

The Author

Joseph Fiumara

MA, Cinema and Media Studies, York University

Contact

For further information on this research, please contact Joseph at oyasumijojo@gmail.com

A Series of Miracles: Kyoto Animation's Empathic Anime

My research into anime proposes that radical change is occurring within the industry and that this change has also begun to shift what kind of anime are being produced—a movement I call “Empathic Anime.” It is characterized by the empathy with which staff approach their work, a growing awareness of the necessity of humane labour conditions and heightened expression through detailed animation to match these elements. Kyoto Animation (henceforth referred to as KyoAni) is the studio at the heart of this movement.

KyoAni, a relatively smaller studio, breaks from, and stands in opposition to, the typical norms of anime production: extreme levels of overwork, rushed production schedules, and male-centric studio cultures. All staff are salaried employees, allowing them to earn a living wage, afforded protection under labour laws, and given paid time off. The studio's core philosophy is that “work isn't everything.” In addition to this, and I believe most important for their success, more than half of the employees are women.

Placing women at the forefront allows different voices to produce television shows and films. With different voices comes unique content. Led by anime director Yamada Naoko, KyoAni's place at the leader of Empathic Anime is exemplified by other studios adopting similar production practices, and indicates a future for anime beyond the “collapse” predicted by important directors such as Anno Hideaki and Miyazaki Hayao, resulting from an overabundance of anime being produced annually along with extreme and unhealthy labour practices.



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I take a twofold approach to addressing KyoAni's place within the anime industry and the changes they have inspired among other studios. Firstly, I take a look at the history of the anime industry and its relationship with labour, examining mainstream studios such as Toei, MushiPro, Ghibli and Gainax. How did the practices of these studios lead to the modern problems in the industry? How can these issues be resolved? And how did KyoAni rise above their established norms?

Anime theorist Thomas Lamarre calls this lineage “the Gainax discourse,” wherein the aesthetic we now associate with anime arose from very specific labour and production conditions. This aesthetic includes the large eyes and lanky proportions typical of the genre, as well as the focus on expressive character poses and dramatic flat composition. My goal with this approach is to disrupt the male-centred history of anime and place women within it. Traditionally, women were found in roles that weren't compensated by proper pay and were low on the hierarchy of positions within a studio. Women formed the backbone of exploited labour as anime also began to outsource animation to what essentially amounted to sweatshops throughout the rest of Asia.

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Japanese women primarily served as freelance workers in early anime and, not being protected by labour laws, they were compensated with goods and memorabilia. This work was advertised as “productive leisure,” whereby the heteronormative structure of society—the husband as the breadwinner and the wife as a stay-at-home mother and housekeeper—could be maintained. Women would work at home, colouring frames of animation or touching up mistakes and inconsistencies, while men worked at the studio itself for a paycheck. This led to the current state of the anime industry, where these problems of exploitation run deep and blanket the entire gender spectrum. The industry norm, wherein staff are overworked to the point of health complications, is promoted as a labour of love. What could be better compensation than knowing you’re doing what you love—even if you’re doing it for seventy hours a week?

In contrast to this, I examine KyoAni’s work environment and its focus on women and I argue that humane working conditions produces fundamentally different, and often more human, art. Director Yamada Naoko, who also serves as studio head, produces anime that exemplifies this. A long-time cinephile, she draws on her cinematic inspirations—directors like Sergei Parajanov, Alejandro Jodorowsky and Sofia Coppola—to create anime that are distinct, reflecting a different approach to filmmaking than most anime directors. I examine her television series, *K-ON!!* (2010) and her films, *A Silent Voice* (2016) and *Liz and the Bluebird* (2018) through feminist film theory to explain how her work functions so differently from her peers and how a different work environment at KyoAni allows for this kind of creativity to flourish. Her work is enduring, with *K-ON!* serving as a landmark for the *nichijou-kei*—or slice-of-life—genre of anime, and numerous anime directors have admitted drawing on her work in feature film in particular in recent years. Additionally, Yamada employs an aesthetic referred to as *moe*, often associated with a fetishization of young girls and the infantilization of women in the medium, but as a declarative reclamation of the aesthetic as something made by women, for women, drawing from real experience rather than male fantasy.

KyoAni’s production practices have begun catching onto other studios, such as with the studio Ufotable and their toppling of box office records with *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba – Mugen Train* (Sotozaki 2020). Yamada’s body of work has had a lasting impact, maintaining their immense popularity through the years. Her films are continuously screened at film festivals worldwide and other studios claim inspiration from her and her studio’s work.

Change is desperately needed in the anime industry as, year after year, the number of television anime productions are increasing while job security and the conditions in which animators work are continuing to decline. By examining the success and content of KyoAni’s productions, along with the influence they exert on the industry and the working conditions of their staff, it is clear that Empathic Anime is a solution to the industry’s problems: sustainable, passionate animation by new voices brought to the fore—empathic anime by empathic people.



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