Saved by the Nerd: Otaku and the space of family in Summer Wars

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Abstract

This article analyses Hosoda Mamoru's anime film Summer Wars (2009) through its rearticulation of the lonely male otaku. A highly debated issue in and outside of Japan, the otaku community of fans shares with nerds associations with obsessive interests, technology, and lack of social skills. Summer Wars provides a counternarrative to such discourses by setting up a story of interpersonal ties with an otaku at its centre. Furthermore, the film displaces this story to rural Japan, thus recontextualising the otaku's typical highly technological urban environment by relocating one of them amidst a large family and historical continuity. Through this emblematic shift in space, in opposition to the city at multiple levels, Summer Wars takes a novel approach in representing the otaku's potential for sociability, while still retaining the very features that may categorise him as an otaku; at the same time, the film uses otaku themes to create an imaginative reflection on the importance of interpersonal familial bonds, recuperated through the space of the native place.

Keywords: nerd; otaku; anime; Summer Wars; Mamoru Hosoda; family

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Introduction

This article focuses on the Japanese animated film *Summer Wars* (*Samā uōzu*, 2009), analysing the ways in which it engages with the history and representations of *otaku* culture to imaginatively portray an alternative site for the lonely or antisocial male *otaku*. The term *otaku* surfaces often in discourses on contemporary Japan, ranging from popular culture and media consumption, to debates on the difficulty of young Japanese to forge deep interpersonal bonds: a symptom of, but also a contribution to the predicament of social, material and psychic loneliness which Allison has described as the 'new human condition for Japan/ese in the 21st century' (**Allison, 2012: 349**). Loosely considered as the Japanese equivalent of 'nerd', the term *otaku*, etymologically meaning 'your residence' and a formal second-person singular pronoun, has been appropriated by popular culture fans since the 80s in conversations among themselves (**Morikawa, 2013: 56-57**). While perceptions and definitions have shifted, recurrent traits of *otaku* are the passionate interest in popular culture, and associations with technology. Itō defines this culture as

> A constellation of 'fannish' cultural logics, platforms and practices that cluster around anime, manga, and Japanese games and are in turn associated with a more generalised set of dispositions toward passionate and participatory engagement with popular culture and technology in a networked world (**Itō, 2012: xi**)

Otaku have also become lynchpins for debates on anti-social behaviours, alienation and isolation. While there are specific socio-cultural conditions that impede a perfect equivalence between nerds and *otaku*, for example an emphasis on intelligence for the former and a link with perverse or deviant sexuality for the latter (**Slater & Galbraith, 2011**), nerds share with the Japanese counterpart associations with passionate or obsessive interests, but also characteristics of unpopularity, social isolation and loneliness (**Rentzsch et al., 2011: 144-45**). Therefore, studying the relationship between *otaku* and social interactions (or the lack thereof) advances the understanding of the broader ramifications in representations of the lonely nerd.

The relevance of this relationship is underscored by the fact that issues of *otaku* as failed men have been crucial in *otaku* debates since the term came about. While the *otaku* population is by no means only made of men (**Saitō T., 2007**), and studies arguing for counter media histories challenging the supremacy of male *otaku* perspectives have appeared (**Ishida, 2020**), the understanding of *otaku* stereotypically as lonely males incapable of engaging in socially acceptable forms of reproductive masculinity, and of appropriate sexual development, is still a fundamental

component in discourses and media representations of this culture (**Galbraith, 2015: 30-31**). In this context, *otaku*'s fascination with fictional characters, often beautiful girls, could be seen as a site in which to seek alternatives to hegemonic forms of masculinity (**Ueno, 1989: 131-32; Galbraith, 2019: 20-48**). Furthermore, *otaku* culture can also explore alternative gender images: for example, the manga series *Genshiken* (2002-16), revolving around a university *otaku* club, represents variations from the stereotypical heterosexual male *otaku*, such as *fujoshi* (literally 'rotten women', indicating female *otaku* fans of popular culture, particularly of male homoerotic manga), and a heterosexual male who likes male homoerotica and practices cross-dressing.

These last approaches resonate with a general shift in perceptions and narratives of *otaku* occurring between the 1990s and 2000s, which expressed a more positive reappraisal of the culture. As Shen aptly summarises, 'in the 2000s, *otaku* were still portrayed as distanced and detached, but representations shifted from "they are lonely" to "they are happy and satisfied with themselves"' (**Shen, 2015: 75**). Animation has played a crucial part in this shift. Described as Japan's 'chief cultural export' (**Newitz, 1994: 11**), Japanese animation, or 'anime' as it is commonly known worldwide, is paramount for *otaku* culture as a defining technology. Concomitant with the shift in narratives, *otaku* appropriated anime as a medium through which to 'create' and represent their identity; a prime example is *Otaku no video* (1991), 'the first anime portraying *otaku* and placing them into a history of anime fandom in Japan' (**Shen, 2015: 77**). Not only that, anime also became a theoretical tool by which *otaku* could assert their minute knowledge of the technological medium, which in turn enabled them to become interactors in the wider production and promotion of anime works produced with them as the intended specialised audience (**Lamarre, 2009: 153**). A striking example of this is the famous anime studio Gainax which, rising to prominence from the early 80s, contributed to the creation of *otaku* culture as a genre by overtly producing anime for *otaku* (**Nishimura, 2018: 271-72**). It is no coincidence that *Otaku no video* itself is a Gainax product. However, despite the above shift, intensifying in the late 90s and 2000s, most empowered representations of *otaku* still do not articulate their potential for sociability outside of fan groups, nor do they imagine forms of *otaku* masculinity that can coexist with a wider community.

The internationally acclaimed anime film *Summer Wars*, from director Hosoda Mamoru, intervenes precisely in the major debates outlined above to imaginatively recalibrate the lonely or anti-social male *otaku*'s relationship with technology (anime and the virtual world) to represent alternative masculinity actualised on the forging of social bonds. Though seemingly unpopular and socially awkward, the protagonist Kenji is

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accepted into a wider familial community. However, this reconciliation is not achieved through bonds within a group of like-minded individuals that do not entail confrontation with a substantially different 'other', nor is it predicated on the normalisation of the young man, as in other revisionist depictions of *otaku* in the 2000s, but through a maturation motivated by the establishment of social bonds with a heterogeneous group. What is more, this process is represented through an evident shift in space. The most important interpersonal interactions take place in an ancient house in rural Japan, a far cry from the manifestly urban settings more readily associated with *otaku* isolation and pervasive technology. Through the displacement to a countryside correlated with the space of family, engaging with cultural representations of the native place, of nostalgia, and of nature in anime, *Summer Wars* navigates crucial issues in *otaku* culture to portray a reconciliation of interconnected issues of technology and rurality as a site for enacting alternative forms of *otaku* masculinity, thus offering an imaginative rearticulation of the *otaku* and loneliness dichotomy.

A Brief History of O*taku*

An overview of debates surrounding *otaku* is useful to delineate the main traits at play in *Summer Wars*. *Otaku* as a term indicating fans was introduced in 1983 by Nakamori Akio in the niche erotic manga magazine *Manga burikko* (Manga cutie). Nakamori used the term disparagingly to identify anime gadget fans deficient in perceived masculine skills:

> [Otaku] are still men, and entering puberty they'll start having a few erotic desires, but if you look at their style, the way they talk, and their character, it's clear that they'll never get women. 'Otaku' definitively lack male skills. So they're content with carrying around pin-ups of anime characters like Minky Momo and Nanako [protagonists of popular magical-girl anime] (**Yamanaka, 2015: 37**).

From very early on *otaku*'s incapacity for social functioning was epitomised by their failure as men: for Nakamori, not only were they incapable of getting women, but they were also strangely effeminate, acting like 'women' themselves (**Galbraith, 2015: 27**). This negative connotation escalated dramatically, with the inclusion of dangerous anti-social behaviours, in the wake of the media-induced moral panic in 1989, when the 27-year-old Miyazaki Tsutomu was arrested for abducting and killing four primary-school girls in Saitama between 1988 and 1989. When searching his room, investigators found stacks of pornographic and popular-culture related materials; this led the media to label Miyazaki as an *otaku*, framing his crime as part of a larger social problem afflicting Japanese youth (**Lamarre, 2004: 184**). In the aftermath of the incident, the magazine *Shūkan yomiuri* sanctioned *otaku*'s propensity for isolation and

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loneliness, describing them as individuals who had 'difficulties with natural human communication, and a tendency to confine themselves in their own world' (quoted in **Azuma, 2001: 10**). [i]

However, from the mid-90s, the diffusion of technological literacy and the transnational boom of anime and its related merchandise attenuated the media panic identifying *otaku* as sociopaths (**Lamarre, 2009: 152-53**). Concomitantly, 'revisionist' discourses portrayed *otaku* in a more positive light. For example, in his *Introduction to Otakuology* (*Otaku-gaku nyūmon*, 1996), Gainax co-founder and self-proclaimed 'King of Otaku' (*Otaking*) Okada Toshio highlights *otaku*'s specialistic viewing practices enabling them to spot subtle differences in animation styles, even between episodes of the same series. Okada's thesis recontextualises *otaku* practices as crucial in the production and consumption of cultural products. For him, their attention to minute inconsistencies innovates aesthetics and reception:

> What might appear as stylistic inconsistency to non-*otaku* viewers appears to the *otaku* as a dense aggregate of the works of a series of artists or producers, from which emerges a cooperative system. In brief, production is as distributive as vision. (**Lamarre, 2006: 367**)

This emphasis on plurality in *otaku* practices exemplifies their relation to technology. Lamarre argues that *otaku* obsession with image details and, more broadly, with the essence of technology, opens a kind of free relation with the technological condition:

> But this 'freeness' is not that of the classical modern subject, the rational and transcendent agent associated with one-point perspective […] This otaku 'freeness' moves toward an articulation of thoughts and actions within media networks – as focal concerns – wherein lines of sight replace viewing positions, which makes for a 'subjectile' that maneuvers within the exploded projection alongside projectiles, not a transcendent subject but a projected or projectile subject pursuing lines of sight. (**Lamarre, 2009: 128**)

Anime by Gainax emblematically signify this technological relation. If, narratively, their O*taku no video* portrays *otaku* reclaiming their own history, technologically their works dialogue with the interests of the fan community. For example, in the short film *Daicon III Opening Animation* (1981), Gainax emphasises the design and animation of figures, instead of using layers of images, or painterly backgrounds to create depth of field. The sense of depth and movement is produced by arranging elements on the surface, and by creating an exploded view of different lines of sight coexisting: 'density of information, a sense of tightly packed elements with potential depth, begins to take precedence over movement within a

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world. At the same time, because this is a *moving* image, the sensation is one of information incessantly rising to the surface' (**Lamarre, 2009: 133-34**). Such techniques speak to *otaku* subjects who, as attentive viewers and ideal consumers, navigate the multiplicity of lines of sights and the different frames of reference presented in the anime's multi-faceted surface. The animated distributive fields of information entice the *otaku* viewers to make connections that would be otherwise inaccessible to other viewers.

The shift to *otaku*'s centrality in cultural logics is echoed in critic Azuma Hiroki's (**2001**) description of their consumptive habits as exemplary of broad tendencies in contemporary society. He maintains that *otaku* viewing products as compositions of recurrent elements (e.g. characters reworked in derivative products) that make up a database exemplifies a wider postmodern condition where, after the fall of the grand ideologies following the political upheavals of the 60s and 70s, people can no longer grasp grand narratives (borrowing Jean-François Lyotard's terms) underpinning society, enjoying instead culture as a rearrangement of familiar elements for immediate satisfaction.

If *otaku* gained interest as important players in cultural consumption, they also became the object of narrative representations positively portraying their sociability, seen as an escape from their lonely confinements to *otaku* groups. A prime example is the cross-media franchise *Train Man* (*Densha otoko*), focusing on the love story between a socially awkward *otaku*, the eponymous Train Man, and a beautiful upper-class working woman. Supposedly based on real events, *Train Man* was originally written collectively as a series of anonymous posts on the popular Internet forum 2channel between March and May 2004. As news of the events spread, numerous companies vied for publishing rights of the story, which was eventually published in book form on 22 October 2004, recording more than 260,000 copies sold within three weeks of publication. Its success is also attested by the productions of a film version and of a TV series in 2005, together with adaptations in other media. *Train Man* shows *otaku*'s potential for sociability, portraying an online community of like-minded fans that exchanges views with the titular character, offering him advice on how to pursue his daunting romantic relationship in a community outside of the *otaku* one. Also, this revisionist light was reflected in media addressing socio-economic issues in Japan, both describing Train Man as a marriage partner for career women, one category blamed for decreasing marriage rates (and at later ages), and as an 'ideal consumer – loyal to brands and willing to spend money on self-improvement' (**Freedman, 2015: 130**). However, there are limits and contradictions to this reappraisal:

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> Train Man has influenced the development of a new kind of romantic male hero in Japanese literature and visual media: the compassionate, motivated *otaku* with disposable income and leisure time. Train Man marks a departure from common images of the stoic middle-class businessman, a figure who represented twentieth-century Japanese social ideals. Yet to be this *otaku* hero, Train Man needed to move outside his community and prove that he wanted to, and could, conform to the notions of male behaviour that have dominated the popular imagination since the postwar period. (**Freedman, 2015: 132**)

While *Train Man* participates emblematically in the shift towards positive reimaginings of the male *otaku* by showing his capacity for romantic interpersonal connections, to do so its protagonist still needs to distance himself from his niche *otaku* sphere, and adapt to standardised notions of masculinity. From this perspective, *Summer Wars* goes further in its engagement with the change in representations of the lonely or anti-social *otaku* by displaying the possibility of an alternative form of masculinity predicated on social interactions that are not limited to communities of like-minded fans, nor are achieved through a 'normalisation' requiring the *otaku* to change drastically. Instead, to creatively engage with the history of *otaku* representations and technology, the film displaces the *otaku* away from the city, plunging him into one of the oldest centres of social ties, the family.

Summer Otaku

The film *Summer Wars* is the principal work which has spawned comics and novelised versions of its story, including spin-off products, between 2009 and 2012. It is an example of 'media mix', a business and production strategy releasing interconnected works in established media platforms. Media mix rose to prominence in mid-1970s Japan, famously associated with the then president of Kadokawa publishing company, Kadokawa Haruki, who marketed this strategy as part of the company's identity (**Zahlten, 2017: 218**). Further, Steinberg maintains that media mix has an even longer history, as it cannot be conceived without the emergence of anime in the 1960s as a system of interconnected media (**Steinberg, 2012: viii**). Interestingly, both notions have a manifest connection with *Summer Wars*, both as an anime, and for the fact that the interconnected books are published by Kadokawa.

The film is the second original feature film directed by Hosoda Mamoru (b. 1967), one of the most famous anime *auteurs*; he was even a potential candidate to direct the film *Howl's Moving Castle* (*Hauru no ugoku shiro*, 2004) for Studio Ghibli, arguably the most famous and most widely researched anime studio, helmed by eminent director Miyazaki Hayao, who inspired Hosoda himself to venture into the business (**Carew, 2017:**

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37). After rising through the ranks of Tōei Animation studio, Hosoda directed feature-length episodes of popular anime TV series such as *Digimon* (2000) and *One Piece* (2005), before joining Madhouse and directing his first feature *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* (*Toki wo kakeru shōjo*, 2006; henceforth, *The Girl*). While an original story, the film is loosely based on Tsutsui Yasutaka's 1967 popular Sci-fi novel by the same name; Hosoda's film is set twenty years after the book, and has as its protagonist Makoto, the niece of Kazuko, the original time-travelling girl. Therefore, *Summer Wars* is the first anime film based on an entirely original concept. Although the characters and settings are different, both films highlight the power of social bonds (a theme recurrent in Hosoda's later productions). Hikawa writes that the imaginative force of Hosoda's films is that despite fantastic backgrounds (time travelling, virtual worlds), they are rooted in the everyday world, conveying positive messages about people's capacity to overcome obstacles. In this sense *Summer Wars* constitutes an evolution from its predecessor:

> *The Girl* portrayed the 'miracle of traversing boundaries' through 'overcoming the boundaries of time.' Since that is based on personal ties, it constitutes an 'Elementary theory of bonds.' Its successor *Summer Wars*, an 'Applied bonds' of sorts, portrays networked 'emotional ties.' Moreover, the 'miracle of traversing boundaries' has evolved and powered-up into something that makes the whole world resonate: the 'interpersonal ties' of lovers, family, society, the world, and of even traversing the time 'handed down from generations' linked from a distant past. (**Hikawa, 2015: 219**)

Subverting the trope of the lonely, anti-social nerd, an *otaku* is at the centre of human ties here. The story begins when Koiso Kenji, a socially awkward math genius, is hired by the most popular girl in the school, Shinohara Natsuki (one year his senior), to pose as her fiancé on her visit to her family home in the country town of Ueda, Nagano Prefecture (about 180 km from Tokyo). The occasion is a big family reunion for the 90th birthday of Sakae, Natsuki's great grandmother and pillar of the large historic Jinnouchi family, boasting an ancestry as old as the 16th century. On the first night Kenji solves a mysterious numerical code he had received on his phone, only to find out the next morning that he inadvertently allowed a US-developed AI hacking software, called 'Love Machine', to hack into OZ, a futuristic virtual world where users, represented through avatars, interact worldwide in all kinds of activities. Love Machine's rampage causes dire repercussions in the real world, from blackouts and traffic disruptions to manipulating satellite courses. Kenji is at first reproached by the family, but is then accepted back thanks to his determination to repair the damage. One morning, grandma Sakae is found in her bed, dead from angina. Though grief-stricken, the members

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of the Jinnouchi family, spanning four generations, join forces and challenge Love Machine to an online game of cards where, thanks also to the help from users all over the world, they finally defeat it.

Kenji's typical male *otaku* traits surface from the outset. Although he is not presented as a fan of popular culture, his characterisation as a math genius manifests an obsessive interest paired with an image of loneliness linked with technology. In fact, he is first shown working furiously at a computer performing maintenance checks on OZ; with his friend Sakuma, they are working alone in an untidy school room, cluttered with scattered objects and bowls of instant noodles. Moreover, the door used to read 'Otaku club' but it has been crossed out and replaced with 'Computer club.' The visual details highlight the two boys' associations with *otaku* notions of obsession with technology (underscored by the fact that they are working at a computer during the hot summer), their isolation from other groups and, through the sign, that they were probably mockingly labelled as unpopular *otaku* by their schoolmates. This setting is perturbed by the intrusion of the other, Natsuki. In contrast to their loneliness, the popular beautiful girl surprises the two boys who, as soon as they learn of the trip, clumsily vie for her attention. It is likely that Natsuki chose to ask the awkward *otaku* because she thought they would not have anything better to do and that they would be happy to have the unique opportunity to spend time with a girl.

Social relationships overwhelm the male *otaku* (Kenji beats Sakuma at a game for the right to accompany Natsuki), through evident contrasts. Even as he is about to join Natsuki at the station to leave for Ueda, Kenji's *otaku* nature is emphasised by his reading Shor's factorisation algorithm. Then again, when he meets her he is panting, whereas she is calm and self-assured in asking him to carry her heavy baggage. Still, although on the bullet train Kenji is embarrassed, often with downcast eyes, there are hints at his potential social value as an *otaku*. Natsuki is impressed that he almost made it to the math Olympics. Their exchange mixes traits of social awkwardness with a potential reappraisal:

> Natsuki: Math Olympics? What's that? Isn't that amazing? That means you're really good!
>
> Kenji: Oh, well… That's the only thing I'm good at.
>
> Natsuki: Ohh, show me something.
>
> Kenji: (with downcast eyes) Ok. what is your date of birth?
>
> Natsuki: My date of birth? It's 19 July, 1992.
>
> Kenji: It was a Sunday.19 July 1992 was a Sunday.

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> Natsuki: (surprised) Are you saying that you memorised all dates?
>
> Kenji: No. I just used modular arithmetic. (Looking at her confidently) Did I get it right?
>
> Natsuki: (apologetically) Sorry, I don't remember what day it was... (**Hosoda, 2009**)

Natsuki's possible appreciation of Kenji's skills, together with his shift from a timid affirmation of ineptitude to a growing confidence that his abilities might impress the girl, foreshadow dynamics around the social valorisation of the *otaku* that will develop later on. While it is true that the driving force for Kenji's social maturation is a romantic interest, as in *Train Man*, the sociability of the male *otaku* here does not blossom through a 'normalisation' into an accepted masculine role away from the *otaku* world, but through an alternative role reconciling his *otaku* identity after the imposed encounter with the bonds of a family of individuals with different interests and expectations.

This is emblematised at the first family dinner. The large group is gathered at the table, loudly making sneering remarks at an embarrassed Kenji. Sakae's third son Mansaku, visibly drunk, insinuates that Natsuki brought Kenji over because they are expecting a child. However, while a number of relatives acquiesce to Kenji purportedly becoming a part of the family, and other disapprove (cousin Shōta), grandma Sakae sees value in him: 'Kenji will make a perfect groom. My eyes can't be fooled. The Jinnouchi family has no need for mediocre men. If not, how could he protect his family and lands?' (**Hosoda, 2009**). This judgment, coming from the family's highest authority, entrusts the social bond of upholding the family's future on the *otaku* man; further, that this declaration comes so early in the film underscores that, notwithstanding possible disapprovals, Sakae's sharp eyes have detected Kenji's capacity to unite the family and stand as its backbone: a far cry from the usual depictions of asocial *otaku*.

This miracle of traversing interpersonal ties takes shape throughout adversities. Though Kenji encounters hostility after contributing to Love Machine's hacking, his determination to defeat the programme manages to bring the family together. By making the most of his capacities (computer skills, mathematical calculations), he is able to reconcile his *otaku* identity with interpersonal bonds revolving around family and love. A telling example of this is when the family reacts to Sakae's death, in the second half of the film. The camerawork emphasises the sadness through one horizontal scrolling movement showing all grieving members in succession. From the focal point of the wooden veranda, the camera finally stops on Kenji and Natsuki sitting side by side, against the large

background of a blue sky. This emotional scene highlights Kenji's symbolic incorporation into the family, and his resolution to be a part of it:

> It's of course a scene on how each family member is dealing with the loss of Sakae, but not only that, it's also the setting where Kenji shows his determination as a man by holding Natsuki's hand. This is the first moment he enters Natsuki's sphere. (**Sawamoto, 2015: 88**)

Animated Spaces

Kenji's social maturation as an *otaku* is however inextricably linked with an evident shift in space. After a few initial scenes set in Tokyo, social interactions take place in the countryside, mainly in the massive ancient Jinnouchi house, and in the surrounding rural area. This is no mere change of scenery, since the countryside stands in contrast with the city, representing a communal space where familial social bonds of old (the historic Jinnouchi), can incorporate different generations and backgrounds (the *otaku*). The urban space in the film's beginning is associated with technology, seen through OZ's pervasiveness, and loneliness, visible through Kenji and Sakuma's empty room, and the lonely people on the train. These two elements fashion an environment easily identifiable with *otaku*. Thus, Kenji's move from his habitual place of action to a countryside house swarming with people corresponds to a spatial as well as an emotional displacement. It is exactly this shift that creates the possibility to reconcile both urban and rural worlds.

The rural location shows connections that go beyond the film's present. The idea for the story originated from an episode in Hosoda's life, when he met his wife's family in her native Ueda. Since people in his family did not get along well, he was happy to become a part of the lively community of her grandparents and parents. It was an occasion to rediscover happy social bonds (**Hosoda & Kitagawa, 2009: 87**). However, during *Summer Wars*' location scouting, Hosoda did not want to set it in the same town, as it was too close to home. The production eventually settled on Ueda, the reason being that the town presented evocative connections with the Sanada clan, prominent during the warring states era (15-16th century AD) (**Hosoda et al., 2009: 60-61**). These historical connections underscore the intergenerational ties of the Jinnouchi family, whose present state is not self-sufficient, but incorporates a shared history which is passed on to future generations (Kenji included) through community.

Historical representations are important here for their ties to Japanese and *otaku* cultures. The countryside, symbolised physically by the Jinnouchi house, shares common traits with descriptions of the native place (*furusato*). Dodd remarks that, from the second half of the 19th century to the late 1930s, several writers wrote of the native place as

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opposed to the city evils. Whether a really native place or not, through the decades the *furusato* served as a *locus* to represent alternatives to dominant notions of modernity:

> Although [the *furusato*] sometimes overlaps with a specific physical location, its broader significance in modern Japanese literature is as a mythical construction through and against which radical alternatives to prevalent ideas about what constitutes modern Japan have been played out. (**Dodd, 2004: 3**)

In the 1930s these ideas were connected with urbanisation. With great numbers of people having migrated to the cities, the *furusato* functioned as the repository of the nostalgic memories left behind (**Ibid: 22**). This nostalgic imagination has seen a resurgence following analogous developments in the wake of the economic boom of the mid-60s, with the tourist industry and mass media using images of the native place to promise access to a traditional Japan, a place of historical continuity, that is being lost. According to Ivy, the rhetoric of the *furusato*, present even today, reveals a phantasmatic structure, because the originary loss of the hometown is not experienced at the origin, but exists in the aftereffects it produces through the displacement, through its absence that continues to haunt as a loss (**Ivy, 1995: 21-22**).

This nostalgia for the reassuring native place is an important part in the formation of national identity, which includes *otaku* representations. Saito Kumiko observes that, concomitant to the return to nationalism in the 1990s involving questions about Japanese remilitarisation, the rise of a graphic style in popular culture products consumed by *otaku*, emphasising nostalgic regionalism, contributed to reinforce a sense of nationalism at the emotional level. By looking at background art in videogames and anime, she highlights recurring traits of unspecified regional locations, between the urban and the rural, that form an imagery of a beautiful nostalgic Japan suspended between the technological and the natural, with which viewers may identify through a recollection of their personal past: 'The regionalist narrative in popular visual media helps re-establish national pride in Japanese particularity, but only within the safe range of the personal and emotional without recovering the memory of Showa's war and postwar periods or the nation's geo-ethnic varieties' (**Saito K., 2013: 48**).

Summer Wars uses regionalistic representations of the *furusato* to posit it as a site of a personal family identity, thereby using anime, the *otaku* technology *par excellence*, to select and compose a view of history, epistemologically shaped by the visual techniques used to represent it (akin to the process highlighted in **Ortabasi, 2008: 292**). However, the nostalgic component is not as strong. First, it is important to bear in mind

that the *otaku* male is not returning to his *furusato*, but Natsuki's, so not to a place that he might long for as the site of his memories. Second, unlike the examples in Saito's analysis, this native place is clearly identifiable with Ueda in Nagano, as are the historical events in which the Jinnouchi took part; third, Ueda and the family eventually evoke not so much a site of nostalgic and phantasmatic absence, as one of a communal alternative to the city seen as a place where people like *otaku* can fall prey to isolation. The chromatic contrast works to this effect. OZ is characterised by a vast white background, whereas in Ueda the main colours are the green of nature surrounding the majestic house, dominated by the brown hues of its wooden structure. Where OZ's white suggests emptiness, and the possibility to fill it with virtual beings, the green and brown symbolise a space that has a history, which is inherited but can be renewed. The camera movements too emphasise this city/country contrast: when Kenji first arrives at the estate, an overhead shot of the massive residence underscores his shock seeing a place exuding vastness as opposed to the cramped locals of city life. Another chromatic choice to a similar effect is the blue of the open sky which, as the logo designer Kanematsu remarks, recurs in posters of Hosoda films to underscore the emotions' universality (**Kanematsu and Yamauchi, 2015: 99**).

The *furusato*, as opposed to the city, has been the object of other famous anime films. One prime example is Studio Ghibli's *Only Yesterday* (*Omohide poro poro*, 1991). Directed by the Studio's co-founder Takahata Isao, it is the story of Okajima Taeko, a 27-year-old Tokyo office lady who decides to take a short leave from the pressures of city life and enjoy manual work in a rural idyll. Through the physicality of the work, the open natural setting, and the simplicity of the companions in the countryside, Taeko feels happy, although at times pained by childhood and teenage years' memories awakened by the trip. While the film does not completely idealise rural life, as it concedes that even working in the countryside modifies nature, and exposes the struggles of the dwindling agricultural sector facing the challenges of Japan's urban expansion, still the country space offers Taeko the possibility to reconcile her old self with the woman she is, and possibly find her authentic life on her own terms (**Odell & Le Blanc, 2015: 85**).

Summer Wars shares similarities with *Only Yesterday* in the portrayal of the native place as the site of deep social bonds entailing a reconciliation. Through these ties, Hosoda's film also posits a reconciliation of the apparent dichotomy between technology, with which the stereotypically urban *otaku* are entangled, and nature. Here, *Summer Wars* engages broadly with anime representations of both elements. Unlike Takahata's film, the nostalgic element and the emphasis on rural life are not central, nor is the critique to pollution and environmental destruction encroaching

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on natural life, which is often found as a lingering background in Ghibli animated films directed by Miyazaki Hayao. For example, as Napier writes, in the fantasy pastoral utopia of *My Neighbour Totoro* (*Tonari no totoro*, 1988), seen from the eyes of two young sisters in the 1950s, the 'idealised landscapes and vision of childhood innocence represent an attempt to restore "a better" history on both a personal and cultural level'. Against the background of excessive materialism and consumerism during the economic boom in 1980s Japan, 'the film also offers to many Japanese viewers not only the "forgotten" realm of individual childhood, but a lost world of a past national culture' (**Napier, 2018: 103**). In *Summer Wars*, while painterly backgrounds do visually emphasise the beauty of natural landscapes, rurality is not a utopian vision, but becomes a site to implement an alternative to the nature/technology duality. In this sense, the mutual interaction is broadly akin to how the human (technological) world and the natural one are represented in Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (*Kaze no tani no Naushika*, 1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (*Mononoke hime*, 1997), where human heroines can coexist with a nature that, far from being idealised, is presented as dynamic and potentially destructive, just as humans and their tech (**Ibid: 80, 187-89**). In a similar vein, *Summer Wars* portrays a technology that, with all its dangerous potential (Love Machine's chaos), can still be enmeshed in and reconciled with nature.

In order to do this, however, the film rearticulates an alternative relation between an *otaku* and technology, where the latter is no longer an exclusive attribute of his, separated from the non-technological world, but becomes a way to reconcile his masculinity with communal life. Moreover, this highlights again *Summer Wars*' engagement with the shift in *otaku* reimaginings, as it is a clear departure from 1990s visions of technology as irreconcilable with interpersonal bonds in the real world. Emblematically, the film provides a more optimistic outcome from that of another famous anime production on a cyber world, *Serial Experiments Lain* (1998). Here, the middle-school protagonist is alienated by the cybernetic world of NAVI, which exacerbates her estrangement from the real world. As Napier argues, '*Lain* is a vision of nonconnection in a technological nightmare in which neither family not the individual exists any longer' (**Napier, 2008: 44**). *Summer Wars* instead reverses the perspective by placing family as the fulcrum that enables reconciliation with technology. As Satō comments, the reality of the familial ties needing to uphold real-world traditions is pitted against the faceless abstract images of the Internet' (**Satō, 2009: 59**).

Summer Wars navigates important debates and representations of nature and of *otaku* imagination to offer a reconciliation which, at the same time, is necessarily actualised on a new relation between *otaku* and anime as

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their self-reclaimed defining technology, which now becomes the vehicle to portray an alternative picture of *otaku* masculinity.

Family Ties

The alternative masculinity is enacted through the interaction with family entailed by the shift to the rural space. Against the *otaku* urban loneliness, the rural family house is a repository of connections and community. The familial bonds Kenji encounters are epitomised in the prominent figure of grandma Sakae. The wise woman symbolises to a degree the household head (*kachō*) of the traditional Japanese family system, known as the *ie* (house, family). In this large-family organisation, the household functions as a hierarchical system with the head (the oldest male) possessing the *ie* symbolically, 'including family prestige, class, and ranking' (**Kumagai, 2008: 8**). The patriarchal *ie* system originated among the upper classes in the Edo period (1600-1868), and was later extended to the general population with the Family Law in 1898, which stipulated succession and allocation of rights of inheritance of the whole estate based on primogeniture. In the aftermath of Japan's defeat in World War II and the subsequent American Occupation, this system was abolished, with Japanese society reorganising itself gradually around the basic unit of the nuclear family (**Hashimoto & Traphagan, 2008: 3-5**). While Sakae is a woman, and she is not possessing her family, which is in turn divided into a myriad of smaller nuclear units, still her charisma and symbolic authority are redolent of the *ie* system, signifying the family's ties with its past and intergenerational bonds. Of the six stereotypical representations of old women in prose and graphic fiction for children outlined by feminist critic Saitō Minako (cited in **Aoyama, 2015: 55**), Sakae embodies transversal traits of: A, the woman living surrounded by nature, and who has consoling powers; C, the godmother type with sensational knowledge and skills; E, the ideal, knowledgeable, liberated, and charming one that helps the young. In this sense, especially in the relationship with Natsuki, whose parents are absent for most of the film, she embodies the mediating, long-term time flow of the caring grandmother described by literary scholar Kawasaki Kenko:

> Instead of the medium-term historic ordering of time that is brought about by the presence of the parents' generation, there is the short-term, wavering and unsettling sense of time of the young people, woven in with a sense of the long-term and of continuity, that is introduced by the grandmother who watches her grandchildren. (**Kawasaki, 2008: 303-04**)

Sakae represents the continuity of the family history that, mediating through generational conflicts, reaches the young. This bridging function is visible in her association with Kenji. As Love Machine's hacking plunges

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the world into chaos, like the boy she strives to help. The film alternates scenes of Sakae calling relatives and acquaintances working as doctors, firefighters and other professions, encouraging them to help those in need, with scenes of Kenji frantically scribbling numbers to hack into Love Machine's admin directory. Both characters are paralleled in striving towards the same goal, each one making the most of their abilities to be useful to the community: one *otaku* implementing his intelligence, and Sakae emphasising communal spirit. In her final acts, the woman exhorts her family to value their ties to their history, even the negative ones, since it is exactly one relative, her late husband's illegitimate child, the now estranged Wabisuke, who created the Love Machine software in the first place (though the programme was later militarised unbeknownst to him): 'Listen, everyone! We'll clean up the mess our relative caused together!' (**Hosoda, 2009**). Through her wise, long-term vision traversing generational boundaries, Sakae reinforces the bonds of familial community; then, in a private moment with Kenji, she entrusts Natsuki's wellbeing to him. She manages to pierce through the boy's embarrassment and lack of self-confidence, typical traits in representations of the 'failed man' male *otaku*; her understanding of his qualities contributes to creating a space for Kenji to achieve an alternative masculinity, as an *otaku* and a trustworthy family member.

The reimagination of the male *otaku* fits the rural space, mainly represented by the physical and emotional site of the family house. Here, as the recognition of Kenji's potential eventually extends to the whole family, the representation of an alternative *otaku* masculinity reaches completion. Kenji does not adapt to standard notions of reproductive masculinity, nor does he fit into an accepted form by abandoning his *otaku* traits. Instead, he still maintains his obsessive interests and social awkwardness, but at the same time he is integrated into the wide and diverse familial community, and becomes the driving force that sets into motion the cooperation leading to Love Machine's demise. Having symbolically received the baton from Sakae after she saw value in him, Kenji represents the continuation of collaborative action, which is at last shared by the whole family. This unity is sanctioned emblematically in the scene of communal eating. In the name of collaboration, the family members reconcile the present with their collective pride and history:

Aunt Yumi: But isn't the enemy too powerful?

Men: In the summer campaign of the siege of Osaka in 1615 our family went up against the 150,000-strong army of the Tokugawa [shogunate].

Yumi: But they lost, didn't they?

> Mansaku: It's not about fighting because you think you're going to win, or not fighting because you think you're going to lose. We Jinnouchi fight even lost battles! Every time.
>
> Aunt Rika: A family of fools!
>
> Mariko (Sakae's daughter): Yes, and we are their descendants!
>
> Aunt Naomi: For sure. And I'm one of those fools. (**Hosoda, 2009**)

Even the once estranged Wabisuke has returned, shocked at the news of Sakae's death. Like Kenji, he has been incorporated into the family who, through sharing the dining table, shows a newfound strength, thus fulfilling Sakae's dying wish for community expressed in her last letter:

> As a family, don't let go of each other's hand. Don't let life get the best of you. There are going to be hard and painful times, but even then make sure to eat together as always, because the worst thing is to be left hungry, and to be alone. I have been happy because all of you were there. Thank you, and goodbye. (**Hosoda, 2009**)

The emotional relevance of the dining scene is emphasised also by the peculiar animation technique of 'shadowless drawing' (*kage nashi sakuga*). Recurrent in Hosoda's films, this technique draws characters without adding a shadow to them, thus highlighting the subtlety of their movements (**Doi, 2015: 42; Hikawa, 2015: 39-41**). The animation clearly shows worry on Yumi's face, Kenji's determination, and varying degrees of acceptance of the family's character on the part of Mariko, Rika and Naomi. More importantly, the fact that everyone's face is frantically chewing food manifests the kinship of action, symbolising familial conviviality.

Finally reunited, the Jinnouchi family takes arms against Love Machine beating it on its own OZ ground. Against the dangerous potential of technology used for personal gain and accumulation, community prevails, showing that the Internet can become a site for connections, as users from all over the world assist the Jinnouchi in the battle. This reconciliation between the real world of interpersonal bonds and the virtual world where these generate collaborative action is predicated on an alternative masculinity that engages with the discourse on *otaku* and anime. Together with its relationship to representations of nature, nostalgia, and the native place mentioned above, *Summer Wars* engages with anime as *the* technology embodying *otaku* practices: like *otaku* anime presenting multiple lines of sight which *otaku* adeptly navigate making connections, *Summer Wars* too features multiple frames of reference (family, city, countryside, nature, *otaku*, romance, technology), all seemingly coexisting in the same exploded view. Yet, although this multiplicity evokes *otaku*

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habits of consumption and production, on another level *Summer Wars* runs counter to the technological discourse that sees *otaku* anime as too narrow in scope, focusing too much on small focal concerns that do not address universal questions. This position, epitomised by Miyazaki Hayao's anime films since the mid-80s, opposes this *otaku* tendency by grounding anime multiplanar images in absolute frames of reference (nature and humanity) (**Lamarre, 2009: 109**). In a middle ground of sorts, *Summer Wars* uses multiple frames of reference but, through a rural story, manages to portray a reconciliation between the wider discourses on *otaku*, technology, and nature.

Ironically, at the centre of the reconciliation between various frames of reference, including community and a divisive technology, is a lonely *otaku*, who eventually coordinates with two other *otaku*-like characters, the programming genius Wabisuke, and the introvert 13-year-old Kazuma, a fighting game expert; by joining their talents with and for the group they manage to counter Love Machine's final attempt to destroy the Jinnouchi house with an asteroid probe. In the end, *otaku* have saved the day at the local and the global level.

Conclusions

Summer Wars is a film of displacements. It moves a story of technology from the sprawling urban environment with which it is usually associated to rural Japan, and displaces the typically lonesome male *otaku* to an avalanche of close social bonds in the form of the large Jinnouchi family. Against the background of the shift in *otaku* representations, these relocations serve to recontextualise seemingly antithetical associations, thus enacting a reconciliation, between the virtual and the real, between nerdy male loneliness and social ties. Through this displacement, *Summer Wars* engages with numerous debates on *otaku* culture, with representations of nature and of nostalgia for the native place, and with technological ones, using anime techniques and modes of consumption, historically appropriated by the *otaku* community, to offer a new relation with this technology that allows for the representation of a new site for the male *otaku* to seek alternative masculinity.

This alternative masculinity, correlated with the shift in space, is the driving force behind familial unity. Through Kenji's determination and abilities, the entire family comes together and is able to overcome challenges, eventually beating OZ's potentially destructive technology. The reimagined alternative male *otaku* proves his sociability by implementing his skills for the family's good. It is a maturation from his initial shyness that enables him to bloom into a fully-fledged member of the Jinnouchi clan. This trait also sets *Summer Wars* apart from other notable works in the 2000s reimagining *otaku*'s potential for social

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functioning; here, Kenji's incorporation in the group does not take place through a need for him to change his ways. Sakae emblematically endorses his valour because she has seen the possibility for him to be a functional part of the family while still making the most of his *otaku* talents. This recognition is shared by others, as underscored when Mansaku encourages him to stop Love Machine's final attack: 'Only you can stop it!' (**Hosoda, 2009**). This is why, as central to social dynamics as he may be, unlike Train Man Kenji represents alternative *otaku* masculinity The film emphasises this in the final scene when, as Natsuki kisses him, he blushes, blood spurting from his nose, humorously portraying his inexperience with love or sensual contacts.

Hosoda's film proposes a rearticulation of the male *otaku*, placing him at the centre of a family narrative stressing the importance of cooperation through bonds. In doing so, not only does it posit *otaku*'s potential for broad sociability, and thus the possibility for technology to coexist with familial continuity, but it also moves away from considerations of *otaku*'s self-referentiality, instead engaging with *otaku* and anime debates at multiple levels, navigating various cultural dynamics to represent an alternative site actualised on a shift in space, which is as geographical (in contrast with the city), as it is emotional (the repository of family ties). While it may not be the only recent anime film celebrating interpersonal connections (**Napier, 2008: 48-49**), the fact that it does so by (dis)placing the lonely *otaku* as the central communal hero, all the while negotiating important historical and technological developments, shows its multi-faceted cultural relevance in investigating momentous issues in contemporary Japanese culture, and in furthering the understanding of imaginative possibilities in representations of *otaku* masculinity. Perhaps, the space of bonds emblematised by the rural place will someday be found in the city too.

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Endnotes

[i] Translation by the author. Unless otherwise stated in the bibliography, all translations from Japanese, including quotes from Summer Wars, are the author's own.