fell down the rabbit hole of Honda Toru's otaku-philosophy.

Before you begin reading you must first heed a warning. Firstly, I have made attempts to translate certain titles of Honda Toru's publications, since the majority of these have never been translated. However, my Japanese knowledge is not the best since I am still studying, so there are likely errors or misreadings of certain kanji. I provided translation notes when applicable, especially when attempting to translate divisive words or phrases. These English titles were supplied simply for those who prefer those. Some sections were also, regretfully, translated with the help of dictionaries and my shoe-strung together grammar knowledge. That is why I have carefully selected information from these sections in an attempt to not use it as a basis for understanding, rather to support information I already have sound evidence of. Some information that was translated myself might contain errors, so feel free to correct them as you notice them. Secondly, the majority of the information provided about Honda's early life was told through his own personal accounts from interviews. Similarly, the majority of information gathered in the "Early Life" and "Professional Career & Radicalization" sections was extracted from a Japanese Wikipedia article last edited in 2014. Due to the nature of it being an interview and written by a third party, there could likely be inaccuracies in this information, though sources are cited to ensure trustworthiness. The article itself even gave a warning as to the validity of the information. Though without knowing Honda himself it's difficult to properly interpret what he tells us so as such I have simply taken it all as truth.

That said, I have meticulously sifted through the available information to form a clear picture of who Honda Toru is. When available I cross-referenced information in an attempt to keep everything as close to the discernible truth as possible. However, as mentioned previously, if you are able to correct the following information then please let me know.

Some other minor notes regarding this paper Firstly, I often reference a 2005 interview from Asahi Shimbun¹ in which Honda Toru reveals a great deal of information about himself. I have linked the Web Archive version in the previous footnote for the sake of reference. However, I have personally archived the interview in simple HTML on my own Neocities website and have chosen to link that instead. Though the content of both are identical and the latter was provided for simplicity's sake. Secondly, I have preserved Japanese naming convention (Last First) for the sake of my personal distaste in altering it. As such some quotes or references might seem inconsistent since their respective authors used Western naming convention.

¹<https://web.archive.org/web/20050624023834/http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200506040207.html>

Introduction

Densha Otoko, or “Train Man”, was a misguided attempt to revise the popular social perceptions of male otaku, but in doing so was largely controversial within the niche it sought to reconstruct. The story depicts a regressive, stereotypical image of an otaku who protected a woman from getting molested on a train and consequently ends up falling in love with her. It was widely popular upon release, largely in part to the 2005 television drama that received much critical praise and noteworthy awards. The drama was an adaptation of a novel by the same name, and was also adapted into a manga which was how I was first exposed to the story. Though unlike the mainstream reception, upon completing *Densha Otoko* I was filled with absolute loathing for that was unmatched to anything I have ever read before. To me, this manga represented everything wrong in society, and my feelings only grew stronger as I saw the praise it received online. But it was through seeking someone to share my opinions that I stumbled across another harsh critic of the novel by the name of Honda Toru.

“Toru Honda boasts he is the archetypical otaku. A single guy, he lives alone in Nakano Ward, Tokyo. Fashion bores him. He buys his clothes exclusively from Uniqlo. His shoes cost 1,000 yen. Honda splits his time between the Nakano Broadway shopping mall and Tokyo's Akihabara district. The nearby locale features shops selling video game figurines; the latter is the premier otaku oasis. A 35-year-old freelance writer, Honda spends almost all his money on his otaku hobbies. He has eight DVD recorders. He can record up to 30 hours worth of animation a day. He bought a 45-inch LCD TV for 900,000 yen to watch his fantasy friends in delicious detail. Honda has no girlfriend. He says he can't remember the last time he talked to a woman, excluding the 80-year-old owner of his apartment building.”²

Coincidentally sharing the name of the female lead in *Fruits Basket*, Honda Toru is a Japanese cultural critic and advocate of embracing everything weird about otaku culture. He is admirable in this regard since he is oftentimes unfiltered in responding to difficult questions and will not hesitate when expressing his more controversial ideas. He harshly criticized *Densha Otoko* in his own novel *Denpa Otoko*, whose title is a reference to the “Denpa” subculture oftentimes related to otaku, though the former should not be confused with the latter. This subculture is generally used to describe cultural deviants who seem to act on another “wavelength”, as what the Japanese word “電波” roughly translates to³. Honda wrote his novel acting on behalf of the marginalized people of the otaku culture that felt offended by the depiction of otaku and how there was a movement to reform this lifestyle. His somewhat infamous writings regarding “moe” and “*Love Capitalism*” are harshly critical of modern Japanese society, though is applicable to similar modern societies not just limited to his native country.

² <https://artificialnightsky.neocities.org/honda-san/asahimanifesto.html>

³ 電波- *Denpa* is both a word to describe electrical signals/radio waves and also a Japanese subculture. Regarding the latter, people described as *denpa* are often disconnected from reality as if “on a different wavelength” or are joked to be receiving signals from aliens etc. 電波男 is most accurately described as “men on a different wavelength.”

Honda is a deeply fascinating man but is unfortunately difficult to stumble across in the West due to none of his works being translated to English and only a handful of interviews being available. I suspect his novels will never be officially brought to the West due to their controversial nature and extremely niche interest group so those of us not proficient enough to read Japanese will be left to sifting through the drip-feed of resources regarding him on the internet. Honda is a fellow otaku and a voice of reason in a world where the popular trend is moving towards marginalizing more outlandish people in the subculture in an attempt to standardize everyone to being “normal,” and explain that being an otaku as simply a “phase.” Undermining the concept of being a fringe otaku makes those within the community who resonate with the stranger aspects will then feel alienated within a community in which they used to find solace in. I feel like Honda’s ideas are incredibly interesting to consider as someone who resonates with his criticisms of society and learning about his personal philosophy. Join me as we go down the rabbit hole and explore who exactly Honda Toru is.

Portrait of the Otaku as a Young Man

Early Life

"Love is an illusion anyway, so even if you aren't popular with women you can be fulfilled in your own mind." (Honda and Yanashita 2008, pp. 69, 72-73)

Honda Toru (本田 透) was born May 12th, 1969 and became a prominent advocate of reforming the idea of hegemonic masculinity in Japan. He found success in 2005 with the publication of *Denpa Otoko*, a direct counter-argument directed towards the the popular *Densha Otoko* published a year earlier. In it he revealed radical ideas regarding the preservation of a pure otaku mindset, the viability of finding love in two-dimensional characters, discussions of *moe*, and coining the term “Love Capitalism.” His unfiltered critiques and relatable nature set him apart and established popularity within otaku circles, with his novel selling 33,000 copies in three months. His words eased fellow otaku by announcing that you are not alone in these thoughts, the problem lies in society.

Honda Toru was born in Kobe, Hyogo Prefecture. He claims how his abusive father quickly left the family for the sake of another woman, and was raised by a misandrist mother growing up. As she was bedridden due to developing cancer later in life, she confesses to young Honda that “she had been forced to marry someone she did not love. Her life had been a huge failure” In an interview with Asahi Shimbun, he notes how “his man-hating mother raised him as a girl and always objected when he made friends with girls.” supporting the controlling impression he felt toward her. Honda recounts how he would often feel as if he was deprived of affection and even meals growing up. Compounding with the already known information, Honda came to understand that his life was a false existence. “Because of this poor home situation and opposition from his mother, he was unable to attend a prestigious neighborhood school and instead entered a public Junior-High school. However, Honda was bullied in that Kobe high school and soon dropped out. Gathering information from the interview conducted by Patrick W. Galbraith’s interview in *The Moe Manifesto* we can connect the dots to get a better idea of the turbulent mind of

Honda during this time. When asked about his hobbies, Honda begins recounting how “Fantasy was important for me from an early age as an escape from home and school.” He expands upon this by explaining how he dealt with severe depression in high school due to his home life among other factors. He was presumably struggling with the demands of the rigorous education system and unsure about his future and fell into despair. Even going as far to claim that during this period “I actually wanted to drop out and kill myself.” He continues to say how during this time he became deeply invested in the anime “Fist of the Northstar” and wanted to see it through to the last fight, but due to the drawn out nature of the story, by the time it concluded he was past these problems. Anime and *moe*, in a sense, saved him.

In an interview with Mammo.tv⁴, translated by Frog-kun⁵, Honda reveals more insight to this period between high school and entering university. He explains that during a period when he had dropped out of high school, “I shut myself in my room and watched anime all day.” which seems like he had *hikikomori* tendencies which would not be unreasonable for these circumstances. “When I was well and truly a loner, I feel like I saved money. Back then, I read as much as I could and wrote down my thoughts. At the time, I thought I didn’t have a future, but now that I think about it, I might just be glad I had that experience of being a hikikomori. You could say I put myself through brain training on hard mode. I was definitely incapable of thinking of it that way at the time, though.” He continues “Depending on the situation, it wouldn’t have been strange if I’d killed myself, but I would think, ‘I can’t die until I’ve seen the last episode.’” once again referencing First of the Northstar. “I didn’t have any money, and nor could I go outside. All I had was a mere pen and paper, so I wrote out the tenets of my philosophy, using an ethics textbook as a template.” During this time Honda would write many of his scattered thoughts in notebooks oftentimes applying ideas he was learning in books he read to what he was currently grappling with in daily life. For example, in regards to the concepts around two-dimensional reality he notes that he applied Plato’s theory of Ideas⁶ to harem anime. Throughout the interview he references many philosophical ideas of Descartes, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard from which he gained much insight into understanding the world for himself. Much of which would be largely influential on his later philosophies.

Following this he was able to overcome this depressive episode to attend university and continue on with his life. “I thought I’d give up anime, but in 1992 along came Sailor Moon and I fell back in deeper than ever. I started drawing Sailor Moon fanzines.” Presumably he was reading doujinshi at the time, self-published fan magazines oftentimes based off an anime, game or manga. This propelled Honda into the world of enjoying anime once again. After the death of his mother he started studying for university entrance exams at a cram school using money from her life insurance, and was eventually accepted into the prestigious Waseda University where he earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Sociology from the Department of Human Sciences. During this time at the university he notes how he used to be in a band as well so it seemed as if he was able to interact with his peers. Afterwards he attended Digital Hollywood University, which is a technical school that teaches digital communications subjects “with eight specialized subject areas, including animation, web, game programming, 3DCG, film, business content,

⁴ <https://web.archive.org/web/20110205231626/http://www.mammo.tv/interview/archives/no215.html>

⁵ <https://frogkun.com/2016/11/24/i-may-not-be-popular-but-i-live-on/>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_forms

graphic design and advanced media technology.”⁷ After graduating, Honda worked at a publishing house for nine months before quitting.

During his university days Honda recounts how one of his biggest influences was Okada Toshio, one of the co-founders of Gainax. Okada worked on various projects including planning for the Daicon III-IV openings as well as script writing on *Gunbuster* and *Otaku no Video*. *Otaku no Video* being notable due to it being a glorification of otaku and the subculture, where the main character wishes to become the “OtaKing!” (Otaku King) It includes the animated story intercut with live action interviews with various otaku. *Otaku no Video* is generally considered to be a fictional representation of the founding of Studio Gainax.

However, it was during 1995 his home was destroyed in the Kobe earthquake, Honda once again felt ready to give up on life, but he instead came across the anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. He continues by illustrating his descent down the slippery slope of becoming an otaku during this low point in his life. “It was really the one-two punch of *Evangelion* and then bishoujo games (dating simulator games) that sealed my fate as an otaku in the late 1990s.” With this he came to realize his special interest in *bishoujo games* as “like a dream come true for me, because I have no interest in three-dimensional women. I’m not even interested in idol singers.” He looks back on this time fondly, remarking how “Again, those moe characters saved my life, whether I wanted it or not.”⁸

Honda has a special interest in *moe* and finds that two-dimension girls to be much more appealing to him. He explains how he found his true love after playing the bishoujo game *One; Kaguyaku Kisetsu e* in 1998, coincidentally one of the early projects by the now popular staff of the KEY visual novels. His *waiifu*⁹ is one of the main heroines in this game named Kawana Misaki, whom he allegedly went on to marry. The claim is a bit vague so we cannot be certain if he legally “married” Misaki though it’s safe to assume he believes it to be so. Another important character Honda discusses is Asuka Langley Soryu from the aforementioned *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. “My favorite character of all time is still Asuka from *Neon Genesis Evangelion*,” and claims that Hideaki Anno betrayed fans by “brutally killing Asuka in the movie that ended the series.” Both of these mentioned characters have a certain *moe* element to them which is a core principle in Honda’s personal value system and will be elaborated much further in a later section.

Professional Career & Radicalization

In 2004, Honda claims to have founded the “Country of Kimomen” (キモメン王国), considering himself one of these “kimomen.” He explains these people as having a “Sickening face, unsightly appearance” and the title is likely derived from the Japanese slang “kimoi” (キモイ) referencing something sickening (気持ち悪い- sickening feeling) and appending “men” to represent a man. He also considered himself a

⁷ <https://www.dhw.ac.jp/en/about/>

⁸ <https://artificialnight sky.neocities.org/honda-san/asahimanifesto.html>

⁹ Two-dimensional wife

modenai otoko (もてない男), an unpopular man and bore both titles with a sense of pride. It was during this period when he started advocating for the acceptance of two-dimensional love. Honda strongly emphasized that these types of men were those who did not care nor had experience with the opposite sex. However in his own book (僕は肝心の魂が喪男ですから¹⁰) Honda contradicts himself since he has explained that he has indeed had experience with women disqualifying him from his own status. That said, I feel as if it's unfair to judge simply by this fact. It's very likely he had a terrible experience and fell into doubting said relationships since his did not work out, or was deeply hurt by it. Regardless, he still would still claim that he does not care for the opposite sex.

Since then he has published various novels ranging from social commentary advocating his extreme otaku ideals, to light novels, and all the while rejecting the idea that men have the obligation to comply with the informal rules of society. This leads me to consider my theory that he was indeed hurt deeply by love in the past and is now applying his otaku desires to a value system in which he won't need to rely on the opposite sex for fulfillment. Considering his poor experiences with his mother growing up, bullying in high school and the implied bad relationship he had previously, it's fair to assume Honda does not trust the opposite sex or people in general. To judge if that's reasonable depends on the person, though knowing what Honda has experienced I understand how he might reach such conclusions. Many others like him have done the same and that is why his ideas held value to those it meant a lot to.

He concludes these ideas by explaining his stance on the relationship between men and women in reality. "There cannot be love between men and women in three-dimensions, only the relationship between maid and master. Only then will a wonderful society emerge, don't you think?"¹¹ (いずれは三次元の男女が恋愛関係ではなく、メイドさんと御主人さまという関係を構築する。そんなすばらしい世の中が到来するのではないのでしょうか」と述べている)¹². His feelings towards three-dimensional love is that of harsh dismissal. Expressing the idea that he avoids such relationships out of self-protection (護身) and now devotes those feelings of love towards two-dimensional relationships. Kana Misaki from the visual novel *One ~Kagayaku Kisetsu e~* is who he considers his "imaginary wife" (脳内妻 - lit. Wife inside one's brain). Elaborating on this idea, he has formed an "imaginary family" (脳内家族) consisting of a wife and daughter, which he considers to be a fulfilling lifestyle.

As a professional writer, Honda Toru was very prolific during a period between 2005 and 2014, his publications ranged from social commentary essays to an unusual number of light novels. According to Honda's Amazon listing page¹³, his earliest publication was *Denpa Otoko* in March of 2005. Other notable publications from him were largely critical of Japanese society and were advocating on behalf of the unpopular men he saw as marginalized, himself included. Such works were *Moeru Otoko* (萌える男 - Infatuated Men¹⁴) in November 2005, *No'nai Ren'ai no Susume* (脳内恋愛のすすめ - Recommending

¹⁰ 僕は肝心の魂が喪男ですから - Roughly translates to "My Identity as an Unpopular Man"

¹¹ Referencing the Maid Cafe, popular among otaku (メイド喫茶)

¹² メイドさん大全』 p93より

¹³ <https://amzn.to/34ilhJN>

¹⁴ 萌える - "To sprout, to have a crush, to be infatuated with..." I chose to translate *moeru* as "infatuated" since it made the most logical sense, though it now carries a more negative

Imaginary Love) in December 2007 and *Sekai no Denpa Otoko- Moodan no Bunkakushi* (世界の電波男 — 喪男の文学史 - World of Disconnected Men¹⁵ - History of Unpopular Men) in April 2008. These books were largely influential of bringing Honda's personal philosophy to becoming noticed by fans and critics alike. Themes contained within included his ideas of the economics of romance with "Love Capitalism" (*ren'ai shihonshugi*), urging otaku to embrace two-dimensional love, criticizing the image of a successful Japanese male and explaining the power of *moe*.

While not strictly writing non-fiction Honda also write light novels, Japanese pulp-novels for young adults. One of his most popular novel series on Japanese Amazon are *Light Novel no Tanoshii Kakikata* (ライトノベルの楽しい書き方)¹⁶ which is a romantic comedy about a high school boy pretending to date a girl who happens to be a light novel author, the series is completed at 10 volumes in length. The other is *Imagine Sacrament* (イマジン秘蹟秘蹟)¹⁷ which is about a high school of exorcists, the series is completed with 3 volumes. *Imagine Sacrament* appears to be relatively well liked among fans as one reviewer notes that it's the "Embodiment of who Honda Toru is as an author" (著者本田透の体現) I found it curious to see Honda shift from writing more radical social essays to fantasy and romantic comedy light novels around late 2007 through early 2008. I would be incredibly interesting to read these novels if they were accessible since there might contain traces of Honda's philosophy within the themes. My best guess would be financial reasons since it appeared he wished to write professionally, and later expresses his wish to have an anime adaptation of his stories. However it seems as of 2014 he hasn't published anything, according to Amazon Japan. According to Honda, his final dream as a writer is to have his light novels be adapted into an anime or manga.

He concluded by expressing his desire to build a "Doronpa" Building¹⁸, expressing his love for the Hanshin Tigers baseball team, and claiming to be a fan of the pre-wrestler Antonio Inoki. Once again due to the limited information online and lack of popularity, much of what could be learned of Honda Toru is before 2014. Since then there has been radio silence regarding his professional career since there seems to not have been any further novels or essays since. Upon checking his personal blog and website, the former was no longer available and the latter seems to not have been updated since around 2012.

Electric Trains & Radio Waves

Densha Otoko is, at best, a pacification of otaku culture. It was a novel written in a misguided attempt to relieve societal anxieties regarding the perception of otaku during a time when rumors floated through circles of whispering housewives. "*Otaku are violent! Keep your children away, remember the Otaku*

implication. However without knowing the exact details of the book it's difficult to judge accuracy.

¹⁵ 電波男- As previously noted, 電波 is referring to "being on a different wavelength." I chose to translate the title as "Disconnecting Men" due to the nature of Honda urging these marginalized individuals to separate themselves from societal expectations and embrace *moe*.

¹⁶ <http://bit.ly/325xFMR>

¹⁷ <http://bit.ly/2WwiLhx>

¹⁸ <http://archive.md/XJs8> - I don't even know where to begin...

Killer?” or “*I always knew my neighbor was strange... I keep my daughters away from him!*” Might have been among what would pass around in the mainstream. Social circles were largely uninformed of otaku culture at the time and watching anime or playing erotic games would be a mark of shame, since it often carried negative misconceptions. *Densha Otoko* was published in 2004 and I suspect it was an attempt to purify the otaku image by telling the readers “otaku are normal people, we just need to show them the right path.” However, this only served to sever the community and discourse arose.

Honda Toru is a man who believes that fiction is no different from reality, and escapism is a crucial aspect of his life. Deeply moved by this publication he was compelled to write a harsh criticism in his own novel *Denpa Otoko*, striving to fight against the pacification of the popular otaku image. I would imagine the popularization of *Densha Otoko* helped propel the discussion of *Denpa Otoko* especially in the niche circles he sought to restore and within the niche of otaku, Honda became a hero. However, *Densha Otoko* maintained a vice grip on the public consciousness and started to shift how society perceives otaku as.

To surmise the novel, an Otaku saves a woman from being molested on a train and ends up falling for her. Shortly after considering his confused emotions he resorts to seeking advice from an anonymous internet forum akin to 2channel, mirroring the allegedly true events that inspired this story. Through the unreasonably helpful advice of his internet companions the otaku was able to land a stable job, learn to dress in a socially acceptable manner and get the girl in the end. In *Recreating Japanese Men* by Sabine Fruhstick and Anne Walthall¹⁹, they discuss in more detail how *Densha Otoko* shaped public perceptions. Fruhstick and Walthall explain how “*Densha Otoko* tells the story of an otaku who moves from the transitional objects and the fantasyscapes of Akihabara and the Internet to genuine connection with another human being in the confusing and challenging but ultimately more satisfying outer work of contemporary Japan.” (p158) Important to note the subtle emphasis placed on human connections being genuine, which criticizes the connection otaku have with escapism. The wonderland of Akihabara and the goods within are reduced to being “transitional” and genuine human connections are argued to be more satisfying. All implying otaku dreams are simply a passing phase brought upon by lack of social abilities. The novel advocates the viability of completely disregarding old friendships and altering your self image to better display an image of success. However, this was all the result of wanting to court a single woman, and pretending to be someone you are not for such a shallow reason felt disingenuous, contradictory to the genuine human connections the writer sought to advocate for.

Continuing, Fruhstick and Walthall write how “Along the way it helped to change Japanese perceptions of otaku, ushering an arguably new vision of contemporary Japanese masculinity, one that lacks that includes some of the most salient manifestations of otaku culture, from [manga] to maid cafes.”(p158) This passage follows the idea of how the novel sought to reform social perceptions of otaku by instead offering an alternative. The “contemporary Japanese masculinity,” as it is described, might alienate youth who feel like such a rigorous ideal is not in line with their personality and often will result in thoughts of failure. While not the root cause, otaku often will retreat to these fantasy worlds because they offer

¹⁹ Fruhstick, Sabine, and Anne Walthall, eds. *Recreating Japanese Men*. Vol. 20. Univ of California Press, 2011.

something reality cannot. Friendship, love, comedy or knowledge, though not limited to these. The appeal of fiction is the ability to fantasize in a separate world while knowing these stories are a place divorced from the current, all our own. It's intimate and beautiful, and many people enjoy these types of stories but some people find the values within to be something they were not able to find in reality. Because sometimes, these desires cannot realistically exist here. These marginalized individuals who discover their ability to find love within their heart because of a two-dimensional character because these fantasyscapes to be more inviting than the world that rejected them for not complying with the rigorous rules. It's a common cliché in Japan to say "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down" and this applicable in this example. Without delving into the psychology of *hikikomori*, these are young Japanese people who experiences unbearable social pressures and feel their only option is to retreat to their rooms. While there is certainly an overlap between hikikomori and otaku, their individual reasons for retreating away from reality are similar. The problem lies in the vilification of these lifestyles that force those within a difficult place in their life to "grow up" and "face reality" when they are attached to something special. Undermining the importance of escapism simply by saying it's not real is reducing it to simply a passing daydream, and equating socially acceptable ideals to being better without considering that everyone is different. This disregards all individuality. *Densha Otoko* depicts a man who threw away his collection of anime tapes, figures and video games simply because in that moment he was infatuated with a woman and was willing to go to such extreme lengths to court her, which I feel was enough reason to raise an eyebrow. In many cases, one could view this as an unhealthy elevation of a single woman, whereas those enraptured in the romantic would view this as a story of self-improvement. Love is a complicated matter but the unproportional importance on seeking it even if it meant drastically change yourself and who you are simply to appear more normal is a lie.

The "they lived happily ever after" ending was disgusting. The woman fell in love not with the man as who he was, but the contemporary image of what a Japanese man should be. In this, Honda Toru and I found there to be a difficult problem that sat in the core of all the themes that appeared heartwarming, but were ultimately twisted. "Densha Otoko may be seen as a modern-day Cinderella story, with the crucial difference that this time Cinderella is a man and his help comes not from fairy godmothers and magical creatures but from his anonymous 2channel friends and the contemporary magic of the Internet" (p160) The story is not the progressive image cleanser it sought to be, but rather a clumsy social critique built off the perspective of an outsider and ends up undermining its own themes by instead offering commentary on to what length an otaku must go to discard their dignity in order to re-assimilate with society. And within that message is embedded the perverted rules that have been deemed normal but those who follow them blindly are not taking the time to examine them critically enough. This was a story written for the masses, not otaku. However, if anything, *Densha Otoko* excelled in highlighting the separation between normal people and otaku and deepened the ideals of those on the extremes. One of which was the figure in focus Honda Toru, and his similarly critical examination of *Densha Otoko* elevated him to becoming someone we could look up to. "Honda's editor, Shun Saito, agrees, 'The supporters of 'Densha Otoko' cheered as their hero stopped being an otaku. But is being otaku such a bad thing? Aren't we supposed to be proud of otaku? That's the message *Denpa Otoko* offers.'²⁰

²⁰ <https://artificialnightssky.neocities.org/honda-san/asahimanifesto.html>

Love Capitalism & The Economics of Love

Tomohiro Kato

Love is dead, long live the otaku. In a rapidly modernizing society that urges young people to compete in an intensive workforce, those swept along with the flow of expectations will often sacrifice basic needs for the chance to taste success. It has been criticized often by cultural critics in Japan when discussing the phenomena of *hikikomori*, NEETs and consequently otaku. These are the marginalized people who, for a myriad of reasons, were unable to keep pace with the daily race to step over your peers to further themselves and instead were forced to submit due to their personality. Not everyone has the capability of being a competitive person, as I'm able to understand the sentiment for similar reasons. Sometimes it's simply the lack of confidence in yourself and are unable to process the idea that you are the most qualified, or perhaps it's because you don't want to cause harm to those around you. So instead such individuals choose to retreat into their own escapist fantasy in an attempt to reconcile their feelings towards the world outside their home. Similarly to the intensely competitive job market, many young men and women feel similarly towards finding significant others and are often at odds with themselves when trying to seek love, often for all the wrong reasons.

I think it's worth considering the logical extreme of these sentiments to get inside the mind of someone who felt the need to strike back against society. In the now infamous manifesto of one of these individuals, they write: "I have no girlfriend, and it is solely for this reason that my life has collapsed" (*Kanojo ga inai, tada no itten de jinsei hōkai*). These were some of the final words—as posted on the Internet—of the now (in)famous Katō Tomohiro. On June 8, 2008, Katō drove a truck down the crowded main shopping street of Tokyo's famous electronics district, Akihabara, closed off at that time to vehicular traffic.²¹ To give some perspective, Tomohiro Kato was a man who was representative of many youth at the time leading many to even sympathise with his ideas and criticisms of society even if they were not as radical as he was. Because of this, many consider his life as a warning that some men will retaliate when they fail to live up to perceived expectations. Even a cornered rat will bite the cat. Kato grew up well-liked by his peers and lived in a relatively normal suburban family in his early life. However, his fortunes changed when he enrolled in an elite high school; he was reported as being a loner and unpopular. His grades faltered and he started acting violently at home, which strained relationships with family members. Though Katō criticized his parents and upbringing in a very general way — for example, telling the police "I did not get along well with my parents." Following high school, Kato was rejected acceptance to a prestigious national university in Hokkaido and instead chose the Nakanihon Automotive College, a vocational school. However, the job he would receive as a temporary worker would only add to his resentment towards society. In Japan, being a temporary worker means that one is not actually part of the company which resulted in Kato becoming increasingly estranged from his coworkers and company. As he explains himself; "Over the years, you become estranged from friends, from society, when you work as a temp.' Alienated from family, a failure at school, unable to secure regular work, Katō was presented as a drifter, untethered to any social institution or group, lacking

²¹ Miles, Elizabeth. "Manhood and the Burdens of Intimacy." 148.

sociality, let alone intimacy, a status recognized in repeated reports as the core source of his dissatisfaction and anxiety.²² These working conditions only served to add fuel to the fire, so to speak. His increasingly distant personality forced him into a position where it was easy to separate himself from the people around him and consequently feel like he was not allowed to belong.

Among other bloggers and news reporters at the time, Honda Toru wrote regarding this event. However, his take was much different from his contemporaries since many were harshly criticizing otaku and giving warnings to parents. Honda instead expressed how he regarded Kato Tomohiro as an example of the immaturity and logical extreme many young men might take. What was most interesting was how Honda explained how the Kato incident was "...basically the same as me up until I was about 25"¹⁵ specifically emphasizing how Kato's immaturity saying "...since [he] was a kid. That's also probably why he couldn't just take it easy... Certainly when you turn 25, stuff like occupation and income, that's where the initial screening of people takes place." Honda uniquely expresses how this was not directly the result of society or otaku, rather it was specific to Kato because he was immature and ill-equipped to handle his own life. In a sense, I understand why Honda might feel that way especially since Kato left a poor impression on people's image of otaku and instilled fear in them. This was not the first instance of an otaku committing a heinous crime, but the already society that already rejected otaku had all the more reason to justify their sentiments. Though being a defender of the otaku, Honda felt the need to explain that Kato should not be described as some dangerous individual because he was an otaku, rather, explain how he was unable to cope with society and retaliated violently which was not unforeseen considering his past. Of course this did not dismiss the cultural criticisms Honda dialogue about during this time, though this specific instance called for analyzing the individual in question psychologically instead of saying every otaku was like him. Honda concludes his thoughts regarding Kato by explaining "Love is an illusion anyway, so even if you aren't popular with women you can be fulfilled in your own mind"²³ which are the perfect distillation of his ideas regarding romantic love in the modern age.

Love as an Illusion

"[Honda] says otaku are almost considered 'untouchables' in a society that defines love as the most noble of human emotions.

*Not so, he says. Love is dead. What remains is moe-the intense affection players develop toward their favorite animated characters."*²⁴

In the previously mentioned interview with Mammo.tv, explains how during his adolescence he was feed ideas of capitalism to win love. Honda began to realize that love was being manipulated into appearing like a consumption item rather than an emotion. "...magazines and dramas were also reinforcing ideas like, 'If you don't own an automobile as a university student, then you can't go on dates with girls,' or 'If

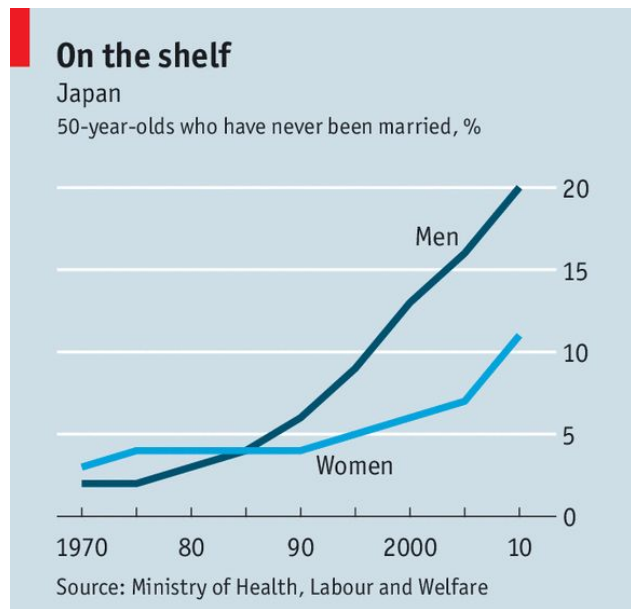
²²Slater, David, and Patrick W. Galbraith. "Re-Narrating Social Class and Masculinity in Neoliberal Japan: An examination of the media coverage of the 'Akihabara Incident' of 2008." *electronic journal of contemporary japanese studies* (2011).

²³Honda and Yanashita 2008, pp. 69, 72-73

²⁴ <https://artificialnightsky.neocities.org/honda-san/asahimanifesto.html>

you can't take her out to skiing or to a hotel, then you won't be popular with the opposite sex.' That sort of thing was regarded as common sense. In an interview with Journeyman Pictures entitled *Generation Z-Japan*, regarding disillusioned Japanese youth and elders alike, Honda explains how he did not have an interest in hobbies that made you popular like cars. Instead his interest lay in *moe* and denying that would be a lie. So instead those people who were like Honda were left feeling like society was excluding them from the game before it started. There was this prevailing attitude that if you didn't have money you couldn't find love. And that was how love became commoditised by a capitalist society during the tail end of the 1980s."

Honda Toru's core philosophy surrounds the idea of *moe* and a view of a reality where "men who feel marginalized by a society in which there are few acceptable male roles beyond a salaryman." He believes that men do not need to work unnecessarily hard to earn the means to participate in romance by using money to win affection. This is his popular idea of "Love Capitalism" (*ren'ai shihonshugi*). Through his own observations and presumed experience with romantic relationships, Honda concluded that popular culture drove the idea that romance required exquisite and luxury consumption goods over the feelings of love. These ideas were largely informed through television dramas and commercials that influence impressionable people to believe that those shared messages had some truth behind them. Being a modern capitalist country, Japan shares a lot of similar behaviors with the west in terms of capitalism and consumption of material goods. There is an emphasis on dressing well and fitting in which can be equated to the general collectivism in the country, silently urging people into conformity. While not directly related, television dramas can be seen as a fantasy trying to capture reality and is no different from a science fiction story. However seeing it grounded in reality eases the dissociation from reality to a point where some people believe them to be plausible. Consequently this allows them to feel like the ideal lifestyle they see on screen is attainable and pursue those dreams. In a sense, this was not necessarily a bad ideal since creating an attainable dream for those willing to work for it. However, individuals, particularly men, who were unsuccessful in this style of society and were not productive enough were considered outcasts. Honda believed popular culture to be encouraging consumption of material goods to be used as status symbols and in turn displayed a facade of success for onlookers. Those with money purchased luxury goods so women seeking successful husbands gravitated towards them and they married. Honda viewed this as a form of love purely driven by capitalism, hence "love capitalism."



Economist.com

Figure 1²⁵

According to recent studies there has been a decline in Japanese marriages and consequently birthrates have declined. According to *Figure 1* picture above, we can notice a steady increase in the percentage of people over the age of 50 who have never been married. It is also worth noting that the number of Japanese men over 50 who have never been married surpassed that of women around 1985, and has since reached nearly 20%. This phenomena can be related both the societal acceptance of devotion to work over interpersonal relationships as well as the idea of “the age of wanting to get married but being unable to” (kekkon shitakutemo dekinai jidai)²⁶ in which young people wish to participate in romance but are unable to find a match. In modern society we understand this contract as “the ideology and practice of ‘love marriage,’ while notable for its illusion of free choice and therefore greater potential intimacy, contributes both to the delay of marriage until later in life and the increase in the number of Japanese singles.”¹⁷ The idea of a “love marriage” allowing for people to marry someone they feel affection for as opposed to an arranged marriage. While seeming like many would be happier with this model there has also been an increase in those unmarried, though we cannot say everyone unmarried wishes to be so. However, if we consider the possibility that many will become more desperate for love yet feel inadequate for meeting a significant other they can find themselves in a bind, where searching for love is something they desire but are unable to “participate” because of various reasons. Critics “agree that being in love today is a competitive arena, wherein love is neither easily attained nor guaranteed. Such acknowledgements and criticisms point to larger discourses on how love in contemporary Japan functions not only as a form of work, but, moreover, as a form of social recognition comparable to one’s occupational and company status, that many see as unavailable to an increasing number of young women and, especially, men.”¹⁷ The idea of love being a “market” similar to that of an economy where individuals are able to exchange goods or services equates love to being like a commodity item. Honda builds off this idea by explaining how he

²⁵ <https://www.economist.com/asia/2016/09/01/i-dont>

²⁶ Miles, Elizabeth. "Manhood and the Burdens of Intimacy." 148.

perceives dating and courtship to becoming increasingly tied to consumption in order to win affection. For instance, there are very few Christian followers in Japan yet the majority of the country celebrates Christmas. Since there is very little religious connection to the holiday it is often seen as something for couples to celebrate and go on dates, eat dinner and buy each other presents. Companies have pushed advertisements²⁷ on consumers advocating this hyper-capitalistic ideas and is now a tradition within the country. This is similar to how people will jokingly relate Valentines Day as the day greeting card companies profit. These ideas have disseminated into popular culture and thus the phenomena repeats itself. People will consistently buy into this sham and thus the cycle repeats itself. When Honda spoke about how popular culture and dramas influence impressionable young people into buying into “love capitalism,” there is some truth in that statement as it is seen in the aforementioned example.

“These days, our lives are based around consumption. You have to keep using money in order to prolong a romance. That even applies to mature and lifelong romances. Even if you get married and have a child, you still have to do romance! I found myself thinking that in a society like this, I was worthless unless I could find love or make relationships with other people.” Feeling inadequate in the ability to establish relationships if it demanded buying power and unable to rely heavily on others for happiness is the result. Not everyone can properly understand romance and Honda is one of them. Even if one of the marginalized men of society wished to pursue romance seriously there is no guarantee of success. “But because this is a capitalist society, not everyone can win at love.” Honda would explain. Those without the monetary buying power or appealing characteristics to fit a predetermined mold for what the opposite sex is looking for are bound to end up failing and remaining unmarried. Even if there is no hope for success for some, Honda provide assurance that once one is able to find inner peace with being alone and unpopular they can live peacefully. “The modern man cannot be saved by grand narratives. He can no longer receive spiritual comfort from Christianity or elevate himself along with his country, as he might have done before. He cannot save himself by his own hand. He may seek small comfort through relationships such as romance or family, but if that doesn’t save him, he cannot preserve his sense of self. He’ll end up thinking that his life has no worth.” The call to all marginalized men of society to realize that their happiness shouldn’t be completely reliant on others since there is no control there. Only you can find something tangible worth living for and it doesn't need to fit the expectations of society. All that matters is your own satisfaction. He finalizes this train of thought by saying “The world doesn’t revolve around school, and for that matter money and love aren’t necessities either. I think it’s fine to immerse yourself in what you like doing.”

In the current model of love economics, Honda explains how “The value of men in Japan was determined by their productivity at work.” Money is spending power and proves their productivity and success implying they were a worthy male. Consequently those without spending power will often feel inadequate to participate in romance since they cannot afford expensive dates or jewelry one might be expected to give. Therefore these people who are marginalized by society, particularly Japanese men, will often fail to find love and might even lash out in anger because society was setting them up for failure. “Maybe it’s the anxiety of falling off the course of a “credentialist” society, or perhaps it’s the feeling of isolation from society during your teen years. Whatever it is, it’s an existential crisis. You start thinking that if you

²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KrAMSIJ1fo>

connect with others through something like love, then you might be saved from the pain inside of you. Many people felt driven into a corner by the thought that they had no worth if they couldn't be loved.”²⁸ This gives more insight into the maturity of Honda compared to other like Tomohiro Kato, the latter of which was unable to move past these feelings of isolation. When posed with this dilemma many might feel like their inadequacies outweigh the best aspects of themselves and rely too much of the validation of others. Placing unproportional importance on the feelings of others to validate your own life results in a reliance on them, and that is an unhealthy mindset. This is why he believes in living a quiet life; “It may be that in this world your entire being is determined by your relationships with others. But that's not actually the case. If you think you're okay with that, then that's how it'll be.” Essentially explaining how you must first come to terms with yourself before you decide that you want to live alone. The idea of living self-sufficiently without others is then explained with the concept of the *Über mensch* as defined by Nietzsche. Honda interpreted this as “No matter what happens, I won't be shaken. I can seriously believe that my life is fine the way it is.” In other words, it means someone who acts independently. It establishes the modern ego, or perhaps self-sufficiency on a spiritual level.” The importance of an ego establishes a baseline for a person to be able to be comfortable living a life not acknowledged by others. In a sense implying that this state is almost like enlightenment. The ability to ignore the harsh glares of society “is nothing but a trial,” and being able to live knowing that you are being judged should not overtake your personal happiness doing what you wish. Honda himself was able to achieve this state because he felt he understood what it required. The tangible thing, as he understood it, gave him the ability to live on because being able to live alone requires the “need to strive to do something you really want to do, as trite as that sounds.” Personal fulfillment is the core of this idea. Honda believes that achieving a state in which you should be able to reconcile the world around you pursuing something you really want to do. For him it was writing and thinking, for others love might be enough. However not everyone is able to rely on the validation from others. Those who don't have anything tangible to rely on and are instead pushed to despair.

This moves us to why Honda urges fellow otaku to accept their love for two-dimensional *moe* characters. He explains how *moe* is a low cost and low stress solution to satisfying our desire to be loved. “...some of us find satisfaction with fictional characters. It's not for everyone, but maybe more people would recognize this life choice if it wasn't always belittled. Forcing people to live up to impossible ideals so they can participate in so-called reality creates so-called losers, who in their despair might lash out...” The idea is to not limit yourself to feeling like you must find a significant other to marry otherwise you're a failure, which some Japanese feel pressured to do. Rather, Honda explains how some otaku can satisfy their unrequited feelings of love with a two-dimensional character, emphasizing that even if this works for some it might not be the solution. This proposal is “...defying, contemporary demands on men in the “marriage/love market” and in a sense, this is Honda's start to a “Love Revolution.” (*ren'ai kakumei*) Calling all otaku who ever felt marginalized by society and never had any luck with romance to be able to accept their love for a two-dimensional character and reject the lies they were taught to be objective.

There is a sense of purity that is carried with the proposal to allow otaku to finally accept themselves. There is no inherent harm to anyone else involved and nobody is hurt. Some might argue that rejecting

²⁸ <https://frogkun.com/2016/11/24/i-may-not-be-popular-but-i-live-on/>

reality to such a degree is detrimental and that a fictional relationship will always be inferior to a “real” relationship. However, love is too broad a term that it’s difficult to apply it only to a certain type of relationship. Humans created the “love” to explain the complex concoction of feelings towards something or someone that could not be explained concisely, except as a strong passion. Now it’s often used as an elevated form of “like,” and people will say “I love my dog,” or “I love potato chips!” We can love a person as much as we might love our favorite food or game, so what’s the difference between explaining our strong feelings towards a fictional character as love? Honda, with whom I agree with, is able to see past the common social perceptions and stigmas that are ingrained in public thought. For instance my parents or peers would initially laugh before expressing deep concern if I said I was genuinely loved a two-dimensional character. However they wouldn’t think twice if I said I loved a certain food or book. This all comes back to the social stigmas tied with otaku culture and the rigorous thought that reality is inherently more important just because we can perceive it as “real.” The perceived objectivity of what constitutes valid feelings of love is simply a perverse form of thought-policing. Conditioning people into believing that their love is all wrong is a denial of individuality. Honda closes with a hopeful statement that “Someday we will be able to accept that the world of dreams is a good world.”²⁹

Moe Revolution

“Moe is the saving grace of the otaku. It never flirts; it never calculates-it offers perfect uncalculated love. Moe is, above all else, self-sacrificing; it asks nothing in return.”³⁰



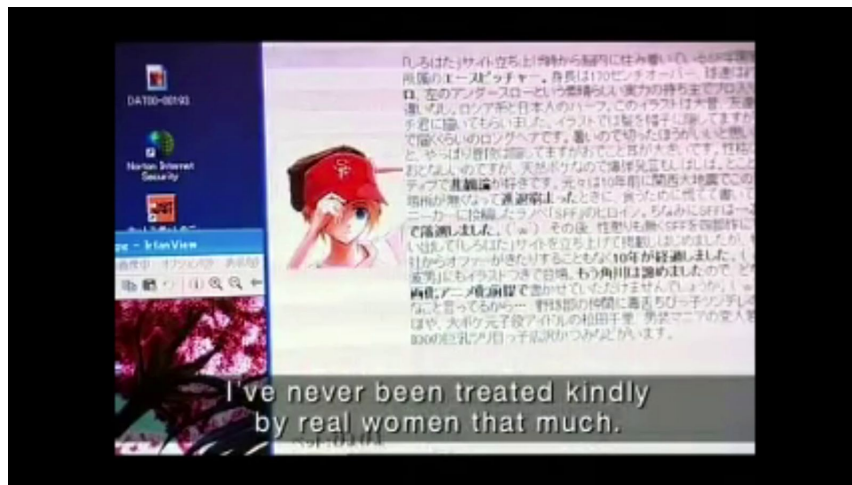
During an interview in the documentary *Generation Z- Japan*³¹, Honda Toru confesses that “I’ve never been treated kindly by real women that much.” At the time he was 35 years old and deeply invested in his personal philosophy. He shows the interviewer his “virtual family inside his laptop” and a virtual maid he has, jokingly adding how “I feel like I’m simply a dangerous person.” As explained earlier, Honda has a virtual wife, or a *waifu* as known in the west, named Kawana Misaki from the visual novel *One*

²⁹ Galbraith, Patrick W. *The Moé manifesto: an insider's look at the worlds of manga, anime, and gaming*. Tuttle Publishing, 2014.

³⁰ <https://artificialnightsky.neocities.org/honda-san/asahimanifesto.html>

³¹ <https://youtu.be/hEML4C2NQnY?t=4m54s>

~Kagayaku Kisetsu e~. According to his accounts, Honda is able to satisfy his romantic feelings through a character he shares a strong attachment towards. The reason why is due to *moe*.



Moe is ““like love, but a sort of bittersweet love. It’s like falling in love for the first time.” he explains to Patrick W. Galbraith in their interview in *Moe Manifesto*. Galbraith’s own explanation of the phenomena was retrieved from attempts to explain the intricacies of the linguistic nuances. “Moe is a Japanese slang word. It means ‘a rarefied pseudo-love for certain fictional characters (in anime, manga, and the like) and their related embodiments.’ Patrick W. Galbraith notes that it is a pun derived from a Japanese word that literally means "budding," as with a plant that is about to flower, and thus it can also be used to mean "budding" as with a pre-adolescent girl.”³² It is important to note the importance of the concept of a preadolescent girl, since the concept of *shoujo* (少女- young girl, maiden) is prevalent in otaku media. Forgoing extraneous explanations of the connections between the two, otaku have a tendency to gravitate towards the innocent purity of the *shoujo* as an idealistic concept. This is why *moe* characters tend to feature younger girl characters that are innocent and the pleasant feelings of an innocent crush from your childhood. “The young age often seen in moe characters add a certain vulnerability in them inspiring us to protect and nurture them.” Honda explains, “If she not vulnerable and can live on her own ‘It would be hard to approach such a perfect being.’” That is why he has such strong attachment to characters like Asuka from *Evangelion*, or Misaki from *One*.

Returning to Honda’s definition, he mentions the feeling as “bittersweet” which reminded me of popular themes of visual novels at the time. Visual Art’s KEY³³ is a well-known producers of visual novels popularizing the *nakige*³⁴ (泣きゲー - lit. crying game) style of game. Common examples are *Clannad*, *Kanon* and *Little Busters*. These visual novels would often contain themes of melancholia, depression and bittersweet love allowing the reader to get more emotionally invested in the narrative. An interesting connection here is that *One ~Kagayaku Kisetsu e~*, which Honda is a proclaimed fan of, was written by Hisaya Naoki and Maeda Jun who would later write scenarios for Visual Art’s KEY. I get the impression

³² <https://jisho.org/word/萌え>

³³ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Key_\(company\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Key_(company))

³⁴ <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/Utsuge?from=Main.Nakige>

that Honda's definition of *moe* was largely influenced by popular visual novels at the time in which the reader would intimately get to know these vulnerable characters and ultimately fall in love. *Nakige* were designed to get the reader to become invested in the characters and narrative for the emotional impact and the implicit consequence of this was feelings of love.

Honda continues to define *moe*, where “[t]he other part of *moe* is a feeling of calm (癒し - *iyashi*) You look at a cute character and your heart is at ease. *Moe* is a warmth and solace that cannot be found in human society.” Continuing to add to his personal feelings towards a world that he was unable to find satisfaction with, so finding solace in *moe* gave him the warmth that was never able to be provided in reality. In his eyes, *moe* is something beyond the visual appeal of two-dimensional characters. Rather, he focuses on the concept that “...they are not tainted by our world” which would explain why some of these characters often have non-human traits like *nekomimi*. “...anything can take the shape of a cute girl. Machines. Utensils. World nations. As long as it is female, and human in shape, a *moé* character does not have to be based on a human.”

The concept of *moe* is difficult to fully explain without cultural context, but it is critical in understanding many of the ideas Honda developed regarding his advocacy of romance with two-dimensional characters. However, he does not fully urge people to give up romance before they try. Honda clarifies that people should not “...imagine a relationship with an anime character because they couldn't find a girlfriend, but rather [because] they fell in love with a character in the first place.” He believes the relationships between fiction and reality to not have any barriers. There is no limit to how much we could love a fictional character because the feeling of true love is extremely subjective. However, there should be no barriers to either end of the dimensional spectrum. Nobody decides who we fall in love with, it just happens. Similarly, Honda sees dimensions as no longer being a barrier for those who wish to traverse beyond the standardized romantic practices in modern society. Just because it isn't “real” does not make it inherently inferior. Even if the story is fiction, our feelings are real. “Society is not ready for *moe*.” he warns, though with cautious optimism due to recent trends like maid cafes that might serve to bridge the gap between dimensions. Honda sees these as the limbo between the otaku fantasy and the society we are living in. To bridge the gap there is this 2.5D, where reality is now being influenced by the otaku imagination. He concludes by earnestly wishing that “*Someday we will be able to accept that the world of dreams is a good world.*”

Understanding the Madness

It is quite idealistic for a rational person to fully immerse themselves in the idea that they can live in a fantasy world. Escapism is quite often frowned upon because it is considered childish for that person to not “face reality.” As children those pure feelings of joy immersing ourselves in the playground within our own mind was considered valuable. However, as adults those people are considered mad, but I digress. As I've stated before, undermining the importance of escapism simply by saying it's not real is reducing it to simply a passing daydream, and equating socially acceptable ideals to being better without considering the importance of individuality. Honda Toru has explained his strong feelings towards escapism because it allowed him to move past a very difficult period in his life, and he even expresses how “thanks to anime, I'm still alive to this day.” Many others might be able to sympathize with his

sentiment since in our darkest times art can be a savior, be it as a consumer or a creator. This was his response to a question in an interview inquiring about how he found what he wanted to do in life. Honda explains how it was thanks to the internet and otaku hobbies that he manages to put food in front of himself. During university and high school he had borderline *hikikomori* tendencies and never was that outgoing and often wondered if it was okay to watch anime of all things. But it was thanks to his hobby that he was able to find a reason to move forward and establish a career based off it. I often get the impression that many people in the anime community and otaku circles will tend to avoid discussing their passions in public. “Hiding your power levels” or the like are practices to give people the impression that there is a reason to be ashamed of your passion. This feels quite backwards since if otaku are ashamed of their hobbies, how could it become acceptable? In essence, hiding your passions is simply suppressing an important aspect of yourself. Otaku has often been associated with inferiority complexes due to the level of embarrassment tied with some of the activities and continuing to do so leads into an infinite spiral of self-deprecation. Vast in the glory of being what you are, because you are special. “For now, you should do what you like doing. If you get involved in something you’re passionate about, you’ll get by, so there’s no need to feel a sense of inferiority about your hobbies.”

In *Akihabara: Conditioning a Public* "Otaku from Medademia 5, Patrick W. Galbraith expresses the concept of growing out of being an otaku. He believes the idea of “Otaku Grow Up!” to be rooted within the shifting perceptions of otaku in the 1990’s where the concept of the modern Japanese man began to take shape. As a result of the economic bubble bursting, the general public began to question the structure of their tired ideas of “working hard in school so you can work for a good company,” albeit slowly. During this time, Galbraith describes it as “...a new model of the consuming male. Far from the sociopathic otaku of the 1990s, he is a warmhearted, repressed guy looking to “graduate” (*sotsugyōsuru*) from the otaku lifestyle; his consumption had to be redirected from personal pleasure to productive social relationships.”³⁵ I understand this as the view from an outsider. Parents will tell their children that “you’ll grow out of that phase” as if to tell them they would grow more mature without those hobbies or interests. The stigmas surrounding various subcultures, not specifically otaku, are often the source of criticism from such people since they are deemed less important, and often without basis. The implications of the aforementioned definition suggests that being an otaku is simply a transitional stage where one slips into when they are unable to find pleasure in normalcy. The personal pleasure that is often associated with the indulgent behaviors of otaku is generally frowned upon and scoffed at by outsiders, but is it really so wrong? Being an otaku is an identity that many will take on to associate themselves with something larger, oftentimes giving them a sense of belonging or a reason for existence. Many otaku likely were able to express themselves properly because of their hobby, or understand themselves better because of these “personal pleasures” so explaining this as simply a phase undermines what it means to be an otaku. I’m sure many people don’t stay here forever and will “graduate” eventually, however those who have a deeper connection to their hobbies consider it a way of life. Anime might just be an art medium, but it touched the hearts of many lost individuals who have felt alone for too long.

³⁵ Galbraith, Patrick W. "Akihabara: Conditioning a Public" Otaku" Image." *Mechademia* 5, no. 1 (2010): 210-230.

For an otaku, the idea of forgoing an essential aspect of themselves for the sake of trying to pretend to be a normal person seems beyond reasonable. Such was why there was an extremely divided reception of the previously mentioned *Densha Otoko* among otaku and the general public. "Honda argues in *Denpa Otoko* that if *Densha Otoko* would have been a 'real otaku', he would not have given up his hobbies for 'love capitalism'; instead, he would have introduced her to 2channel and transformed her into an otaku."³⁶ From his perspective, Honda sees the main character of *Densha Otoko* as becoming another person to succumb to the will of society and in doing so gave up a part of himself. Buying into love capitalism was an admittance of defeat and many otaku felt like this was a message that refraining from enjoying their current hobbies would make them happier. Though can we truly know if the grass is indeed greener on the other side, even if we are happy now? Honda believes himself to be on the best side of the metaphorical fence currently and is satisfied himself through work and his imagination. Material things are simply a means to the same goal but falling in line with those expectations to buy happiness was not worth it to him. To compound the fact, Honda viewed the concept of three-dimensional love to be worthless in the end, since happiness could arise without bothering with real women, who he stopped having an interest in.

Through his work as a social critic, Honda Toru has propelled himself to being a figurehead for defending otaku culture. While hardly recognized as such, his ability to be so forthright about with fringe geek philosophy, cynicism towards socially acceptable conventions and has a complete disregard for his own public perception. Though we might be able to say that this image of a "*kimoi otaku*" he plays into is the perception he wants to give, and is unashamed to display the edgier aspect of otaku culture in the limelight. Honda is edgy, but incredibly aware of that fact. His genuine desire for himself and others to reject three-dimensional love, appreciate moe and be wary of love capitalism are the same ideas someone else might have in a similar situation. That is why I, like many others, resonate so much with his personal philosophy. Honda is a genuine otaku, and his thoughts are very much aligned with those belittling jokes thrown around about otaku on the internet or behind our backs in public. "Otaku are gross!" or "I bet he has a 2D girlfriend because he can't get a real one!" might be among some of the insults hurled at otaku. But it was through internalizing the otaku identity that allowed him to move onwards and become stronger. Even if Honda knew that he was not popular he lived on. His ideas speak from the experience of a hardcore otaku who genuinely understands the extent of the subculture. That is why his words are so resonant to otaku.

Honda Toru seems to be running with the concept of being a "*kimoi otaku*"³⁷ and internalized it to becoming a fundamental aspect of his personality. In the introduction to their translation on Frog-kun's blog³⁸, they explain perfectly the core of who Honda is. "At first glance, it's easy to be dismissive of Honda. He seems to play up the "*kimoi otaku*" stereotype for effect, all the while dressing up his thinly veiled misogyny with pseudointellectual references to Western philosophers." However the key to the madness is understanding where it all came from, and learning about his life. Through the examination of his backstory we can begin to understand the genuine feelings that spurred these radical philosophies instead of merely dismissing them as the rambles of a crazed misogynist. There is a method to the madness so to speak. Honda faced hardship when dealing with the difficulties of his life but has chosen to

³⁶ Docent, Cultuur, and René Glas. "Serious 'techno-intimacy'."

³⁷ <https://jisho.org/search/%E3%82%AD%E3%83%A2%E3%82%AA%E3%82%BF>

³⁸ <https://frogkun.com/2016/11/24/i-may-not-be-popular-but-i-live-on/>

face those problems is a way that only an otaku could. Applying lessons he learned himself and applied the concepts he learned through his self-taught philosophy or university studies he was able to construct a unique outlook on life.

Honda is not oblivious though. He understands that his practices are intentionally radical and painfully realizes his lack of popularity. Living his life as a self-proclaimed loner and struggled with problems out of his control at school and at home. Comparing him with Tomohiro Kato gives us perspective to how one could easily head towards self-destruction with similar circumstances, but Honda did not succumb to the pressures of reality and the numerous odds stacked against him. He claims to have considered suicide and was a *hikikomori* for some time, but in the end he came out with a better understanding of himself. What saved him was the philosophy that he discusses in his essays, about finding fulfillment on your own if you aren't able to talk to people, finding love in unlikely places, and accepting yourself for what you are and not what you aren't. "*I may not be popular, but I live on.*" Not lingering on the idea that you are a failure, rather, quickly accepting it and continuing to live. The ability he learned was to stop caring too much about the failures others held him to, and instead focus on his own happiness. Some might argue that self-improvement is a better answer but I feel like both are equally beneficial in terms of self-actualization. Even if you strive to improve yourself physically, you must confront your mind eventually. Honda's ideas of how unpopular otaku men can lead fulfilling lives on their own is the first step to moving past the darkness within the heart so they can truly live life without worrying. This is why he has expressed a desire for there to be a revolution in thought where otaku hobbies are not necessarily normalized, but accepted. In an interview with Asahi Shimbun in 2005³⁹, Honda was pressed about his solitary lifestyle and continuing as an otaku. "[H]e doesn't recommend every otaku follow his path, because 'you lose a lot of things.' The warmth of another human being?" The journalist adds the remark after Honda's statement which highlights the disparity between the mindset of someone like Honda versus someone who is more accustomed to a traditional social lifestyle. In actuality, Honda likely wants there to be a world where he would not be pressed for answers about his isolation and questions of "aren't you lonely?" He wants people to accept two-dimensional love and moe not because he wants everyone to reject reality for the sake of fantasy. He is simply advocating for it to be a valid option that is not scoffed at. That time is likely far off, the transition to accepting something such as that is difficult, since it seems that society is still not ready for a *Moe Revolution* just yet.

Afterword

What initially drew me to Honda was the profundity and relevance of his thoughts regarding how otaku fit into modern society. Simply put, instead of filtering himself he offers an option to go against the grain and be yourself. The harsh criticism towards *Densha Otoko* made me feel as if my own resentment had basis. Being a fan of the manga *Genshiken*, concerning a group of otaku in university, I enjoyed discovering and indulging in the more niche aspects of otaku culture; reading doujinshi, playing visual novels and being attracted towards two-dimensional characters. It seems that there has been a movement recently with the rise of influence of internet memes, social media, and "cringe culture," that a lot of those

³⁹<https://artificialnight sky.neocities.org/honda-san/asahimanifesto.html>

genuine feelings of sinking into becoming an otaku have been lost. It's often spoken with a mutual understanding of irony how someone has a "waifu" and how getting a dakimakura is more of a joke. Irony has become extremely pervasive in discussions that people who do feel a connection to the subculture feel alienated in their inability to express themselves genuinely while those around them are mirroring their own sentiments with an ironic tinge. *Genshiken* is a celebration of what it means to be an otaku, but doesn't stray away from the difficulties that a university student might encounter whether that be otaku related or not. The conversations contained within are my idealistic vision of what hanging out with fellow otaku would be and seeing the current state of online communities has left me endlessly exhausted.

Honda alluded to this when he explained that otaku are becoming pacified if we could come to accept the message of *Densha Otoko*. Accepting the idea that becoming a *riajuu* and getting a girlfriend could improve your life feels like we're being force fed propaganda on the "proper way to live." This goes back towards the idea of how people perceive success as getting a good education and landing a job at a big company. But this model completely disregards individuality and personal happiness. Honda represents the voice of otaku who are willing to deviate from the path of what society deems acceptable and instead indulge in his own hobbies. Being an otaku was never normal to begin with and it should not be considered so. The steady rise in popularity of anime in the public eye is giving more people the option to choose the path of an otaku, but instead there is more of a pacification of the community. The divide between the classic otaku ideal and the modern casual approach alienates those of us who want to preserve the weirdness of it all. That is why I find Honda Toru fascinating, a man who is the figurehead of this ideal, preserving everything weird about otaku culture.